

# ONEG SHABBAS

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## Midrashically Reconsidering Nadav's & Avihu's Deaths Rabbi Drew Kaplan

While there is no explicit mention of any drinking in this week's Torah portion, there is an oblique reference to it. I'm specifically referring to

Nadav and Avihu's deaths, where our Torah portion describes them as dying "הַקֹּרֶבֶם אֶשׁ זָרָה לִפְנֵי ה' בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי" when they offered alien fire before The LORD in the wilderness of Sinai" (Num. 3:4).



Several weeks ago in *Parashat Shemini*, we discussed this intriguing juxtaposition of the prohibition against priests drinking on the job, their service, with the immediate juxtaposition being too glaring to ignore. Whether a midrash or an interpreter, it's just too immediate to ignore. However, when we encounter this description in this week's Torah portion, we don't necessarily see any direct mention of drinking that causes their deaths.

Indeed, there are midrashim that attribute Nadav's and Avihu's deaths to other possibilities, such as the following selections from *Midrash Tanhuma (Aḥarei Mot 6:1)*:

It was taught in a baraita in the name of R. Eliezer: Nadab and Abihu died only because they had taught halakhah in the presence of their master, Moses.

and also this (ibid.):

Bar Qappara said in the name of R. Jeremiah bar Eleazar, "Aaron's sons died because of four things: For the drawing near, for the sacrificing, for alien fire, and for not taking advice from each other. For drawing near, in that they entered the innermost sanctuary. For the sacrificing, in that they offered a sacrifice, which they had not been commanded [to offer]. For alien fire, in that they had brought fire from a cookhouse (instead of from off the altar). And for not taking advice from each other.

בר קפרא בשם רבי ירמיה בן אלעזר אמר, בשביל ארבעה דברים מתו בני אהרן, ועל הקרבה, ועל ההקרבה, ועל אש זרה, ועל שלא נטלו עצה זה מזה. על הקרבה, שנכנסו לפני ולפנים. ועל ההקרבה, שהקריבו קרבן מה שלא נצטוו. ועל אש זרה, שהביאו אש זרה מבית הכירים. ועל שלא נטלו עצה זה מזה, תאני רבי חיא, איש מחמתו, איש ממחמתו, איש מעצמו עשו ולא נטלו עצה זה מזה

as well as this (ibid.):

Abba Hanin says, "Because they had no wives, and it is recorded, 'and he shall make atonement for himself and for his household' (Lev. 16:6)."

אבא חנין אומר, שלא היה להם נשים, דתינינן תמן, וכפר בעדו ובעד ביתו, היא אשתו.

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## The Drinking Story in Ruth Rabbi Drew Kaplan

As there is a tradition to read the book of Ruth on the upcoming holiday of Shavuot, how can we not mention the drinking story within this book? Indeed, this drinking story helps moves things along in a certain relationship.

### Naomi's Plan - Catch Boaz Post-Drinking

When we read the verses of Ruth approaching Boaz at the outset of chapter three, it seems quite clear that the idea is to approach him when he is perhaps most susceptible to being approached, as designed by her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 3:2-4):

"...Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you were close to. He will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor tonight. (3) So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down to the threshing floor. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. (4) When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what you are to do."

ועתה הלא בעצו מדעתנו אשר היית אתי נעורתי הנה הוא זרה אתי גרן השערים הלילה: (ג) ורחצתך | וסכתך ושמת שמלתך עליך ויבדת גרן אל תודעי לאיש עד כלתו לאכל ולשתות: (ד) ויהי בשכבו וידעת את המקום אשר ישכבשם ובאת וגלית מרגלתי ושכבת והוא יגיד לך את אשר תעשין

Of course, as we read here, the plan is to catch him following not only his eating, but also his drinking. Clearly, the idea is to catch him in a good mood.

### Ruth's Approaching - Catching Boaz in a Good Mood from Drinking

Not only does Naomi's plan get well-executed by Ruth, but she catches him in a particularly good mood (Ruth 3:6-7):



She went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. (7) Boaz ate and drank, and in a cheerful mood went to lie down beside the grainpile. Then she went over stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down.

Not only had he finished eating, as well as drinking, but the text also informs us that he was feeling quite good - perhaps he was buzzed, providing him to be in a really good mood. While this is both a well-designed and well-executed plan to catch Boaz in a good mood, it should come as no surprise to any of the readers of this publication how susceptible Boaz would be to a young, pretty lady in this state. While this drinking story amidst the book of Ruth seems pretty straightforward, there's another aspect that goes overlooked in its telling - the order of words. While one expects the verbs "he ate and he drank" to be next to each other, yet Boaz' name appears between these two verbs, which is a bit peculiar. Picking-up on this atypical literary arrangement, two sixteenth century rabbis identify what this may mean.

