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Malkitzedek's Bringing of Wine & Bread to Avram

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Following Avram's involvement in the war between the four kings vs the five kings, when Avram rescued Lot (Gen. 14:14-16), we read of the king of S'dom coming out to meet Avram (Gen. 14:17). However, before the king of S'dom speaks with Avram (Gen. 14:21-24), there is a brief narrative interruption where Malkitzedek, the king of Shalem, comes out to Avram and blesses him (Gen. 14:18-20):

And King Makitzedek of Shalem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Above. He blessed him, saying, "Blessed be Abram of God Above, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Above, Who has delivered your foes into your hand." And [Abram] gave him a tenth of everything.

ומלכי־צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שְׁלֵם הוֹצִיא לֶחֶם וַיִּין וְהָיָא כֹהֵן לֵאלֹהֵי עֲלִיּוֹן וַיְבָרֶכְהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרֹךְ אֲבָרָם לֵאלֹהֵי עֲלִיּוֹן קִנְהָ שָׁמַיִם וְאֶרֶץ וּבְרֹךְ אֱלֹהֵי עֲלִיּוֹן אֲשֶׁר־מָגֵן צָרֶיךָ בְּיָדְךָ וַיִּתְּלֵהוּ מִעֵשֶׂר מִכָּל

What stands out here, in addition to the interruption of the king of S'dom approaching Avram, is that Malkitzedek brings forth bread and wine to Avram. This is the first time in the book of Genesis that we've seen wine appear since Noah got drunk in chapter 9. While we can understand that bread will help his hunger, why does he bring wine out to him? Wouldn't water have been a more appropriate beverage to provide to those coming from battle?

Allegoric & Metaphoric Approaches

One set of approaches regarding this gifting is to suggest that the bread and wine are not significant in and of themselves, as we read in this midrash (בראשית רבה מ"ג):

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: "He revealed to him the laws of the High Priesthood. 'Bread' – this alludes to the showbread; 'and wine' – this alludes to the libations."

The Rabbis say: "He revealed Torah [precepts] to him, as it is stated: 'Come, partake of my bread, and drink of the wine that I have mixed' (Proverbs 9:5)."

רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחְמָן אָמַר הִלְכוֹת כֹּהֲנָה גְדוּלָה גְּדוּלָה לוֹ, לֶחֶם, זֶה לֶחֶם הַפָּנִים. וַיִּין, אֵלֹהֵי הַנְּסֻכִּים.

וְרַבְּנָן אָמְרֵי תוֹרָה גְּדוּלָה לוֹ, שְׁנַאֲמַר (משלי ט, ה): לֵכוּ לֶחֶם בְּלִחְמִי וַיִּשְׁתּוּ בַיִּין מִסֻּכֵּי.

Whereas Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman advocates for the bread and wine serving as allegories, his late third century rabbinic contemporaries advocate that they merely serve as metaphors for what Malkitzedek served him. These rabbis seem to be unsatisfied with considering Malkitzedek as simply providing Avram provisions; instead, they consider this story as relating something to us being beyond the physical aspects of what he served him, considering that Malkitzedek was revealing something of a Torah-nature, whether Torah, itself, or, more specifically, the showbread and libations.

While it seems that subsequent medieval commentators did not take up the rabbis' metaphorical approach to this story, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi), however, seemed to have taken a liking to Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman's allegorical consideration, as he mentioned it (רש"י על בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה לֶחֶם וַיִּין). However, if this

story was meant to allegorize offerings in the Temple, why only these items? Why not meat, which is a more central aspect of the offerings? Rabbi



Mordecai ben Avraham Yoffe (1530-1612) provides a fascinating answer to this question (ד"ה רש"י, בראשית י"ד:י"ח, "לבוש האורה, בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה רש"י):

And his bringing out of the bread and wine was to greet them outside of the city in the manner of gift-giving. "The Midrashic explanation is of the meal-offerings, etc." is that they were in the form of a gift to God, since the language of meal-offerings is a gift. And the reason that he did not bring meat out to him is meant to hint at the animal-sacrifices, since they are brought for expiation, such as a sin-offering, as well as a guilt-offering, which are not provided in a manner of gifts, which is why he did not want to mention the sin of his sons, but the meal-offerings only come about on account of the donation-offerings and elevation-offerings, which are in the manner of a gift, even though there is also amongst the meal-offerings the meal-offering of the suspected adulteress, which is expiatory. That meal-offering derives from barley, which he did not bring out, rather wheat semolina and wine for libations, which also accompany libations for elevation-offerings.

