

ONEG SHABBAS

THE UNOFFICIAL PARASHAH SHEET FOR KIDDUSH CLUBS

פרשת בראשית - Volume 5, Issue 1 17-18 October 2025 - כ"ו תשרי תשפ"ה

What Was the Forbidden Fruit?

A common curiosity that arises reading this week's parashah is "What was the forbidden fruit that Adam and Eve ate?" While the tree of knowledge of good and evil existed in the Garden of Eden, there seems to be no continued existence of it beyond that place. However, that does not seem to stop inquiring minds to try to consider that the fruit of that tree exists in the world beyond the Garden of Eden. Indeed, throughout the ages, various people - not only Jews - sought to figure out which fruit it was.

Not An Apple

While we are commonly familiar with the idea (especially in artistic renderings) in the [Christian-dominated] West that the fruit was an apple, there seems to be no such textual basis for this assertion.

Indeed, in Philip Getz' recent review article of Azzan Yadin-Israel's new book, *Temptation Transformed: The Story of How the Forbidden Fruit Became an Apple* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), he writes ("Fruit of the Fall", *Jewish Review of Books* (Fall 2023), 13):

In twelfth-century France, apples began showing up in Christian depictions of "the Fall of Man," everywhere from the Cathedral of Notre Dame to illuminated Bibles and psalm books. These red and gold apples supplanted the previous identification of grapes and figs as the forbidden fruit with which the serpent tempted Eve and Eve tempted Adam.

Ultimately, Getz shares with us the connection (ibid., 14):

The generic word for fruit in Old French, *pom*, derives from the Latin *pomum*, which had been the Latin word commonly used to translate the similarly generic Hebrew *peri*. But in the twelfth century *pom* began specifically to designate apples. French readers of the Latin then projected this new meaning of *pom* onto its linguistic ancestor *pomum*, thereby transforming the generic fruit into their vernacular *pom*: a tempting apple.

Now that we've dealt with this commonly considered fruit that may have been the fruit of knowledge in popular Western thought, what does our tradition have to say about this fruit?

Not An Apple, So What Else?

So what textual clues do we have within our own tradition as to which fruit this may have been? Let's go to what the rabbis speculated. The classic text concerning rabbinic speculation as to this fruit's identity is one with not one, not two, but three opinions (*Sanhedrin* 70a-b (parallel text at *Berakhot* 40a)):

It was taught: Rabbi Meir says: "The tree from which Adam the first man ate was a grapevine, since nothing else brings wailing upon a person, except for wine."

Rabbi Yehudah says: "It was wheat, since an infant knows not how to call 'Mommy' or 'Daddy' until the infant tastes grain."

Rabbi Nehemiah says: "It was a fig, since the thing that they messed up with, they repaired it, as it is said, 'and they sewed a fig leaf' (Gen. 3.7)."

תניא רבי מאיר אומר אותו
אילן שאכל אדם הראשון
ממנו גפן היהשואין לך דבר
שמביא יללה לאדם אלא יין
רבי יהודה אומר חטה היה
שאין התינוק יודע לקרוא
אבא ואימא עד שיטעום טעם
דגן

רבי נחמיה אומר תאנה היה
שבדבר שקלקלו בו נתקנו
שנאמר (בראשית ג, ז) ויתפרו
עלה תאנה

What is fascinating about each of these second century rabbinic possibilities is that they each furnish a reason for the fruit they suggested.

However, only one of them offers a Biblical proof-text, when Rabbi Nehemiah suggested that the fruit they ate is directly connected with their remedy for their noticing their nakedness. I will admit to personally liking this suggestion, as the fig leaves not only appropriately covered them, but the text also directly tells us that such a plant was actually there, in addition to my personally appreciating the logic. But what about the other suggestions?

Wheat?

Rabbi Yehudah's suggestion of wheat is clearly peculiar, yet clever. No one considers wheat to be a fruit and who calls wheat a tree? Moreover, wheat is not something that one typically picks up and eats, yet one can still detect a sense of cleverness with his suggestion, despite it being highly unlikely.