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### Demonstration of Jews' Holiness

One intriguing approach is articulated by Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac de Uçeda (1545-1604), who wrote (אגרת שמואל על רות ג'ז):

The text does not say that "he ate and then he drank Boaz" to teach us that, at the time of his eating, he was Boaz, but then, after his drinking, he was changed into another man. "And then his heart became good" - as if he was no longer Boaz, because then the wine had entered him; and then, with all this, the text shows us the apparent difference between holy Jews as opposed to the rest of the world. That in this situation, for someone else to have eaten, drank, and become gladdened of heart, when a beautiful, perfumed, well-adorned, and clean-from-dipping woman were to have approached him while he was lying down - and, with all of this - he swore his desire so that he would not come upon her. ... And this is to inform us the praiseworthiness of Boaz - informing us that he ate, he drank, and his heart was good, and with all of this he did not sin, because if it weren't for this, what is this text coming to inform us?

ויאכל בועז וישת וייטב לבו וגומר לא אמר ויאכל וישת בועז להורות כי בעת האכילה ה' בועז אבל אחר השתיה נשתנה לאיש אחר וייטב לבו וכאלו אין זה בועז כי נכנס יין בקרבו ועם כל זה ראה מראה הפרש שבין ישראל הקדושים לאומת העולם כי בכאן אחר שאכל ושתה והוטב לבו ובאה לו כמשכבו אשה יפת תואר מקושטת מבוסמת וטהורה בטבילה ותגל מרגלותיו ועם כל זה נשבע ליצרו שלא לבוא עליה .... ולהודיענו שבחו של בועז הודיענו שאכל ושתה וייטב לבו ועם כל זה לא חטא דאי לא הכי מאי אתי לאשמעינן



According to Rabbi de Uçeda, while it seems he is about to describe Boaz as being a changed man on account of the wine he drank, he then changes course and uses it to describe how differently Jews behave versus gentiles in their sexual conduct, especially while slightly intoxicated. Of course, it still could yet be that something may, indeed, have happened that night in that bed between the two of them, even if the text does not indicate that, but it is certainly an intriguing rhetorical question with which he ends.

### Level of Drinking

Another sixteenth century rabbi considered this language and went in a different direction, as we read of Rabbi Moshe Alshikh (1508–1593) having written (עיני משה על רות ג'ז):

And here there was a place to say that it was not just because the wine passed and he lay down and fell asleep immediately. For this, the text preceded to say "And Boaz ate"; and preceded his name to the drinking that you might think that the main part of his activity was from the wine, except that "he ate", which is to say that the main activity in which he took part was the eating. So why is it that the text says that "he is Boaz"? This is to say that, after he ate, "he drank and his heart was gladdened", although his drinking was not to

והנה היה מקום לומר כי אין זה רק כי יין עברו וישכב וירדם מיד לזה הקדים ואמר ויאכל בועז והקדים שמו אל השתיה לומר על יעלה על רוחך כי עשה עיקר מהיין כ"א ויאכל בועז כלו' כי לא עשה עיקר רק מהאכילה למה שהוא בועז אלא שאחרי כן וישת

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and, finally, this list (ibid.):

Rabbi Mani of Sha'av and Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi, "Aaron's sons died because of four things, and [a sentence of] death is recorded in connection with all of them. Because they entered without washing hands and feet, and it says, 'When they come unto the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water lest they die' (Ex. 30:20); because they entered while lacking [the proper priestly] clothes, and it says, 'And they shall be upon Aaron and his sons in their coming to the tent of meeting...' (Ex. 28:43); ... because they had no children, and [a sentence of] death is recorded in connection with [that lack], where it is stated, 'But Nadav and Avihu died...and they had no children' (Num. 3:4); and because they entered and had drunk wine, and it says, 'Drink neither wine nor beer... lest you die' (Lev. 10:9)."

### Conclusion

While there are certainly midrashim that include being intoxicated while sacrificing, there are midrashim that attribute their premature deaths to other factors. While people typically think of their deaths as being caused by drunkenness or otherwise drinking while on the job, maybe we should consider other possibilities, as raised by these rabbis. Certainly, drinking can cause problems, but it is not always the culprit.

### L'chaim

the point of getting drunk, rather it was enough drinking that he was simply feeling good.

וייטב לבו כ"א שתה ואין לשכרה רק שיעור כדי שוייטב לבו בלבד

According to Rabbi Alshikh, this anomalous phrasing is to show us readers that Boaz' primary activity was eating, with drinking being only a secondary activity; so much so that he hadn't gotten drunk from the wine, simply buzzed. Otherwise, Rabbi Alshikh points out, on account of his not having gotten drunk, he is able to be alert enough to see this lovely young lady at his feet.

### Conclusion

While it is easily a strategic idea to approach a man in whom one is interested while he has been drinking, as demonstrated by Naomi's planning and Ruth's execution, the anomalous arrangement of the separation of "eating" from "drinking" prompts a couple of sixteenth century rabbis to point out a couple of possibilities of reading strategies for understanding this different wording. Whether it demonstrates the chastity of Israel or simply that Boaz didn't get drunk that night, there may be more to this drinking than appears.

### L'chaim

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