

ONEG SHABBAS

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

Yoseph Sending Provisions to His Father

When one is saying farewell to someone, it can certainly be helpful to send food with them to accompany them on their way. While we see that in our own lives, it is also quite true as we read in the book of Genesis. We see this as we read of Yoseph sending provisions with his brothers back to their father. While Ya'akov has missed out on all the drama going on in Egypt, as Yoseph reveals his identity to his brothers, he thoughtfully sends back provisions with them, seemingly not only for them to take back to Egypt, but also for their travels (Gen. 45:21-23):

Yoseph gave them wagons as Pharaoh had commanded, and he supplied them with provisions for the journey. To each of them, moreover, he gave a change of clothing; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five changes of clothing. And to his father he sent the following: ten he-asses laden with the best things of Egypt, and ten she-asses laden with grain, bread, and provisions for his father on the journey.

וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם יוֹסֵף עֲגֻלוֹת
עַל־פִּי פֶרְעֹה וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם
צִנּוֹת לְדֶרֶךְ: (כב) לְכָל־ם
נָתַן לְאִישׁ חֲלָפוֹת שְׂמֹלֶת
וּלְבִנְיָמִן נָתַן שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת
כֶּסֶף וְחֲמֵשׁ חֲלָפוֹת
שְׂמֹלֶת: (כג) וּלְאֲבִיו שְׁלֹשׁ
כֹּזְאוֹת עֲשָׂרָה חֲמֹרִים
נֹשְׂאִים מִטּוֹב מִצְרַיִם
וְעֶשֶׂר אֲתֹנֹת נֹשְׂאוֹת בָּר
וְלֶחֶם וּמִזֶּן לְאֲבִיו לְדֶרֶךְ

While it is incredibly understandable and reasonable that he would send food with them for the way, is that all he sent them? While the phrase “best of Egypt” might simply refer to the foods that are mentioned within these verses as being amongst the highest quality in Egypt, could “the best of Egypt” also include beverages?

Talmudic Take on “Best of Egypt”

Indeed, there is a third-century sage who suggests that “the best of Egypt” might include more than simply food (*Megillah* 16b):

What are “the good things of Egypt”? מאי “מטוב מצרים”?
Rabbi Binyamin bar Yefet said: “Rabbi אמר רבי בנמינ בר יפת אמר
Elazar said: ‘He sent him wine, which רבי אלעזר: שגר לו יין,
the elderly find pleasing.” שדעת זקנים נוחה הימנו.

(Please note that the verb Rabbi Elazar uses is שגר (or שגר), which is the term found in many manuscripts (see MS Vatican 134, MS Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 (366), MS Goettingen 3, MS NY-Columbia X 893 T 141, MS Munich 95). The only manuscript that witnesses שלח is MS Munich 140, along with the printed editions (Pesaro, Venice, & Vilna) (It seems to have gotten inserted here as שלח, which was used in the previous line, seems to have got accidentally copied here.).)

(Another item to note is that all of the manuscripts witness simply יין (wine), with most printed editions of the Talmud witnessing that, as well. However, the only printed edition which has יין [aged] (wine) is the 19th century Vilna edition, which is clearly an addition that seems to have crept in for that printing.)

As to why he sent him wine, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi) comments (ד"ה שיגר לו יין):

Since the elderly find it pleasing, לפי שדעת זקנים נוחה הימנו
this is the best thing of all for him. זה הדבר הטוב לו מן הכל

While this may be true that the elderly find wine pleasing, why would he send him wine?

While it may be true that it provides comfort to the aged, it does not seem to be something restricted to elderly people, as wine can provide comfort to quite a wide range of ages. Nevertheless, there is certainly something quite understandable with this gift to his father that it should be wine insofar as it would be something that brings comfort to him.



Rashi Describing the “Best of Egypt”

In his commentary to the verse in our Torah portion, Rashi mentions not only this rabbinic suggestion, but another midrashic suggestion, as well (רש"י על בראשית מ"ה: כ"ג, ד"ה מטוב מצרים):

We find in the Talmud that he sent him מצינו בתלמוד ששלח
wine, which old people like very much, לו יין שדעת זקנים
and a narrative midrash states that he נוחה הימנו, ומדרש
sent him split beans. אגדה גריסין של פול

As we read Rashi's comment on this verse, two aspects stick out. The first of these is Rashi's mentioning both of these possibilities from the Talmud and the midrash, why not just stick with one of them? However, what is the significance of these beans? To understand what is going on, let's check out the midrash (בראשית רבה צ"ד: ב):

זה גריסין של פול
שהוא על עיקת נפש
This is split beans, which are effective in
soothing the uneasiness of the soul

With this midrashic explanation of the split beans, the key words are clearly about providing soothing to the uneasiness of the soul, which is interesting, as it sounds as if Yoseph is aware, perhaps from his brothers, as to how difficult things have been going for their father. As such, this seems to be his overture to their father to help ease his situation and to provide comfort to him, even though he, himself, hasn't been in contact with his father. Ultimately, it turns out that his father later on self-describes his life as having been difficult (Gen. 47:9).

Returning to Rashi's description is the other matter, which is his description that matches Rabbi Elazar's notion of Yoseph sending his father wine; wouldn't anybody/everybody be eased with wine? Would not everybody find wine to be pleasing? This certainly seems superfluous, although it would seem that sending wine is a pleasant and calming gift.

