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Drinking in the Divine

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A curious Biblical drinking story occurs towards the end of this week's Torah portion (Ex. 24:9-11):

And Moses, Aaron, Nadav, and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel—under whose feet was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet [God] did not raise a hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

ויעל משה ואהרן נדב
ואביהוא ושבעים מזקני
ישראל: ויראו את
אלקי ישראל ותחת
רגליו כמעשה לבנת
הספיר וכעצם השמים
לטרה: ואל אצילי בני
ישראל לא שלח ידו
יחזו את האלקים
ויאכלו וישתו



As to how this incident is described in Midrash Tanhuma, it is the following (מדרש תנחומא, בהעלותך ט"ז:א):

Was there [actually] eating and drinking there? To what is the matter comparable? To a servant who attended his master while [holding] a slice of bread in his hand and taking bites from it. Similarly, had they acted with disrespect as if they had been eating and drinking. So the elders along with Nadav and Avihu deserved to be destroyed by fire on that day; but because the giving of Torah was dear to the Holy One, blessed be He, He therefore did not want to harm them and bring calamity to them on that day. This is what is written, "But He (the Holy One, blessed be He,) did not raise His hand against the nobles of the Children of Israel" (Ex. 24:11). From this [description], you may infer that they deserved to have a hand raised [against them].

וכי אכילה ושתיה היה
שם. משל למה הדבר
דומה, לעבד שהיה
משמר את רבו
ופרסו בידו והוא
נושך ממנו, כך הקלו
את ראשם כאוכלים
ושותים. והיו ראוי
לישרף באותה שעה
הזקנים ונדב ואביהו.
ומפני שהיה מתן
תורה חביב לפני
הקדוש ברוך הוא,
לפיכך לא רצה
הקדוש ברוך הוא
לפגע בהם בו ביום
לעשות פרצה בהם,
הדא הוא דכתיב: ואל
אצילי בני ישראל לא
שלח ידו (שם), מקלל
שהיו ראויים להשתלח
ידו

Wow! While seeing God should be remarkable enough, having this visual depiction of what lay beneath God's feet is already astounding. Yet, perhaps due to how fantastic that description is, the drinking that follows seems to get lost in our readings of this scene. As one person with whom I am connected on Facebook remarked this week: "What does it mean that they saw God and they ate and drank? This seems to be a very difficult (and often forgotten) passage?"

Eating and Drinking?

Setting aside the question as to "what does it mean that they saw God?", as that deserves its own treatment, the question about "what does it mean that they ate and drank?" actually is quite fascinating, as we do not typically read of divine encounters with an accompaniment of a meal, whether subsequently or simultaneously occurring to seeing God. Indeed, we can read of two differing opinions within Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki's (1040-1105) commentary (רש"י על שמות כ"ד:י"א, ד"ה ויחזו את) (האליהם):

They stared at God with a coarse attitude through [simply] eating and drinking, such is the incident described in Midrash Tanhuma, but Onkelos does not translate it that way.

היו מסתכלין בו בלב
גם מתוך אכילה
ושתיה, כך מדרש
תנחומא, ואנקלוס
לא תרגם כן



According to this midrash, they acted in a disrespectful manner as if they had been eating and drinking, yet, seemingly, this midrash is not content with them actually having eaten and drank at this point.

As to Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki mentioning Onkelos (35-120 CE), here is his translation (תרגום אונקלוס על שמות כ"ד:י"א):

But against the nobility of the B'nei Yisrael, He [God] did not send His hand [there was no damage]. They envisioned [saw the Glory of] God, and they [rejoiced in their sacrifices which were accepted graciously as if they] ate and drank.

ולרברבי בני
ישראל לא הוה
מקא וחוזו ית וקרא
די והוה חדן
בקרביהון
דאתקבלו ברעוא
כאלו אכלו ושתו

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These two positions that Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki mention conflict in two different ways: (1) whether there was actually eating and drinking there or not, and (2) whether their behavior was appropriate to the situation or not. While there may have been some further commentators that saw it the same as the midrash suggests, the notion that the 74 leaders of the Israelites merely behaved in a haughty manner so as to seem as if they had eaten and drank, yet did not, did not seem to catch on.

What Did They Eat and Drink?

While there is no specification as to what they ate nor what they drank, many commentators connected their consumption with the peace-offerings made in Exodus 24:5, such as Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (1085-1158) and Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) (רשב"ם) (על שמות כ"ד: י"א, ד"ה ויאכלו וישתו). This would mean that they would have taken it with them as provisions along their journey to encounter the Divine. As to what they drank, it would likely be wine and/or water. Why were they drinking, though?

Description of Happiness

One answer as to why they were drinking was simply that they were happy. Rabbi ibn Ezra, described them as being happy (אבן עזרא על) and Rabbi Yoseph ben Yitzhak Bekhor Shor of Orléans (12th century), who described them as being שמחים הרבה (שמות כ"ד: י"א, ד"ה ויאכלו וישתו) "Very happy" (בכור שור, שמות כ"ד: י"א, ד"ה ואל אצילי בני ישראל).

