ONEG SHABBAS

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

The Torah's First Libation

While we might take libations in the course of worship for granted, there had to be a first such instance of this practice. By libation, I mean ניסוך, the pouring out of a beverage to God. When we think of "Jewish drinking", we typically consider the pouring of beverages for Jews to consume. However, libations in the Torah go in a different direction: the pouring by Jews of beverages for God. The first time we read of a libation in the Torah occurs, of all places, in our Torah portion.

Indeed, as pointed out by Rabbi Avraham, son of Maimonides (1186-1237), this is a religious innovation by Ya'akov (ר' אברהם בן הרמב"ם בראשית ל"ה:י"ד, ד"ה ויסך עליה נסך):

This is a worship that he innovated upon the stone-pillar.	{היא} עבודה שחידש {עתה} על המצבה

Now that we are being introduced to this innovative practice in this week's Torah portion, how can we understand it?

Background: Setting-up of Stone Pillars

We read of Ya'akov setting-up a מצבה (stone-pillar) towards the beginning of last week's parashah (Gen. 28.18), as well as later on in that parashah (Gen. 31.51-52). In this week's parashah, we see him doing so a third time, yet he introduces an innovation in his setting-up a stone-pillar. Having arrived from Paddan-Aram, where God appears, blessing him concerning names, fertility, nations, and land (Gen. 35:9-13), we then read (Gen. 35:14):

and Jacob set up a pillar at the site where [God] had spoken to him, a pillar of stone, and he **libated** upon it and poured oil upon it.	וַיַּצֵּב יַעֲקֹב מַצֵּבָה בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אִתּוֹ מַצֶּבֶת אָבֶן **וַיסֶךְ** עָלֶיהָ נֶסֶךְ וַיִּצֹק עָלֶיהָ שָׁמֶן

As part of this process, we then read of Ya'akov providing this place with a name (Gen. 35:15):

Jacob called the place where God had spoken to him the name of "God's House".	וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶת־שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אִתּוֹ שָׁם אֱלֹקים בֵּית־אֵל

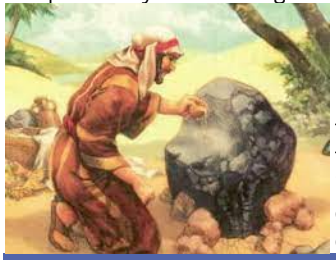
Having had such a special experience with God at this place, his libation and oil-pouring seem to be connected with his naming of this place. Calling places names is on-brand for him, as this is the fifth and final such recorded occurrence in the Torah (having previously done so on four previous occasions (Gen. 32:3, 32:31, 35:7, & 35:8)).

Which Beverage Does He Libate?

Despite the Torah stating that he libated, the Torah does not specify with which beverage he did so. So which beverage did he use to libate?

Did Ya'akov Libate Beer?

One possibility of a beverage Ya'akov may have libated upon this stone-pillar could have been beer. If we use the model of the daily offering, beer was the beverage that was commanded to be libated twice-daily to accompany the twice-daily offerings (Num. 28:7). While this could be a possibility from elsewhere in the Torah, beer does not seem to capture the attention of any of the commentators in this specific instance.



Did Ya'akov Libate Wine?

A seemingly clear possibility for what Ya'akov libated at this time would be wine, as Rabbi David Kimḥi (1160–1235) wrote (רד"ק על בראשית ל"ה:י"ד). After all, wine is the most commonly-libated beverage throughout the Torah, likely due to its being the choicest beverage in the Torah. As this scene is the first instance in the Torah of libation, it strikingly provides a fascinating מעשה אבות סימן לבנים (the actions of the forefathers serve as a model of action for the descendants), whereby Jews are expected to largely libate to God using wine. In so doing, as Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344) writes, it is similar to the libations later on in the Torah (רלב"ג ביאור המלות על התורה, בראשית ל"ה:י"ד):

This is from the topic of libations and, behold, he made this libation to for the glory of God.	הוא מעניין נסכים והנה עשה זה הנסך לכבוד השם יתעלה

Did Ya'akov Libate Wine or Water?