ומה שהוציאו לחם ויין לקראתו חוצה לעיר דרך מתנה רמז רמז לו על המנחות כו' שהם דרך מתנה לש"י שכן לשון מנחה מתנה ומה שלא הוציא לו בשר לרמז בו על קרבנות בהמות מפני שיש בהן שבאין לכפרה כגון חטאת ואשם ולא דרך מתנה לא רצה להזכיר לו חטאת בניו אבל המנחות אינם באין אלא על הנדבות והעולות דרך מתנה אעפ"י שגם במנחות יש מנחת סוטה שהיא לכפרה אותה באה מן השעורים והוא לא הוציא לו אלא סולת חיטין ויין לנסכים בג"כ לנסכי עולות

Rabbi Yoffe here provides a helpful explanation as to how Malkitzedek's providing of bread and wine were appropriate gifts, despite the lack of meat provided.

Feeding The Battle-Wearied

While Rashi wrote about that idea, he also articulated a more straightforward comment (רש"י על בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה לֶחֶם וַיִּין):

Thus is done for those wearied through battle and he showed him (Avram) that he bore him no malice for killing his descendants.

כך עושים ליגעי מלחמה, והראיה לו שאין בלבו עליו על שהרג את בניו

{continued on the next page}

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

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{continued from previous page}

This idea gained traction amongst subsequent medieval commentators, such as Rabbi David Kimḥi (1160–1235) (popularly known as Radak) (ד"ק) (על בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה הוציא לחם ויין ספורנו על בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה הוציא) (1475–1549) (popularly known as Sforno) (לחם ויין). However, the question that arises with this notion of providing bread and wine to battle-weary men is why are they being provided wine? Rabbi Elijah Mizraḥi (1455–1525) suggested that these may actually serve as umbrella terms (מזרחי, בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה כך עושין ליגיעי מלחמה):

The text only needed to mention the bread, since that is the behavior of people everywhere: "And let me fetch a morsel of bread" (Gen. 18:5) and "And Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread" (Ex. 18:12). If you were to say that wine was necessary for those coming from battle, but not because he did not take out meat and fowl and fish and the like according to the way of the kings. There is to say that bread and wine contains all foods and beverages, such as the words of the Rabbis that the blessing of bread and the blessing of wine include all types of foods and beverages, as our sages said, "aside from the blessing of bread and the blessing of wine" (RH 29a), that all types of benefitting are included within them.

לא היה צריך להזכיר אלא הלחם שכן דרך בכל מקו ואקחה פת לחם ויבא אהרן וכל זקני ישראל לאכל לחם מת"ל ויין אלא שהם צריכי ליגיעי מלחמה אבל לא מפני שלא הוציא בשר ועופות ודגים וכיוצא בהם כדרך המלכים דאיכא למימר שלחם ויין כוללים כל מיני המאכלות והמשקים כמאמר ר"ל חוץ מברכת הלחם וברכת היין שכל מיני ההנאות נכללים בהם

Instead of going in the direction that bread and wine serve as catchall terms for foods and beverages, Rabbi Mordecai ben Avraham Yoffe (1530–1612) suggests that maybe Malkitzedek brought it out for the soldiers to have a drinking party (לבוש האורה, בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה רש"י):

It seems to me that a question for Rashi is if he did this for Avraham's honor or if he was passing by on his return from war that he would be bringing it to his house and they would make a drinking party. Therefore, Rashi wrote "this is what they do for those wearied from battle", that they would be tired, wearied, and famished, so he provided for them dry bread and wine that was better than any other delicacies that they could not wait until the food would be cooked because of hunger, and he passed by suddenly and it is possible that it was not Avram's path to pass there, so Malkitzedek would not have known beforehand; therefore, he brought it close to his city.

