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Wine's Torah Début

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The very first ever drinking story in the Torah is certainly a fascinating one. The first recorded drink in the Torah is consumed by none other than the namesake of this week's Torah portion. How do we consider Noaḥ? How do we consider his drinking? How do we consider his getting drunk?

After all, he "is a man who was singled out by God for salvation," according to Rabbi David Kasher, who continues:

> His unfathomable efforts before and during the Flood managed to preserve and then restart humanity—and to save all animal species from extinction along the way. According to the Torah's narrative, we all owe our lives to Noah, for from the families of "המבול אחר בארץ הגוי נפרדו נח בני - the Children of Noah, all the nations spread out onto the earth after the Flood" (Genesis 10:32).

Clearly, Noaḥ is special, although how do we consider this drinking session? This brief story is only ten verses long (Gen. 9:18-27) and the drinking aspect is quite brief, yet we read of not only the first appearance of wine and drinking, but also the first appearance of a vineyard, as well, as well as the first appearance of drunkenness. While it's not necessarily inevitable, it is certainly fascinating that the first drinking story in the Torah involves getting drunk.

There are many angles from which to consider this initial drinking story in the Torah, including the question of how do we characterize Noaḥ's actions? Opinions on this can range anywhere from total innocence in his drinking and getting drunk to seeing how low he debased himself, as well as anywhere in between these two extremes.

Negative Perspective

The rabbis of the third century, at least as recorded in midrashim, perceived Noaḥ's actions negatively, as we read of one rabbi's opinion (*Bereshit Rabbah* 36 (cf. *Sanhedrin* 70a)):

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: "Always beware of being excited for wine, because in the passage on wine [this one] is written with a *vav* fourteen times, as it is written: 'And Noaḥ the husbandman began', 'and planted a vineyard', 'And he drank of the wine', 'and was drunken'; 'and he was uncovered', 'And Ḥam saw...and told his two brethren', 'and Shem and Yapheth took a garment', 'and laid it upon both their shoulders', 'and went backward', 'and covered...and Noaḥ awoke...and knew what his youngest son had done unto him', 'And he said: "Cursed be Canaan"' (Gen. 9:20-25)."	אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן לְעוֹלָם לֹא תְּהֵי לָהוט אַחַר הַיַּיִן, שֶׁכָּל פָּרָשַׁת הַיַּיִן כְּתִיב בָּהּ וָיו"ן אַרְבַּע עֶשְׂרֵה פְּעָמִים, הָדָא הוּא דִכְתִיב: וַיָּחֶל נֹחַ, וַיִּטַּע כָּרֶם, וַיִּשְׁתְּ מִן הַיַּיִן, וַיִּתְגַּל, וַיַּרְא חָם, וַיַּגֶּד לְשָׁנֵי אֶחָיו, וַיִּקַּח שֵׁם וֶיֶפֶת, וַיָּשִׂימוּ עַל שְׁכֶם שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיֵּלְכוּ אֲחֹרַנִּית וַיְכַסּוּ אֵת עֶרְוַת אֲבִיהֶם וּפְנֵיהֶם אֲחֹרַנִּית וְעֶרְוַת אֲבִיהֶם וגו' וַיִּיקַץ נֹחַ, וַיֵּדַע אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לוֹ, וַיֹּאמֶר אָרוּר כְּנָעַן עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים וגו'

While it is unclear what necessarily is the issue with all of these *vav*s, it would seem to be a statement of a multiplicity of "woes".

For a clearer statement of negativity towards his actions, we read of another third century rabbi, who stated (*Bereshit Rabbah* 36):

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said: "On the same day he planted, he became drunk, and he was humiliated."	אָמַר רַבִּי חִיָּא בַּר אַבָּא בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם נָטַע, בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם שָׁתָה, בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם נִתְבַּזֶּה.

While it is not clear how these actions could all have been on the same day, what is clear from his words is that he perceived that Noaḥ humiliated himself.

