

ONEG SHABBAS

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To Drink or Not to Drink: The Lack of Potable Water at Rephidim

With the appearance of the phrase “to drink” (לשתות) appearing in this week’s Torah portion, I was curious to discover how frequently it appeared in the Torah and how it appears (I am hoping that readers of this publication may also share in this curiosity). It turns out that this week’s Torah portion features the final appearance of this word in the Torah (Num. 33:14):

They set out from Alush and encamped at Rephidim; it was there that the people had no water to drink.	יִסְעוּ מֵאֲלוֹשׁ וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּרִפְדִּים וְלֹא־הָיָה שָׁם מַיִם לֵעָם לִשְׁתּוֹת
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Appearances in Genesis & Exodus

Of the nine appearances of this word, the first three appear in Genesis, all regarding animals drinking, whether camels (Gen. 24:19 and Gen. 24:22) or goats (Gen. 30:38). The first three appearances of this term in the book of Exodus concern the Egyptians unable to drink water, due to the first of the ten plagues (Ex. 7:18, 7:21, & 7:24). The final appearance of this word in the book of Exodus describes the lack of water for the Israelites to drink at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1).

Appearances in Numbers

In the book of Numbers, the first appearance is in a strange complaint by the Israelites, complaining about the lack of water to drink (Num. 20:5), discussed previously in this space for Parashat Hukat. With this term being absent in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the final appearance in the Torah, as I mentioned earlier, is the recap of the lack of water to drink at Rephidim (Num. 33:14), previously mentioned in the book of Exodus.

Surely, water is not only an important beverage, it is perhaps the most important beverage to drink, not only for humans, but, as we read in the book of Genesis, for animals, as well. So the lack of potable water in a desert (or anywhere, really) becomes a vital issue of life and death.

Why Only Rephidim?

When we read of this phrase in our parashah, as mentioned at the outset of this essay, why is this the only time we read of this retelling? The first time we read of this story, we read of a riot breaking out over the lack of



potable water (Ex. 17:1-3), but fortunately, water was eventually able to be furnished to our ancestors (Ex. 17:6). Interestingly, none of these details are mentioned here, rather, just a note on location with this lack of potable water. Also, it’s worth noting that they had previously complained to Moses, “What shall we drink?” (Ex. 15:24), yet, at this point, they don’t ask him, rather demanding, “Give us water and we will drink” (Ex. 17:2). So, why are these details not included in this narrative retelling?

A fascinating response to this question is provided by Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) (popularly known as Ramban), who wrote (רמב"ן על במדבר ל"ג:י"ד, ד"ה ויחנו ברפידים ולא היה שם מים לעם לשתות):

It did not mention the miracle of the water at Marah, nor the matter of the manna in the Wilderness of Sin, however, because the incident at Rephidim was called Testing and Strife, and it was sanctified in their sight through the bringing forth of water from the rock, and the battle with Amalek came upon them there – therefore, it mentioned briefly, "and there was no water for the people to drink", for that is the place distinctly known and recognized for it.

לא הזכיר במרה נס המים ולא במדבר סין ענין המן אבל בעבור היות ענין רפידים דבר גדול שנסו את ה' ונקרא המקום מסה ומריבה ונקדש לעיניהם להוציא להם מים מסלע ובאה אליהם שם מלחמת עמלק על כן הזכיר בקצרה ולא היה שם מים לעם לשתות כי הוא המקום הניכר והנודע בו

Having a riot break out and being attacked by Amalek were not significant enough to be mentioned, but not having water to drink, however, is, according to Ramban. Clearly, for the Torah to mention this incident, it surely stuck out as a memorable moment. This was a compelling enough explanation for Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (1270-1340) to quote it in his commentary, as well (במדבר ל"ג:י"ד, ד"ה ויחנו ברפידים ולא היה מים), pointing out that the brevity of the phrase is purposeful. The phrase hints at a cascade of events, including divine testing, miraculous water, and war—making the location “recognized and known” by those events. The water crisis acts as a literary trigger for these larger theological themes.