A Sense of Achievement?

Perhaps beyond simply being happy, an intriguing description of the motivation of these leaders' drinking is described by Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1549), who wrote (ד"ה ויאכלו) (וישתו):

Afterwards, they made a drinking-party without their normal senses having been in any way transformed or temporarily neutralized. They made this party upon what they [felt they] had achieved. עשו משתה אחרי כן בלתי השתנת בחושיהם, וזה עשו לשמחה על מה שהשיגו

Rabbi Sforno's comment here criticizing these leaders seems to indicate that their drinking-party should have an element of celebrating being spiritually changed, although they are sorely lacking in that department. It is certainly a curious criticism.

Not on Moshe's Level

Speaking of spiritual levels, a not uncommon theme amongst many commentators is that the direct divine experience does not occur that much, yet this juxtaposition of seeing God and consumption is shown in clear contrast to Moshe's abstaining from food and drink for 40 days, as described in Exodus 34:28. Indeed, this is articulated by Rabbi ibn Ezra quoting Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi (1075-1141) (עזרא על שמות) (כ"ד: י"א, ד"ה וישתו):

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi said that the meaning of and did eat is, they had to eat even though they enjoyed the splendor of God's presence. Scripture mentions this because Moses lived for forty days and forty nights without eating and drinking, as is noted in the next section. ורבי יהודה הלוי אמר כי טעם ויאכלו. כי הוצרכו שיאכלו אע"פ שנהנו מזיו השכינה. והזכיר זה בעבור משה שחיה ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה בלא אכילה ככתוב בפ' אחרי זאת

Rabbi HaLevi's take on their need to eat and drink is simply a need, despite their enjoying the Divine Presence.

Celebrating Receiving the Torah

As opposed to simply being happy at seeing God or needing to now eat and drink, an altogether different description of the motivation for eating and drinking is something that Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) articulates (רמב"ן על שמות כ"ד: י"א: ד):

The meaning of the expression "and they drank" is that they made it an occasion for rejoicing and festival, for such is one's duty to rejoice at the receiving of the Torah, just as He commanded when they finished writing all the words of the Torah upon the stones, "And thou shalt sacrifice peace-offerings, and shalt eat there; and thou shalt rejoice before the Eternal thy G-d" (Deut. 27:7). And with reference to Solomon it is written, "Wisdom and knowledge is granted unto thee etc." (II. Chron. 1:12), and immediately after that, "he came to Jerusalem... and made a drinking-party for all his servants" (1 Kings 3:15). "Rabbi Elazar: 'From here, you learn that we make a drinking-party at the finishing of the Torah" (SOS Rabbah 1:9).

וטעם וישתו שעשו שמחה ויום טוב, כי כן חובה לשמוח בקבלת התורה, כאשר צוה בכתבם כל דברי התורה על האבנים וזבחת שלמים ואכלת שם ושמחת לפני ה' אלהיך (דברים כז ז). וכתבי בשלמה (דה"ב א' יב) החכמה והמדע נתון לך וגו', מיד ויבא ירושלם ויעש משתה לכל עבדיו (מלכים א' ג: ט"ו). ואמר רבי אלעזר מכאן שעושין משתה לגמרה של תורה (הש"ר א' ט).

In other words, these elders are celebrating receiving the Torah through drinking and merriment, which is to be emulated whenever celebrating something of a Torah matter, as well as completing one's study of a Torah aspect. In Rabbi Moses ben Nahman's view, this was no mere haphazard drinking incident, this is actually meant to serve instructively as a blueprint for Torah-based celebrating.

Albeit of a more descriptive angle, Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (1270-1340) seems to echo this depiction of this scene as celebratory (טור) (האר"ך, שמות כ"ד: י"א, ד"ה וישתו):

They made a big party on the day of receiving the Torah, similar to the commandment of writing all of the Torah's words upon the stones: "and you shall sacrifice there offerings of well-being and eat them there" (Deut. 27:7) - that it is a commandment to rejoice at the covenant of the Torah.

שעשו שמחה גדולה ביום מתן תורה כאשר מצוה בכותבם כל דברי התורה באבנים וזבחת שלמים ואכלת שם שמחה לשמוח בברית התורה.

Conclusion

While it is already quite surprising to see over seven dozen leaders of our ancestors seeing God on top of a gorgeous sapphire pavement, perhaps even more shocking is that they eat and drink while seeing/watching God(!). They likely ate from the peace-offerings made before their ascending the mountain while also consuming wine. While there are some voices critical of this consumptive behavior, many medieval commentators described the leaders' behavior as rejoicing over their experience of seeing God and receiving the Torah. Moreover, receiving the Torah is very much not only worthy of rejoicing through drinking, but should also occur when completing Torah milestones.

L'chaim 