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The First Gift of Wine in the Torah

Following Avram's involvement in the war between the four kings vs the five kings, when Avram rescued Lot (Gen. 14:14-16), we read of the king of S'dom coming out to meet Avram (Gen. 14:17). However, before the king of S'dom speaks with Avram (Gen. 14:21-24), there is a brief narrative interruption where Malkitzedek, the king of Shalem, comes out to Avram and blesses him (Gen. 14:18-20):

And King Malkitzedek of Shalem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Above. He blessed him, saying, "Blessed be Abram of God Above, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Above, Who has delivered your foes into your hand." And [Abram] gave him a tenth of everything.

ומלכי צדק מלך שלם הוציא לחם ויין והוא כהן לאל עליון ויברכהו ויאמר ברוך אברהם לאל עליון קנה שמים וארץ וברוך אל עליון אשר מגן צריך בידך ויתרלו מעשר מכל

What stands out here, in addition to the interruption of the king of S'dom approaching Avram, is that Malkitzedek brings forth bread and wine to Avram. This is the first time in the book of Genesis that we've seen wine appear since Noah got drunk in chapter 9. While we can understand that bread will help his hunger, why does he bring wine out to him? Wouldn't water have been a more appropriate beverage to provide to those coming from battle?

Allegoric & Metaphoric Approaches

One set of approaches regarding this gifting is to suggest that the bread and wine are not significant in and of themselves, as we read in this midrash (בראשית רבה מ"ג:ו):

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: "He revealed to him the laws of the High Priesthood. 'Bread' - this alludes to the showbread; 'and wine' - this alludes to the libations." The Rabbis say: "He revealed Torah [precepts] to him, as it is stated: 'Come, partake of my bread, and drink of the wine that I have mixed' (Proverbs 9:5)."

רבי שמואל בר נחמן אמר הלכות כהונה גדולה גלה לו, לחם, זה לחם הפנים. ויין, אלו הנסכים. ורבנן אמרי תורה גלה לו, שנאמר (משלי ט, ה): לכו לחמו בלחמי וישתו ביינו מסכתי.



Whereas Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman advocates for the bread and wine serving as allegories, his late third century rabbinic contemporaries advocate that they merely serve as metaphors for what Malkitzedek served him. These rabbis seem to be unsatisfied with considering Malkitzedek as simply providing Avram provisions; instead, they consider this story as relating something to us being beyond the physical aspects of what he served him, considering that Malkitzedek was revealing something of a Torah-nature, whether Torah, itself, or, more specifically, the showbread and libations.

While it seems that subsequent medieval commentators did not take up the rabbis' metaphorical approach to this story, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi), however, seemed to have taken a liking to Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman's allegorical consideration, as he mentioned it (רש"י על בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה לחם ויין). However, if this story was meant to allegorize offerings in the Temple, why only these items? Why not meat, which is a more central aspect of the offerings?



Rabbi Mordecai ben Avraham Yoffe (1530-1612) provides a fascinating answer to this question (ד"ה רש"י, בראשית י"ד:י"ח):

And regarding the fact that they brought out bread and wine to meet him outside the city as a gift - this hinted to him about the grain offerings, etc., which are given as gifts to the Name [of God], since the term מנחה means a "gift." And the reason he did not bring him meat, to hint thereby at the animal sacrifices, was because among them are offerings that come for atonement, such as the sin offering and guilt offering, which are not in the manner of a gift - he did not wish to remind him of the sins of his sons. But the grain offerings come only as freewill or burnt offerings, which are indeed gifts. Although among the grain offerings there is the meal offering of the suspected adulteress, which is brought for atonement, that one comes from barley. However, he brought him only fine wheat flour and wine - the wine being for the libations that accompany burnt offerings.