In a similar vein, we read of Rabbi Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel (1437-1508)’s writing on this, who adds a little something further (אברבנאל במדבר (ל"ג:י"ד):

And behold, it says "at Rephidim, and there was no water for the	והנה אמר ברפידים ולא היה שם מים לעם
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{continued on page 2}

Oneg Shabbas is composed by, edited by, and published by Rabbi Drew Kaplan.

If you have any comments, compliments, or suggestions, feel free to reach out at Drew@JewishDrinking.com



{To Drink or Not to Drink, continued from previous page}

people to drink" – not to recount the miracle that was done there with the water, for it does not mention the miracle of the manna nor the miracle of the waters of Marah. But because at Rephidim they tested God, saying: 'Is the Lord among us or not?' – and, for this reason, the place was called Trying and Strife – and, because of this, Amalek came upon them there, therefore, all of this is mentioned briefly through the reference to the lack of water, from which everything that followed was triggered, and the question "Is the Lord among us?" was posed.

ולשות לא להגיד
הנס שנעשה להם
שם מהמים כי הנה
לא זכר נס המן ולא
נס מי מרה אבל
בעבור שברפידים
נסו את השם לומר
היש ה' בקרבנו אם
אין ונקרא המקום
מפני זה מסה
ומריבה ובעבור בא
עליהם שם עמלק
לכן זכר כל זה בדרך
קצרה מחסרון
המים שממנו נמשך
מה שנמשך והותרה
השאלה

In other words, Rabbi Abarbanel, points out that, as opposed to other places, Rephidim becomes memorable not for the water itself, but for the spiritual and military crises. Thus, he frames it as a compact reference to a pivotal theological and narrative episode, from which great consequences unfolded.

Water vs. No Water

A simpler explanation is provided by Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344) (popularly known as Ralbag), who wrote (ביאור המלות על רלב"ג) (popularly known as Ralbag), who wrote (ביאור המלות על רלב"ג) (popularly known as Ralbag), who wrote (ביאור המלות על רלב"ג):

Behold, [the mention of] this [incident] points [to the juxtaposition] that all of the locations to which they arrived from the moment that they arrived at Elim, they found water, but this incident was the first place that they did not find water.

הנה זה ממה
שיורה כי בכל
המקומות שבאו
מעת בואם
לאלים מצאו מים
וזה היה המקום
הראשון שלא
מצאו בו מים

For Ralbag, the verse serves a logistical and empirical function. It tells us something about the pattern of the Israelites' travel through the wilderness. Up until Rephidim, they had always encountered water sources. Rephidim is marked not for its theological drama, but because it represents a break in that pattern—the first time water was not available, which then precipitated the complaint and subsequent divine intervention. Ralbag does not delve into themes of divine testing, spiritual growth, or symbolic meaning, as we read above. His interest is in mapping the physical journey and noting how the absence of water stands out in contrast to the norm up to that point. The emphasis is observational: a notable travel disruption rather than a theological crisis.



{continued on page 4}

Wine Not: Not Drinking Wine Leading up to Av 9th

Rabbinic Origins

In the aftermath of the destruction of the temple, the practice established by rabbinic leadership, in addition to fasting on the 9th of the month of Av, was also to abstain from meat and wine on the afternoon of the 8th, leading up to the fast (*mTa'anit* 4:7). Why the tannaitic sages chose to only compel the nation to abstain from wine and meat for the afternoon leading into the 9th of Av as opposed to making it even earlier, such as the week in which the 9th of Av occurred was seemingly due to it being an overly onerous amount of time for Jews to go without either wine or meat. In fact, Rabbi Yehoshua specifically addresses those who want to entirely abstain from both wine, as well as meat, but pushed back, saying that, "to mourn excessively as you are doing is also impossible, as the Sages do not issue a decree upon the public unless a majority of the public is able to abide by it (*tSotah* 15:10 & *bBB* 60b).

