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Blood: A Forbidden Beverage

Rabbi Drew Kaplan

In this week's Torah portion, we see a clear prohibition against the consumption of blood (Lev. 3:17):

It is an enduring particular law wherever you dwell: you must not eat any fat or any blood.

While there was a previous prohibition already mentioned against blood-consumption (Gen. 9:4), this seems to be brought up at this place in the Torah due to all of the offerings taking place in the text. Yet, you might ask, why are we discussing eating blood, since this publication concerns drinking? We are discussing it in these terms, since our sages considered this blood a beverage that could be drunk.

Rabbis Consider Blood as a Beverage

While we do not typically consider blood as a beverage, our sages certainly did, as it can be drunk. In fact, you can go ahead and search online for news articles about those who drink blood, whether human or otherwise. Spoiler alert: doctors recommend against it. Nevertheless, the Mishnah includes blood as one of seven beverages that cause impurity (mMakhshirin 6:4):

There are seven beverages: dew, water, wine, oil, blood, milk, and bees' honey.



While we certainly consider wine, milk, and water as consumable beverages, others on this list may not necessarily make us consider them as such. Nevertheless, blood can certainly be a beverage. This

is made clear to us, as the rabbis considered this, as well (תוספתא שבת):

Whence is it that blood is a beverage? As it is said: "And drunk the blood of the slain"

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I know what you're thinking: Why is the essay below concerning Passover, when Purim has not even occurred? Great question! In the Talmud, there is a teaching that states (Pesachim 6a)

One asks about and teaches the halakhot of Passover thirty days before Passover.

Not to trigger anyone, but Passover is 30 days from this Shabbat, thus, this publication is now beginning to discuss Passover matters.

Have no fear, though: Purim materials are still available at JewishDrinking.com/Purim l'chaim and have an enjoyable Purim

Which Wine to Drink for the 4 Cups?

Rabbi Drew Kaplan

When it comes to drinking four cups at the Passover Seder, wine is the expected beverage to be drunk for these four cups. In many times and places throughout the Jewish experience, wine has been unobtainable; in those circumstances, one can use raisin wine, which is done by soaking raisins in water, since raisins are simply dried-out grapes. If one does not even have raisins available, there are some who say one can use mead for the four cups at the Seder.

Talmudic Statements on Wine for the Four Cups

There is a second century text that is pretty accepting of all wines

These four cups must contain one quarter-log, whether the wine is undiluted or diluted, whether it is new or aged.

Thereupon, Rabbi Yehudah (2nd century) argues against this very open and welcoming position to the wine at the Seder, restricting what one can use

Rabbi Yehudah says: "[The wine for the four cups of wine at the Seder] must have the taste and appearance of wine."

While it is unclear which types of wine don't look like wine (perhaps it could be cloudy or some other non-wine appearance), the Talmud's greatest wine-lover, Rava (280 - 352) offered

"What is Rabbi Yehudah's reason for making this statement? As it is written: 'Only look upon wine when it reddens' (Prov. 23:31)."

To Rava's understanding, Rabbi Yehudah seems to be speaking about the color of the wine for the cups. In this way, Rava explicitly favors the redness of wine for the four cups of wine at the Passover



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4th Century Articulation of Drinking of Blood

While those texts above discuss blood as a beverage, what about their consumption, which, as we read in our Torah portion, is described as eating? For this, a fourth-century sage describes it as drinking (תלמוד ירושלמי מעשר שני ב:א:ב):

Whence is it that drinking is included in eating?	מניין שהשתיה בכלל אכילה
Rabbi Yonah understood it from the following (Lev. 17:12): "Therefore, I said to the Children of Israel, no person among you may eat blood."	רבי יונה שמע לה מן הדא. על כן אמרתי לבני ישראל כל נפש מכם לא יאכל דם



This is a very clear articulation that, despite the language of "eating" blood, it is, indeed, a matter of drinking.

What About Coagulated Blood?

Another question that arises is blood which is no longer in liquid form considered a liquid? It seems that the Talmudic rabbis understood it to encompass a problem even if the blood was made into a non-liquid (*Hullin* 120a):

One who caused blood to coagulate and ate it or melted forbidden fat and swallowed it is liable.	הקפה את הדם ואכלו או שהמחה את החלב וגמנו חייב
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While this is a problematic behavior, as we read in this week's Torah portion that it is consuming/eating, is it a beverage and/or is it drinking? As we see in the following Talmudic discussion, it seems unclear (תלמוד ירושלמי מעשר שני ב:א:ב):

How do we consider congealed blood? But is it not taught: "Congealed blood is neither food nor drink"?	מה נן קיימין אם בדם שקרש. והתני דם שקרש אינו לא אוכל ולא משקה. אלא כי נן קיימין כמות
So we must hold as is, and the Torah called it "eating."	שהוא והתורה קראת אותו אכילה.

