

ONEG SHABBAS

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

Why Did Yosef's Brothers Get Drunk in Egypt?

The final story of drunkenness occurs in this week's Torah portion and it seems nothing goes wrong, with everyone happy. This certainly seems to be different than the previous stories of drunkenness. In fact, when it comes to stories of drunkenness in Torah, the very first instance of this receives a lot of attention in subsequent Jewish writings and commentaries. This attention is certainly appropriate, as this story of Noah also is the very first instance of wine in the Torah (Gen. 9:18-27). The second mention of drunkenness doesn't even use the term "drunk", although the story involving Lot's daughters getting their father drunk is so obvious that it clearly doesn't need it (Gen. 19:30-38). Whereas the first story of drunkenness in the Torah seems to overtake Noah by surprise, there is no such surprise concerning Lot's daughters, as they are quite clearly intentionally using it for a very specific purpose. The third story in the Torah seems to garner less attention.

This third and final story of drunkenness in the Torah seems to attract less attention than the aforementioned stories, as we read in this week's Torah portion that Yosef and his brothers drank together: וַיֵּשְׁתוּ וַיִּשְׁכְּרוּ עִמּוֹ "And they drank and they got drunk with him" (Gen. 43:34). It may be that this drunken episode does not attract a lot of commentatorial attention as nothing of a sexual nor a violent matter happens and, seemingly, the brothers all go to sleep happily. Why, after all, spend much time or energy on a story in which nothing wild happens? After all, it seems to be a happy story about brothers drinking together. But why did they get drunk there?

Excited to Be Reunited

One midrashic approach positions this story as one of relief of the brothers uniting (בראשית רבה צ"ב:ה):

Rabbi Levi said: "The entirety of the twenty-two years that he did not see them, he did not taste the taste of wine. They, too, did not taste the taste of wine until they saw him. That is what is written: 'They drank, and became inebriated with him' – with him, they drank, but other than with him, they did not drink."

אמר רבי לוי כל עשרים ושנים שנה שלא ראה אותן לא טעם טעם יין, אף הן לא טעמו טעם יין עד שראו אותו, הלא הוא דכתיב: וישתו וישכרו עמו, עמו שתו חוץ ממנו לא שתו



Regarding Rabbi Levi's suggestion here, Rabbi Shmuel Yaffe Ashkenazi (1525-1595) explains (יפה תואר על בראשית רבה צ"ב:ה"ד):

And the manner of people who are not accustomed to [drinking] wine is to be drunk when they drink even a little bit of wine. ודרך האיש שאינו רגיל בין להיות שכור גם אם ישתה מעט יין

Thus, it did not seem to be their intention, but even a little bit of wine for someone who hasn't consumed wine in over two decades will be quite affected by this little amount of wine.

Of course, during this scene, the only one who knows that he is drinking with his brothers is Yosef, as he has not yet revealed himself to be their long lost brother. It is interesting as Rabbi Levi positions the behavior of Yosef and his brothers as having abstained from drinking wine in the intervening years. While this is certainly possible on behalf of Yosef, how would his brothers know that they are in the presence of their brother?



A couple of further rabbinic articulations of rabbinic approaches are as we read in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 139a):

Rabbi Mallai said from the name of Rabbi Yitzhak from Migdal: "From the day that Joseph took leave from his brothers, he did not taste any wine, as it is written: 'They shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of he who was separated from his brothers' (Gen. 49:26)."

Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: "They hadn't tasted wine during the intervening period, due to their remorse, as it is written: 'And they drank and got drunk with him' (Gen. 43:34)."

אמר רבי מלאי משום רבי יצחק מגדלאה: מיום שפירש יוסף מאחיו לא טעם טעם יין, דכתיב: "וילקדוך קיור אחיו" רבי יוסי ברבי חנינא אמר: אף הן לא טעמו טעם יין, דכתיב: "וישתו וישכרו עמו"

According to Rabbi Mallai from the name of Rabbi Yitzhak from Migdal, it seems that he hadn't had any wine, although it doesn't say anything about the brothers. On the other hand, Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina focusses his comment on the brothers feeling remorseful and not having tasted wine at all during these 22 years. Thus, these two rabbis are articulating a similar sentiment as Rabbi Levi above, although it is unclear according to Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina how the brothers would have known they were drinking with Yosef.

In fact, it seems somewhat strange why they are getting drunk with him. After all, if it has been all of these years that they have been holding off on tasting wine, why would they suddenly begin drinking? Moreover, if someone were to be received by royalty, it does not seem to be a manner fitting of behavior to get drunk in the presence in such a palace, so why would they get drunk now?

High Quality & Potency of Royal Wine

Another possibility as to why they got drunk with him has to do with the quality of the wine, as suggested by Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1549) (ספורנו על בראשית מג:ל"ד):

{continued on the next page}

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{continued from previous page}

With many varieties of royal wine that were set before them, to which they were unaccustomed, and they did not take care to drink their full measure from the first, as one ought to do for any diner who eats with the great, as it is said: "When you sit down to dine with a ruler, consider well what is before you" (Prov. 23:1).

במיני יין מלכות רב
שנתן לפנייהם שלא היו
מורגלים בהם ולא
השגיחו שלא לשתות כל
צרכם מן הראשון כאשר
ראוי לעשות לכל סועד
עם הגדולים כאמרו כי
תשב ללחום את מושל
בין תבין את אשר לפניך

For Rabbi Sforino, owing to the potency of this royal wine, they were not used to drinking such fine wine. Perhaps it could have been that the alcohol level of the wine was not noticeable and they got carried away, enjoying the wine. It is, of course, interesting to consider that nowhere in the course of the story is there anything mentioned about what they drank. The Torah does not state which beverage they consumed. The reason I mention this is that Egypt was a beer-drinking area, whereas Israel is a wine-drinking area, so maybe they drank beer. However, it may be pointed out that, when considering royalty, they have a lot more material resources to much more easily import wine from Israel. Thus, it is a reasonable speculation that they drank wine.

