

ONEG SHABBAS

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A Drunken Rebellion?

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 יוֹדֵעַ ה'
make known who is [God's] and	אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־לִי
who is holy by granting direct	וְאֶת־הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְהַקִּירִב
access; the one whom [God] has	אֵלָיו וְאֶת־אֲשֶׁר
chosen will be granted access.	יִבְחָרֵבּוּ יִקְרִיב 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 יוֹדֵעַ?
Moses said, "Perhaps amidst their having a lot of food and drink, they said this matter."	אָמַר מֹשֶׁה, שָׁמָּה מְתוּחַ רַב מֵאֲכָל וּמִשְׁתָּה אֲמָרוֹ דָּבָר זֶה.
Therefore, he said, "In the morning."	לָכֵן אָמַר, בֹּקֶר.
He said, "Maybe between now and then they will repent."	אָמַר, שָׁמָּה בֵּין כָּר וּבֵין כָּר יַעֲשׂוּ תְשׁוּבָה. לָכֵן נֶאֱמַר: בֹּקֶר יוֹדֵעַ.
Therefore, he said to them "In the morning, He will make known."	אָמַר לָהֶם: אֵין לִי רְשׁוּת לִיכְנֵס עַכְשָׁו, אֲפֹרָ עַל כִּי שָׁאִין לִפְנֵי לֹא אֲכִילָה וְלֹא שְׁתִּיָּה, אֲלֵא בְשִׁבְלִינוּ שְׁאֲכִלְנוּ וּשְׁתִּינוּ.
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 eaten and drank."	

This is such a fascinating midrash, since it attributes Moshe's answer of "In the morning" to being on account of drinking, as well as eating. But more than that, this midrash paints Moshe's concern as a possibility that they may have had a lot to eat and drink leading up to their approaching him. Why would he, according to this midrash, have had such a concern? Perhaps it was on account of their manner of approaching him: perhaps he thought this was behavior that comes as a result of having had a lot to drink, as well as a lot to eat. Perhaps through their having gotten together to eat and drink, they hatched this rebellion. Thus, Moshe's response here is owing to his concern of their having been drinking.

However, the midrash does not stop there, as the midrash provides two further possibilities: the first of which is the possibility that they may repent by the time morning arrives. Perhaps, Moshe thinks, they just need to sleep off this drinking (and eating) and come back not only well-rested, but clear-minded, resulting in their repenting for such seditious behavior.

The final piece of this midrash is the mention of drinking, once again, as well as eating. In this section, the midrash positions Moshe as having drank, as well as eaten, so he mentions why he and Aaron can't bring their offerings now, whereas the morning would provide them with a clean slate, as drinking goes, since they can't bring offerings under the influence (cf. Lev. 10:9).



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 בקר, רש"י על במדבר ט"ז:ה):

"Now is a time of drunkenness for us and it is not appropriate to appear before Him."	עַתָּה עֵת שִׁכְרוּת הוּא לָנוּ וְלֹא נִכּוֹן לְהֵרָאוֹת לִפְנֵינוּ, וְהוּא הֵיאָה מִתְכַּוֵּן לְדַחֲוֹת שְׁמָא יִחְזְרוּ 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 the inappropriateness of appearing before God now that it is the time of day when drunkenness occurs for Moshe and seemingly everyone else. While the midrash mentioned nothing about drunkenness, Rashi transforms this third answer in the midrash to being about this time of day being that of when they usually get drunk. This is sort of like the third response in the midrash, although not quite. We also read of the second response in the midrash, although it seems to be Rashi's ultimate answer - that the concern of the time of drunkenness was really just a response to push off the showdown until the morning to get them to sleep off their proposed rebellion.

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.

Interpreting Rashi: Not Actually Drunk

What does Rashi's description of the rebellion taking place at a time of day when drunkenness would commonly occur mean? Rabbi Elijah Mizrahi (1455-1526) took up a response (ד"ה עתה עת שכרות, מורח, במדבר ט"ז:ה):

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 שִׁכְרוּת הַמַּחְלּוֹקֶת עַל דֶּרֶךְ וְשִׁכּוּרָה וְלֹא מִיַּיִן
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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 (שפתי חכמים, 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 or Moshe & Aaron as having regularly gotten drunk at this hour?

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 Eliyahu Mizrahi interpreted it as "intoxication of controversy", similar to the verse "drunk, but not with wine" (Isaiah 51:21), but this is an incorrect explanation, because the phrase "time of intoxication" means that everyone had already eaten their meal, and there is concern that someone might have drunk a quarter-log of wine, and therefore it is inappropriate to appear before him; thus, it is called "time of intoxication".

And Moshe did not say "You are drunk", but rather that the time was one of intoxication—since it is customary for people who have eaten and drunk to be drunk.

And since he was troubled by the question of why it mattered whether the wicked entered while intoxicated or not, and would thereby be liable to death (cf. Leviticus 10:9), why Moses was so insistent about it—one cannot say that Moses and Aaron were preventing them for their own sake, for that is not reasonable. After all, Aaron was required to bring the afternoon offering (Exodus 29:41), and that offering had not yet been brought. For if the afternoon offering had already been brought, it would obviously be forbidden to offer anything afterward, since nothing is brought after the afternoon offering (Rashi on Leviticus 6:5). And all the more so Moses, who had the Divine Presence speaking with him constantly—it is inconceivable that he drank a quarter-log of wine.

Rather, one must conclude that Moses' intent was only to push them off—perhaps they would repent.

While Rabbi Loew wrote about details concerning the need for sobriety and timing in bringing offerings, he understood 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

פירש הרא"ם, שכרות המחלוקת, וכמו (ישעיה נא, כא) "שכורת ולא מיין". ובחנם פירש כן, כי 'עת שכרות' רצה לומר שכבר הכל אכלו טעוּתו, ויש לחוש שמא אחד שתה רביעיית 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 רביעיית יין.

אלא על כרחך לא היתה כוונתו של משה רק לדחותם, אולי יחזרו

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. Rabbi Loew pulls off a fascinating dance: both offering a minimal perspective of wine-consumption for them to be considered within the time of drunkenness, but also possibly actually getting drunk. In this way, Rabbi Loew offers two possibilities for understanding Rashi's comment. Either way, he is clearly rejects Rabbi Mizrahi's suggestion that they didn't actually drink.

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 (משיכיל לדוד, 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, it 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 Moses' words and did not realize that it was merely a deferment, because he thought perhaps there is a distinction to be made between the priests, who were already designated and would not drink wine at all, and these men, for whom this was the first time and who had not yet been prohibited from drinking wine. Therefore, there was reason to issue a decree regarding them.

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 



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