

ONEG SHABBAS

THE UNOFFICIAL PARASHAH SHEET FOR KIDDUSH CLUBS

פרשת שופטים - Vol. 4, Iss. 44 29-30 August 2025 - ו' אלול תשפ"ד

When a Vineyard Holds You Back from Battle

When going to battle, you likely want to have soldiers who are not distracted or otherwise not fully present. Fortunately, Moses, in this week's Torah portion, recognizes this need (especially since he, himself, had been involved in multiple battles) and allows for men in certain circumstances to absent themselves from arranging for war. While two of the three examples Moses provides are not surprising, one is certainly unexpected. And, yes, it has to do with wine (Deut. 20:5-7):

(5) Then the officials shall address the troops, as follows: "Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it. (6) Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but has never [???ed] it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another harvest it. (7) Is there anyone who has paid the bride-price for a wife, but who has not yet taken her [into his household]? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another take her [into his household as his wife]."

(ה) וְדַבְּרוּ הַשְּׂטָרִים
אֶל-הָעָם לֵאמֹר
מִי-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר בָּנָה
בַּיִת-חֹדֶשׁ וְלֹא חֲנָכוֹ
יָלֵךְ וְיָשֵׁב לְבֵיתוֹ
פְּרִימוֹת בְּמִלְחָמָה
וְאִישׁ אֲחֵר יִחְנְכֵנוּ: (ו)
וּמִי-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נָטַע
כֶּרֶם וְלֹא חָלְלוֹ יָלֵךְ
וְיָשֵׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פְּרִימוֹת
בְּמִלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אֲחֵר
יִחְלְלֵנוּ: (ז) וּמִי-הָאִישׁ
אֲשֶׁר-אָרַשׁ אִשָּׁה וְלֹא
לָקָחָהּ יָלֵךְ וְיָשֵׁב לְבֵיתוֹ
פְּרִימוֹת בְּמִלְחָמָה
וְאִישׁ אֲחֵר יִקְחֶנָּה:

While one can clearly imagine that a new house that is undedicated is certainly something that will stay on a man's mind, as well as a betrothed, but not yet married wife, it is certainly curious that a planted vineyard should cause someone's mind to be distracted. Yes, I fully acknowledge that the word חלל is currently untranslated in the passage above, although we will return to that word. However, what do these three matters have to do with each other?

Talmudic Perspective on This Trio

In considering what these three activities have to do with each other, the rabbis of the Talmud provided the following insight (Sotah 44a):

Our Rabbis taught: "that has built" (Deuteronomy 20:5), "that has planted" (Deuteronomy 20:6), and "that has betrothed" (Deuteronomy 20:7) - The Torah teaches this in the way that people behave: A man builds a house, then plants a vineyard, and afterwards marries a woman. And even King Solomon said in his wisdom: "Prepare your work outside, and make it fit for yourself in the field; and afterward build your house" (Prov. 24:27); "Prepare your work outside" - this is a house; "And make it fit for yourself in the field" - this is a vineyard; "And afterward you shall build your house" - this is a wife.

תָּנוּ רַבָּנֵי: "אֲשֶׁר
בָּנָה", "אֲשֶׁר נָטַע",
"אֲשֶׁר אָרַשׁ",
לִמְדָה תוֹרָה דֶּרֶךְ
אָרֶץ: שִׁבְנָה אָדָם
בַּיִת, וְיָטַע כֶּרֶם,
וְאַחֲרַי כָּר יֵשֵׁא
אִשָּׁה.
וְאַף שְׁלָמָה אָמַר
בְּחֻמָּתוֹ: "הֵכֵן
בְּחוּץ מְלֶאכְתְּךָ
וְעָתִידָה בְּשָׂדֶה לָךְ
אֲחֵר וּבְנִית בֵּיתְךָ".
"הֵכֵן בְּחוּץ"
מְלֶאכְתְּךָ - זֶה
בַּיִת,
"וְעָתִידָה בְּשָׂדֶה לָךְ"
- זֶה כֶּרֶם,
"אֲחֵר וּבְנִית בֵּיתְךָ"
- זֶה אִשָּׁה.