Considering Rabbi Meir's Grapevine Assertion

Finally, it's fascinating to consider Rabbi Meir's suggestion concerning grapes/wine, especially for readers of this publication. His assertion that wailing comes upon the world because of grapes/wine is certainly intriguing.

While he ostensibly is pointing out the connecting to bringing wailing upon the world, as seen with Noah in chapter 9, could Rabbi Meir also mean to say that wine is something that could help reveal knowledge? In this sense, could he mean that one's mind can open and operate more expansively while drinking wine? As such, Rabbi Meir would seem to be indicating that this wine would help uncover morality, reality, and other wisdom through its consumption. Indeed, think about times when you have gathered with others over drinks and consider how you have thought differently, leading to new insights.

Another possibility for Rabbi Meir is that he means that wine-drinking could be discovering and learning something totally new, even if that ultimately brings upon crying over a sad new reality. Indeed, this perspective would describe that new insights and ideas are not always pleasant. As such, consider the image of someone crying over drinks -

whether they
are crying
while drinking
as they
consider
something sad
in their life, or
perhaps
simply
drinking to
drown their
sorrows.



A third possibility could be that sometimes when knowledge is discovered, it's not always the most exciting and sometimes it can actually be quite hard to hear. While grapes/wine is not an expected fruit for this tree, it is, nevertheless, an intriguing drinking consideration.

{continued on the next page}

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

{continued from previous page}

A fourth possibility, which Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi) mentions concerns their punishment (רש"י על סנהדרין ע:), (ד"ה שאין לך דבר שמביא לילה על אדם אלא יין)

Therefore, it seems that because of him, הלכך מסתברא דעל ידו
death and crying came into the world. נקנסה מיתה ובכיה לעולם

Rashi's take here has less to do with the intellectual and moral insights brought on by consumption and more to do with the physical aspects of their punishment for consuming the fruit of the morality tree causing death and its similarity with wailing over death being associated with wine.

Amongst these approaches, it is still a surprising statement that a grapevine would cause wailing, especially since it would still be on the tree and not fermented at all.

Alternative Text

For the sake of completeness, I should also mention that there is a later parallel text in Genesis Rabbah 15:7:

Rabbi Meir said: "It was wheat, for when a person lacks understanding, people say of him: 'He has not eaten wheat bread all his life'."

מה היה אותו האילן שאכל ממנו אדם וחווה, רבי מאיר אומר חטים היו, כד לא הוה בר נש דעה אינון אקמרו לא אכל ההוא אינשא פתא דחטי מן יומיו.

Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai said: "It was grapes, as it is written: 'Their grapes are grapes of poison, their clusters bitter to them' (Deuteronomy 32:32-33) - those very clusters brought bitterness to the world."

Rabbi Abba of Akko said: "It was an etrog (citron), as it is written: 'And the woman saw that the tree was good...' (Genesis 3:6) - She said: 'Go and see: which is the tree whose wood is eaten just like its fruit?' You will find none but the etrog."

Rabbi Yose said: "It was figs; you learn this from the context itself...."

In addition to the addition of the etrog to this list of possibilities, we also read of the switching of different second century rabbis with these possibilities. Perhaps the most significant difference for our purposes is the proof-text for the grapes being the potential fruit being that from the book of Deuteronomy, which speaks more to their being fruit than their actual vinification.

Conclusion

While this week's Torah portion does not mention the specific fruit of the tree of knowledge between good and bad, our sages were certainly curious to try to specify what it was. In so doing, their debate about the identity of the fruit of knowledge reflects less a search for botanical precision than a deep exploration of human nature and moral awakening. Each proposed fruit - fig, grape, wheat, or etrog - embodies a different aspect of the human encounter with awareness: shame, sorrow, intellect, or beauty. Whether through the intoxication of wine, the cultivation of wheat, or the covering of fig leaves, the story becomes one of growth through error and insight through consequence. The forbidden fruit, then, is less about temptation and more about the cost of understanding. The mystery of the fruit endures not to satisfy curiosity, but to remind us that the pursuit of wisdom always carries both sweetness and sorrow. One thing to consider as we enjoy our wine, especially on Shabbat, is to consider how much wisdom it opens us up to in our life experiences.