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Addition to Rashi's Description of "Best of Egypt"

While it seems that Rashi verbatim quoted Rabbi Elazar, there were some manuscripts that faithfully stayed true to Rashi's words, there were also some that did not. In fact, according to AlHaTorah.org, most manuscripts witness Rashi as having written "wine" (יין) (MSS Leipzig 1, Munich 5, Hamburg 13, Leiden 1, Oxford 34, London 26917, Roma printed edition, and most of the witnesses of the Babylonian Talmud), whereas one manuscript (MS Oxford 165) witnesses an additional word (and, it would seem, some of the printed editions of the Babylonian Talmud): "old wine" (יין ישן).

While it is unclear whence this additional word of "old" came - was it first something that crept in through a scribe adding it to Rashi's commentary and then, somehow made it into the Vilna printed edition, or some other manner - it is nevertheless fascinating to consider *why* this scribal addition was made. Indeed, if, after all, simply wine would be good for anyone, what is special about it?

Rabbi Luria's Commentary on Rashi's Addition to the Talmudic Description of "Best of Egypt"

Quoting an earlier commentator, Rabbi Shabbethai ben Yoseph Bass (1641-1718) wrote (בראשית מ"ה:כ"ג; ד"ה יין ישן שדעת זקנים נוחה) (הימנו):

Rabbi Shlomo Luria (1510-1573) wrote:	כתב מהרש"ל מדלא
"Since it is not written in the Torah what	כתיב בקרא מהו הטוב
was the good thing that Yosef sent him,	ששלח לו שמע מינה
it implies that it was not something	הוא דבר שאינו חשוב
notable. So why did he send it to him?	ולמה שלח לו לפי
Because for Yaakov it was good.	שליעקב היה טוב לכן
Therefore, he comments that it was	פירש שהוא יין ישן שזה
aged wine, which is generally not so	אינו דבר חשוב כל כך
notable, but it was noteworthy to	וליעקב היה דבר חשוב
Yaakov because old people derive	לפי שדעת זקנים נוחה
pleasure from it."	ממנו וכו' עכ"ל

In Rabbi Luria's take on this episode, he opines that this suggestion of aged wine, despite it not being mentioned in our Torah portion, was generally not notable. Indeed, this is a pretty fascinating balancing act for Rabbi Luria: on the one hand, it is special enough to be considered as "amongst the best in Egypt", yet not special enough to be specified in the Torah. However, he balances this out by specifying that aged wine is special to Yaakov, owing to both his being old, as well as seeking to derive pleasure from it.

A Further Consideration of the Scribal Addition to Rashi's Commentary

As you may be able to surmise, the scribal addition of that one word: "old" (ישן) to describe the wine spread significantly, enough so to the point that the commentaries to Rashi's commentaries were writing about this aged wine. Indeed, this offers us an opportunity to consider further what might have driven this broader understanding of this wine being aged wine, rather than standardly aged wine.

If one were to send old wine, that might be something that would actually constitute not only something that would seem to be comforting to elders, but also something that would be amongst "the best of Egypt". Moreover, since Egypt is not a wine-growing region, they would have had to import the wine, aged it in wine cellars in Egypt, and then subsequently exported from Egypt, all of which would have bore quite some time, labor, and expense.

In this respect, while it would not have been wine that originally came from Egypt, it would have been improved (made better) by its time in Egypt. Perhaps, then, there is some aspect to this aging in Egypt that aided its quality, perhaps from the air in Egypt. This is certainly something that would make it significant and amongst the best to be found in Egypt and why the scribes may have added this descriptor here.

Improving in Age Like Fine Wine

Another aspect that this scribal addition to Rashi's commentary accomplishes is providing both a better articulation of how it is pleasurable, as well as somehow pleasing for the elderly. Some of this is achieved with a higher level of being pleased with the higher degree of complexity, a higher degree of calmness in the wine, and alcohol content in aged wine over non-aged wine. Maybe this achieves a sense of contentment for the elderly more so than the non-elderly....



While this suggestion of *aged wine* rather than simply *wine* achieves something for anyone who may drink it, perhaps there is another notion taking place. Perhaps, these scribes sought to provide something of a poetic nature to this gift: whereas Ya'akov is aged, so, too, is this wine. However, it's not simply saying that the wine is old as Yoseph's father is old, but when wine ages, it settles down, it matures, it improves, it develops more character and complexity, so it seems to be that these added aged characteristics that improve the wine over time is something that Yoseph is also yearning and hoping for when he sees his father after not having seen him for over two decades: that he yearns to see that his father has matured, has developed, and has become refined with time. In this respect, it almost seems to yield an aspiration that Yoseph really hopes to see his father having been developed and improved after all this time.

Thus the scribal addition of this description of this wine being aged may provide us with an insight that these scribes sought to see this gift on Yoseph's behalf of hoping to see his father as having become refined, more complex, more settled, and calmer than when he last saw him over two decades before. Alternatively, perhaps this wine being aged may reflect a framing of Yoseph as experiencing Egypt as a calmer, less turbulent, and a more complex place to live than in the land up in which he grew amidst the challenges he had to face with his antagonistic brothers. In this respect, this aged wine can exemplify the best of Egypt.

Conclusion

As we read of the various provisions that Yoseph sends with his brothers, we also read of him sending items for his father, whom he hasn't seen in over two decades. As wine is an important beverage, for both enjoying and as a gift, why would he not have sent wine? Indeed, this gift of wine should have been significant enough to warrant mention, yet, it did not. While "the best of Egypt" may simply have been various food or sundry items, perhaps he sent wine to provide succor to his aged father. Moreover, perhaps this wine may have been something special - aged wine, perhaps even as a way of demonstrating particular honor to his father. Moreover, he may have sent aged wine to his father to indicate to him that he saw him as refining over time, as wine does. Whether he sent regular wine or aged wine, may we all be able to send wine and experience the best that any land has to offer us.

L'chaim

