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Ya'akov's Vinous Blessing of Judah

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When we encounter Ya'akov's blessing to Yehudah in this week's Torah portion, it "can be divided into two parts: The first (vv. 8-10) is a promise of sovereignty over his brothers and the future kingdom/rule....The second part (vv. 11-12) is a blessing for the increase in wine production in the Judean Hills, a prophecy being fulfilled in our own day" (Aaron Demsky, *The Color of Judah's Eyes*, *TheTorah.com* (11 January 2017)). As we read these wine blessing lines, they are certainly fascinating descriptions regarding wine (Gen. 49:11-12):

He tethers his donkey to a vine, his donkey's foal to a choice vine; he washes his garment in wine, his robe in blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine; his teeth are whiter than milk.

These two verses, totalling 18 words, yield three separate sets of couplets: the first describing connections of donkeys to vines, the second to clothing drenched in wine, and the third describing colors and facial anatomy. But what exactly do they mean?

Talmudic Take

As this entire blessing contains some colorful and fascinating imagery, one third century rabbi provided his explanation of the entire aspect of Israel's vinous blessing to Yehudah (*Ketubot* 111b):

When Rav Dimi came, he said: "What is that which is written: 'Binding his foal to the vine' (Gen. 49:11)? Every grapevine you have in the land of Israel requires a foal to harvest. "And his donkey's colt to the choice vine" - Every barren tree you have in the land of Israel will produce enough to load two donkeys.

And lest you say 'they do not contain wine', the verse states: 'He washes his garments in wine'.

And lest you say 'It's not red', the verse states: 'And from the blood of the grape you drank foaming wine' (Deut. 32:14).

And lest you say 'It does not inebriate', the verse states: 'And his incitement' (Gen. 49:11).

And lest you say 'It has no flavor', the verse states: 'His eyes shall be red with wine' (Gen. 49:12). Each palate that tastes it, says: 'For me, for me.'

And lest you say, 'It is good for the young, but it is not good for the old', the verse states: 'And his teeth white with milk' (Gen. 49:12). Do not read *leven shinayim* (white teeth); rather, *leven shanim* (as one of [many] years."

כי יתאמר רב דימי, אמר: מאי דכתיב "ואוסר לִגְפֵן עֵרְוָה" - אין לך כל גֵּפֶן וְגֵפֶן שְׂבָאָרְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂאִין צְרִיךְ עֵיר אַחַת לְבַצֹּר. "וְלִשְׁוֹרְקָה בְּנֵי אֲתוֹנוֹ" - אין לך כל אֵילן סָרֵק שְׂבָאָרְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂאִינוֹ מוֹצִיא מִשּׁוֹי שְׂתֵי אֲתוֹנוֹת. וְשָׂמָּה תֵּאֱמַר אֵין בּוֹ יַיִן, תִּלְמֹד לֹמַר: "כִּבְסֵ בְּיַיִן לְבוֹשִׁי".

וְשָׂמָּה תֵּאֱמַר אֵינוֹ אֲדוֹם, תִּלְמֹד לֹמַר: "יֹדֵם עֵגֶב תִּשְׁתֶּה חֶמֶר".

וְשָׂמָּה תֵּאֱמַר אֵינוֹ מְרוּה - תִּלְמֹד לֹמַר: "סוֹתֵה". וְשָׂמָּה תֵּאֱמַר אֵין בּוֹ טַעַם - תִּלְמֹד לֹמַר: "הַכְּלִילִי עֵינַיִם מִיַּיִן".

כֹּל חֵירָק שְׂטוּעָעֵמוֹ, אֹמֵר: "יֵלֵי לֵי".

וְשָׂמָּה תֵּאֱמַר לְנִעְרִים יִפֶּה וְלִקְנִיָּם אֵינוֹ יִפֶּה - תִּלְמֹד לֹמַר: "וְלִבְּנֵי שָׂנִיִּים מִחֻלְבֵי", אֵל תִּיקָרֵי "לִבְּנֵי שָׂנִיִּים" אֵלֶּא "לִבְּנֵי שָׂנִיִּים".

Rav Dimi's poetic perspective on this blessing is rather fitting; after all, the language employed by Israel is quite poetic, so Rav Dimi is providing further poetic imagery as to how bountiful the wine harvests for Yehudah are to be as part of this blessing.

Beyond the poetry, how do each of these blessing couplets actually work out?