While it would seem that neither meat nor wine should be able to be consumed for the entirety of the day leading up to the 9th of Av, the Sages permitted consumption of wine and meat in the morning (*bTa'anit* 30a), so that one would not have to be with neither meat nor wine that day. Following the establishment of this enactment in the Tannaitic era, subsequent Talmudic sages, both amoraic and stammaic, ratified the limitation of the avoidance of wine and meat to only the day before Av 9th. Moreover, so, too, did even further subsequent generations of rabbis, both Saboraim, as well as Geonim.

Medieval Ashkenazic Expansion

However, in the medieval period, Ashkenazi rabbis sought to extend this period of time of abstaining from wine. We already read by the turn of the 14th century, as Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (1270–1340) wrote:

The Ashkenazic custom is that individuals refrain from meat and wine from the 17th of Tammuz onward, and from Rosh Chodesh (Av) onward, everyone refrains from meat and wine, except on Shabbat, when they eat and drink as is done the entire year.

ומנהג אשכנז היחידים
נמנעים מבשר ויין מ"ז
בתמוז ואילך ומראש
חודש ואילך נמנעים
כולם מבשר ויין וזולת
שבת שאוכלין ושותין
דרך כל השנה כולה



While the notion of not having wine from the first day of Av is a huge abstention from wine, at least that custom of refraining from the 17th of Tammuz is not still common today, thank God.

More Than Just Wine???

Another move was to forbid all alcoholic beverages, as Rabbi Moses Isserles (1530-1572) wrote (דרכי משה, אורח חיים תקנ"א:ט):

...And further wrote Rabbi Alexander Süsslein HaKohen (d. 1349) in his Sefer Agudah that "we are accustomed to not drink beer", but the custom is not like his words, that we even drink mead. ...

...וכתב עוד באגודה
דנהגין שלא לשתות
שכר ואין המנהג
בדבריו דאפילו שכר
דברשוטין....

This is something that he ratifies in his commentary to Rabbi Yosef Karo's *Set Table* (רמ"א או"ח תקנ"א:א).

Occasions for Leniencies

Since the abstention from wine is a custom that is a stringency, there are also mechanics to enable leniency, as Rabbi Isserles writes about situations in which wine, as well as meat, may be consumed (רמ"א לאו"ח):

At a Mitzvah Meal like a circumcision, redemption of the first-born male, a Siyum (concluding of a) Tractate, or an

ובסעודת מצוה כגון
מילה ופדיון הבן וסיום
מסכת וסעודת אירוסין

{continued on page 4}

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10 Types of People You'll See at the Kiddush Club

Sarah Tuttle-Singer

1. The First One

He's already unbuttoned his top button and slipped out before the *haftarah*. He's not subtle, but he swears no one notices. He's absolutely wrong. But someone has to be first. The others all shuffle out behind him.

Main character energy.

He is the Moses of our time.

2. The One Really REALLY Into Single Malt

Will only drink Glen- whatever if it's aged longer than his bar mitzvah portion. Definitely prefers whisky he cannot pronounce. Looks pained if someone suggests Israeli whiskey. Doesn't say a word because he's friends with the owners of Milk & Honey.



3. The Plastic Cup Philosopher with the Plastic Chair

Two L'chaims in and he's quoting Heschel, Levinas, and Joe Rogan in the same breath. By the third, he's solving the Middle East conflict. He's also the guy with the white plastic chair who is either a professor or homeless or both from your bomb shelter.

The chair abides.

4. The Noshers Who Says He's Intermittent Fasting

Claims he's "just here for the vibes," but somehow ends up with an entire Ziploc of rugelach. Also maybe half a kugel in his coat pocket. And alllll the herring. Is convinced it's all for him. Why else is the container so small?

5. The One In The Know

Knows who's getting divorced, who just got a nose job, and who got kicked out of the synagogue WhatsApp group. Knows what deodorant you're wearing.

Doesn't know the Torah portion.

