

ONEG SHABBAS

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

A Drunken Rebellion? Rabbi Drew Kaplan

When we read of Korah's rebellion at the outset of this week's Torah portion, a lot of our considerations about this challenge to Moshe concerns the motivations and reasons behind it, at least in midrashim and commentaries. Throughout the book of Numbers, we read of a variety of leadership challenges for Moshe, while here is a direct challenge to his leadership. Of all the responses he could have provided, he begins with responding (Num. 16:5):

Come morning, The LORD will	בֹּקֶר וַיֵּלֶךְ ה'
make known who is [God's] and	אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ
who is holy by granting direct	וְאֶת־הַקְּדוֹשׁ וְהַקְּרִיב
access; the one whom [God] has	אֵלָיו וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר
chosen will be granted access.	יִבְחַרְבּוּ וַיִּקְרִיב אֵלָיו

This direct challenge setting-up a showdown sounds quite dramatic and will certainly put an emphatic end to any question on the matter. However, a question that often goes under considered is why does Moshe start off by responding "בוקר" - "in the morning"? Why not just have their showdown right then and there? Of course, it may be that they needed time to fetch their firepans. But could there be anything else?

Eating & Drinking in the Midrash

An insightful midrash suggests that Korah and his followers may have been eating and drinking (*Midrash Tanhuma, Korah* 5):

What reason did he have for saying, "In the morning, He will make known?"	מָה רָאָה לוֹמַר, בֹּקֶר וַיֵּוָדַע?
Moses said, "Perhaps they had been eating and drinking a lot, they said this matter."	אָמַר מֹשֶׁה, שָׂמָא מִתּוֹךְ רַב מֵאֲכָל וּמִשְׁתָּהּ אִמְרוּ דְבַר זֶה.
Therefore, he said, "In the morning."	לְכָר אָמַר, בֹּקֶר.
He said, "Maybe between now and then they will repent."	אָמַר, שָׂמָא בֵּין כָּךְ וּבֵין כָּךְ יַעֲשׂוּ תְשׁוּבָה. לְכָר נֶאֱמַר: בֹּקֶר וַיֵּוָדַע.
Therefore, he said to them "In the morning, He will make known."	אָמַר לָהֶם: אֵין לִי רְשׁוּת לִיכְנֹס עִכְשָׁו, אָף עַל פִּי שְׂאִין לִפְנֵי לָא אֲכִילָה וְלֹא שְׁתִּיָּה, אֲלֵא בְשִׁבְלֵינוּ שְׂאֲכַלְנוּ וְשְׁתִּינֵינוּ.
He said to them, "I have no authority to enter [the tabernacle] now. Even though there is no eating and no drinking, it is simply because of us [that we are forbidden to enter] as we have taken food and drink."	

This midrash positions Moshe's suggestion for them to meet in the morning as they had been eating and drinking a lot. While drinking is



mentioned here, it's not done so as the main inspiration or catalyst for their rebellion. Rather, they might have felt very highly of themselves, having eaten and drank together. Further, this midrash also mentions that maybe Moshe didn't want them to enter in to bring offerings if they had been drinking.

Rashi's Read: Time of Drunkenness

While Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) is known for his summarizing of midrashim in his commentary to the Torah (acronymically known as Rashi), what he does with this midrash is interesting (ד"ה על במדבר ט"ז:ה;):

"Now is a time of drunkenness for us and it is not appropriate to appear before Him."	עַתָּה עֵת שְׁכָרוֹת הוּא לָנוּ וְלֹא נְכוֹן לְהִרְאוֹת לִפְנֵי, וְהוּא הִיָּה מִתְכוּן לְדַחוֹת שְׂמָא יִחְזָרוּ בָהֶם
But his real intention in postponing the matter was that perhaps they might reconsider [their opposition].	

Instead of directly quoting the midrash about eating and drinking, Rashi writes about this hour of their approaching Moshe as having been the time of day when drunkenness regularly occurs. While in the midrash, it's just simply a matter of them drinking, Rashi writes that Moshe thought it was the time of day for the Israelites that it would be common for drunkenness to occur. (This also brings up the question for us to consider of Rashi's specifying: are the times for drunkenness to commonly occur for our ancestors in the desert different from other times in our history? Are the times for drunkenness to occur different than the times for other peoples?)

