

ONEG SHABBAS

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Blessings & Punishments Through Wine

In this week's Torah portion, we read of the song that God had commanded Moses to (Deut. 31:19):

teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this poem may be My witness for the people of Israel.

In describing this song, which has become known as Ha'azinu for its opening word, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) (popularly known as Ramban) wrote (על דברים ל"א: י"ט, ד"ה וְעִתָּה כְּתוּב לָכֵן אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת):

It is called "a song" because Israel would recite it with singing and melodies. It was also written in the style of a song, since songs are written with interruptions, indicating the places of chanting.

לְמַדָּה אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁירָה בְּפִיהֶם לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

וְיִקְרָאָהּ שִׁירָה כִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל יִאֲמְרוּהָ תְּמִיד בְּשִׁיר וּבְזִמְרָה, וְכֵן נִכְתְּבָה כְּשִׁירָה, כִּי הַשִּׁירִים יִכְתְּבוּ בָהֶם הַפֶּסֶק בְּמִקוֹמוֹת הַנְּעִימָה

Throughout this song, we read of several references to wine and drinking. What are they, and what do they tell us about good times and bad times, as reflected through wine?

Drinking the Blood of Grapes for Wine

The first of these mentions occurs during the first half of this poem, as described by two-time guest of *The Jewish Drinking Show*, Dr. Rabbi Zev Farber, who wrote: "The first half of *Ha'azinu* is relatively straightforward: When the nations were being given their territories, [God] chose Israel to be His people (vv. 8-9). In fact, He had found them in a wasteland and brought them to His own lush land (vv. 10-14)" (*Haazinu: The Song's Enigmatic Climax*). At the conclusion of this being in a lush land, we read that the song includes that the Jews (Deut. 32:14):

Drank the blood of grapes for wine.

דָּם־עֵנֶב תִּשְׁתֶּה חֲמֶר

What does this wine reference mean? Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi) described this verse as saying (רש"י על דברים) (ל"ב: י"ד, ד"ה וְדָם עֵנֶב):

You shall drink good wine, and taste wine of יין טוב וְטוֹעַם יין a fine and good quality.

חֲשׁוֹב

Rashi further wrote on this verse, describing this wine word (רש"י על דברים) (ל"ב: י"ד, ד"ה חמר):

"Wine" in Aramaic is חמר. This is not the name of an actual substance, but rather a term of יין בלשון אַרְמִי "חמר", אין זה שם דָּבָר אֱלָא לְשׁוֹן מְשֻׁבָּח בְּטַעַם, וְיִינֹש בְּלָעַז. praise for its taste – like vinous in French.

In addition to Rashi having mentioned a high quality of wine, Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) described this wine blessing as a high quantity of wine (אבן עזרא על דברים ל"ב: י"ד, ד"ה תשתה חמר):

The meaning is, as if speaking to a friend: "It is so abundant that you will drink wine at all times." חמר בכל עת

Building off of Ibn Ezra's notion of an abundant quantity of grapes [that would yield wine], Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1549) (popularly known as Sforno) described the abundance of grapes/wine they would have as involving a fantastic ratio of yield versus energy/labor put into growing these grapes (ספורנו על דברים ל"ב: י"ד, ד"ה וְדָם עֵנֶב תִּשְׁתֶּה חמר):

The juice of the grapes was fit to drink מיץ הענבים היה ראוי with little labor involved, and thus they לשתיה בלתי רב מלאכה בו and they were sustained without hardship. All of ובכן היו מתפרנסים שלא בצער וכל זה עשה להם this the Almighty, blessed be He, provided האל ית' כדי שיהיה להם for them so that they would have free time to engage in Torah and mitzvot. פנאי לעסוק בתורה ובמצוות

This is certainly quite the blessing for the Israelites in the good times, although they unfortunately turned away (Deut. 31:16, 31:20-21, and 31:29). This leads to bad times, including punishments. After this verse, there is a change in what takes place, as Rabbi Dr. Farber continues (ibid.):

Vv. 26-27 reflect a turning point: [God] worries that if he simply allows Israel to be destroyed by their enemies, the enemies will believe it was their own might that accomplished the feat. [God] amazes at the foolishness of this view, but still remains concerned that they will think it (vv. 28-31). [God] then appears to reflect on the terrible punishment he has in store for the enemies who destroyed his people and speak so arrogantly about themselves and their gods (vv. 32-35).

