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The Golden Calf as a Biblical Drinking Story

Rabbi Drew Kaplan

While we do not typically think of the Sin of the Golden Calf story as a Biblical drinking story, it surprisingly is. Perhaps what makes this story in our mind to be considered as a drinking story is that the drinking happens after the sin. Indeed, after Aaron creates the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:1-5), we then read of their drinking (Ex. 32:6):

Early the next day, the nation offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

In considering this, one aspect that seems to be a bit different is that we do not typically have much in the way of choreographical descriptions when it comes to eating and or drinking in the Torah, yet here we read of them specifically sitting to do so, which is then followed by them then standing up to do play/dance.

Perhaps this erotic dancing in which they engaged had something to do with how much they drank, especially considering that they may have gotten drunk through their celebrating, as Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) described (רמב"ן על שמות ל"ב:ו):

This means that they all sat down together to eat to satiety and drink until they got drunk, as they would do at feasts and on festivals, and afterwards, they rose up to make merry with their idols and indulge in revelry.

While celebrating opportunities is not a wrong move in and of itself, the Golden Calf was indeed a massive error and sin. There is a lot to discuss regarding the sin of the Golden Calf, although that deserves its own separate discussion. However, it is clear that it was wrong.

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Who is to Drink on Purim?

Rabbi Drew Kaplan

Following-up from last week's discussion of When to drink on Purim, a further matter to consider is Who is supposed to drink on Purim?

When we consider the phrasing of the original statement by Rava (280-352), the "who" is to drink seems to be a person, although potentially a man (*Megillah* 7b):

Rava said: "A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until one does not know the difference between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordekhai."

We later read that this statement is repeated verbatim by Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575) in his *Shulhan Arukh* (OH §695:2). But is getting drunk on Purim really for everyone?

While this term literally means a human being, it seems reasonable to understand it meaning within this context to be speaking of Jews. But is this really to mean all Jews? Could it mean men, but not boys? Could it mean men, but not women? Seemingly, these distinctions seem to be absent from writings on this matter throughout halachic history (unless they do, indeed, exist and I have yet to encounter them).

Are Women Included?

Does איניש also include women? Perhaps, although there does not seem to be [much/any] pre-20th century rabbinic writings on the matter, as Rabbanit Debbie Zimmerman has pointed out, this is a rather recent phenomenon ("Purim - Women and Alcohol", *Matan* (Adar 5579/March 2019)):

In the last century or so, several prominent *poskim* (rabbinic decisors) have questioned whether women are included in this obligation.

For example, Rav Vosner rules that a woman is not obligated to get drunk based on a *gemara* in *Ketubot* that warns that too much wine causes women to behave lewdly....

Similarly, Rav Shternbuch rules that women are not obligated because they do not regularly get drunk and drunkenness could lead to serious sins. ...

While some may balk at a double standard for man and women, it is inappropriate to dismiss opinions of such *poskim* without a second thought. In this case, it seems reasonable to entertain the possibility that this distinction between men and women is at least partially based on physiological differences that still exist today. There are a plethora of studies indicating that women have a lower alcohol tolerance than men - meaning that the average woman gets drunk twice as fast as the average man, and overindulgence can pose a more significant threat to women's health. Additionally, it would be irresponsible to ignore the fact that inebriation makes a person even more vulnerable than usual, so a woman who chooses to drink on Purim should be careful to do so in a safe environment.

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Drinking the Golden Calf?

While one might think that this is the only drinking element of the story, there's actually more. Indeed, we read of Moshe doing the following (Ex. 32:20):

He took the calf that they had made	וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַעֲגֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ
and burned it; he ground it to	וַיִּשְׂרֹף בְּאֵשׁ וַיִּטְחֵן עֵד
powder and strewed it upon the	אֲשֶׁר־דָּקַק וַיִּזֶר עַל־פְּנֵי
water and so made the Israelites	הַמַּיִם וַיִּשְׁקוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי
drink it.	יִשְׂרָאֵל

This drinking that the Israelites then do seems almost like the suspected adulteress ritual (cf. Num. 5), which the second-century sage Rabbi Yossi (d. 160) articulated (AZ 44a), followed by many Medieval commentators.

Some Possibilities

As to the mechanics of this gold being made drinkable in the water, Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) wrote (מב"ן על שמות):

The reference is to the water from the brook that descended out of the mountain. Moses commanded all of Israel to drink from these waters. ...	הם מי נחל יורד מן ההר וצוה שישתו כל ישראל מאלה המים.... והנה המים חדשו אות בעובדי העגל בפניהם או שצבתה בטנם
Now the water caused a sign to appear on the face of those who served the calf or their bellies swelled up.	

Rabbi ibn Ezra is clearly influenced by Rabbi Yossi's connecting this story with the suspected adulteress ceremony in mentioning the bellies swelling up (see Num. 5:21-22 & 5:27), although there is nothing written in this story concerning physical consequences of drinking the golden-laced water.