Yosef Intentionally Got His Brothers Drunk

A rather fascinatingly different approach however is that they did not necessarily intend to get drunk with Yosef, but that Yosef very much intended to get them drunk, as it would catch them off guard for the episode to follow regarding the goblet, as Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (1270-1340) wrote (הטור הארוך, בראשית מ"ג:ל"ד-א):

Yosef had planned to make them drunk so that they would not examine their sacks and bags before leaving, as they would be bound to do so as not have anything planted on them as had happened the first time. When they awoke late in the morning, he urged them to make haste and leave.

שכיון להשכירם כדי
שלא יחפשו
באמתחותיהם כדי
שלא יארגע להם
כתחילה ועל זה
מיהר לשולחם באור
הבוקר שלא יחפשו

While we do not read of many other commentators latching onto this possibility, there is a trio of 19th century commentators who do (Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855) (בראשית מ"ג:ל"ד), Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865) (שד"ל על בראשית מ"ג:ל"ד), and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) (בראשית)). Amongst them, the fullest articulated version is that of Rabbi Reggio, which includes the following:

"...And Joseph, too, drank a great deal, for he was happy that all his brothers were with him and that the time was drawing near for him to make himself known to them. And behold, all this honor, and also the excessive drinking, was intentional, in order afterward to arouse suspicion against them regarding the theft of the goblet. For had they not entered his house, nor eaten with him, nor become drunk, there would have been no grounds to fabricate such an accusation against them. And after the meal, Joseph removed himself from that room in order to command the one who was over his household what he was to do, and, as a result, they remained there alone; therefore they were suspected.

א...וגם יוסף שתה הרבה
כי היה שמח על שהיו
כל אחיו אצלו ונתקרב
הזמן להתודע אליהם,
והנה כל הכבוד הזה
וגם השתיה ברבוי היה
בכוונה כדי לחשדם
אח"כ בגניבת הגביע, כי
אילו לא נכנסו בביתו
ולא אכלו עמו ולא
השתכרו, לא היה מקום
להעליל עליהם כזאת,
ולאחר הסעודה
נתרחק יוסף מן החדר
ההוא כדי לצוות את
אשר על ביתו מה
שיעשה ומתוך כך
נשארו הם לבדם שם,
ולכן נחשדו



New Episode

The newest episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show* is now out, on kosher-certified vermouths on the market, as we are heading into 2026, featuring Mendy Mark.

The episode is available on YouTube, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever else you enjoy listening to podcasts, as well as at

JewishDrinking.com/KosherVermouthsInto2026



One of the most attractive aspects of connecting Yosef getting his brothers drunk is that that story plays out immediately, as we read of Yosef instructing his workers to place the silver goblet in Binyamin's bag (Gen. 44:1-2) and to say the following line, directly connecting it to drinking (44:5):

It is the very one from which my master drinks and which he uses for divination. It was a wicked thing for you to do!"

הלא זה אשר ישתה
אֲדֹנִי בּוֹ וְהוּא נִחֵשׁ יִנְחֹשׁ
בּוֹ הִרְעַתֶּם אֶשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם

They are, indeed, stopped, do not know that there is anything afoot (Gen. 44:7-9) and then the goblet is discovered in Binyamin's bag (Gen. 44:12). Setting-up this ensnaring of Binyamin may very well have been set up through this drinking episode that gets them drunk and then, perhaps hung-over, they set out on their way back home in the morning and not keen to carefully inspect their bags.

Removing Suspicion

While the brothers would not have sought out drinking and getting drunk, perhaps they were invited to dine with this Egyptian minister and sought to shake off suspicion, as suggested by Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel (1512-1609), who suggested (ד"ה לא שתו הם יין) (והוא לא שתה יין):

...Yesterday, he had seized them as spies and now they were drinking with him except now they were still considered in their eyes as spies. And, therefore, if he wanted to drink wine with them on account secrets emerging when wine enters. And he seized them upon another matter which was his intention and they said, "If we don't drink, perhaps he will say that you don't want to drink lest out of fear that they would reveal secrets."

It's actually quite the opposite: "We should drink wine with him and get drunk and he will not hear anything out of us, so that we may depart from being under his suspicion." Therefore, they drank and got drunk with him.

...אתמול החזיק אותנו
כמרגלים - ועכשיו שותה
עמנו, אלא עדיין אנחנו
בעיניו מרגלים, ולפיכך
הוא רוצה לשתות עמנו יין,
כי נכנס יין יצא סוד
(עירובין סה.), ויתפוס
אותנו בדבור אחר, כך הוא
כוונתו, ואמרו הם - אם
לא נשתה יאמר לכך אין
אתם רוצים לשתות
שיראים אתם כי תגלו סוד
שלכם, אדרבא - נשתה
עמו יין ונשכר ולא ישמע
מאתנו שום דבר ונצא
מהחדש שלו, לפיכך שתו
עמו ונשתכרו עמו

Conclusion

While it seems to be a strange occurrence of a bunch of brothers getting drunk in a royal palace, perhaps it could have been owing to their lack of drinking in years, the higher quality of wine, seeking to shake off suspicion, or even a set-up by their brother to catch them off-guard. One thing that is clear is that this final episode in the Torah of drunkenness is not negatively considered, but perhaps seems to be a synthesis of drinking and getting drunk in the Torah: brothers drinking and getting drunk with each other as a good time.

L'chaim 🍷

