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The Bounty of Grapes

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When Israel's Ministry of Tourism was created in 1964, what logo did they choose to represent their ministry? A scene depicted in our Torah portion



related to drinking! The scene I am describing is that of the tourists bringing back a big bunch of grapes on a pole. And, as readers of this publication understand, these grapes are meant to signal the bountifulness of the land, as well as their ability to make a lot of wine, as well as good-tasting wine.

When Did They Visit?

It was no accident that these tourists found a big bunch of grapes, since, as our Torah portion describes it, these scouts visited during "ימי בכורי" the days of the first ripe grapes" (Num. 13:20).

As to when this was, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi) wrote that it was (רש"י על במדבר י"ג:כ, ד"ה בכורי ענבים):

The days when the grapes were ripening at its early stage of growth. ימים שהענבים מתבשליין בבכור

Thus, it was in the summer, perhaps late July-early August. To be in Israel at this time of year also means it is pretty warm for these tourists. A fuller description of this time of year is that of Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1470-1550) (popularly known as Sforno), who wrote (ספורנו על במדבר י"ג:כ, ד"ה והימים ימי בכורי ענבים):

The fruit for which the land is famous had not even fully ripened as yet as it was still early in the season. Even so, what they would see would be enough to convince them of the excellence of the land. ולא היו הפירות שנשתבחה בהם בשלמותם עדיין מכל מקום בטח משה רבינו שגודל הפירות וטעמם גם באותו הזמן יספיק להעיד על שבח הארץ וטובה

Bringing the Bounty

When these scouts come upon these grapes, they are seeking to accomplish the task set out to them by Moshe of "ולקחתם מפרי הארץ" You shall take from amongst the fruits of the land" (Num. 13:20), which they clearly do (Num. 13:23):

They reached the wadi Eshcol, and there they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes and they carried it on a pole with two, and some pomegranates and figs. ויבאו עד-נחל אשכול ויכרתו משם זמורה ואשכול ענבים אחד וישארו במקוט בשנים ומן הרמנים ומן התאנים

This would certainly seem to be a straightforward depiction as reflected in the logo for the Israel Ministry of Tourism, albeit without the pomegranates and figs. Yet, some rabbis perceived the bounty brought back by these scouts as somehow even more impressive.

Talmudic Expansion of Fruit

It is quite curious that despite it seeming quite simply that this massive cluster of grapes required a pole to be carried by two of the scouts, the rabbis discuss the possibilities that there may have been a multiplicity of poles and scouts, beginning with the second century sage, Rabbi Yehudah (*Sotah* 34a):

Rabbi Yehudah says: "...Isn't it understandable when it stated "on a pole", do I not already know that it was carried by two? What is the verse to be understood as teaching upon 'with two'? With two poles." אמר רבי יהודה: אמר רבי יהודה... ממשמע שנאמר "במוט", איני יודע שבשנים? מה תלמוד לומר "בשנים" – בשני מוטות.

It would seem that Rabbi Yehudah's close reading of the verse in our Torah portion yields that it should have been obvious that, if there was a pole used to carry this bunch of grapes, then there should be no need to describe it as having been carried by two of these scouts. In his reading, this mention of two is describing that there was not merely one pole, but a doubling of this pole used to transport these grapes. Ostensibly, that would require four of these scouts to carry these poles.

However, a rabbi in the subsequent century expanded Rabbi Yehudah's description even further, adding poles to this carrying set-up (*Sotah* 34a):

Rabbi Yitzhak said: "Scales and scales of scales. How so? Eight of the spies carried the cluster, one of them carried a pomegranate, and one carried a fig. Joshua and Caleb did not carry anything." אמר רבי יצחק: טורטני, וטורטני טורטני, הא כיצד? שמנה נשאו אשכול, אחד נשא רימון, ואחד נשא תאנה. יהושע וכלב לא נשאו כלום

While I am not sure from which language this loanword of *torteni* derives (the closest I have found [so far] is that Middle Persian's *tarāzu* (if you know whence this word derives, please let me know)), Rabbi Yitzhak is describing a set-up where each of these poles is carried by four of these tourists; how does it work?

One description is provided by the Tosafistic authors, who quote Rabbi Hananel ben Hushiel (980-1055) (popularly known as Rabbeinu Hananel) in the following (תוספות על סוטה ל"ד א, ד"ה טורטני וטורטני דטורטני):

Rabbeinu Hananel explained that turteni is reed of scales in Greek. How did they carry it? They brought two poles and a string with ropes and put the cluster on top of ropes and put poles in ropes at the end of the latticed columns and the cluster gave one pole from one end of the head and so on at the top of the other end two פירש ר"ח דטורטני בלשון יון קנה של מאזנים וכיצד נשאוהו הביאו שני עמודים וסירגום בחבלים ונתנו האשכול על גבי חבלים ונתנו מוטות בחבלים בקצה העמודים המסורגים והאשכול נתן מוט א' מן הקצה מזה הראש וכיצא בה {continued on next page}

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poles were found at the top. The posts are latticed with ropes and the cluster is supported by ropes, and for each pole of those poles two poles are less, of which a pole is at the head of this and a pole at the head of that. Four poles were found at the heads of the two poles that were placed at the heads of the columns, and each pole and pole of these four poles were holding them, etc. That is rods and rods on rods.

