

ONEG SHABBAS

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

Ya'akov's Vinous Blessings to Yehudah

As we read of Ya'akov's final moments as he is dying, following his blessing of Yoseph and his sons (Gen. 48:1-22), we then read of his blessings to his other sons (Gen. 49:1-28), followed by his death and burial (Gen. 49:29-33). While these blessings carry with them an emotional weightiness to them owing to the scene, it is hard for readers of this publication not to notice that there is wine involved (Gen. 49:11-12):

He tethers his donkey to a vine, his
donkey's foal to a choice vine; he washes
his garment in wine, his robe in blood of
grapes. His eyes are darker than wine; his
teeth are whiter than milk.

These wine-related blessings included here are being directed towards Yehudah. It should be noted that Yehudah is not being blessed solely regarding wine, but actually his blessings "can be divided into two parts: The first (vv. 8-10) is a promise of sovereignty over his brothers and the future kingdom/rule....The second part (vv. 11-12) is a blessing for the increase in wine production in the Judean Hills, a prophecy being fulfilled in our own day" (Aaron Demsky, *The Color of Judah's Eyes*, *TheTorah.com* (11 January 2017)). These wine-related blessings yield three separate sets of couplets: the first describing connections of donkeys to vines, the second to clothing drenched in wine, and the third describing colors and facial anatomy. How can we make sense of it?

Talmudic Take

One third century rabbi provided his explanation of the entire aspect of Israel's vinous blessing to Yehudah (*Ketubot* 111b):

When Rav Dimi came, he said: "What is that which is written: 'Binding his foal to the vine' (Gen. 49:11)? Every grapevine you have in the land of Israel requires a foal to harvest. "And his donkey's colt to the choice vine" - Every barren tree you have in the land of Israel will produce enough to load two donkeys.

And lest you say 'they do not contain wine', the verse states: 'He washes his garments in wine'.

And lest you say 'It's not red', the verse states: 'And from the blood of the grape you drank foaming wine' (Deut. 32:14).

And lest you say 'It does not inebriate', the verse states: 'And his incitement' (Gen. 49:11).

And lest you say 'It has no flavor', the verse states: 'His eyes shall be red with wine' (Gen. 49:12). Each palate that tastes it, says: 'For me, for me.'

And lest you say, 'It is good for the young, but it is not good for the old', the verse states: 'And his teeth white with milk' (Gen. 49:12). Do not read *leven shinayim* (white teeth); rather, *leven shanim* (as one of [many] years."

אֶסְרִי לִגְפֶן עֵירָה
וְלִשְׂרָקָה בְּנֵי אֶתְנֹן כֶּבֶס
בִּינִי לִבְשׁוֹ וּבְדָם עֲנָבִים
סוּתָהּ: חֲכָלִי עֵינַיִם
מִיֵּין וּלְבָרְשָׁנִים מִחֶלֶב

כִּי אֶתָּא רַב דִּימִי, אָמַר: מַאי
דְּכָתִיב "אֶסְרִי לִגְפֶן עֵירָה"
— אֵין לָךְ לִגְפֶן וְגִפֶן
שְׂבָאֲרָךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂאִין צָרִיךְ
עֵיר אַחַת לִבְצוֹר.

"וְלִשְׂרָקָה בְּנֵי אֶתְנֹן" — אֵין
לָךְ כָּל אֵילָן סָרֶק שְׂבָאֲרָךְ
יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂאִינוּ מוֹצִיִּים מִשּׁוֹ
שְׁתֵּי אֶתְנֹנוֹת.

וְשִׁמָּא תֹאמַר אֵין בּוֹ יֵין,
תְּלַמּוּד לּוֹמַר: "כֶּבֶס בִּינִי
לְבֹשׁוֹ".

וְשִׁמָּא תֹאמַר אֵינוּ אָדוּם,
תְּלַמּוּד לּוֹמַר: "וּבְדָם עֲנָבִים
תִּשְׂתֶּה חֲמֶר".

וְשִׁמָּא תֹאמַר אֵינוּ מְרֻחָה —
תְּלַמּוּד לּוֹמַר: "סוּתָהּ".

וְשִׁמָּא תֹאמַר אֵין בּוֹ טַעַם —
תְּלַמּוּד לּוֹמַר: "חֲכָלִי עֵינַיִם
עֵינַיִם מִיֵּין".

כָּל חִיר שְׁטוּעֻמָּה, אָמַר: "לִי
לֵי".

וְשִׁמָּא תֹאמַר לְנַעֲרִים יָפָה
וְלְזָקֵנִים אֵינוּ יָפָה — תְּלַמּוּד
לּוֹמַר: "וּלְבָרְשָׁנִים מִחֶלֶב",
אֵל תִּיקְרִי "לְבָרְשָׁנִים" אֶלָּא
"לְבָרְשָׁנִים".

