Aryeh Lebowitz – based on מתנת חיים עמ' קעד

1. Questions.
2. Purim is very unique amongst holidays and its uniqueness can be seen in the very first משנה in מסכת מגילה. There are separate days that it is celebrated depending on which city you live in. Those in walled cities celebrate on the 15th while those in unwalled cities celebrate on the 14th. There is another, much more subtle anomaly in the date that we choose to celebrate Purim. The מגילה reports that we celebrate on these days "כימים אשר נחו בהם היהודים מאויביהם" – we celebrate on these days because it is when we rested from our enemies. The war was won on the 13th and 14th of אדר, not the 14th and 15th of אדר. We don’t celebrate on the day of the miracle, but on the day AFTER the miracle. The מנות הלוי asks why we would treat Purim differently than every other holiday in this way. After all, we celebrate פסח on the day that we actually left מצרים and שביעי של פסח on the day that we actually experienced קריעת ים סוף and חנוכה on the day that we were actually victorious!
3. The מצוות היום of פורים are also somewhat perplexing. Reading the מגילה is a fine way to celebrate. What better way to celebrate a miracle than to read the story of the miracle itself! Having a סעודה makes plenty of sense because Jews celebrate great events with food. The difficult mitzvos to understand are משלוח מנות ומתנות לאביונים. Don’t get me wrong – I am in favor of feeding the poor and showing gratitude and friendship to people, but what in the world does it have to do with פורים? We should do things like this all the time but to formulate specific and detailed obligations to do so is difficult to correlate with any of the themes of the day.
4. Finally, the obligation that the גמרא ושולחן ערוך records to become intoxicated to the point that לא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי is a striking formulation. There are lots of levels of drunkenness, but this is not typically thought of as one of them. What message are חז"ל trying to convey by using the cryptic language of אגדה to teach this הלכה?
5. Rav Matisyahu Solomon שליט"א answers all these questions by elaborating on the idea that the גמרא in מסכת שבת teaches. קימו וקבלו היהודים means that קימו מה שקיבלו כבר. Purim is a day of קבלת התורה.
6. In elaborating on the ברכה of יששכר who was the one chosen to dedicate his life to תורה, רבינו בחיי notes that יעקב uses the phrase "וירא מנוחה כי טוב" – Yisachar had to be blessed with a sense of מנוחה – a sense of tranquility and peace of mind. People can achieve a great deal in תורה learning when they are not distracted. The great phenomenon of young men and women experiencing great torah growth when learning in ישיבה in ארץ ישראל can probably be attributed more to the מנוחה from the pressures of grades, the distractions of the television and computer and the sometimes challenging relationships with parents, than to esoteric concepts like אוירא דארעא דישראל מחכים. רבינו בחיי notes that in the same breath that we ask for תורה leadership each and every day "השיבה שופטינו כבראשונה ויועצינו כבתחילה", we also ask for peace of mind and focus "והסר ממנו יגון ואנחה". The two go hand in hand.
7. When the רמב"ם (הלכות מלכים פרק יב הלכה ד') teaches about what the purpose of ימות המשיח is, he does not speak about Jewish political power or world domination. The רמב"ם maintains that there will be peace for ארץ ישראל while the world continues to operate as normal. The reason we yearn for this day is "לא נתאוו החכמים והנביאים ימות המשיח לא כדי שישלטו על כל העולם ולא כדי שירדו בעכו"ם ולא כדי שינשאו אותם העמים ולא כדי לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח אלא כדי שיהיו פנויים בתורה וחכמתה ולא יהיה להם נוגש ומבטל" – we need peace so that we can learn תורה. Torah can only flourish when we have a sense of מנוחת הנפש. In the words of חז"ל – "שמעתא בעי צלותא" – learning requires a clear head.
8. This explains the רמב"ם’s emphasis in הלכות תלמוד תורה that "כל איש מישראל חייב בתלמוד תורה בין עני בין עשיר בין שלם בגופו בין בעל יסורין בין בחור בין שהיה זקן גדול שתשש כחו אפילו היה עני המתפרנס מן הצדקה ומחזר על הפתחים ואפילו בעל אשה ובנים חייב לקבוע לו זמן לתלמוד תורה ביום ובלילה". If you think about it, both old and young, sick and healthy, rich and poor, are also obligated in סוכה and תפילין and מצה and every other מצוה in the תורה. Why does the רמב"ם emphasize this point specifically by תלמוד תורה?
9. Rav Matisyahu explains that since תלמוד תורה can only be achieved with a sense of מנוחה one might have thought that somebody who does not have מנוחה in his life is exempt. The רמב"ם therefore teaches, not that תורה can be achieved without מנוחה, but that one must *find* a sense of מנוחה.
10. In fact, when the רמב"ם describes what will change in ימות המשיח to enable us to focus on learning, he writes לא יהיה שם לא רעב ולא מלחמה ולא קנאה ותחרות. He lists the impediments to מנוחת הנפש – famine, war, jealousy and quarelling.
11. In light of this we can answer all the questions we began with:
12. Purim is celebrated the day after the miracle because we aren’t celebrating the defeat of our enemy – we are celebrating the מנוחה that resulted. This is explicit in the מגילה itself: "ונוח בארבעה עשר בו ועשה אותו יום משה ושמחה, והיהודים אשר בשושן נקהלו בשלשה עשר בו ובארבעה עשר בו ונוח מחמשה עשר בו ועשה אותו יום משתה ושמחה". We are celebrating the קבלת התורה that can only be experienced through מנוחה.
13. When חז"ל sat down to formulate the מצוות היום, they specifically chose actions that reflect our ability to get past the impediments to מנוחה. We won’t experience קנאה ותחרות – we will do just the opposite by supporting friends and strangers alike.
14. Perhaps the phrase "עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי" teaches that the celebration of Purim can only be appreciated so long as we still realize that the celebration is about ברוך מרדכי and NOT ארור המן. Haman’s downfall in its own right is nothing to celebrate – בנפול אויביך אל תשמח. We celebrate the new קבלת התורה led by מרדכי and the torah leadership. Once a person gets to the point that he can no longer tell the difference between the two, he has no business celebrating anymore because he is missing the point.
15. Message. In all of the important messages that we hear from our רבנים, and we convey to our children, I sometimes feel that one of the most important messages gets lost. We talk a lot about kindness, empathy, tefilah, torah, and mitzvos, but how often do we speak about the importance to have a sense of peace of mind – to be emotionally healthy and unburdened by sadness and distractions. How often do we speak about not letting the little things in life, or even the big things, bother us to the point that we become agitated. In order to succeed in תורה we need to have a sense of tranquility – not to be emotionally distracted. The message of פורים is that this can be accomplished even in גלות.