

ONEG SHABBAS

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Oneg Shabbas explores drinking in the weekly Torah portion, along with timely essays on drinking in Jewish life

Moabitesses Using Ammonite Wine for Seduction Rabbi Drew Kaplan

Towards the end of our parashah, we read of the following brief story (Num. 25:1-3):

While Israel was staying at Shittim, the nation profaned themselves by fornicating with the daughters of Moab, (2) who invited the nation to the sacrifices for their god. The nation partook of them and worshiped that god. (3) Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor, and The LORD was incensed with Israel.

(א) וישב ישראל בשטמים ויחל העם לזנות אל־בנות מואב: (ב) ותקראנה לעם לזבחי אלהיהן ויאכל העם וישתתו: לאלהיהן: (ג) ויצמד ישראל לבעל פעור ויחראף ה' בישראל!



While reading this brief story, which is followed by negative consequences, it is easy to consider the first verse as we can simply imagine them being led astray by certain desires, which then led to the idolatry in the second verse, leading to God's immense anger at them in the third verse. Yet, our tradition has a midrash that does not imagine this story to be so simple. Otherwise, wouldn't women from other nations have caused these men to be led astray? Why them?

Midrash

A commonly recurring midrash found in multiple works is the following (Sifrei Bamidbar 131:2):

"They came and sat in Shittim" (Num. 25:1) - in the place of straying. At that time, Ammonites and Moabites arose and built markets for themselves from Beth HaYeshimoth until Har HaShaleg, where they installed harlots, old ones outside and young ones within, who sold flaxen garments. And Israel ate and drank. At that time, a man would go out for leisure and seek to buy something from the old one, she would offer it to him at cost, whereupon the young one would call out to him from within, saying "Come and buy it for less," and he did so. The same, the next day and the day after. The third day, she would say to him "Come inside and pick for yourself - you're like one of the family." He obliged. The pitcher near her was full of Ammonite wine, the wine of gentiles having not yet been forbidden to Israelites. She would say to him: "Would you like to drink some wine?" He obliged, and when the wine burned in him, he said to her "Consent to me," at which she took an image of Peor from under her breast-band and said to him: "My master, if you want me to consent to you, bow down to this."

באו וישבו להם בשטמים, במקום השטות. באותה שעה עמדו עמונים ומואבים, ובנו להם מקולין מבית הישימות ועד הר השלג, והושיבו שם נשים, ומוכרים כל מיני בשמים. והיו לישראל אוכלים ושותים. באותה שעה אדם יוצא לטייל, ומבקש ליקח לו חפץ מן הזקנה, והיתה מוכרת לו בשווי; וקטנה קוראה ואמרה לו מבפנים "בוא וקח לך בפחות", והיה הוא לוקח הימנה ביום הראשון וביום השני, וביום השלישי אמרה לו "היכנס לפנים וברור לך לעצמי, אי אתה בן בית?" והיה נכנס אצלה, והצרצור מלא יין מיון העמוני, שעדין לא נאסר יין של גוים לישראל. אמרה לו: "רצונך שתשתה יין?" - והוא היה שותה, והיה היין בוער בו, ואומר לה "השמעי לי!" והיא מוציאה דפוס של פעור



He: "Can I bow down to idolatry?" She: "What difference does it make to you? I am only asking that you bare yourself before him." (The sages ruled that baring oneself to Peor is its mode of worship.) The wine burned in him and he said "Consent to me." She: "If you want me to consent to you, 'veer off' from the Torah of Moses."

And he did so, as it is written, "They veered off to shame (i.e., to idolatry); and they became detestable (to Me) in loving (the daughters of Moav)" (Hoshea 10:10).

In the end, they reverted to (their practice of) making idolatrous banquets for them to which they invited them, as it is written, "And they (the Moavite women) called the people to the sacrifices of their gods, etc." (Num. 25:2).

Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua says: "Just as a nail cannot be removed from a door without wood, so, too Israel cannot leave Peor without souls."

מתחת פסיקין שלה, ואומרת לו: "רבי, רצונך שאשמע לך? - השתחוה לזה!" ואומר לה: "וכי לעז אני משתחוה?" אמרה לו: "וכי מה איכפת לך? - אינו אלא שתגלה עצמך לו!" מכאן אמרו "המפער עצמו לבעל פעור הרי זה עבודה." והיה היין בוער בו, ואומר לה "השמעי לי!" ואומרת לו: "רצונך שאשמע לך? - הנזר מתורתו של משה", והוא נזר, שנאמר (הושע ט"י): "וינזרו לבושת ויהיו שקוצים כאהבים." באחרונה חזרו לעשות להם מרחיחים, והיו קוראים להם ואוכלים, שנאמר "ותקראנה לעם לזבחי אלהיהם." ר' אלעזר בן שמוע אומר: כשם שאי אפשר למסמר לפרוש מן הדלת בלא עץ - כך אי אפשר לישראל לפרוש מן הפעור בלא נפשות.

As you can see from this midrash, wine is involved. The function of the wine is to serve as a way of causing the men to loosen up and foster sexual desire, with the Moabitesses around. However, instead of this midrash describing these economic encounters that lead to sexual liaisons that could lead to intimate connections that would possibly lead to the Moabitesses to coax the men to idolatry, it positions the daughters of Moab as conditionalizing the sexual encounter upon the idolatrous consent.

While there is hesitancy by the men, they are convinced that all they have to do is to become naked, which it seems they were already planning on doing, yet the wine returns to the story once again to catalyze this activity. While there was some intrigue while shopping, what catalyzes the fornication followed by idolatry on the men's part is this Ammonite wine. Furthermore, it is fascinating to read of the parenthetical historical comment that this story took place prior to the sages forbidding gentile wine.