Rav Dimi's poetic perspective on this blessing is rather fitting; after all, the language employed by Israel is quite poetic, so Rav Dimi is providing further poetic imagery as to how bountiful the wine harvests for Yehudah are to be as part of this blessing.

Beyond the poetry, how do each of these blessing couplets actually work out?



Of Donkeys and Vines

The first duo of these blessings - "אֶסְרִי לִגְפֶן עֵירָה וְלִשְׂרָקָה בְּנֵי אֶתְנֹן" - "He tethers his donkey to a vine, his donkey's foal to a choice vine" - seems to communicate something about donkeys carrying loads, similarly to what we read of Rav Dimi's description, yet why would someone tether their donkey to a vine? After all, this "image is problematic because an ass would soon destroy the vine to which it is tied" (Nahum Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 308).

Instead of tying a donkey to a vine, however, perhaps this image is meant more as a way for the grapes or wine to get to port:

Egyptian records from the mid-second millennium B.C.E. indicate that wines from Canaan were routinely shipped to Egypt from the seaport in Gaza. Coastal Ashkelon, which was a major wine producer in the seventh century B.C.E., would also have transported its wine by sea.

Land-locked Judah had no direct access to bodies of water for transporting wine outside of its own territory. Nevertheless, evidence of wine trade in Judah does exist. How would the wine get to the sea port in Gaza? This is where the donkeys in Genesis 49:11 come in.

(Tina M. Sherman, "'He Tethers His Donkey to the Vine' - Judah Exported Soreqa Wine", *TheTorah.com* (17 December 2021).)

Now that we understand the donkey connection, another question that arises is what is שְׂרָקָה? Sherman writes that, "Modern translators and commentators...understand שְׂרָקָה (soreqa) as a reference to a vine that produces a high-quality grape variety. This interpretation is based on a related form, שֹׂרֶק (soreq), which appears three times in the Bible." After pointing to Isaiah 5:2 and Jeremiah 2:21, she notes (ibid.):

The third instance of soreq occurs in Judges 16:4, as a place name: נַחַל שֹׂרֶק, the Sorek Ravine (known also as Wadi es-Sarâr), which lies to the west of Jerusalem. The name of the ravine and the name of the grape variety are likely connected: soreq grapes grew in the Sorek Ravine.

Indeed, when Samson marries the woman from Timnah (Tel Batash), which lies just to the south of the Sorek Ravine, the narrative describes Samson arriving at תִּמְנָה כְּרָמֵי תִמְנָה "the vineyards of Timnah" (Jud. 14:5). In fact, excavations at Timnah have identified a probable winepress at the site dating to the 6th century B.C.E. Finally, the valley has "sloping hills," access to water, and a soil type that would have provided good growing conditions for grape vines.

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For most of the biblical period, the Sorek Ravine was in the territory of Judah, and thus it makes sense that the blessing in Genesis 49:11 would explicitly connect these high quality *soreq* vines to Judah, which would have been an ideal export product.

Finally, wouldn't we expect camels for transporting such products? Indeed, it's a possibility, but not the only consideration (ibid.):

Camels were more efficient pack animals for long distance transport, but camels' footpads were less suited to hilly, rocky terrain. The Judahites would probably have used donkeys to transport their wines for the short trip from the hill country, where their vineyards were located, to a seaport, probably in Philistia, from which they could be shipped overseas.

Thus, the imagery of loading donkeys with grapes is not a general expression of plenty, but is meant to communicate that Judah will profit abundantly from its high-quality grapes, sending donkey after donkey loaded with *soreqa* wine down to the coast. From there, Judah's wine would be sold to connoisseurs around the Mediterranean, who would appreciate this high-quality Judean vintage.

Laundering Clothing in Wine?

The second duo of these blessings - *כִּסְּ בִּינָה לְבָשׁוֹ וּבְדָם עֲנִיבִים סוּתָהּ* - "he washes his garment in wine, his robe in blood of grapes" - seems to communicate an abundance of wine, as Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (acronymically known as Rashi) comments: *כָּל זֶה לְשׁוֹן רַבִּי יוֹן* "All of this is an expression of the abundance of wine" (רש"י על בראשית). Indeed, in a more contemporary description of this picture (Sherman, "He Tethers His Donkey to the Vine"):

This passage is generally understood as an exaggerated image: Judah will have so much wine that people will wash their garments in wine instead of water. More likely, it carries a sense similar to the modern use of the term "awash" to refer to being "full of or abounding in" something. Judah will be awash with wine, such that the flood of it will stain the people's garments red.

There are largely two different camps among the commentators as to how this laundering of wine will take place: whether, as Rabbi Samuel



ben Meir (1085-1158) commented, because their garments are so full of grape juice from trampling the harvest to prepare it for wine (רשב"ם על בראשית), or, as Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) commented, because they will use wine instead of water to launder their clothes (אבן עזרא על בראשית). Clearly, there is a massive abundance of wine!