Influenced by these midrashic comments, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzḥaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi) wrote (רש"י על בראשית ט׳:כ׳, ד"ה ויחל):

He profaned himself, for he should have occupied himself first with planting something different	עָשָׂה עַצְמוֹ חֻלִּין, שֶׁהָיָה לוֹ לַעֲסֹק תְּחִלָּה בִּנְטִיעָה אַחֶרֶת

In this comment, Rashi understands the Hebrew word ויחל as "debasing" - that instead of seeking a moral or spiritual elevation following the flood, he debased himself, clearly taking a negative view of his actions.

Beginning

Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) not only pushed back on Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba's perspective of the temporal aspect of this story, but also seems to position him in a positive agricultural light (אבן עזרא על בראשית ט׳:כ׳, ד"ה איש האדמה):

A skilled agriculturalist, agriculture being a great science. The Rabbinic statement that Noaḥ drank from his vineyard on the day he planted it is not to be taken literally.	יודע עבודת האדמה והיא חכמה גדולה והדרש שביום שנטעו שתה מיינו, יש לו סוד ואיננו כמשמעו

For another understanding of the word ויחל, Rabbi David Kimḥi (1160–1235) (popularly known as Radak) explains it not as "debased", but as "began" (רד"ק על בראשית ט׳:כ׳, ד"ה ויחל נח איש האדמה):

We had already written in the first Torah portion that Noaḥ was a farmer and excelled in this vocation. Now, after the deluge, he acquired additional expertise in combining different strains of	כמו שכתבנו בפרשה ראשונה, כי נח התעסק בעבודת האדמה והתחכם בה, ועתה אחר המבול התחכם עוד לנטוע

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grapes and making wine out of the grapes. Up until this time, people had not been drinking wine, but eating the grapes, as with other fruits, but now Noaḥ became the first to plant a vineyard. Regarding it saying “And he began to plant and he planted”, which primarily relates to the language of beginning, or, perhaps its explanation is that he began with the activity of planting and he planted a vineyard....

הגפנים רבים יחד ולעשות מן הענבים יין, כי עד הנה לא היו שותים יין אלא אוכלים הענבים כשאר הפירות: ונח היה תחלה לנוטעי כרם, ומה שאמר ויחל ויטע, פי' ויחל לטעת ויטע, כי על התכונה המקור דבק עם לשון תחלה...או פרושו, החל בעבודה הזאת ונטע כרם כמו ויחל ליטע

In this consideration, Radak is pointing to Noaḥ either having been the first person to ever plant a vineyard or, alternatively, having begun with the activity of planting, following the flood, amongst the plants, though, was a vineyard. While this points to his agricultural ingenuity, considering him in a more positive light than had Rashi, Radak then considers Noaḥ’s drinking in a negative light (ibid.):

This story has two different primary topics, the first of which is that Canaan, Ḥam’s son, and his offspring were a cursed tribe, cursed by Noaḥ, that is. We observe throughout the book of Genesis how careful our ancestors were not to intermarry with members of such a cursed part of mankind.... Another aspect of this story is to warn anyone drinking wine not to overindulge, as this will impair the functioning of his brain, that if he drinks it in such an undiluted state, he will get drunk from it and mess with his mind and screw up his thinking and come to madness.... Therefore, the story that comes from the Torah is to relate to us about his condemnation, that the first person to drink wine got drunk off of it and messed with his mind, causing him to undress and get naked without his knowing it.

והיה הספור הזה לשני הענינים, האחד למה כנען וזרעו היו מקוללים כמו שראינו שהיו האבות מואסים ומרחקים מאד מלהתחתן עמהם.... ועוד היה הספור הזה להזהיר על משתה היין ושלא לשגות בו, כי הוא מפסיד הדעת, כי אם ישתהו חי וישתכר ממנו ינגב המוח מבלבול המחשבה ויבוא לידי שגעון.... לפיכך בא ספור ממנו בתורה לספר בגנותו, כי הראשון ששתה ממנו נשתכר בו ונשתבשה דעתו עד שנתגלה ערותו והוא לא ידע

Clearly, Radak perceives this story as a warning for alcohol-consumption, particularly warning us not to overindulge in drinking, especially as he continues (רד"ק על בראשית ט׳:כ"א, ד"ה וישת מן היין):

He drank limitlessly until he got drunk and disgraced himself.