6. The Gates (of Awe) Crasher

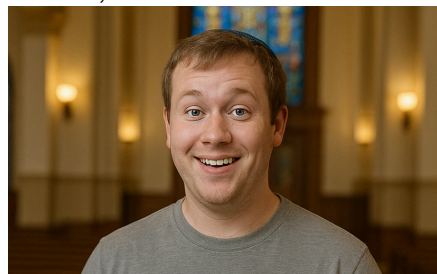
Not actually a member of this shul. Just heard the whiskey was better here. Knows the rotation of every decent kiddush club within a 20-block radius. There are days when we all aspire to be this person.

He is the stuff of great poetry, literature, and cinema.

7. The Confused Guest

Proudly announces it's his "first time in a Temple." Asks where he can get a cute little beanie. Wishes everyone "Shalom Shabbat."

Bless.



8. The Frum Bro

Tight fade, tight pants, tight theology. Says "Baruch Hashem" after every sentence but mixes it with "bro" and "deadass." Drinks like Simchat Torah and Purim had a baby. Every single week.

Also the Rabbi's son.

9. The Woman Who's Totally Over It



She's invited herself in. Simps for literally no one. She's holding court with a plastic cup of wine, asking the men pointed questions about *Eishes Chayil* and their mother issues.

Nobody dares stops her. Not a Pick Me Girl.

10. The One Who's Actually There for Spiritual Reasons

He says a quiet l'chaim for someone's recovery. He's thinking about his mom, of blessed memory. He means it. We should all be more like him. But we won't be.

There's always next week.

I am fortunate that Sarah Tuttle-Singer granted me permission to republish the above piece, which she published to Facebook on July 9th (2025). As her list was written within an Israeli context, there are aspects of these descriptions which are particular to that context. However, there are many aspects of this that are still descriptive of people you will see at kiddush clubs in the diaspora.

When I had shared the list above, an addition that was shared with me was "It's missing the guy who is nervous the rabbi will notice and sneaks in and out." This is the person that really does not want to be seen by the rabbi heading out of shul to go take part in kiddush club, whether for reasons pertaining to their ongoing conversion or for not wanting to seem to disrespect the rabbi.

Amongst the comments on her Tuttle-Singer's original post were the following:

- So you've captured the "spirit" of the club perfectly. Seems with only small adjustments, you're describing a few I've been to here in the US...
- I go every Shabbat for the Parshat HaShavuah revolving around a real story. Afterwards a friend of mine carrying a whiskey flask pours a shot of Shlivovitz which I savor but he and wife gulp it down. Maybe they are the real heroes who know a good whiskey
- The ones who can't even wait for the blessing over the wine and are already piling their plates high with food.
- We are the "kiddushnikim" and have succeeded in involving the kids who help cut stuff up and set up the tables. Parents thank us and say it's the reason their kids agree to come to synagogue.
- How about the guy who is first to make kiddush, and then toasts all the Jewish folk, and God bless America, and then holds forth on ALL his opinions and won't listen to a single thing anybody else says....
- Also talks during the entire torah reading, and is insulted when (slightly) more pious people shush him....

{To Drink or Not to Drink, continued from page 2}

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The Dread Sets In

An alternative description concerning water vs. no water is that of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), who offers a symbolic-theological interpretation (רש"ר הירש על התורה, במדבר ל"ג:י"ד, ד"ה ולא היה שם מים וגו'):

From that point, the real dread of the waterless wilderness began, and, from Horeb, an unfailing spring of water was granted to them there that would henceforth accompany and sustain them on their journey through the desert.

Von da begann der eigentliche Schrecken der wasserlosen Wüste, und ward ihnen vom Horeb her der nie versiegende Wasserborn, der sie fortan durch die Wüste geleitete.



Thus, Rabbi Hirsch treats the phrase as a profound moment of existential and spiritual awakening. In both Rabbi Gershon's and Rabbi Hirsch's perspectives, they had water until then, marking Rephidim as a notably waterless occasion. Both of them also describe that there were subsequent non-water places in which they found themselves. However, where Ralbag sees a geographic anomaly, Rabbi Hirsch sees a spiritual milestone; the lack of water marks the beginning of Israel's deep dependence on God's miraculous sustenance and the shift from natural to supernatural provision. His focus is emotional and theological - highlighting human vulnerability and divine reliability.