While it is not clear in Rashi's description whether Moshe saw these members of the rebellion as noticeably intoxicated, slightly intoxicated, or not even noticeably intoxicated [but simply it was the hour of intoxication], it is possible to consider this depiction as urging these hundreds of leaders to sleep off the booze. This sleeping off of liquid courage would not only diminish their drunken excitement, but also stepping away from being swept up in all of the political excitement being around over two hundred other guys in a mob mentality.

Response to Rashi: Not Actually Drunk

Does Rashi's description of the rebellion taking place at a time of day when drunkenness would commonly occur amongst our ancestors mean that they were drunk? Rabbi Elijah Mizrahi (1455-1526) did not think so (מזרחי, במדבר ט"ז:ה; ד"ה עתה עת שכרות):

An explanation of drunkenness is that the disagreement was in the manner of "those who are drunk, but not with wine" (Is. 51:21).	פִּירוּשׁ שְׁכָרוֹת הַמַּחְלֹקֶת עַל דֶּרֶךְ וּשְׁכוּרָה וְלֹא מִיין
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Rabbi Mizrahi clearly does not consider them to have actually been drunk, in his reading of Rashi's commentary, just that they seemed to have appeared to be drunk, just not from wine. Rabbi Shabbethai ben Joseph Bass (1641-1718) seemed to have been influenced by Rabbi Mizrahi, who also liked this idea of quoting this Isaiah verse (שְׁפִתֵי חֲכָמִים, במדבר ט"ז:ה; ד"ה עתה עת שכרות). Would they have been drunk from another beverage (cf. Rashi to Is. 51:21), or would they merely appear as if they were drunk, but not that they had been drinking? Perhaps these commentators did not want to consider the rebels as acting under the influence of alcohol?

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Not Not Drinking: Response to the Not-Drinking View

Responding to Rabbi Mizrahi's suggestion that they didn't drink was Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1512-1609), who wrote (גור אריה על במדבר) ט"ז:ה', ד"ה עתה עת שכרות:

Rabbi Elijah Mizrahi (1455-1526) commented, "The drunkenness of disagreement, in the manner of 'those who are drunk, but not with wine' (Is. 51:21)", but he baselessly explained that, since "a time of drunkenness" means to say that all of them had eaten their meals and there was to be concerned that maybe one of them had drunk a few ounces of wine. Therefore, it was not appropriate for them to appear before Him, thus, "a time of drunkenness." He didn't say, "You are drunk", rather that the time was the time of drunkenness in which people eat and drink that they would be drunk. And since he asked him, what was there to be concerned about the wicked if they were to enter while drunk or should they not enter and be obligated with death (Lev. 10:9)? And why did he care about them, since you can't say because Moses and Aaron were holding them back on account of themselves? This isn't correct, since Aaron needed to bring the evening offering (Ex. 29:41), and he had not yet offered it, since, if he had offered the evening offering, it is obvious that he shouldn't offer anything following it, since after the evening sacrifice, nothing should be brought (Rashi to Lev. 6:5). And all the more so, since The Divine Presence was speaking with Moses constantly, he should not have been drinking even a quarter-log of wine. Rather, one is forced to say that this was not directed at Moses, but to push them off and that maybe they would reconsider.

פירש הרא"ם, שכרות המחלוקת, וכמו (ישעיה נא, כא) "שכורת ולא מיין". ובחנם פירש כן, כי 'עת שכרות' רצה לומר שכבר הכל אכלו סעודתן, ויש לחוש שמא אחד שתה רביעית יין, ולפיכך אין להראות לפניו, ולכך 'עת שכרות'. ולא אמר 'משוכרים אתם', אלא שהזמן הוא זמן של שכרות, שדרך בני אדם שאכלו ושתו להיות משוכרים. ומפני שהוקשה לו מה היה לו להקפיד על הרשעים אם יכנסו בשכרות או לא יכנסו ויתחייבו מיתה (ויקרא י, ט), ולמה הקפיד עליהם, דאין לומר כי משה ואהרן בשביל עצמם היו מונעים, זה לא יתכן, שהרי אהרן היה צריך להקריב קרבן של בין הערבים (שמות כט, מא), ועדיין לא היה קרב, דאם היה קרב קרבן של בין הערבים – פשיטא שאין להקריב שום דבר אחריו, דאחר קרבן בין הערבים לא היה דבר קרב (רש"י ויקרא ו, ה). ומכל שכן משה שהיתה השכינה מדבר עמו תמיד, שלא שתה רביעית יין. אלא על כרחך לא היתה כוונתו של משה רק לדחותם, אולי יחזרו