Rabbi Moses ben Nahman continued to consider how the golden calf would have made it into the water to be drinkable (מב"ן על שמות ל"ב, כ):

After grinding the golden calf to a fine powder, he scattered it on the surface of the stream which came down from the mountain, and made the people drink of those waters. It is possible that gold burnt in fire does not melt, but instead when placed therein is charred and can be ground to powder, as Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra mentioned. This powder was light upon the face of the waters, and therefore it floated, and he made them drink of it. Or it may be that he scattered it upon the stream in small quantities, and then drew the water and made them drink it before the gold powder sank in the stream. Or perhaps it was a miraculous event. Thus he wanted to disgrace their deeds by grinding their god to powder and bringing it into their bellies to issue as excrement.	אחרי שהיה דק לעפר זרקו על פני מי הנחל היורד מן ההר והשקה אותן מאותן המים. ואפשר כי הזהב השרוף שאיננו נתר, אבל הוא שרוף, ונטחן עד אשר דק, כאשר הזכיר ר"א, קל הוא על פני המים, על כן היה צף והשקהו להם. או היה זורה אותו על הנחל מעט מעט, ושואב ומשקה להם טרם ישקע. או שהיה ממעשה הנסים. והנה רצה לבזות מעשיהם, טחן האלוה שלהם והכניסו בבטנם שיוציאוהו ברעי ובצואה
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Following the articulations of these possibilities, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman explicitly liked Rabbi Yossi's idea of connecting this experience with that of the suspected adulteress.

However this gold made it into the water to be consumed, it is certainly a colorful conclusion to this Biblical drinking story!

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Indeed, there seem to be numerous 20th century Haredi halakhic decisors who articulated that women are not obligated within this category (Rabbi Ephraim Greenblatt (1932-2014)'s *Rivevos Ephraim* 1:458, 4:173:10, 53, *Mekadesh Yisroel Purim* 334, Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch (1926-)'s *Moadim V'zmanim* 2:190, Rabbi Gavriel Zinner's *Nitei Gavriel Purim* 73:4, Rabbi Shmuel HaLevi Vosner (1913-2015)'s *Shevet HaLevi* 10:18:2, and *Shulhan Arukh Hamekutzar* 123, n. 19 (Credit goes to Rabbi Moishe Dovid Lebovits for compiling this list ("Drinking on Purim", *Halakhically Speaking* 10:3 (2014), 12, n. 7)).). However, while women seem to be halakhically exempt from getting drunk on Purim, that does not mean that it is necessarily inappropriate for them to get drunk on Purim.

What About Those Who are Not Yet Men?

While we read of Jewesses being exempted from getting drunk on Purim, what about males under a certain age? In recent decades, there have been dozens of publications in the Jewish world advocating not only against, but quite strongly and harshly against teenagers drinking, whether in general, or on Purim, in particular.

In America, usually a large focus of attention in popular discourse is against underage drinking, which would be anyone under the age of 21, as that is the current minimum legal age for the purchasing of alcohol in this country. I suspect the discourse in any country is largely going to follow along the lines of minimum legal age, although another variable to consider are the varying cultural norms from one country to another.

While underage drinking, in general, and Purim, in particular, continues to occur, whether only in small numbers or otherwise, it is certainly concerning. According to various 20th century Haredi halakhic decisors, children are not included in Purim-drinking (*Moadim V'zmanim* 2:190, *Teshuvos V'hanhagos* 3:229, and *Nitei Gavriel Purim* 73:4, n. 10 (Credit for this list goes once again to Rabbi Lebovits (Ibid., 13, n. 79)).). Furthermore, there are many, many dangers associated with under-age drinking, as can be seen from the deeply unfortunate number of teenagers who end up in hospitals on Purim.

Further Demographic Consideration

These considerations concerning demographics also make me think about another aspect of drinking. As Rava was arguably the Talmud's most notable wine-drinker, one wonders if he was used to having others around him who also were experienced drinkers, and perhaps even finding themselves happily inebriated on occasion. If so, perhaps he made his statement in the sense of "If you're going to drink and get drunk on any number of occasions throughout the year, make sure to do so on Purim." That way, one demonstrates that it is certainly the drinkingest day par excellence on the Jewish calendar and full of merriment. However, perhaps, for those not accustomed to drinking, much less getting drunk, perhaps the obligation to get drunk is certainly less necessary.

Conclusion

While the language used both by Rava in the Talmud, as well as in subsequent halakhic literature, including Rabbi Karo in his *Shulhan Arukh*, seems to be broadly inclusive of people to get drunk on Purim, it seems inappropriate for underage people (particularly teenagers) to drink, while women are exempted from this inclusion. While this seems to limit the drinking to men, one also wonders about those who are not used to getting drunk. Certainly, however, for those used to drinking and/or getting drunk, Purim is a wondrously festive and very appropriate day for doing so.

L'chaim 