

ONEG SHABBAS

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

A Land Flowing of Milk and Honey

Ostensibly, when we encounter the first expression of “a land flowing of milk and honey”, it may not occur to us that this description relates to drinking. Quite the contrary: on the one hand, milk is a beverage, albeit not of an intoxicating variety. Moreover, honey, which, as Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) describes it, flows from figs and/or dates (רש"י על שמות (י"ג:ה'; ד"ה זבת חלב ודבש), is something that flows and, thus can potentially be drunk. Again, though, is there any connection here with an intoxicating beverage? According to the second century sage, Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai, he argues that it can be drunk and potentially intoxicating (*Nazir* 4a & *Bekhorot* 45b). Now that we have connected this expression to drinking, what can we understand about it?

The appearance of this expression in our Torah portion is the first such appearance, as we read (Ex. 3:7-10):

And The Lord said, “I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. (8) I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (9) Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. (10) Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.”

This is the first appearance of the phrase in the Torah, with three subsequent appearances in Exodus (3:17, 13:5, and 33:3), one in Leviticus (20:24), one in Numbers (14:8), and several in Deuteronomy (6:3, 11:9, 26:9, 26:15, and 27:3), but what does it signify?

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רָאֵה רָאִיתִי אֶת-
עֵינֵי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם
וְאֶת-צַעֲקוֹתָם שְׁמַעְתִּי
מִפְּנֵי גַמְשׁוֹ כִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת-
מַכָּאֲבֵי: (ח) וְאָרָד
לְהַצִּילוֹ | מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם
וְלִהְיוֹתָ לְמֶרְחָץ הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא
אֶל-אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחְבָּה אֶל-
אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ אֶל-
מְקוֹם הַכְנָעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי
וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי
וְהַיְבוֹסִי: (ט) וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה
צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה
אֵלַי וְגַם-רִאִיתִי אֶת-הַלֹּחֵץ
אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם:
(י) וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ
אֶל-פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת-עַמִּי
בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם



It would seem to be, as Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) articulated, that both the agricultural produce, as well as consumable items from animals would be abundant (רמב"ן על שמות ג':ח, ד"ה אל ארץ זבת חלב ודבש):

And the meaning of “flowing with milk and honey” is that Scripture first praises the land as being good — meaning that the air is wholesome and pleasant for human beings, and that every kind of good may be found there and that it is spacious, so that all Israel may dwell there with room to spare; or that spacious means that it contains broad regions: lowlands, valleys, and plains, great and small, and that most of it is not mountains and ravines.

וטעם זבת חלב ודבש כי שבת תחלה את הארץ שהיא טובה, לומר שהאוויר טוב ויפה לבני אדם וכל טוב ימצא בה, ושהיא רחבה, שיעמדו בה כל ישראל במרחב או טעם רחבה שיש בה רחבות, שפלה ועמק ומישור גדולים וקטנים ואין רובה הרים וגאיות

It then returns to praise it as a land of livestock, in that it has good pasture and fine waters, so that milk increases in the animals, for animals are healthy, robust, and abundant in milk only in good air, plentiful grass, and good water.

וחזר ושבת אותה שהיא ארץ מקנה שיש בה מרעה טוב, והמים יפים, ויגדל החלב בבהמות, כי אין הבהמות בריאות וטובות ומרבות החלב רק באויר טוב ועשב רב ומים טובים.

And because although such conditions may be found in meadows and on high mountains, the fruits there are not especially rich and fine, it therefore says further that the land is also fertile, that its fruits are rich and sweet, to the point that the whole land flows with honey from them.

ובעבור שימצא זה באחו ובמרום הרים אין הפירות שם שמינים ויפים מאד, אמר כי היא עוד שמינה שפירותיה שמינים ומתוקים עד שתזוב כולה בדבש מהם.

Behold, he praises it for all of God's bounty: for grain, for wine, for oil, and for flocks of sheep and cattle. This is the meaning of “it is the splendor of all lands” (Ezekiel 20:6).

והנה שבת אותה על כל טוב ה', על דגן ועל תרש ועל יצהר ועל בני צאן ובקר. וזהו צבי היא לכל הארצות (ויחזקאל כ ו)

Thus, according to Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, the land flowing of milk and honey is a shorthand way of describing good agricultural conditions for fruit-growing, as well as good land conditions for grazing livestock. It's a great land for both growing flora and raising fauna. Moreover, he also points out that the description אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחְבָּה “a good and wide land” is a good climate for people and wide enough for them to spread out.

Is the Land Always Flowing?

Another comment of his, though, points out that it is not as if the lands always are so agriculturally abundant (ibid.):

He mentions here six nations and omits the seventh. Perhaps this was because his land was not flowing with milk and honey as were these [lands of the six nations mentioned].

יזכיר בכאן ששה עממים ויניח השביעי, אולי לא היתה ארצו זבת חלב ודבש כאלה

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This would seem to indicate that it would only be with the children of Israel entering the land would it then be able to actually flow with such abundance.