Conclusion

In the end, what may seem like a passing phrase — “and there was no water for the people to drink” — becomes a narrative pressure point from which theology, memory, and identity flow. Whether viewed through the theological lens of Ramban and Abarbanel, the empirical geography of Ralbag, or the spiritual symbolism of Rabbi Hirsch, Rephidim is far more than a desert encampment. It becomes a crucible of faith, a flashpoint of human need and divine response, and a moment that reverberates through the collective memory of the Israelites.

The Torah's brief retelling in Numbers 33:14 invites the reader to recall not only the physical thirst of the people, but also their existential questioning - “Is the Lord among us or not?” That single absence of water becomes emblematic of a deeper spiritual drought and longing. In that light, the scarcity at Rephidim is not merely about hydration; it is about trust, presence, and the human condition in the wilderness of uncertainty. And perhaps, in our own moments of spiritual thirst, the memory of Rephidim reminds us to look not only for water, but for meaning, growth, and the presence of something greater, even - and especially - in the dry places. Hopefully, none of us are without water to drink, for, if we were, like our ancestors, we would surely remember it. May we never lack water to drink (or anything else).

L'chaim 

{Nine Days, continued from page 2}

Engagement Meal, we eat meat and drink wine, all those who are relevant to the meal, but there is to minimize that one should not to add on. ואוכלין בשר ושותין יין כל השייכין לסעודה אבל יש לצמצם שלא להוסיף

Havdallah Tonight

Another situation that will occur is that of Havdallah tonight - what about the wine for that? This is something about which Rabbi Isserles wrote stringently (ibid.):

And we are accustomed to be strict to drink wine, neither for grace after meals nor Havdalah; rather, we give it to a child. And in a situation where there is no child, one can drink the wine themselves for Havdalah. ונהגין להחמיר שלא לשתות יין בברכת המזון ולא בהבדלה (תשובת מהר"ל סי' ק"ו) אלא נותנים לתינוק ובמקום דליכא תינוק מותר בעצמו לשתות הבדלה

Further describing how one should approach Havdallah for tonight, Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel HaLevi Epstein (1829-1908) wrote (ערוך השולחן או"ח) (תקנ"א:כ"ו):

For Havdallah, there are some who are accustomed to drink it, but we do not drink [the cup of wine], rather, we make Havdallah on beer. And for those who have written to give the cup of wine for Havdallah to children, this is on account of him being able to drink it, as we have written; but if there is no child around, then one should drink the cup of wine for Havdallah. However, when there is a child around, it is preferable that the child should drink the wine for Havdallah rather than the adult.

בהבדלה יש נוהגין לשתות, ואנחנו אין שותים, ועושים הבדלה על השכר וזה שכתבו ליתן ההבדלה לתינוקות - זהו מפני שגם בעצמו מותר לשתות, כמו שכתבנו, דאם אין תינוק - ישתה בעצמו, אך כשיש תינוק - מוטב שישתה התינוק משישתה הגדול

Thus, beer seems to be the preferred route. Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan (1838-1933) wrote about this child to whom one is giving this cup (משנה ברורה תקנ"א:ע):

If the child has reached the age of educational training in mitzvot, he may drink most of the cup—specifically if he has not yet reached the stage where he is obligated to mourn for Jerusalem. And this applies only in the case of a mitzvah. But when it is not for the purpose of a mitzvah, even though he is not yet able to mourn, it is forbidden to give him meat and wine if he is healthy.

שהגיע לחינוך וישתה רוב הכוס ודוקא אם לא הגיע עדיין להתאבל על ירושלים ודוקא בזה שהוא מצוה אבל בלא מצוה אף שא"י להתאבל אסור בבשר ויין כשהוא בריא

L'chaim 

Drinking During The 9 Days



With “The 9 Days” beginning this week, you can check out the episode on drinking during this time of *The Jewish Drinking Show*.



The episode is available on YouTube and wherever you prefer listening to podcasts, as well as at JewishDrinking.com/drinking9days

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

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