While readers of this publication may take it for granted that a vineyard, which is used for the production of wine, is understandable that it should be considered important, what is it about this activity that should hold this person back from entering battle? Let's first consider the other activities before moving on to the vineyard.

Dedicating One's House

When we consider dedicating one's house, what is it and what makes it worthy of holding one back from battle? Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) wrote (עזרא על דברים כ"ה; ד"ה חנכו) (1089-1167):

Like the dedication of the altar (Num. 7:10), and likewise "training a child (Prov. 22:6) and, from this, our Sages of blessed memory learned that we train children. The reason that [one who has not dedicated his house is released from service] is that such a man's heart and desire is to dedicate his house. And behold, his heart is for his house, not for war; therefore, he will flee and cause others to flee.

כמו שנכתב המזבח
וכן חנוך לנער
ומזה למדו רבותינו
ד"ל מחנכין את
הנערים והטעם כי
לבו וכל תאוותו
לחנוך ביתו והנה
לבו לביתו לא
למלחמה על כן
ינוס ויניס אחרים

This action of dedicating one's newly-built house sounds like it is an exciting occasion, especially since he has already done the hard labor of procuring the land, acquiring the materials, and all of that work to actually build the house. An alternative view is articulated by Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi), who wrote (ד"ה ולא חנכו) (ד"ה ולא חנכו):

He has not yet dwelt in it. The term חנוך denotes beginning.

ולא דר בו, חנוך
לשון התחלה

Whether we consider ibn Ezra's view or Rashi's view, both of them indicate that, despite all of the previous hard work, all that is left is a simple action.

Marrying One's Fiancée

With marrying an engaged wife-to-be, how exciting is it to have pursued this woman, developed a relationship, and now all that is left is simply the act of the wedding, itself? Like the dedication of one's newly-built house, this action seems to be one not only filled with excitement due to all of the previous work done to get to this situation, but also the added physical dimension of his excitement for carrying out the wedding, as well, which makes it quite understandable.

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Doing What with One's Vineyard? View 1: Redemption

Now that we have explored these other two activities, what is this vineyard-related activity that is keeping this man from battle? In order to answer this question, we need to figure out this word of חללו - how do we understand it? There seem to be two linguistic understandings of this word amongst the Medieval rabbinic commentators. Rashi and Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) (popularly known as Ramban) understand it to refer to redeeming grapes and making them redeemed. Rashi wrote (רש"י על דברים כ"ו, ד"ה ולא חללו):

He has not yet redeemed it in the fourth year of its growth, for the fruits had either to be eaten in Jerusalem or to be given a non-holy character, by exchanging them for money and the money's worth to be consumed in Jerusalem.

לא פדאו בשנה הרביעית, שהפרות טעונין לאכלן בירושלים או לחללן בדמים ולאכל הדמים בירושלים.

Rashi is referring to the commandment to set aside fourth-year fruit for The LORD (Lev. 19:24), and that grapes may be eaten from the fifth year and beyond (Lev. 19:25). Ramban further explains this understanding as (רמב"ן על דברים כ"ו, ד"ה וטעם ולא חללו):

Scripture commanded that all the fruits thereof [of the fourth year] shall be holy, for giving praise unto the Eternal, that they should praise the Glorious Name at that celebration. It is possible that the meaning of חללו is "that he has not made it plain/secular" referring to the "redemption", which our Rabbis have mentioned.

צוה הכתוב (ויקרא יט כד) שהיה כל פרי קדש הלולים שיהלו את השם הנכבד בשמחה ההיא ויתכן שהיה פירוש ולא חללו שלא עשאו חולין והוא הפדיון שהזכירו רבותינו

Doing What with One's Vineyard? View 2: Dancing

Conversely, the other linguistic approach is articulated by Ibn Ezra (אבן עזרא על דברים כ"ו, ד"ה חללו):

From the root of *halilim* (flutes), for their custom was to dance in the vineyards.