Of Donkeys and Vines

The first duo of these blessings - "He tethers his donkey to a vine, his donkey's foal to a choice vine" - seems to communicate something about donkeys carrying loads, similarly to what we read of Rav Dimi's description, yet why would someone tether their donkey to a vine? After all, this "image is problematic because an ass would soon destroy the vine to which it is tied" (Nahum Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 308).

Instead of tying a donkey to a vine, however, perhaps this image is meant more as a way for the grapes or wine to get to port:

Egyptian records from the mid-second millennium B.C.E. indicate that wines from Canaan were routinely shipped to Egypt from the seaport in Gaza. Coastal Ashkelon, which was a major wine producer in the seventh century B.C.E., would also have transported its wine by sea.

Land-locked Judah had no direct access to bodies of water for transporting wine outside of its own territory. Nevertheless, evidence of wine trade in Judah does exist. How would the wine get to the sea port in Gaza? This is where the donkeys in Genesis 49:11 come in. (Tina M. Sherman, "'He Tethers His Donkey to the Vine' - Judah Exported Soreqa Wine", *TheTorah.com* (17 December 2021).)

Now that we understand the donkey connection, another question that arises is what is שְׂרָקָה? Sherman writes that, "Modern translators and commentators...understand שְׂרָקָה (soreqa) as a reference to a vine that produces a high-quality grape variety. This interpretation is based on a related form, שְׂרָק (soreq), which appears three times in the Bible." [continued on next page]

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After pointing to Isaiah 5:2 and Jeremiah 2:21, she notes (ibid.):

The third instance of *soreq* occurs in Judges 16:4, as a place name: נַחַל הַסּוֹרֵק, the Sorek Ravine (known also as Wadi es-Sarār), which lies to the west of Jerusalem. The name of the ravine and the name of the grape variety are likely connected: *soreq* grapes grew in the Sorek Ravine.

Indeed, when Samson marries the woman from Timnah (Tel Batash), which lies just to the south of the Sorek Ravine, the narrative describes Samson arriving at *קרמי תמנתה* “the vineyards of Timnah” (Jud. 14:5). In fact, excavations at Timnah have identified a probable winepress at the site dating to the 6th century B.C.E. Finally, the valley has “sloping hills,” access to water, and a soil type that would have provided good growing conditions for grape vines.

For most of the biblical period, the Sorek Ravine was in the territory of Judah, and thus it makes sense that the blessing in Genesis 49:11 would explicitly connect these high quality *soreq* vines to Judah, which would have been an ideal export product.

Finally, wouldn't we expect camels for transporting such products? Indeed, it's a possibility, but not the only consideration (ibid.):

Camels were more efficient pack animals for long distance transport, but camels' footpads were less suited to hilly, rocky terrain. The Judahites would probably have used donkeys to transport their wines for the short trip from the hill country, where their vineyards were located, to a seaport, probably in Philistia, from which they could be shipped overseas.

Thus, the imagery of loading donkeys with grapes is not a general expression of plenty, but is meant to communicate that Judah will profit abundantly from its high-quality grapes, sending donkey after donkey loaded with *soreqa* wine down to the coast. From there, Judah's wine would be sold to connoisseurs around the Mediterranean, who would appreciate this high-quality Judean vintage.

Laundering Clothing in Wine?

The second duo of these blessings - *כבס בגינתו ויבדם ענבים סותה* - “he washes his garment in wine, his robe in blood of grapes” - seems to communicate an abundance of wine, as Rabbi Shlomo Yitzḥaki (1040-1105) (acronymically known as Rashi) comments: *כל זה לשון רבוי יין*. “All of this is an expression of the abundance of wine” (רש"י על בראשית). Indeed, in a more contemporary description of this picture:

This passage is generally understood as an exaggerated image: Judah will have so much wine that people will wash their garments in wine instead of water. More likely, it carries a sense similar to the modern use of the term “awash” to refer to being “full of or abounding in” something. Judah will be awash with wine, such that the flood of it will stain the people's garments red. (Sherman, “He Tethers His Donkey to the Vine”)

There are largely two different camps among the commentators as to how this laundering of wine will take place: whether as Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (1085-1158) commented, because their garments are so full of grape juice from trampling the harvest to prepare it for wine (רשב"ם) “All of this is an expression of the abundance of wine” (על בראשית מ"ט:יא, ד"ה כבס ביין לבושו), or, as Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) commented, because they will use wine instead of water to launder their clothes (עבדים ויבדם ענבים), ד"ה ויבדם ענבים (עבדים). Clearly, there is a massive abundance of wine!