נ"ל שקשה לרש"י אם לכבוד אברהם היה עושה מפני שעבר עליו בשונו מהמלחמה היה לו להביאו אל ביתו והיה לו לעשות משהו לכך אמר כך עושין ליגיעי מלחמה שהם עיפים ויגיעים ורעבים וערב להם לחם יבש ויין יותר מכל מעדנים שאינם יכולים להמתין עד שיתבשלו המאכלים מפני הרעב והוא שעבר עליו פתאום ואפשר שלא היה זה במהלכו של אברהם לעבור שם ומלכי צדק לא ידע קודם לכן שיבא כ"כ קרוב לעירו

Rashi also says "The Midrashic explanation is of the meal-offerings, etc.", which is to say that the meaning of the midrash is that he certainly brought them to his house and honored them, and made a huge drinking party. And his bringing out of the bread and wine was to greet them outside of the city in the manner of gift-giving.

ואח"כ אומר רש"י ומדרש אגדה רמז לו על המנחות כו' כלומר דעת המדרש הוא ודאי שהביאו לביתו וכבדו ועשה לו משהו גדול ומה שהוציאו לחם ויין לקראתו חוצה לעיר דרך מתנה

In other words, the reason that Malkitzedek brought the bread and the wine out to them was so that they would have nourishment while still out on the battlefield as a way to get them immediately fed and getting their drinking going before coming back to Malkitzedek's house to then continue their drinking, as well as eating, which is a really fascinating approach that both answers why he went out to them, as well as why he only provided them with these two consumable items.

New Episode

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Wine as Good or Bad?

Following the consideration of why Malkitzedek brought out wine in addition to bread, another aspect that arises in rabbinic literature is the question of is this wine even a good thing? In considering this, we read of a third-century disagreement amongst rabbis about the very appearance of this wine (בראשית רבה מ"ג:):

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: "Every time wine is written in the Torah, it connotes a [negative] impact, except for this one." Rabbi Levi said: "We cannot except this one either, that, from there, He decreed upon him: 'They will be enslaved to them and they will oppress them' (Genesis 15:13)."

רבי אבא בר כהנא אמר כל יין שכתוב בתורה עושה רושם חוץ מזה. אמר רבי לוי אף זה לא יצאנו מידו, שמשם קרא עלינו: ועבדום וענו אתם ארבע מאות שנה (בראשית ט, ג)

What does Rabbi Abba bar Kahana mean that bad things happen whenever we read of wine in the Torah? Rashi explained his statement as referring to unfortunate occurrences happening, pointing to with Noah, with Lot's daughters, and with the sons of Aharon (רש"י על בראשית רבה מ"ג:; ד"ה כל יין שבתורה עושה רושם). One notable problem with this description is the occurrence of Yosef and his brothers getting drunk (Genesis 43:34), although perhaps it could be argued that we don't read of the presence of wine there, so maybe that was a peaceful drunkenness through beer(?). In any event, Rabbi Abba Bar Kahana is still pointing out that this story involving the gift of wine is a demonstrably good story in the book of Genesis involving wine.

Nevertheless, even Rabbi Levi is not satisfied with this story being the exception to wine being involved with negative incidents, as he points out the subsequent decree against Avram's descendants. However, a notable problem with his view is that the story that actually follows this story is that of the king of S'dom (14:21–24), with Avram's vision of God in chapter 15 seemingly not juxtaposed with this story involving Malkitzedek's gifting of wine and bread to Avram. While these two rabbis of the midrash disagreed about whether or not this gifting of wine was good or bad, they do both agree that wine-related stories in the Torah tend to go poorly.

Conclusion

Malkitzedek's bringing out not just bread, but also wine may have been done to reveal aspects of the Torah, to demonstrate to Avram that Malkitzedek had no intent to threaten him, or even as an appetizer to a larger drinking party, there are certainly multiple possibilities as to what this providing of bread and wine could have been. As Malkitzedek is described as a priest of God Above, he may be demonstrating that it's a Godly act to provide not just food, but wine, as well.

L'chaim 🍷

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