

ONEG SHABBAS

THE UNOFFICIAL PARASHAH SHEET FOR KIDDUSH CLUBS

פרשת וישלח - Vol. 3, Iss. 7 - 1-2 December 2023 - י"ט כסלו תשפ"ד

The Torah's First Libation

Rabbi Drew Kaplan

While we might take libations in the course of worship for granted, there had to be a first such instance of this practice. By libation, I mean נִסּוּךְ, the pouring out of a beverage to God. When we think of "Jewish drinking", we typically consider the pouring of beverages for Jews to consume. However, libations in the Torah go in a different direction: the pouring by Jews of beverages for God. The first time read of a libation in the Torah occurs, of all places, in our Torah portion.

Background: Setting-up of Stone Pillars

We read of Ya'akov setting-up a מצבה stone-pillar towards the beginning of last week's parashah (Gen. 28.18), as well as later on in that parashah (Gen. 31.51-52). In this week's parashah, we see him doing so a third time, yet he introduces an innovation in his setting-up a stone-pillar. Having arrived from Paddan-Aram, where God appears, blessing him concerning names, fertility, nations, and land (Gen. 25:9-13), we read (Gen. 35:14):

and Jacob set up a pillar at the site where [God] had spoken to him, a pillar of stone, and he libated upon it and poured oil upon it.

וַיִּצַב יַעֲקֹב מִצְבֵּה בְּמִקְוֵם אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲתָנוּ מִצְבַּת אֲבֵן וַיִּסַּךְ עָלֶיהָ וַיִּסַּךְ וַיִּצַק עָלֶיהָ שֶׁמֶן

As part of this process, we then read of Ya'akov providing this place with a name (Gen. 35:15):

Jacob called the place where God had spoken to him the name of "God's House".

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶת־שֵׁם הַמִּקְוֵם אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲתָנוּ שֵׁם אֱלֹהִים בֵּית־אֵל

Having had such a special experience with God at this place, his libation and oil-pouring seem to be connected with his naming of this place. Calling places names is on-brand for him, as this is the fifth and final such recorded occurrence in the Torah (having previously done so on four previous occasions (Gen. 32:3, 32:31, 35:7, & 35:8).

Which Beverage Does He Libate?

As readers of this publication may realize, despite the Torah stating that he libated, the Torah does not specify with which beverage he did so.

Did Ya'akov Libate Beer?

One possibility of a beverage he may have libated upon this stone-pillar could be beer. After all, beer was the beverage that was commanded to be libated twice-daily to accompany the twice-daily offerings (Num. 28:7). However, this beverage does not seem to capture the attention of any of the commentators in this specific instance.

Did Ya'akov Libate Wine?

A seemingly clear possibility for what Ya'akov libated at this time would be wine, as Rabbi David Kimḥi (1160-1235) wrote (רד"ק על)

(בראשית ל"ה:י"ד). After all, wine is the most commonly-libated beverage throughout the Torah, likely due to its being the choicest beverage in the Torah. As this scene is the first instance in the Torah of libation, it strikingly provides



a fascinating model, especially since it plays out as somewhat of a מעשה אבות סימן לבנים (the actions of the forefathers serve as a model of action for the descendants), whereby Jews are expected to largely libate to God using wine. In so doing, as Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344) writes, it is similar to the libations later on in the Torah (רלב"ג) בראשית ל"ה:י"ד:

הוא מעניין נסכים והנה עשה זה הנסך לכבוד השם יתעלה

While this approach is fairly straight forward, there is another approach to this story.

Did Ya'akov Libate Wine or Water?

Despite the clear and straightforward approach to understanding this story as libation wine to honor God, many commentators consider a different approach. In this approach, the beverage he libated was either wine or water.

The first commentator to suggest the dual possibility of these beverages was Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) (אבן עזרא) (על בראשית ל"ה:י"ד), followed by, amongst others, Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (1270-1340) (הטור הארוך, בראשית ל"ה:י"ד) and Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855) (ביאור יש"ר על התורה, בראשית ל"ה:י"ד). While water is not inherently special, perhaps he may not have had any other beverages at all upon him. Furthermore, it may be that water is a very precious beverage in the desert. However, the possibility of water as the libation has to do with why he libated.

Did Ya'akov Libate on This Stone-Pillar To Clean It?

For these commentators who advocate the possibility of either water or wine for his libating, it seems it has to do with washing the stone-pillar off in order to prepare the stone-pillar for then subsequently pouring oil upon it. Even Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (1194-1270) seems to agree with this reading as to the order of what happened (רמב"ן על)

{continued on next page}

{continued from previous page}

(בראשית ל"ה:י"ד). This approach views the water or wine as simply a liquid to wash/rinse off whatever had been on the stones in order to prepare it for the oil.

Ya'akov, Oil, & Stone-Pillars

The question that arises with this suggestion is "What is so special that this stone-pillar needed to be rinsed for oil to be poured upon it?" After all, the oil will simply pour down and off of the stone-pillar, whether it was rinsed or otherwise. What is Ya'akov's history with standing up these stone-pillars?