Similarly, Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah (13th century) wrote (דברים כ"ו, ד"ה חללו):

The term *halilim* (flutes), and their custom was already to dance in the vineyards, as we find with the daughters of Shiloh. And likewise, they planted vineyards and danced.

לשון חלילים וכבר היה מנהגם לחול בכרמים כמו שמצינו בבנות שילה וכן נטעו כרמים וחללו

The scriptural verse to which they are referring is that of Judges 21:20-21:

So they instructed the Benjaminites as follows: "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards. As soon as you see the daughters of Shiloh coming out to join in the dances, come out from the vineyards; let each of you seize a wife from among the daughters of Shiloh, and be off for the land of Benjamin.

וַיִּצְוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי בִּנְיָמִן לֵאמֹר לְכוּ וְאַרְבֶּתֶם בְּכַרְמִים וְרֵאתֶם אֶת־הַנְּשִׂאִים וְהָיָה אִם־יֵצְאוּ בְּנוֹת־שִׁילוֹ לַחֲוֹל בְּמַחֲלוֹת וַיֵּצְאתֶם מִן־הַכַּרְמִים וַיַּחֲטֹףְתֶּם לָכֶם אִישׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ מִבְּנוֹת שִׁילוֹ וְהָלַכְתֶּם אַרְצָ בְּנִימִן



In considering these dances, Rabbi David Altschuler of Prague (1687-1769) wrote (מצודת ציון על שופטים כ"א:כ"א):

The matter of the dancing of joy, which is called in the language of flutes, for the way is then to sing with flutes, or it means to say, with instruments of dancing. And so it is: "and he saw the calf and the dancing" (Ex. 32:19).

ענין רקידת השמחה, וקרוי בלשון מחול, כי הדרך לומר אז בחלילים, או רצה לומר, בכלי מחול, וכן (שמות יט ב) וירא את העגל ומחלת

When we read this story, we read that it is taking place at an annual feast to God (Judges 20:19), so it may very well be that these dances are taking place in the fall, near Sukkot, which would be at the end of the grape-harvest. If so, then this activity of flutes/dancing is a celebratory way of marking the conclusion of the laborious grape-harvest.

Conclusion

When we consider these two approaches to understanding this word, there are two separate aspects that are important: linguistic and temporal. Regarding the linguistic connection, the reference to Leviticus 19:24 of חללו is a different word, where the ח is in place of the ה, which seems weaker than the reference to Judges 21:21 in that it not only uses the language of לחול, but also specifically being in vineyards. This, then, has an affect on the temporal aspect: whereas the desacralizing approach of Rashi and Ramban mandates waiting up to four years before serving in the army, the dancing approach of ibn Ezra and Hizkuni is simply a matter of dancing.

What is appealing to this approach is the context. Just as the man who has spent so much time, energy, and resources on building his new house only needs to dwell in it (Rashi) or perform a dedicate ceremony (ibn Ezra) in anticipation of getting to live in it and enjoying his own place, as well as the man who has spent the time, energy, and effort in betrothing a woman only needs to perform the wedding ceremony in anticipation of being married and enjoying time with his new wife, so, too, it would seem that the man who has spent the time, energy, and resources in building, cultivating, and growing his vineyard in anticipation of enjoying his delicious wine, all he needs to do is to perform the ceremony of celebrating the end of the harvest.

While I am not convinced of Rashi's and Ramban's understanding of the multi-year exemption, largely because marrying one's fiancée and dedicating a newly-built house are both relatively celebratory events that take place in the matter of hours, rather than the years it takes to wait around to redeem one's grapes. As such, I am presently leaning towards this tentative translation, yielding the following:

Is there a man who has planted a vineyard but has never dancingly-celebrated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another harvest it.

וְהָיָה אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־נָטַע כָּרִם וְלֹא חָלְלוּ יָלֵךְ וַיָּשֶׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פְּרִי־מוֹת בְּמַלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אֲחֵר וַיַּחֲלֵנוּ

Wine, after all, is worth celebrating.

L'chaim

New Episode

One Jew's Journey from Alcoholism to Sobriety



EPISODE #179

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