Not Always Flowing?

Picking-up on this comment, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) further develops it (רש"י הירש על התורה, שמות ג:ח):

Es ist sehr eigentümlich, daß die Bezeichnung der Produktenfülle durch — זוב nur bei א"י und sonst nie wieder in solcher Bedeutung vorkommt, bei dem jüdischen Lande aber der stete Ausdruck ist. זוב heißt im תנ"ך nie: überfließen. Es kommt vorzugsweise nur zur Bezeichnung eines krankhaften Zustandes beim Menschen und sonst nur als ein durch eine Wundermacht — הכה צור ויזוב מים (Ps. 78, 20) — oder durch Gewalt bewirktes Ausfließen — שהם יזובו מדוקרים (Klagel. 4, 9). — vor, "erdolcht strömen sie ihr Blut aus".

Alles zusammengenommen dürfte ארץ זבת ח"י וד' wohl nicht ein Land bezeichnen, das seiner natürlichen Fruchtbarkeit nach diese Fülle entfaltet, sondern ein Land, das dies nur unter besonderen Bedingungen tut. Palästina ist ein hartes Land, הארצות האל. (Bereschit 26, 3). Wiederholt sahen wir es von Hungersnot heimgesucht, und auch, nachdem Israel es verlassen, liegt es öde. למטר. Ein Land, das nicht wie Ägypten nur ohne weiteres von seinen Bewohnern auszubeutende, natürliche Bedingungen der Fruchtbarkeit bietet, sondern, "das nur unter einer steten, von Anfang des Jahres bis zum Ende des Jahres darauf gerichteten besonderen Gottesfürsorge" aufzublühen vermag. Wenn es Wasser hat, so blüht es üppig auf.

Allein dieses Wasser erhält es nur von oben. Es ist ein Boden, der seine Bewohner nötigt, brav zu sein.

It is very peculiar that the designation of abundance of produce through the term זוב occurs only with regard to the Land of Israel and never again elsewhere in this sense, while with respect to the Jewish land it is the standard expression. In the Tanakh, זוב never means "to overflow." It appears primarily only to describe a pathological condition in human beings, and otherwise only as a flowing brought about either by miraculous power—"He struck the rock and water flowed" (Ps. 78:20) — or by force — "those pierced by the sword, from whom blood flows" (Lamentations 4:9), that is, "they stream out their blood as if stabbed."

Taken together, this suggests that "a land flowing with milk and honey" does not describe a land that unfolds this abundance by virtue of its natural fertility alone, but rather a land that does so only under special conditions. Palestine is a hard land, "the lands of God" (Genesis 26:3). We repeatedly see it stricken by famine, and even after Israel left it, it lies desolate. Of it Scripture says: "It drinks water from the rain of heaven." It is not a land like Egypt, which offers natural conditions of fertility that can simply be exploited by its inhabitants, but rather one that can flourish only under constant, special divine providence, directed toward it "from the beginning of the year to the end of the year."

When it has water, it blossoms luxuriantly. Yet this water comes to it only from above. It is a soil that compels its inhabitants to be morally upright.

BANGITOUT
THE GAME OF KIDDUSH CLUB

"THE HAFTORAH CAN BE FOUND ON PAGE.."

START HERE

 1 POINT	 1 POINT	 1 POINT	Rabbi sees you leaving -2 POINTS
Missed mussaf -3 POINTS	 2 POINTS	 2 POINTS	 2 POINTS
 3 POINTS	 3 POINTS	 2 POINTS	Your wife is looking for you -3 POINTS
Rabbi bans kiddush club GO BACK TO START	 4 POINTS	Ran out of crackers -2 POINTS	 4 POINTS

(courtesy of Seth Galena)

Für ein hartes Volk, wie wir waren, gehört ein hartes Land. — אל מקום הכנעני. Die jetzigen Bewohner sind durch die darin genossene Üppigkeit entartet, und das Land speit sie aus. Nur freibleibend von allem kanaanitischen Unwesen wird Israel sich seine Fülle erhalten.

For a stiff-necked people such as we were, a hard land was required — to the place of the Canaanite. The present inhabitants have become degenerate through the abundance enjoyed there, and the land spews them out. Only by remaining free of all Canaanite corruption will Israel preserve its abundance.

There is a lot to unpack here, although let's begin with his clever approach to juxtaposing the land being not necessarily already agriculturally abundant, but needing appropriate care in order to achieve this state. He further argues that the children of Israel would need to properly behave in order to receive such bounty, as opposed to the previous inhabitants. He also describes the anomalousness of the attribution of products oozing in Israel, but nowhere else, including that it has to with special human energies that flow from the appropriate behavior carried out there.

Conclusion

God's stated intention of bringing the Israelites to a good and wide land flowing of milk and honey is not to be taken for granted. It is only through taking care of it that we can achieve such produce, including such products that can be drunk. As such, I'm wishing you a wonderful Shabbat, flowing with wonderful beverages, especially those that may derive from such a land.

L'chaim 