Rabbi Loew begins with contesting Rabbi Mizrahi's comment that this drunkenness time that Rashi suggested was not of wine, finding it to be baseless. He then describes that, rather than all of these rebels being drunk, it simply could have been only one of them who had the minimally problematic amount of wine drunk, making him ineligible for bringing offerings. He also describes Rashi's comment as not describing them as necessarily drunk, just that it was the time for such behavior. While he continues, writing about details concerning the need for sobriety and timing in bringing offerings, he understands Rashi as describing the possibility of these rebels having had the minimal amount of wine to disqualify them from bringing offerings, thus, pushing off the firepan showdown to the morning in order that they become eligible to do so at that time, in order to sleep off any wine they may have consumed.

Categorical Rescheduling

In a similar fashion to Rabbi Loew, Rabbi David Pardo (1719-1792) considered Rashi's words closely, considering his description as being the time of drunkenness (במדבר ט"ז:ה', ד"ה בקר ויודע):

Which is to say that even if you say that that they were not drunk, nevertheless, that time was a time of drunkenness, and they did not differentiate, as they said broadly, that the rabbis did not distinguish, and as we find regarding raising of the hands is not done at minḥah, since it is a time of drunkenness. And even Yom Kippur, where there is no drunkenness, even for this prayer service, they did not have the raising of the hands, since they did not differentiate. And Rashi concludes that he meant to push off, since the truth was that it was permitted in the Mikdash or the tabernacle, since they offered the daily offering and the incense in the afternoon. Nevertheless, Korah accepted his words and did not feel that this was a general pushing off, since he considered maybe there was to distinguish between the priests, since they had already established and they were not drinking wine at all, for them, this was their first time, and they had not been forbidden until now with wine. And, therefore, there was to decree upon this.

עת שכרות וכי כלומר אפילו תאמרו שאין אתם שכורים מ"מ העת בעצמה עת שכרות היא ואין לחלק כדאמר ר' בעלמא לא פלוג רבנן וכדאשכחן גבי נשיאו' כפים שאין ניכר במנחה מטעם שכרות ואפילו ביה"כ דליכא שכרות אפ"ה לא פלוג. ומסיים רש"י והוא היה מתכוין לדחותם דלפי האמת הוא שרי במקדש או במשכן דהא היו מקריבין התמיד והקטורת בין הערבים. ומ"מ קיבל קרח דבריו ולא הרגיש שזו דחייה בעלמא לפי שחשב דילמא יש לחלק בין הכהנים דהוה כבר קביעי ולא היו שותים יין כלל לדידהו שזו פעם ראשונה להם ולא נאסרו עד האידנא ביין ולכך איכא. למיגור בהו

In Rabbi Pardo's description, we have no idea if any of these rebels drank at all, but he understood Rashi as considering Moshe's exhortation to return in the morning to simply be on account of that time of day when they may have been drinking.

Conclusion

Moshe's response to Korah and his followers to return in the morning, according to a midrash, was due to their possibly having been riled up through a lot of eating and drinking, which Rashi developed into Moshe's concern that it was a time of drunkenness, so he urged them to sleep it off and potentially reconsider. Commentators on Rashi did not want to consider that this rebellion was fuelled or catalyzed by actual drinking or even drunkenness, with some even creatively re-reading this as simply anger, rather than actual drinking. While some commentators allowed for the possibility of drinking, that may have been more out of a concern for offering under the influence, which was prohibited. While none of them considered Rashi as depicting the scene as a drunken, enraged mob, it, nevertheless, seems an interesting possibility. Nevertheless, Moshe's direction to the rebellion to return in the morning, according to Rashi, was to sleep off any possible alcohol they may have consumed and to potentially reconsider their demands.

L'chaim 