שתה בלא מדה עד שנשתכר ונתבזה

Clearly, Radak did not perceive his drinking in a favorable light, reminding us of the rabbis of the midrashim.

A Sympathetic Perspective

A sympathetic perspective of Noaḥ, however, perceives his having taken part in a totally acceptable activity as not only having been described at the outset of this week's Torah portion as being a righteous person, but also that this story depicts his agricultural prowess, and that he does not do anything negative while asleep. Indeed, it seems that he was an agricultural innovator, planting the first-ever vineyard, as we read of Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (1194-1270) (popularly known as Ramban) describing him, similarly to one of the explanations of Radak, as an agricultural innovator (רמב"ן על בראשית ט׳:כ׳, ד"ה אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה):

And the meaning of ויחל is that he began to plant vineyards, since there had been previous people who had planted a vine, but he began to plan many vines in many rows which were called a "vineyard", since he desired the wine, didn't plant a vine, like other trees, but made a vineyard.

וטעם ויחל כי הוא החל לנטוע כרמים כי הראשונים נטעו גפן והוא החל לנטוע גפנים רבים שורות שורות הנקרא "כרם" כי ברצותו ביין לא נטע הגפן כשאר האילנות ועשה כרם

New Episode

The newest episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show* is now out, on the topic of drunkenness in the Bible, featuring Dr. Rebekah Welton (yes, we also discuss Noaḥ’s getting drunk).

The episode is available on YouTube, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever else you enjoy listening to podcasts, as well as at **JewishDrinking.com/DrunkBible**

While it is unclear how Ramban perceived Noaḥ’s drinking, it is at least possible that, owing to his silence on the matter, maybe we can consider something about his being the first to plant a vineyard. If Noaḥ was the first person ever to create a vineyard, either he very intentionally knew that he was going to drink wine and get drunk or - who knows? - maybe he enjoyed drinking the juice of this fruit and then, at one point in time, it just had been sitting around for long enough and it tasted really, really good and made him feel really, really great and he didn't really know what he was getting himself into. In some respects, how else would we imagine the first human to consume alcohol?

Even if Noaḥ was not actually the first person to ever consume alcohol (as mentioned in this space in rabbinic midrashim last week depicting Adam drinking wine), maybe this drinking and getting drunk is totally fine. After all, there is no value judgment of his having gotten drunk mentioned in the Torah. Indeed, as Dr. Rebekah Welton said on the 162nd episode of The Jewish Drinking Show, “The text in no sense condemns the drunkenness, itself. It doesn't say ‘it's a sin’, it doesn’t say ‘he shouldn’t have done it’. There's no negative language used in relation to his drunkenness.”

It is certainly unclear from the text that Noaḥ did anything particularly pernicious through getting drunk, nor that he necessarily debased himself by doing so. In this more sympathetic reading towards Noaḥ’s drinking and then getting drunk, he appears as an agricultural innovator who is happy to enjoy the fruits of his labors. He is certainly not the only farmer ever to get drunk. Moreover, he did not do anything to anyone while having been in a drunken sleep.

Either way, this is certainly the first depiction of human consumption of alcoholic beverages in the Torah and two notable things happen: drunkenness and something disturbing of a sexual nature. While this is not the space to discuss what exactly it was that Ḥam did to Noaḥ (although you can check out the fifth episode of The Jewish Drinking Show on exactly this topic), it is certainly interesting that drunkenness occurs.

Conclusion

Whether one perceives Noaḥ’s planting and drinking as positive, negative, or some of both, this episode is certainly the first Biblical drinking story, yielding much discussion and a lot to consider in our tradition.

L’chaim🍷