In this consideration, while the blood is no longer a liquid, it is no longer a beverage, yet its consumption remains problematic, leaving the language to consider it as "eating".

Pernicious Blood Libels

During this time of year, the notion of blood-drinking is particularly uncomfortable, owing to the pernicious and false blood libels made against Jews for centuries. This ultimately came along with terrible anti-Semitic notions of Jews as blood-sucking vampires, especially in the 19th and early 20th century up until the Holocaust. For readers of this publication, you will have noticed what Rabbi David HaLevy Segal wrote that, in his time in Poland, Jews did not drink red wine at the Passover Seder for fear of the blood libels, preferring to stick to white wine for the Four Cups of Wine at the Seder.

Conclusion

While we might not consider the prohibition against eating of blood in our Torah portion as having anything to do with drinking, yet our sages clearly perceived this prohibition even extending to drinking blood, yielding it as a drinking prohibition in our tradition.

There have also been deeply unfortunate and false blood libels against the Jewish people have not been prevalent enough to get in our way of consuming red wine at the Passover Seder these days, ultimately, Jews never consumed blood, it has never been part of our tradition in any which way, and we should be fortunate to celebrate our Passover Seders with red wine this year.

L'chaim 🍷

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Seder, which makes sense, since he used this Scriptural verse for arguing that one should only ever use red wine for Shabbat kiddush (*Bava Batra* 97b). Clearly, the Talmud's greatest wine-lover not only preferred red wines versus white wines in general, but also for ritual use. However, it would seem it was not a mere personal preference for him, as we read of another fourth century rabbi to privilege red wine for the four cups of wine at the Passover Seder, as Rabbi Yirmiyah in Israel (4th century) said (*yShekalim* 3:2):

Rabbi Yirmiyah said: "It is a commandment to fulfill one's requirement of four cups of wine at the Passover Seder with red wine, as it is said, 'Only look at wine when it reddens...' (Prov. 23:31)."	אמר רבי ירמיה מצוה לצאת בין אדום שנאמר אל תרא יין כי יתאדם
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So, rabbis in both Israel and Persia in the fourth century were not only explicitly advocating the use of red wine for the four cups of wine at the Passover Seder, but also using the same scriptural verse to do so.

That may have had something to do with a widespread preference for red wine over white wine, as we read of a late third century rabbi contrasting them (*Gittin* 70a):

Rav Hisda said: "There are sixty types of wine. The best of them all is red, fragrant; the worst of them all is inferior white wine."	רב חסדא: שיתין מיני חמרא הוו, מעליא דכולהו – סימקא ריחיתנא, גריעא דכולהו – טיליא חיורא
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Ratifying Rabbinic Preference for Red Wine

Ultimately, Rabbi Yosef Karo made sure to write that we should use red wine for our four cups of wine at the Passover Seder (שו"ע). An interesting perspective to provide some further meaning-making on red wine at the Passover Seder is that, as Rabbi David HaLevi Segal (1586-1667) (popularly known as the Taz) wrote (ט"ז או"ח):

There is a further hint to red wine in that it commemorates the blood that Pharaoh spilt of the Israelites.	יש עוד רמז לאדום זכר לדם שהי פרעה שוחט בני ישראל
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Considering White Wine

However, Rabbi Yaakov, son of Asher (1270-1340) (popularly known as the Rosh) wrote, if white wine was preferable, one should use white wine (טור או"ח תע"ב:י"א), with which Rabbi Moses Isserles (1530-1572) agreed (רמ"א לשו"ע או"ח תע"ב:י"א). While it seems to be that he is discussing one's own personal palate preference, it could also be better for safety reasons, as Rabbi David HaLevi Segal wrote, when there are blood libels swirling around, then it is definitely preferable to use white wine, such as in his time, when Jews in Poland were avoiding using red wine (ט"ז או"ח תע"ב:ט).

Altered Wines

While it is not preferable, one can also fulfill one's wine obligation of the four cups at the Passover Seder with a few different types of changed wines. The Yerushalmi Talmud infers from Bar Kappara's statement that spiced wine, such as with honey and peppers (which is called *conditum* (whether *conditum viatorium* (traveler's spiced wine) or *conditum paradoxum* (surprise spiced wine)), is like wine, so one can fulfill one's wine-drinking with that, as well as Rabbi Yonah saying one may fulfill one's obligation using cooked wine, and Rabbi Hiyya's statement that one may use mixed wine, as long as it still looks like wine (*yShekalim* 3:2), all of which gets codified (שו"ע תע"ב:י"ב).

Fortunately, it all goes back to that second century text that is very accepting of various wines for the four cups of wine at the Passover Seder.

L'chaim 🍷