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Fast or Feast?

Rabbi Elazar Rokeach of Amsterdam sat at the head of the long table crowded with relatives and prominent members of the community. It was ***Purim***, and the great Rabbi was about to begin the festive Purim meal.

The huge table was laden with enormous platters of meat, stuffed fish and other delicacies that had been sent to Rabbi Elazar as *meshlo'ach manot* (the special gifts of food that are one of the *mitzvot* of Purim). Fine wines and other beverages were also available in abundance. In between the many courses, Rabbi Elazar held forth on the meaning and significance of the Purim holiday.

The celebration was well underway when a knock was heard at the door. Standing on the threshold were three emissaries of the Prince on an urgent mission. After apologizing profusely for interrupting, they asked to speak to the elderly Rabbi. Rabbi Elazar motioned for them to approach the table and deliver their message. They told him that in a certain district of Holland a dike had burst, and that thousands of innocent people were in danger of drowning.

[Much of the Netherlands ("Low lands") lies below sea level. Over the centuries, a series of dikes were built to protect the Dutch people from being inundated by the ocean. One of these dikes had now given way, and a sizeable portion of the country was in the direct path of the water.] The Prince wanted that the great rabbi should pray for the safety of the threatened citizens.

The Prince's emissaries had heard much about the piety of the saintly Rabbi. Thus, after delivering their message, they fully expected him go off into a corner and pray. Surprisingly, however, they were invited to sit down and join in the festivities.

It was even more curious when Rabbi Elazar ordered every bottle of wine and whiskey remaining in the house to be placed on the table. Within minutes it was covered with an assortment of bottles and decanters. "Now, gentlemen," he continued, "let us fulfill the *mitzvah* of the day to the best of our abilities. We will drink until we cannot distinguish between 'cursed is Haman' and 'blessed is Mordechai.' "

The dozens of guests, including the venerable Rabbi, quickly drained all of the assorted bottles of liquor. Before the astonished eyes of the Prince's emissaries, the elderly Rabbi jumped up to conduct the revelry, whereupon everyone began dancing around the table.

The emissaries could not believe what they were seeing. The scene in the Rabbi's house was starting to resemble an unruly tavern. Without anyone noticing, the three men crept outside and returned to the royal palace.

The Prince was overjoyed to see them. He told them that their mission had been successful, and that the breach in the dike had been repaired. Instead of death and destruction, the damage had actually been quite minimal.

The emissaries were shocked, especially when they learned that the dike had been fixed at the exact time Rabbi Elazar and his guests were at the height of their carousing!

They proceeded to describe to the Prince everything they had witnessed in the Rabbi's house. Now it was the Prince's turn to be surprised, and on two accounts: How could such an esteemed Rabbi have behaved in such a manner? And more importantly, why was it that the workers had suddenly been able to fix the dike at that exact moment?

A few days later Rabbi Elazar was summoned before the Prince. Officially, it was to be thanked on behalf of the nation. Privately, however, the Prince hoped to clarify exactly what had happened that day.

When the right moment presented itself the Prince asked him directly. Rabbi Elazar smiled, his countenance exuding an ancient wisdom. "We Jews act in a unique manner," he replied. "Whenever it seems as if G-d is angry, we try to appease Him by fulfilling His will.

"The day the dike broke was Purim," he continued, "when we are commanded to be happy to the point of intoxication. Had I responded by praying and imploring G-d amidst tears, not only would I have failed to fulfill His wishes, but actually transgressed one of His commandments. It was precisely because I recognized the magnitude of the danger that I encouraged everyone to be even more joyful, in the hope it would arouse G-d's mercy."

The Prince was very pleased by Rabbi Elazar's explanation, and sent him home accompanied by a royal entourage.

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from *lchaimweekly.org*, with permission.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Elazar Rokeach of Amsterdam** (? - 27 Tishrei 1741), author of '*Maaseh Rokeach*,' was an outstanding Torah scholar and authority on Jewish law, and also a noted Kabbalist. Before coming to Amsterdam in 1735, Rabbi Elazar served as chief rabbi in several important cities in Poland, among them Brodi and Cracow. The non-Jews of Holland also recognized and respected him for his piety and holiness, and the Dutch royal palace even minted a special coin with his likeness in honor of his arrival.

*Connection:* The importance of increasing *simcha* joy this entire month of Adar Sheini that started today, + **Happy Purim!**