As it turns out, Ya'akov is the only person recorded in the book of Genesis who set up these stone-pillars, having done so on four occasions. While his second occasion was setting it up to demonstrate an agreement with Lavan (Gen. 31:45 and Gen. 31:51-52) and his fourth such occasion was marking Rachel's grave (Gen. 35:20), his first such setting-up of a stone-pillar also involved oil-pouring (Gen. 28:18). So what is so special about pouring this oil at this stone-pillar?

As we inquire into that episode, it turns out that his pouring oil over that stone-pillar came with Ya'akov calling it by the exact same name, God's House (Gen. 28:18). So why did he do so?

Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (1085-1158) suggested that מנשח אותה לקדשה ומושח אותה לקדשה "He anointed it to sanctify it and to make it ready to offer sacrifices on it when he would return to that site" (רשב"ם) (על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח). Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah (1250-1310) also advocated this position (חזקוני על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח). However, one issue with using this stone-pillar for an altar, as Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) wrote (רמב"ן על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח):

appears that a pillar is made for pouring libations of wine upon it and for the pouring of oil upon it, but not for sacrifices and not for offerings, whereas an altar is for bringing Burnt-offerings and Peace-offerings thereon	נראה עוד שהמצבה תעשה לנסך עליה נסך יין וליצוק עליה שמן לא לעולה ולא לזבח והמזבח להעלות עליו עולות ושלמים
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) wrote that the purpose of the oil-pouring was in order to recognize it later (similarly had Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1549) written). This was expanded by Rabbi David Kimhi (1160-1235), who expanded this notion that he poured oil on it (רד"ק על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח):

so that he would recognise this stone on his return from Haran. Oil stains on a stone remain for many years and do not disappear. He planned to erect an altar at this site when he would return from Haran. It is also possible that the pouring of oil on that stone was equivalent to pouring a libation of wine on the altar.	כדי להכירה בשובו דרך שם שיעשה שם מזבח ויקריב עליו, כי כתם השמן לא ימחה במי מטר, או היה יציקת השמן לעבודה כמו נסוך היין
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

He continues: "All of this was to be a visible reminder that the Jewish people would take possession, inherit the land promised to them by God."



So while Rabbi Samuel ben Meir and Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah advocated that this oil-pouring was to sanctify it and get it ready for sacrifices later, Rabbi David Kimhi argued that it was in order to recognize it later for this week's Torah portion for him then to create an altar at this site and as a reminder for his descendants' descendants they would inherit it. But there is also a fascinating novel argument: that the pouring of oil on it was similar to libation wine upon it. This is also reflected in what Rabbi Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa (1255-1340) wrote (רבונו בח"י על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח):

The act of either pouring oil or wine on a pillar is equivalent to offering a sacrifice on the altar. Rabbi Saadyah Gaon (882-942) writes that the reason for Yaakov pouring oil on this pillar was in order for him to be able to identify this particular stone pillar so that in the future he could separate it from other adjoining stones. Seeing that oil remains visible for a long time, he would in due course be able to make an altar of it.

יציקת השמן או נסוך היין על מצבה כהקדמת קרבן על המזבח. ורבינו סעדיה גאון ז"ל כתב כי יציקת השמן בכאן היה להכרה כדי שיכיר את האבן ויפרישנה בדעתו מזולתה, כי השמן על גבי האבן רשמו ניכר ע"כ

Why Pour Oil Now?

So, if pouring oil upon this stone-pillar was in order to recognize it later, in our Torah portion, what is so important about pouring oil upon it in this week's Torah portion? For Rabbi Samuel ben Meir and Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah, what offering did he now do? This seems to be deficient. For Rabbi David Kimhi and Rabbi Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa, it seems to be that this oil-pouring was just as good as either a wine-libation or other sacrifice on this stone-pillar. Indeed, Rabbi David Kimhi commented on the oil-pouring in our parashah that it was (רד"ק על בראשית ל"ה:י"ד) "also intended as a gift-offering" למנחה גם כן.

Conclusion

As we consider these approaches, the most straightforward understanding is that either Ya'akov libated wine to provide honor and glory to God, similar to what we read later on in the Torah, or that he libated either water or wine to rinse off the stone-pillar in order to pour oil on it for something of an oil-sacrifice and/or perhaps to mark it out for future generations. Either way, Ya'akov is the first recorded person to libate in the Torah. l'Chaim 🍷

New Episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show*

The newest episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show* is now out, featuring Ami & Larissa Nahari of The River Wine, a company that imports, distributes, and produces wine and spirits. In addition to distributing Shirah Wines, they also partnered with the Weiss Brothers of Shirah Wines to produce Twin Suns. They also created the first-ever certified kosher-for-Passover reposado tequila and the first-ever certified kosher-for-Passover whiskey. The episode is available at JewishDrinking.com/TheRiverWine, while there are a few video clips available:

- Creating Barrel-Aged Kosher-for-Passover Products: JewishDrinking.com/KFPBarrelAged
- Difficulties in Starting-up as a Distributor: JewishDrinking.com/DistributorBeginningDifficulties
- Creating Twin Suns wines: JewishDrinking.com/TwinSunsCreation

Starting a Kosher Wine-Importing & Distributing Business

EPISODE #147



An archive of past issues is available at JewishDrinking.com/parashah-sheets

If you have any comments, compliments, or suggestions, Rabbi Drew may be reached at Drew@JewishDrinking.com