ומה שהוציאו לחם ויין לקראתו חוצה לעיר דרך מתנה רמזו לו על המנחות כו' שהם דרך מתנה לש"י שכן לשון מנחה מתנה ומה שלא הוציא לו בשר לרמזו בו על קרבנות בהמות מפני שיש בהן שבאין לכפרה כגון חטאת ואשם ולא דרך מתנה לא רצה להזכיר לו חטאת בניו אבל המנחות אינם באין אלא על הנדבות והעולות דרך מתנה אעפ"י שגם במנחות יש מנחת סוטה שהיא לכפרה אותה באה מן השעורים והוא לא הוציא לו אלא סולת חיטין ויין לנסכים בא"כ לנסכי עולות

Rabbi Yoffe here provides a helpful explanation as to how Malkitzedek's providing of bread and wine were appropriate gifts, despite the lack of meat provided.

Feeding The Battle-Wearied

While Rashi wrote about that idea, he also articulated a more straightforward comment (רש"י על בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה לחם ויין):

Thus is done for those wearied through battle and he showed him (Avram) that he bore him no malice for killing his descendants. כך עושים ליגיעי מלחמה, והראה לו שאין בלבו עליו על שהרג את בניו

This idea gained traction amongst subsequent medieval commentators, {continued on the next page}

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such as Rabbi David Kimḥi (1160–1235) (popularly known as Radak) (ק"ד"ר) and Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1549) (popularly known as Sforno) (על בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה הוציא לחם ויין ספורנו על בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה הוציא) (לחם ויין). However, the question that arises with this notion of providing bread and wine to battle-wearied men is why are they being provided wine? Rabbi Elijah Mizrahi (1455-1525) suggested that these may actually serve as umbrella terms (מזרחי, בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה כך עושים ליגיעי מלחמה):

The text only needed to mention the bread, for that is the usual manner everywhere – as it says, “I will take a morsel of bread” (Gen. 18:5), and “Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread” (Ex. 18:12). Why then does it also mention wine? Because those who return from battle need it.

But it was not because he did not bring out meat, poultry, fish, and the like, as kings typically do, for one can say that bread and wine include all kinds of foods and drinks – as our Sages said: “aside from the blessing of bread and the blessing of wine” (RH 29a), that all types of benefitting are included within them.

Instead of going in the direction that bread and wine serve as catchall terms for foods and beverages, Rabbi Yoffe suggests that maybe Malkitzedek brought it out for the soldiers to have a drinking party (לבוש) (האורה, בראשית י"ד:י"ח, ד"ה רש"י):

It seems to me that a question to ask upon Rashi's comment: if Malkitzedek did this out of honor for Avraham because he was passing by on his return from war, then he should have brought him into his house and made a drinking party for him. Therefore, Rashi explained that this is what they would do for those wearied from battle – who were tired, exhausted, and hungry – that dry bread and wine would be more pleasing to them than any delicacies, since they could not wait for the food to be cooked because of their hunger. And it was that he came upon him suddenly, and it is possible that this was not along Avraham's route, so Malkitzedek did not know beforehand that he would come so near to his city.

Afterward, Rashi says, “And the Midrashic explanation is that he hinted to him about the meal-offerings, etc.” That is to say, according to the Midrash, he certainly brought him into his house, honored him, and made for him a huge drinking party. His bringing out the bread and wine to greet him outside the city was in the manner of presenting a gift.

לא היה צריך להזכיר אלא הלחם שכן דרך בכל מקו' ואקחה פת לחם ויבא אהרן וכל זקני ישראל לאכל לחם מת"ל ויין אלא שהם צריכי' ליגיעי מלחמה

אבל לא מפני שלא הוציא בשר ועופות ודגים וכיוצא בהם כדרך המלכים דאיכא למימר שלחם ויין כוללים כל מיני המאכלות והמשקים כמאמר ר"ל חוץ מברכת הלחם וברכת היין שכל מיני ההנאות נכללים בהם