בראש מקצה האחר נמצאו שתי מוטות בראש העמודים המסורגים בחבלים והאשכול נתון בחבלים ועל כל מוט מאלו המוטות שתי מוטות פחותין מהן מוט בראש זה ומוט בראש זה נמצאו ארבע מוטות בראשי שני מוטות הנתונים בראשי העמודים וכל מוט ומוט מאלו ד' מוטות היו טוענים אותן שני אנשים נמצאו שמנה סובלין את האשכול וזה פירוש טורטני וכו' כלומר מוטות ומוטות על מוטות

However, our sages, of blessed memory, chose the side of sailing and tall tales that they were scales and scales on scales.

ואולם לרבתי ז"ל על צד ההפלה והגזמה שהיו טורטני וטורטני דטורטני

Indeed, this pushing back on this notion of all of these poles and men needed to carry this one bunch of grapes certainly seems quite fantastical and not particularly realistic. Indeed, perhaps the Talmudic rabbis were simply pointing out how big these grape bunches could have been, yet, that doesn't reflect the reality as described in the our Torah portion, according to Ralbag.

Another subsequent rabbi who thought that, according to the Biblical text, it seems as if it were simply just two men carrying it, as Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855) wrote (במדבר, על התורה, ביאור יש"ר על התורה, במדבר):

According to its straightforward reading, it was carried by two.

לפי פשוטו בשני אנשים

Compromise?

Does one have to describe the carrying as done by only eight or two men? Apparently not, as Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) (popularly known as the Netziv) cleverly wrote (ד"ה) (וישארו במוט בשנים):

According to how it's written, there were two who carried it until all of the men were gathered. From there, they carried the bunch of grapes until the wilderness of Paran. And then eight of the men carried it, as it is in the Talmud (*Sotah* 34a). And had the scriptural verse not stated "two", I would have considered that the explanation of "and they carried it on a pole" as describing each of them carrying it a little bit of the way. From here, scripture describes that the pole rested on the shoulder(s) of two of them together.

כמשמעו, המה השנים נשארו עד אשר נתקבצו כל האנשים, ומשם נשאו את האשכול עד מדבר פארן, ואז נשאו שמונה אנשים, כדאיתא בסוטה (לד, א). ואי לא כתיב "בשנים" הוה אמינא דפירוש "וישארו במוט" – כל אחד מהם נשא מקצת הדרך, משום הכי פירש הכתוב דשניהם הניחו המוט על הכתף ביחד

Another description is provided by Rashi, who describes it as follows (רש"י על סוטה ל"ד א"י, ד"ה אמר רבי יצחק טורטני וטורטני דטורטני):

A pole carrying and a pole carrying underneath, that the lower ones are assisting the upper ones, with each of these on a side having two poles. How so? Two poles would go this way, with four carrying them, while the other two poles would be carried by another four men, they are diagonally below the two upper ones, one rod for one head and one rod for the other head and going diagonally.

משאוי ומשאוי תחת משאוי שהתחתונים מסייעין את העליונים ובכל אחד היו שני מוטות כיצד שני מוטות הולכין זה אצל זה וארבעה נושאים אותם ושני מוטות אחרים וארבעה בני אדם נושאים אותם והם באלכסון מתחת שנים העליונים מוט אחד לראש האחד ומוט אחד לראש השני והולכין באלכסון

While I have provided these descriptions, I am struggling to picture exactly the set-up on them (so, if you have a good way of describing them or, even better, depicting them visually, I would greatly appreciate it). However, what is clear is that these early medieval rabbis sought to further describe the physical structuring of this carrying apparatus needed to both carry and support this massive cluster of grapes.

While many post-Talmudic rabbis mentioned these expansive enumerations of the poles needed to carry this cluster and the men involved, including Rashi (ד"ה וישארו במוט בשנים) (רש"י על במדבר י"ג:כ"ג, ד"ה וישארו במוט בשנים), not all did.

Rabbinic Commentators Sticking with Two Carrying

Despite the above-mentioned views amongst Talmudic rabbis, as well as Medieval commentators, there were still subsequent rabbinic commentators that describe how the scouts carried back this cluster of grapes as being simply two, including Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344) (popularly known as Ralbag), who wrote (רלב"ג ביאור המלות על) (התורה, במדבר י"ג:כ"ג, ד"ה וישארו במוט בשנים):

Behold - according to the plain reading of the verse, it would seem that two of them carried the pole upon which the cluster of grapes was - one from the head of one and one at the head of the other, or perhaps it would have described that the pole was on two poles and they carried four poles. But the first explanation seems more appropriate according to the plain reading of the text.

הנה לפי הפשט יראה ששנים נשאו המוט שהיה בו אשכול האחד מן הראש האחד והאחר מן הראש השני או ירצה בזה שהמוט היה בשנים מוטות והיו נושאים אותו ד' והביאור הראשון נראה יותר לפי הפשט

Conclusion

Ultimately, no matter how these scouts carried this bunch of grapes, they certainly found it to be a surprisingly bountiful bunch and were clearly very excited about this bounty of grapes. While grapes are certainly edible, grapes were and are treasured for their wine-making possibilities. This is certainly an exciting possibility to enter into our land to know that it will have such a wondrous capacity for massive amounts of wine. Certainly, it is a fitting land for the children of Israel.

L'chaim 🍷



With July 4th on the horizon, you may be looking to find some appropriate and refreshing wines to elevate your celebration of America. If you need a discount on wines, go to JewishDrinking.com and click on the KoshersWine.com discount logo and you get \$15 off orders of \$200 or more. Disclosure: Jewish Drinking, Inc. may receive affiliate commission on qualifying purchases.

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