Despite the clear and straightforward approach to understanding this story as libation wine to honor God, many commentators are not sure that the beverage Ya'akov libated was necessarily wine. In this approach, the beverage these commentators consider is whether he libated either wine or water. The first commentator to suggest the dual possibility of these beverages was Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) (popularly known as ibn Ezra), who wrote (אבן עזרא על בראשית ל"ה:י"ד):

He poured either wine or water on the pillar. Ya'akov first washed the pillar with wine or water and then poured oil thereon. Here at Beth-El, Ya'akov kept his vow and gave a tithe of his wealth in honor of God to a contemporary who was worthy to receive it.	מים או יין. והטעם שרחץ אותה. ואחר כן יצק עליה שמן. ובבית אל שלם נדרו ונתן מעשר מהונו לכבוד השם למי שהיה בדור ראוי לקחתו

His consideration of this dual possibility is followed by, amongst others, Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (1270-1340) (הטור הארוך, בראשית ל"ה:י"ד) and Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855) (ביאור יש"ר על התורה, בראשית ל"ה:י"ד). A differentiated set of reasons for these two beverages is provided by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), who wrote (*Uebersetzung und Erklärung des Pentateuchs*, Gen. 35:14, SV נסך)

It consisted either of wine, as an expression that one's highest joy is owed to God, or of water, as an expression that even every ordinary moment, with all its conditions for life, belongs directly to God	bestand entweder aus Wein, zum Ausdruck, daß man seine höchste Freude Gott verdanke, oder aus Wasser, zum Ausdruck, daß auch jeder gewöhnliche Moment mit allen seinen Lebensbedingungen unmittelbar Gottes ist.

Whether water is normal or precious to be libated depends. However, the possibility of water as the libation has to do with why he libated.

Did Ya'akov Libate on This Stone-Pillar To Clean It?

For these commentators who advocate the possibility of either water or wine for his libating, it seems it has to do with washing the stone-pillar off in order to prepare the stone-pillar for then subsequently pouring oil upon it. Even Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (1194-1270) seems to agree with this

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reading as to the order of what happened (רמב"ן על בראשית ל"ה:י"ד). This approach views the water or wine as simply a liquid to wash/rinse off whatever had been on the stones in order to prepare it for the oil.

Ya'akov, Oil, & Stone-Pillars

The question that arises with this suggestion is "What is so special that this stone-pillar needed to be rinsed for oil to be poured upon it?" After all, the oil will simply pour down and off of the stone-pillar, whether it was rinsed or otherwise. What is Ya'akov's history with standing up these stone-pillars?

As it turns out, Ya'akov is the only person recorded in the book of Genesis who set up these stone-pillars, having done so on four occasions. While his second occasion was setting it up to demonstrate an agreement with Lavan (Gen. 31:45 and Gen. 31:51-52) and his fourth such occasion was marking Rachel's grave (Gen. 35:20), his first such setting-up of a stone-pillar also involved oil-pouring (Gen. 28:18). So what is so special about pouring this oil at this stone-pillar?

As we consider that episode, it turns out that his pouring oil over that stone-pillar came with Ya'akov calling it by the exact same name, God's House (Gen. 28:18). So why did he do so?

Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (1085-1158) suggested (רשב"ם על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח):

He anointed it to sanctify it and to make it ready to offer sacrifices on it when he would return to that site	ומשח אותה לקדשה להקריב עליה קרבנות בשובו

Rabbi Ḥezekiah ben Manoaḥ (1250-1310) also advocated this position (חזקוני על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח). However, one issue with using this stone-pillar for an altar, as Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (1194-1270) points out is that it (רמב"ן על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח):

appears that a pillar is made for pouring libations of wine upon it and for the pouring of oil upon it, but not for sacrifices and not for offerings, whereas an altar is for bringing Burnt-offerings and Peace-offerings thereon	נראה עוד שהמצבה תעשה לנסך עליה נסך יין וליצוק עליה שמן לא לעולה ולא לזבח והמזבח להעלות עליו עולות ושלמים

Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) wrote that the purpose of the oil-pouring was in order to recognize it later (similarly had Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1549) written). This was expanded by Rabbi David Kimḥi (1160–1235), who expanded this notion that he poured oil on it (רד"ק על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח):

so that he would recognize this stone on his return from Ḥaran. Oil stains on a stone remain for many years and do not disappear. He planned to erect an altar at this site when he would return from Ḥaran. It is also possible that the pouring of oil on that stone was equivalent to pouring a libation of wine on the altar.	כדי להכירה בשובו דרך שם שיעשה שם מזבח ויקריב עליו, כי כתם השמן לא ימחה במי מטר, או היה יציקת השמן לעבודה כמו נסוך היין

He continues: וכל זה היה לאות ולסימן שיירשו בניו את הארץ "All of this was to be a visible reminder that the Jewish people would take possession, inherit the land promised to them by God."

While Rabbi Samuel ben Meir and Rabbi Ḥezekiah ben Manoaḥ advocated that this oil-pouring was to sanctify it and get it ready for sacrifices later, Rabbi David Kimḥi argued that it was in order to recognize it later for this week's Torah portion for him then to create an altar at this site and as a reminder for his descendants' descendants they would inherit it. But there is also a fascinating novel argument: that the pouring of oil on it was similar to libation wine upon it. This is also reflected in what Rabbi Baḥya ben Asher ibn Ḥalawa (1255–1340) wrote (רבנו בחיי על בראשית כ"ח:י"ח):

The act of either pouring oil or wine on a pillar is equivalent to offering a sacrifice on the altar. Rabbi Sa'adyah Gaon (882-942) wrote that the reason for Yaakov pouring oil on this pillar was in order for him to be able to identify this particular stone pillar so that in the future he could separate it from other adjoining stones. Seeing that oil remains visible for a long time, he would in due course be able to make an altar of it.	יציקת השמן או נסוך היין על מצבה כהקרבת קרבן על המזבח. ורבינו סעדיה גאון ז"ל כתב כי יציקת השמן בכאן היה להכרה כדי שיכיר את האבן ויפרישנה בדעתו מזולתה, כי השמן על גבי האבן רשומו ניכר ע"כ

Why Pour Oil Now?

So, if pouring oil upon this stone-pillar was in order to recognize it later, in our Torah portion, what is so important about pouring oil upon it in this week's Torah portion? For Rabbi Samuel ben Meir and Rabbi Ḥezekiah ben Manoaḥ, what offering did he now do? This answer seems to be deficient. For Rabbi David Kimḥi and Rabbi Baḥya ben Asher ibn Ḥalawa, it seems to be that this oil-pouring was just as good as either a wine-libation or other sacrifice on this stone-pillar. Indeed, Rabbi David Kimḥi commented on the oil-pouring in our parashah that it was למנחה גם (רד"ק על בראשית ל"ה:י"ד) כן "also intended as a gift-offering".

Another possibility is that he didn't have wine on him previously, as he didn't have as much material ability to libate, as Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman (1843-1921) wrote (ר' דוד צבי הופמן בראשית ל"ה:י"ד, ד"ה ויסך):

Above, he only poured oil upon the stone-pillar he erected (Genesis 28:18), but now, when he has returned to his birthland and is wealthy, he gives expression to the joy of life that he had with the help of God through the libating of wine.	למעלה כ"ח:י"ח לא יצק יעקב אלא שמן על המצבה שהקים, אבל עכשו, כשהוא חוזר למולדתו והוא עתיר נכסים, הרי הוא נותן ביטוי לשמחת החיים שהיתה לו בעזרתו ית' על יד־ניסוך יין

What is particularly compelling about Rabbi Hoffman's distinction between these two oil-pourings on this stone-pillar is that it reflects the material change in Ya'akov's life: he now has more access to wine.

Conclusion

When we reflect on the Torah's initial mention of a libation, which involves offering beverages to God, we must ponder Ya'akov's actions. It appears he initiated this practice, yet we may wonder about the specific beverage he chose and the significance of performing this act on a stone-pillar. While water could be considered for this offering, wine stands out as a more compelling option, as it holds greater significance and is the primary libation throughout the Torah. Regardless of whether Ya'akov's intention was to cleanse the stone-pillar or to bestow honor and reverence upon God, he remains the first individual documented to have made a libation in the Torah.

L'chaim🍷

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