In this telling, while we do not understand the motivation of the Moabitesses, aside from getting these men to worship their gods, perhaps there is something more going on.

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Midrash in the Yerushalmi

In the Talmud Yerushalmi, we get an introduction to this midrash that demonstrates a motivation (Jerusalem Talmud *Sanhedrin* 10:2):

Now what did the evil Balaam do [to warrant losing his portion in the world to come]?	וכי מה עשה בלעם הרשע
It was because he gave advice to Balak son of Zippor on how to cause Israel's downfall by the sword.	על ידי שנתן עצה לבלק בן צפור להפיל את ישראל בחרב
He said to him, "The God of this nation hates fornication. So put up your daughters for fornication, and you will rule over them."	אמר לו אלוה של אומה הזו הוא שונא את זנות אלא העמידו בנותיכם בזימה ואתם שולטין בהן
He said to him, "And will [the Moabites] listen to me [when I tell them to turn their daughters into whores]?"	א"ל ומישמע לי אינון
He said to him, "Put up your own daughter first, and they will see and then accept what you say to them."	אמר ליה אקים בנתך קומי וינון חמיין ושמעיין לך



In this introduction, Bilaam was seeking Israel's downfall, so this plan was put into place by offering up Moab's own daughters for such purposes, which also explains why the verse mentions "daughters of Moab".

Similarly to what we read in the previous iteration of the midrash, there is a multi-day progression in the market, leading to the men entering their tents, whereupon they encounter the wine (ibid.):

When he came in, [he found there] a flagon of wine, Ammonite wine, which is very strong. And it serves as an aphrodisiac to the body, and its scent was enticing. (Now up to this time the wine of gentiles had not been prohibited for Israelite use by reason of its being libation wine.)	וכיון שהיה נכנס היה שם צרצור מלא יין מן היין העמוני שהוא קשה והוא את הגוף מפתה לזנות והיה ריחו מפעפע. ועדיין לא נאסר יין נסך של נכרים על ישראל
Now the girl would say to him, "Do you want to drink a cup of wine," and he would reply to her, "Yes." So she gave him a cup of wine, and he drank it.	והיתה אומר לו רצונך לשתות כוס יין והוא אומר לה הין
When he drank it, the wine would burn in him like the Venom of a snake. Then	והיא נותנת לו והוא שותה וכיון שהיה



he would say to her, "Surrender yourself [sexually] to me." She would say to him, "Do you want me to 'surrender' myself to you?" And he would say "Yes." Then she took out an image of Peor from her bosom, and she said to him, "Bow down to this, and I'll surrender myself to you." And he would say to her, "Now am I going to bow down to an idol?" And she would say to him, "You don't really bow down to it, but you expose yourself to it."

שותה היה היין בוער בו ככריסה של חכינה והוא אומר לה הישמעו לו והיא אומרת לו רצונך שאשמע לך והוא אומר הין מיד היתה מוציאה לו טפוס של פעור מתוך חיקה שלה והיתה אומרת לו השתחוה לזה ואני נשמעת לך והוא אומר לה וכי לע"ז אני הולך ומשתחוה והיתה אומרת לו אין את משתחוה אלא במגלה עצמך לו

In this version, the Ammonite wine is described as being very strong, as well as possessing an enticing smell, as well as aphrodisiacal, causing the men to be sexually aggressive.

Midrash in the Bavli

In this midrash's telling in the Babylonian Talmud, Bilaam brings not only a more focused strategic angle, but also knowledge that the Jews are in need of linen garments (*Sanhedrin* 106a):

Balaam said to them: "The God of these Jewish people despises lewdness, and they desire linen garments, as they have no new garments; come, and I will give you advice. Make for them enclosures using wall hangings and seat prostitutes in them, with an old woman outside the enclosure and a young woman inside, and have the women sell them linen garments."	אמר להם אלהיהם של אלו שונא זימה הוא והם מתאווים לכלי פשתן בוא ואשיאך עצה עשה להן קלעים והושיב בהן זונות זקינה מבחוץ וילדה מבפנים וימכרו להן כלי פשתן עשה להן קלעים מהר שלג עד בית הישימות והושיב בהן זונות זקינה מבחוץ וילדה מבפנים
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While we read of a similarity with this midrash's telling in the Bavli with that of the Yerushalmi insofar as God despising fornication, yet the real bait was this clothing. A further difference is both the manner of worship, as well as giving up Torah in this excerpt after she requests that he worship the idol (ibid.):

She said to him: "And what is your concern? We are asking you to do nothing more than defecate." But he does not know that its worship is conducted in that manner. Once he did so, she said to him: "Moreover, I will not leave you until you deny the Torah of Moses your teacher"	ומה איכפת לך כלום מבקשים ממך אלא פיעור [והוא אינו יודע שעבודתה בכך] ולא עוד אלא שאיני מנחתך עד שתכפור בתורת משה רבך
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This version of the midrash has defecation being the manner of worship rather than mere nakedness. Moreover, the push for him to deny the Torah is another addition here. While we do not read of a fascinating description of this Ammonite wine in this midrash as we had in the Yerushalmi, it yet again plays a pivotal part in this move for these men to seek out pleasure with these women.

Conclusion

While the abrupt narrative concerning our ancestors fornicating with the daughters of Moab speaks of this fornicating followed by idolatry, our sages viewed this story as having been lubricated by wine. While it's not clear why this wine comes from Ammon, it is definitely curious....

L'chaim

The Ammonite Wine Midrash

For more on the topic of this midrash, you can check out the Ammonite Wine Midrash episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show*, featuring Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein.



The episode is available on YouTube and wherever you prefer listening to podcasts, as well as at JewishDrinking.com/AmmoniteWine