נ"ל שקשה לרש"י אם לכבוד אברהם היה עושה מפני שעבר עליו בשבוע מהמלחמה היה לו להביאו אל ביתו והיה לו לעשות משתה לכך אמר כך עושים ליגיעי מלחמה שהם עיפים ויגיעים ורעבים וערב להם לחם יבש ויין יותר מכל מעדנים שאינם יכולים להמתין עד שיתבשלו המאכלים מפני הרעב והוא שעבר עליו פתאום ואפשר שלא היה זה במהלכו של אברהם לעבור שם ומלכי צדק לא ידע קודם לכן שיבא כ"כ קרוב לעירו

ואח"כ אומר רש"י ומדרש אגדה רמז לו על המנחות כו' כלומר דעת המדרש הוא וודאי שהביאו לביתו וכבדו ועשה לו משתה גדול ומה שהוציאו לחם ויין לקראתו חוצה לעיר דרך מתנה

One would expect perhaps bread and other foods along with hydrating water to be brought to battle-wearied soldiers. Moreover, despite the rather healthy effects that hydration would provide someone who is tired from battle, it is also very understandable that one would greatly enjoy drinking wine and relaxing following one's fighting. Moreover, it sounds like it's not just some wine that was provided, but that it was only initially some bread and wine before then bringing them in into his house and then making a huge drinking banquet out of it. As such, the bread and wine was a mere appetizer to his hospitality for a huge drinking party as a way to welcome these warriors.

Wine as Good or Bad?

Following the consideration of why Malkitzedek brought out wine in addition to bread, another aspect that arises in rabbinic literature is the question: Is this wine even a good thing? In considering this, we read of a third-century disagreement amongst rabbis about the very appearance of this wine (בראשית רבה מ"ג:):



Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: "Every time wine is written in the Torah, it connotes a [negative] impact, except for this one." Rabbi Levi said: "We cannot except this one either, that, from there, He decreed upon him: 'They will be enslaved to them and they will oppress them' (Genesis 15:13)."

רבי אבא בר כהנא אמר כל יין שכתוב בתורה עושה רושם חוץ מזה. אמר רבי לוי אף זה לא יצאנו מידו, לשמש קרא עליו: ועבדים וענו אתם ארבע מאות שנה (בראשית טו, יג)

What does Rabbi Abba bar Kahana mean that bad things happen whenever we read of wine in the Torah? Rashi explained his statement as referring to other scriptural drinking stories (רש"י על בראשית רבה מ"ג: ד"ה) (כל יין שבתורה עושה רושם):



With Noah, with the daughters of Lot, and with the sons of Aaron – all of them encountered something involving misfortune related to drinking, except for this one instance, when Malkitzedek gave wine to Abraham.

בנח. בבנות לוט. בני אהרן. כולן אירע להן דבר תקלה חוץ מזה שנתן מלכי צדק לאברהם

One notable problem with this description is the occurrence of Yosef and his brothers getting drunk (Genesis 43:34), although perhaps it could be argued that we don't read of the presence of wine there, so maybe that was a peaceful drunkenness through beer(?). In any event, Rabbi Abba Bar Kahana is still pointing out that this story involving the gift of wine is a demonstrably good story in the book of Genesis involving wine.

Nevertheless, even Rabbi Levi is not satisfied with this story being the exception to wine being involved with negative incidents, as he points out the subsequent decree against Avram's descendants. However, a notable problem with his view is that the story that actually follows this story is that of the king of S'dom (14:21-24), with Avram's vision of God in chapter 15 seemingly not juxtaposed with this story involving Malkitzedek's gifting of wine and bread to Avram. While these two rabbis of the midrash disagreed about whether or not this gifting of wine was good or bad, they do both agree that stories where wine is involved often have negative results.

Conclusion

Malkitzedek's bringing out not just bread, but also wine may have been done to reveal aspects of the Torah, to demonstrate to Avram that Malkitzedek had no intent to threaten him, or even as an appetizer to a larger drinking party. There are certainly multiple possibilities as to what this providing of bread and wine could have been. As Malkitzedek is described as a priest of God Above, he may be demonstrating that it's a Godly act to provide not just food, but wine, as well. May we all be blessed to provide gifts of bread and wine.

L'chaim 