L'chaim 🍷

Rabbis Who Thought that Adam & Eve Drank Wine

The idea that Adam and Eve drank wine in the Garden of Eden is not restricted to the possibility that grapes/wine were the fruit of the morality tree, as we also read of another second century sage suggesting such consumption (*Sanhedrin* 59b):

Rabbi Yehudah ben Tema would say: "Adam, the first man, would dine in the Garden of Eden, and the ministering angels would roast meat for him and strain wine for him. The snake glanced at him and saw his glory, and was jealous of him."

היה ר' יהודה בן תימא אומר אדם הראשון מיסב בגן עדן והיו מלאכי השרת צולין לו בשר ומסננין לו יין הציץ בו נחש וראה בכבודו ונתקנא בו

What is fascinating with this text is not only that there is meat and wine available to Adam, but the ministering angels are providing such great service to Adam(!). Moreover, the question that arises regarding the possibility of Adam drinking is his sourcing of it. The ambiguity of Rabbi Yehudah ben Tema's statement is that it is unclear whether Adam made the wine and the ministering angels are only just now straining the wine for Adam, or whether the ministering angels have created the wine and are now even straining it for his enjoyment. While I am not familiar with other early rabbinic texts with angels furnishing wine for humans, this is certainly an intriguing drinking scene.

We see that the idea that Adam had access to wine continues into the third century, as well (*Sanhedrin* 70a):

Rav Hisha said, "Rav Ukva said", - and some say that Mar Ukva said: "Rabbi Zakkai said: 'The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Noah: "Noah, shouldn't you have learned from Adam the first man, whose banishment from the Garden of Eden was caused only by wine?"'"

אמר רב חסדא אמר רב עוקבא ואמרי לה מר עוקבא אמר רבי זכאי אמר לו הקב"ה לנח נח לא היה לך ללמד מאדם הראשון שלא גרם לו אלא יין



Of course, in reading this statement, while we are left unclear as to how Adam accessed this wine, it seems clear that this rabbinic consideration that the wine was the cause would certainly seem to follow Rabbi Meir's assertion that the fruit of the tree of knowledge was a grapevine, albeit in the form of wine. There are two ways of considering this midrash regarding Adam: either as simply acknowledging that a grapevine was the fruit of the tree of knowledge and that it brought crying to the world, or perhaps more straightforwardly calling out wine as the beverage that not only got Adam banished from the Garden of Eden, but also caused something shameful to happen to Noah. This latter reading seems to consider wine as bringing challenging situations to bear, framing wine-drinking in a negative light.

Considering Adam & Eve's Wine-Consumption

While we do not read that Adam and Eve ever drank wine or were even exposed to it in the Torah, I wonder if these rabbis found it absolutely impossible that they did not drink wine. Perhaps it was simply inconceivable that humanity could go without wine. Why would humanity have - spoiler alert - waited for Noah to create wine in next week's Torah portion? How could humans have winelessly lived for centuries? I find this surprise in their minds to be the most fascinating aspect of this rabbinic consideration of Adam and Eve's consumption in the Garden of Eden: the rabbis can not fathom humanity to live without wine. Perhaps this is the biggest takeaway of this entire consideration of this matter: humanity was not meant to live without wine.

L'chaim 🍷



Jewish Drinking, Inc. is a 501(c)3 initiative to educate about drinking in Jewish wisdom, tradition, history, practice, and more in order to enrich people's lives.

Tax-deductible donations made be contributed at JewishDrinking.com/Donate