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Why Did Yoseph's Brothers Get Drunk in Egypt?

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When it comes to stories of drunkenness in Torah, the very first instance of this receives a lot of attention in subsequent Jewish writings and commentaries. This attention is certainly appropriate, as this story of Noah also is the very first instance of wine in the Torah (Gen. 9:18-27). The second mention of drunkenness doesn't even use the term "drunk", although the story involving Lot's daughters getting their father drunk is so obvious that it clearly doesn't need it (Gen. 19:30-38). Whereas the first story of drunkenness in the Torah seems to overtake Noah by surprise, there is no such surprise concerning Lot's daughters, as they are quite clearly intentionally using it for a very specific purpose. The third story in the Torah seems to garner less attention.

This third and final story of drunkenness in the Torah seems to attract less attention than the aforementioned stories, as we read in this week's Torah portion that Yosef and his brothers drank together: וישתו וישכרו עמו "And they drank and they got drunk with him" (Gen. 43:34). It may be that this drunken episode does not attract a lot of commentarial attention as nothing of a sexual nor a violent matter happens and, seemingly, the brothers all go to sleep happily. Why, after all, spend much time or energy on a story in which nothing wild happens? After all, it seems to be a happy story about brothers drinking together. But why did they get drunk there?

Excited to Be Reunited

One midrashic approach positions this story as one of relief of the brothers uniting (בראשית רבה צ"ב:ה):

Rabbi Levi said: "All twenty-two years that he did not see them, he did not taste the taste of wine. They, too, did not taste the taste of wine until they saw him. That is what is written: 'They drank, and became inebriated with him' – with him, they drank, but other than with him, they did not drink."

אמר רבי לוי כל עשרים ושנים שנה שלא ראה אותן לא טעם טעם ויין, אף הן לא טעמו טעם ויין עד שראו אותו, הן הוא דכתיב: וישתו וישכרו עמו, עמו ששתו חוץ ממנו לא שתו

Regarding Rabbi Levi's suggestion here, Rabbi Shmuel Yaffe Ashkenazi (1525-1595) explained: ודרך האיש שאינו רגיל ביון להיות שכור גם אם ישתה מעט ויין "And the manner of people who are not accustomed to [drinking] wine is to be drunk when they drink even a little bit of wine" (יפה תואר על בראשית) (רבה צ"ב:ה:ד). Thus, it did not seem to be their intention, but even a little bit of wine for someone who hasn't consumed wine in over two decades will be quite affected by this little amount of wine.

Of course, during this scene, the only one who knows that he is drinking with his brothers is Yosef, as he has not yet revealed himself to be their long lost brother. It is interesting as Rabbi Levi positions the behavior of Joseph and his brothers as having abstained from drinking wine in the intervening years. While this is certainly possible on behalf of Yoseph, how would his brothers know that they are in the presence of their brother?



A couple of further rabbinic articulations of rabbinic approaches are as we read in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 139a):

Rabbi Mallai said from the name of Rabbi Yitzhak from Migdal: "From the day that Joseph took leave from his brothers, he did not taste any wine, as it is written: 'They shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of he who was separated from his brothers' (Gen. 49:26)." Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: "They hadn't tasted wine during the intervening period, due to their remorse, as it is written: 'And they drank and got drunk with him' (Gen. 43:34)."

אמר רבי מלאי משום רבי יצחק מגדל: מיום שפירש יוסף מאחיו לא טעם טעם ויין, דכתיב: וילקדקדו נזיר אחיו רבי יוסי ברבי חנינא אמר: אף הן לא טעמו טעם ויין, דכתיב: וישתו וישכרו עמו

According to Rabbi Mallai from the name of Rabbi Yitzhak from Migdal, it seems that he hadn't had any wine, although it doesn't say anything about the brothers. On the other hand, Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina focusses his comment on the brothers feeling remorseful and not having tasted wine at all during these 22 years. Thus, these two rabbis are articulating a similar sentiment as Rabbi Levi above, although it is unclear according to Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina how the brothers would have known they were drinking with Yoseph.

In fact, it seems somewhat strange why they are getting drunk with him. After all, if it has been all of these years that they have been holding off on tasting wine, why would they suddenly begin drinking? Moreover, if someone were to be received by royalty, it does not seem to be a manner fitting of behavior to get drunk in the presence in such a palace, so why would they get drunk now?

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High Quality & Potency of Royal Wine

Another possibility as to why they got drunk with him has to do with the quality of the wine, as suggested by Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1549) (ספורנו על בראשית מ"ג:ל"ד ג'):

<p>They were being served the kind of wines drunk by royalty, something they were not used to, so that it made them drunk. They were careless in not leaving over some of the first kind of wine served them as was the custom for anyone invited to dine with royalty, as they say, "When you sit down to dine with a ruler, consider well who is before you" (Prov. 23:1).</p>	<p>במיני יין מלכות רב שנתן לפניהם שלא היו מורגלים בהם ולא השגיחו שלא לשתות כל צרכם מן הראשון כאשר ראו לעשות לכל סועד עם הגדולים כאמרו כי תשב ללחום את מושל בין תבין את אשר לפניך</p>
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For Rabbi Sforno, owing to the potency of this royal wine, they were not used to drinking such fine wine. Perhaps it could have been that the alcohol level of the wine was not noticeable and they got carried away, enjoying the wine. It is, of course, interesting to consider that nowhere in the course of the story is there anything mentioned about what they drank. The Torah does not state which beverage they consumed. The reason I mention this is that Egypt was a beer-drinking area, whereas Israel is a wine-drinking area, so maybe they drank beer. However, it may be pointed out that, when considering royalty, they have a lot more material resources to much more easily import wine from Israel. Thus, it is a reasonable speculation that they drank wine.