So what are these punishments?

Wine & Drinking Punishment

As part of the punishments, there are punishments involving - you guessed it - wine & drinking (Deut. 32:32-33):

But their vine is from the vine of Sodom and the shoot of Gomorrah. Their grapes are poison grapes; their grape cluster is bitterness to them. Their vine is serpents' venom, like the poison of the dreadful cobra.

כִּי־מִגֶּפֶן סֹדֹם וְגִפְתֹּר וּמִשְׁדֵּמֹת עֲמֹרָה עֲנִבְמוֹ עֲנִב־רוֹשׁ אֲשַׁכְּלֵת מִרְרָתָ לָמוֹ חֲמַת תִּנְיָנִים יִינֵם וְרָאשׁ פְּתָנִים אֲקֹר

What stands out in these verses is that whereas one normally experiences grapes as being sweet, here, there is only bitterness to be experienced; and where wine is usually associated with living and life (l'chaim!), here, the grapes are *poisonous*, resulting in life's opposite: death. The result of this inverse poetry is a deadly result from where one would expect



sweetness, life, and enjoyment. However, who will be doing this drinking? While it might be considered that it's the Israelites', since they are not properly behaving, could it, however, be the non-Israelite nations?

Opposing Perspectives in the Midrash

It turns out that both answers are reflected in midrash, as we read of opposing opinions amongst a couple of second century rabbis (*Sifrei Devarim* 322:28):

Rabbi Yehudah expounded it in connection with Israel; Rabbi Nehemiah expounded it in connection with the nations.

ר' יהודה דורשם כלפי ישראל, ר' נחמיה דורשם כלפי האומות

Rabbi Yehudah expounded it in connection with Israel: "Israel has lost

רבי יהודה דורשו כלפי ישראל איבדו ישראל עצה טובה שנתנה

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{Continued from previous page}

good counsel that was given to them, and there is no counsel except for Torah, as it is said: 'With me (Torah) is counsel and wisdom' (Prov. 8:14).
Rabbi Neḥemiah expounded it in connection with the nations: "The nations have lost the seven mitzvot that I gave them."

Rabbi Yehudah suggests that these verses are referring to Israel, while Rabbi Neḥemiah claims it is referring to other nations, which leads to subsequent rabbis being divided on this matter.

Medieval Commentators

Moving into the Medieval era, the commentators are divided, with Rashi,

Rabbi ibn Ezra, Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (1194-1270) (popularly known as Ramban), and others following Rabbi Neḥemiah, while Sforno and Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah (1250-1310) (popularly known as Hizkuni) seem to follow Rabbi Yehudah.



Owing to the poetic style of the language, a lot of questions arise, first of which is why the reference to Sodom and Gomorrah? According to Rashi, it is on account that their behaviors are as the behaviors of Sodom and Gomorrah (רש"י על דברים ל"ב:ד"ה כי מגפן סדם גפנם):

This is to be connected with what is stated above: — מוסב למעלה —
"I said in My heart, I would scatter them into אֶמְרֵתִי בְלָבִי
corners and make the remembrance of them אֶפְאַיֶהֶם וְאֶשְׁבִּית
cease..." (Deut. 32:26) because their behaviors are זְכָרָם לְפִי שְׁמַעְשֵׁיהֶם
like the behaviors of Sodom and Gomorrah. מַעֲשֵׂי סְדוֹם וְעִמּוֹרָה
This connection is a pretty direct one, with Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (1085-1158) (popularly known as Rashbam), explaining (רשב"ם על דברים ל"ב:ד"ה כי מגפן סדם גפנם):

If not for the boast of the gentile nations that they should have drunk from the vine of Sodom according to the appropriate judgment that not even the memory of neither Sodom nor Gomorrah would have remained, since "they sinned like Sodom and Gomorrah", as it is written, "They avow their sins like Sodom" (Is. 3:9), "chieftains of Sodom...people of Gomorrah" (Is. 1:10).
אם לא מפני גאות האומות שהם מגפן סדם, היה להם לשתות מן הדין שלא ישאר מהם זכר כסדום ועמורה, שהרי סדום וטעמו כסדום ועמורה, דכתיב: וחטאתם כסדום הגידו. קציני סדום עם עמורה