Facial Features

The third and final duo of these blessings - *חֲכָלִי עֵינַי מִיֵּין וְלִבִּי שֵׁנִים מִחֶלֶב* - "His eyes are darker than wine; his teeth are whiter than milk" - seems to communicate something again about wine, but not entirely clear what, for either the eyes or the teeth. So what do they mean?

Eyes Red from Wine

A typical interpretation amongst medieval commentators is the eyes become red from drinking wine (see Rashi (1040-1105), Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), Rabbi Yosef ben Isaac Bekhor Shor of Orléans (12th century), and Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam (1186-1237)).

Eyes Redder than Wine

Rabbi Saadia Gaon (882-942) offers an alternative explanation, understanding the preposition *mem* as "more than", rather than the causal *mem* "because of," "as a result of": *אֲדָמָם בְּעֵינָיִם יוֹתֵר מִיֵּין וְלִבִּי שֵׁנִים מִחֶלֶב* "Redness in the eyes more than wine; whiteness in the teeth more than milk." Rabbi Bekhor Shor suggests a similar explanation as an alternative possibility to the one he staked out first (red from wine) (בכור (שור על בראשית מ"ט:י"ב, ד"ה חכלילי עינים מין):



אָדָם מְרִאֲתוֹ יוֹתֵר מִן הַיֵּין, וְשֵׁנֵי לִבְנוֹת יוֹתֵר מִחֶלֶב. כְּלֹמֶר: אָדָם יָפֶה, וְבֶעַל תּוֹאֵר, וְהֻגֵן לְמַלְכוּת, כְּדֹכֵתִיב בְּדוֹד: אֲדָמוּנִי עַם יִפֶּה עֵינָיִם וְטוֹב רֹאִי

While all of these aforementioned commentators explain *חֲכָלִי* as the color red as in red wine, this explanation is reinforced by the preceding two verses mentioning "blood of grapes" and *soreka*, one of the best types of wine whose clusters produce dark red wine. However, there is yet another perspective to consider.

Blackening Eyes

In contrast to these interpretations of *חֲכָלִי*, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (popularly referred to as Ramban) (1194-1270) stands alone amongst medieval commentators, "explaining this word as a metathesized form (i.e., when the letters rearrange) of the root *חָכַל* (in Arabic *كحل*), with a doubling of the final letter" (Demskey, "The Color of Judah's Eyes"), as we read his commentary (רמב"ן על בראשית מ"ט:י"ב, ד"ה חכלילי עינים):

אֲמָרוּ הַמַּפְרָשִׁים (רש"י) רַבִּינָנוּ וְהַרְדָּק (שְׁהוּא עֵינָי) אֲדָמִימוֹת שִׁיתָאֲדָמוּ עֵינָיו מֵרַבּ שְׁתִּיתָ יוֹן וְכֻמְוָהוּ לְמִי חֲכָלִילוֹת עֵינַיִם (מִשְׁלִי כִּג כֹּט) וְהִנֵּה בְּעֵינֵי שְׁהוּא הַפּוֹךְ מִן כִּחְלֵת עֵינִיךְ (יִחְזָקָאֵל כִּג מ) וְנִכְפְּלָה בּוֹ הַלֵּמ"ד כִּמְנַהֵג רִבִּים וְהוּא כְּעֵינֵן מִכְחוֹל הָעֵינַיִם הַיְדוּעַ וּמוֹרָגֵל בְּדַבְרֵי רַבּוֹתֵינוּ (כָּלִים) פִּי"ג מ"ב) וְכֵן שְׁמוֹ בְּעַרְבִי "אֵל כְּחוֹל" יֹאמֵר שְׁהוּא כְּחוֹל הָעֵינַיִם מִן הַיֵּין כִּי כֹאשֶׁר אַחֲרֵים כְּחוֹלִים אוֹתָם בְּפוֹךְ שְׁהוּא הַ"אֵל כְּחוֹל" כֵּן יִכְחוֹל אוֹתָם הוּא בֵּינָן וְכֻמוֹ שְׁהֶאֱחָרִים מִלְּבָנִים שִׁנִּיהֶם בְּתַמְרוּקִים כֵּן יִלְבֵּן אוֹתָם בְּחֶלֶב וְהַמֶּשֶׁל לְרַבּוֹי הַיֵּין וְהַחֲלֵב בְּאַרְצָהּ כֹּאשֶׁר הַזִּכֵּר אֲוֹנְקָלוֹס (תַּרְגוּם) אֲוֹנְקָלוֹס עַל בְּרַאשִׁית מ"ט:י"ב

Conclusion

Ya'akov's blessing to Yehudah includes these multiple wine-related blessings, which relate to Yehudah having a lot of wine-yield in his territory. Not only do we see that there is so much wine produced in that area, just as in Biblical times, they were able to export the wine, so, too, in our day, are we able to enjoy Israeli wine from Yehudah to throughout Israel and beyond!

L'chaim

