urim is a veritable cornucopia of paradoxes which ignite the imagination of both scholar and layman. But perhaps the greatest challenge of all is posed by this requirement to indulge in drink to the point of losing the faculty of discernment. How, ask the commentaries throughout the generations, can we be commanded to invite that very intoxication which is so roundly reviled in both Scripture and Talmud? And why such a puzzling standard of non-discernment?

Just to set the record straight as regards the halacha, it is the consensus of the authorities that literal fulfillment of this requirement is limited only to those who are capable of doing so without impairing their ability to fulfill all of the mitzvos connected with the festive Purim meal, (washing hands, blessings before and after, etc.) or inciting them to improper conduct. For most people it is sufficient to drink more than is their custom and to achieve the level of fuzziness suggested by the Talmud through a drink-induced nap.

But our original problem still remains. Why encourage excess drinking altogether and why set a goal of such enigmatic nature?

The answers, of course, lie in an analysis of the Purim story as recorded in Megillas Esther. The events chronicled in this divinely inspired document cover a decade of history, from the grand banquet in which Queen Vashti meets her downfall until the miraculous turnabout of a Jewish man is obligated to imbibe on Purim until he can no longer distinguish between “Cursed is Haman” and “Blessed is Mordechai.”
nation threatened with genocide
overcoming its enemies thanks to the
intervention of Queen Esther. From
the perspective of historians and
political analysts it is virtually
impossible to see any link between
the events separated by so many
years and so many political
developments. What connection can
possibly be surmised between the
drunken domestic quarrel between
Achashverosh and Vashti in the third
year of his reign and the same king's
submitting to Esther's
entreaties in his twelfth
year? Chapters, if not
volumes, could probably be
written about how
Haman's meteoric rise to
power and the geopolitical
upheavals of a mighty
Persian Empire on the
threshold of a challenge
from the ascendant
Macedonians affected the
fickle monarch's decision-
making process in first
sanctioning genocide and
then rejecting it.

But historians are capable of dealing
only with tangible links. The Divine
Author of history, however, reveals to
His chosen people in Megillas Esther
that there is a powerful connection
between events separated by so much
time - that the Divine Healer prepared
the cure before the illness by removing
Vashti in favor of Esther even before He
sent the plague of Haman's genocidal
decree to alarm His sinful people into
repentance. The clue to this linkage is
wine - the wine which brought a king to
a drunken rage against a rebellious
queen and the wine which another
queen, concealing her Jewish identity,
served both husband and enemy at the
climactic banquet where she
successfully pleaded for her people's
salvation.

If the link is wine then it is wine
which we must indulge in beyond our
habit in order to remember and reflect
upon this invisible thread which weaves
such disparate events into a miraculous
tapestry of divine intervention. And the
level of our indulgence must be one
that rejects the normal approaches of
discernment, that abandons the logic of
social and political analysts and seeks
the divine hand in the workings of
history.

Until he can no longer distinguish
between “Cursed is Haman” and
“Blessed is Mordechai.” Many
interpretations have been offered as to
why this particular criterion has been
chosen for determining the desired
level of inebriation. On the simplest
level it is a reference to a song of praise
we sing after the reading of the Megillah
and which we repeat in our festive
meals, and it is a challenge to the
drinker to keep the lyrics in
order when his spirits are so
high.

In a deeper sense, however, we may suggest
that there are two levels of
thanksgiving when a man is
saved from disaster by divine
intervention. On one level it is a reference to a song of praise
we sing after the reading of the Megillah
and which we repeat in our festive
meals, and it is a challenge to the
drinker to keep the lyrics in
order when his spirits are so
high.

On Chanukah we offer both hodaah
in the form of the Al Hanissim prayer
and hallel in the recital of Hallel for
eight days. On Purim the reading of the
Megillah is our hallel, for it teaches us to
appreciate the value of the danger as
well as the salvation.

“Cursed is Haman” refers to the
danger, “Blessed is Mordechai” to the
salvation. When one drinks enough
wine to link all the events in the hallel of
our Megillah he no longer discerns
between the values of the two.