Yoseph Intentionally Got His Brothers Drunk

A rather fascinatingly different approach however is that they did not necessarily intend to get drunk with Yosef, but that Yosef very much intended to get them drunk, as it would catch them off guard for the episode to follow regarding the goblet, as Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (1270-1340) wrote (הטור הארוך, בראשית מ"ג:ל"ד א'):

<p>Joseph had planned to make them drunk so that they would not examine their sacks and bags before leaving, as they would be bound to do so as not have anything planted on them as had happened the first time. When they awoke late in the morning, he urged them to make haste and leave.</p>	<p>שכיון להשכירם כדי שלא יחפשו באמתחותיהם כדי שלא יארה להם כבתחילה ועל זה מיהר לשולחם באור הבוקר שלא יחפשו</p>
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While we do not read of many other commentators latching on to this possibility, there is a trio of 19th century commentators who do (Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855) (ביאור יש"ר על התורה, בראשית מ"ג:ל"ד ד'), Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865) (שד"ל על בראשית מ"ג:ל"ד א'), and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) (רש"ר הירש על התורה, (בראשית מ"ג:ל"ד א')). Amongst them, the fullest articulated version is that of Rabbi Reggio:

<p>Being happy and kind-hearted because of the words of consolation that the man who was in charge of the house said to them and who brought Shimon out to them, they drank with him more than was customary on other days, and Joseph also drank a lot because he was happy that all his brothers were with him and the time had come close to make himself known to them. And, behold: here is all this honor and the drinking was plentiful on purpose, so that they would later suspect him of stealing the cup, because if they had not entered his house, eaten with him, or gotten drunk, there would have been no room for such accusations against them. And thus, they were suspected.</p>	<p>להיותם שמחים וטובי לב על דברי תנחומין שאמר להם האיש אשר על הבית ועל שהוציא אליהם את שמעון שנת עמו ויתר מהמנהג בשאר הימים, וגם יוסף שתה הרבה כי היה שמח על שהיו כל אחיו אצלו ונתקרר הזמן להתודע אליהם, והנה כל הכבוד הזה וגם השתיה ברבוי היה בכונה כדי לחשדם אח"כ כגניבת הגביע, כי אילו לא נכנסו בביתו ולא אכלו עמו ולא השתכרו, לא היה מקום להעליל עליהם כזאת, ולאחר הסעודה נתרחק יוסף מן החדר ההוא כדי לצוות את אשר על ביתו מה שיטעה ומתוך כך נשארו הם לבדם שם, ולכך נחשדו</p>
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One of the most attractive aspects of connecting Yoseph getting his brothers drunk is that that story plays out immediately, as we read of Yoseph instructing his workers to place the silver goblet in Binyamin's bag (Gen. 44:1-2) and to say the following line, directly connecting it to drinking (44:5):

<p>It is the very one from which my master drinks and which he uses for divination. It was a wicked thing for you to do!"</p>	<p>הלאו זה אשר ישתה אדני בן והוא נחש ינחש בן הרעתם אשר עשיתם</p>
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In focusing on this line, Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (1194-1270) (רמב"ן על (בראשית מ"ד:ה"ב) comments:

<p>The meaning of "which my lord drinks from" is intended as a pretext in order to magnify the accusation against them, for he who steals the royal cup from which the king drinks demonstrates disdain for royalty, and bribe and ransom will be of no avail.</p>	<p>וטעם אשר ישתה אדני בן עילה להגדיל עליהם האשם כי הגונב כוס המלך אשר ישתה בו בזה המלכות ולא יועיל כי ריבה שחד ותשלומין</p>
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They are, indeed, stopped, do not know that there is anything afoot (Gen. 44:7-9) and then the goblet is discovered in Binyamin's bag (Gen. 44:12). Setting-up this ensnaring of Binyamin may very well have been set up through this drinking episode that gets them drunk and then, perhaps hung-over, they set out on their way back home in the morning and not keen to carefully inspect their bags.

Conclusion

While it seems to be a strange occurrence of a bunch of brothers getting drunk in a royal palace, perhaps it could have been owing to their lack of drinking in years, the higher quality of wine, or even a set-up by their brother to catch them off-guard. One thing that is clear is that this final episode in the Torah of drunkenness is not negatively considered, but perhaps seems to be a synthesis of drinking and getting drunk in the Torah: brothers drinking and getting drunk with each other as a good time.

L'chaim 🍷

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