On the other side, however, is Sforno, who described this verse in line with Rabbi Yehudah's opinion (רש"י על דברים ל"ב:ד"ה ענבמו ענבי רש):

Grapes sprouted forth from this vine, which are poison for them. This is a simile for the evil deeds committed by the Jewish people which backfired. The sins singled out are those of a social, rather than a theological nature, as pointed out by Ezekiel.
ומזה הגפן יצמחו אצלם ענבי רשע שהם מעשים רעים ומוזיקים לבריות וזה בהשתדלם לשים עיניהם ולבם על בצעם ועל דם הנקי לשפוך

Medieval commentators split in their readings like the rabbis of the second century, whether those siding with Rabbi Neḥemiah, describing Israel as a vine gone wild, bearing the same bitter fruit as Sodom and Gomorrah, versus those following Rabbi Yehudah, seeing the people's sins as grapes turned sour - social and ethical failings that poisoned the vintage. In both views, Sodom and Gomorrah provide the template: a vineyard spoiled, whose grapes serve as a sharp reminder of how corruption can taint the whole harvest.

Drunken Arrows

The final drinking reference is not to wine, but to drunkenness, which makes it the final mention of drunkenness in the Torah (Deut. 32:42):

I will make My arrows drunk with blood— אֶשְׁכִּיר חֲצִי מַדָּם
As My sword devours flesh— וְחֶרְבִּי תֹאכַל בָּשָׂר
Blood of the slain and the captive מַדָּם חֲלָל וְשָׁבִיָּה
From the long-haired enemy chiefs. מֶרֶאשׁ פְּרָעוֹת אוֹיֵב

While it is hard for any reader of this verse to consider the arrows literally getting drunk, what then might it mean? Rabbi Yoseph ben Yitzḥak Bekhor Shor of Orléans (12th century) describes (דברים ל"ב:מ"ב):

The arrows will spill the blood of the שוואהים שישפכו חצי דם האויבים לשכרן
enemies to drunkenness.

A further articulation of this description is provided by Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855), who describes this arrow-drunkenness as follows (ביאור יש"ר על התורה, דברים ל"ב:מ"ב, ד"ה אשכיר חצי מדם):

The song's poetic manner is that the arrows דרך מליצת השיר, חצי
will drink the blood of the enemy until the ישתו דם האויב עד
arrows get drunk, which is a parable about the שישכרו, והוא משל על
magnitude of revenge and its exaggeration. גודל הנקמה והפלגתה

In sum, this approach considers the metaphorical language of the arrows consuming so much blood from Israel's enemies that, as if the blood - in its reddishness, which poetically seems like wine - were wine, resulting in the arrows getting drunk off of all of the blood they experience. This yields a very

successful military campaign against Israel's enemies.



Midrashic Perspective

An entirely different perspective, however, is provided in a midrash (Sifrei Devarim 332:42):

How is it possible to make arrows drunk וכי אפשר להם לחצים
from blood? (The meaning is) rather: "I שישתכרו מדם אלא הריני
shall make others drunk with what My משכיר את אחרים ממה
arrows do." שחצי עושים

In this approach, the composer of this midrash is not satisfied with considering this verse in a poetic manner, preferring to consider that there really is drunkenness that is to take place, yet arrows - as inanimate objects - cannot *actually* get drunk. In so doing, he considers the arrows' actions as inflicting so much killing as to drive others - perhaps friends or allies of those slain - to drink so much to cope with these losses that they get drunk. This is certainly an incredibly clever perspective on this poetic language that the arrows still remain non-consuming, yet drunkenness results from their successful actions.

Conclusion

In considering the final song of the Torah, while we might have expected one reference to drinking, it is certainly something for readers of this publication to appreciate that there are multiple references to the joy and bounty of drinking wine, as well as its poetic inverse, the poisonous grapes, whether for misbehaving Israel or for the gentile nations. Finally, the poetic language of drunken arrows is either a metaphor for the arrows being engulfed in blood or for causing others to drown their sorrows, having seen so many arrows driven into their erstwhile allies. One cannot also help but consider that with this song being intended to be placed into our mouths, as mentioned at the outset, there is a mixing of song and wine. This seems to be no mere accident, but poetic cleverness.

L'chaim 🍷



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