Facial Features

The third and final duo of these blessings - *חכלילי עיניו מין ולבן שנינים* - “His eyes are darker than wine; his teeth are whiter than milk” - seems to communicate something again about wine, but not entirely clear what, for either the eyes or the teeth. So what do they mean?

Eyes Red from Wine

A typical interpretation amongst medieval commentators is the eyes become red from drinking wine (see Rashi (1040-1105), Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), Rabbi Yosef ben Isaac Bekhor Shor of Orléans (12th century), and Rabbi Abraham ben HaRambam (1186-1237)).

Eyes Redder than Wine

Rabbi Saadia Gaon (882-942) offers an alternative explanation, understanding the preposition *mem* as “more than”, rather than the causal *mem* “because of,” “as a result of”: *ולבן מין ויתר* “Redness in the eyes more than wine; whiteness in the teeth more than milk.” Rabbi Bekhor Shor suggests a similar explanation as an alternative possibility to the one he staked out first (red from wine):

His complexion is redder than wine and his teeth whiter than milk. Meaning, he is good looking with a good physique and fit to be a king, as was written about David (I Sam 16:12): “He was ruddy-cheeked, bright-eyed, and handsome.”	אדם מראיתו יותר מן היין, ושיניו לבנות יותר מחלב. כלומר: אדם יפה, ובעל תואר, והגון למלכות, כדכתיב בדוד: אדמוני עם יפה עינים וטוב רואי
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While all of these aforementioned commentators explain *חכלילי* as the color red as in red wine, this explanation is reinforced by the preceding two verses mentioning “blood of grapes” and *soreka*, one of the best types of vine whose clusters produce dark red wine. However, there is yet another perspective to consider.

Blackening Eyes

In contrast to these interpretations of *חכלילי*, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) (1194-1270) stands alone amongst medieval commentators, “explaining this word as a metathesized form (i.e., when the letters rearrange) of the root *חכל* (in Arabic *كحل*), with a doubling of the final letter” (Demsky, “The Color of Judah's Eyes”), as we read his commentary (רמב"ן על בראשית מ"ט:י"ב, ד"ה חכלילי עינים):

Commentators (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Radak) say that the word denotes redness, and it means that his eyes will become red from drinking much wine. Of similar meaning is the verse, “Who has redness of the eyes?” (Prov. 23:29). But it appears in my eyes that this is a case of a word whose letters are transposed, it being derived from the expression, “You painted your eyes” (Ez. 23:40). The lamed is doubled as is customary in many places, and it denotes the process of painting eyes which is known and frequently mentioned in the words of our Rabbis. In Arabic, its name is “*al kahul*.” The verse is thus stating that Judah's eyes are colored with wine for just as others paint them with *puch* (eye-paint), which is the Arabic “*al kahul*,” so does he paint them with wine, and just as others whiten their teeth with ointments, so does he whiten them with milk, the comparison indicating the abundance of wine and milk in Judah's land, just as Onkelos mentioned.

אמרו המפרשים (רש"י רב"ע והרד"ק) שהוא עיניו אדמימות שיתאדמו עיניו מרוב שתית יין וכמוהו למי חכלילות עינים (משלי כג כט) והנראה בעיניו שהוא הפוך מן חכלת עינין (יחזקאל כג כ) ונכפלה בו הלמ"ד כמנהג רבים והוא כענין מכחול העינים הידוע ומורגל בדברי רבותינו (כלים פ"ג מ"ב) וכן שמו בערבי "אל כחול" יאמר שהוא כחול העינים מן היין כי כאשר אחרים כוחלים אותם בפוך שהוא ה"אל כחול" כן יכחול אותם הוא ביין וכמו שהאחרים מלבנים שניהם בתמרוקים כן ילבן אותם בחלב והמשל לרבויו היין והחלב בארצו כאשר הזכיר אונקלוס (תרגום אונקלוס על בראשית מ"ט:י"ב)

It should also be pointed out that other commentators mention the bounty of milk in the lands, thus, the whitening of teeth.

Conclusion

Ya'akov's blessing to Yehudah includes these multiple wine-related blessings, which turn out to yield Yehudah having a lot of wine-yield in his territory. Not only do we see that there is so much wine produced in that area, just as in Biblical times, they were able to export the wine, so, too, in our day, are we able to enjoy Israeli wine outside of the land of Israel. L'chaim 🍷