

# ONEG SHABBAS

THE UNOFFICIAL PARASHAH SHEET FOR KIDDUSH CLUBS

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

## An Introductory Look at The Priestly Drinking Prohibition

In this week's Torah portion, we encounter a very direct prohibition against drinking (Lev. 10:8-11):

And The LORD spoke to Aaron, saying: "Drink neither wine nor beer, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages, for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the impure and the pure; and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which The LORD has imparted to them through Moses."	וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: יַיִן וְשֵׂכָר אַל תִּשְׁתְּ   אַתָּה   וּבְנֵיךְ אַתָּה בְּבָאֵיכֶם אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְלֹא תָמוּתוּ חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם: וְלִהְבִּיל בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּבֵין הַתּוֹלַד וּבֵין הַטְּמֵא וּבֵין הַטְּהוֹר: וְלִהְיוֹת אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת כָּל־הַחֻקִּים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' אֲלֵיהֶם בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה
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### Breakdown of the Prohibition

If we were to break down this down into the 5 Ws and H, this yields the following:

- Who = Aharon and his sons (Lev. 10:9);
- What = Drinking neither wine nor beer (Lev. 10:9);
- When = Entering the Tent of Meeting...for all time throughout the ages (Lev. 10:9)
- Where = The Tent of Meeting (Lev. 10:9);
- Why = To distinguish between the holy and normal & the pure and impure (Lev. 10:10-11);
- How = Don't drink [in order to not die] (Lev. 10:9).

### Considering This Prohibition

While there is no blanket prohibition against drinking in the Torah, we do read of one here in our Torah portion that is a limited prohibition. It is limited both temporally and demographically, as it does not affect all Jews, only the descendants of Aharon, known as the kohanim. Not only that, it does not affect kohanim at all times, rather only when going to serve in the Tent of Meeting. Moreover, this prohibition is the only nonvoluntary proscription concerning drinking in the Torah (contrasted against the nazirite vow, which is a voluntary vow not to drink). In addition to the intellectual work necessary to distinguish between categories of holiness and purity, considering that kohanim also are in charge of the variety of functions taking place in the temple precincts, including offering sacrifices upon the altar, operating such activities requires a clear head.

### Considering This Prohibition

The Divine prohibition we read in this week's Torah portion against Kohanim drinking on the job, seems clearly in order for kohanim to maintain a clear head while serving, especially in order to preserve the necessary distinctions of holy/unholy and pure/impure. Clearly, there is a lot at stake while serving and God does not want mistakes to be made. This is rather understandable for all of us.

L'chaim 

## Connecting Tragedy to Prohibition

### Midrashic Association with Aharon's Sons' Deaths

Inasmuch as it is tempting to consider the prohibition against priests serving under the influence (Lev. 10:8-11) in a vacuum, it is hard to ignore its literary context. Coming on the heels of the death of two sons of Aharon (Lev. 10:1-7), the question arises as to why this prohibition is being placed here, intimating that there may be a connection to that tragic story in which two of Aharon's sons die while performing service in the Tent of Meeting.



As such, there are numerous midrashim which make this connection, such as Rabbi Yishmael saying in the early second century (ויקרא רבה י"ב:ה):

Rabbi Yishmael taught: The two sons of Aaron died only because they entered intoxicated with wine...	תני רבי ישמעאל לא מתו שני בניו של אהרן אלא מפני שנכנסו שתינו יין
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Similarly, we read of Rabbi Shimon in mid-second century also sharing this view (ויקרא רבה י"ב:ב):

Rabbi Shimon taught: Aaron's sons died only because they entered the Tent of Meeting intoxicated with wine.	תני רבי שמעון לא מתו בניו של אהרן אלא על שנכנסו שתינו יין לאהל מועד
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We then read of a third-century midrash that provides fascinating imagery to further describe this connection (ibid.):

Rabbi Pinhas said in the name of Rabbi Levi: "This is analogous to a king who had a loyal servant. He found him standing at the entrance to taverns. He beheaded him quietly, and appointed another servant in his stead. We do not know for what reason he killed the first. However, from what he commanded the second, saying: 'Do not enter the area at the entrance to the taverns', we know that it was for that reason that he killed the first. So too, 'fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed them' (Lev. 10:2), but we do not know why they died. However, from what he commanded Aaron, saying to him: 'Neither wine nor beer you shall drink' (Lev. 10:9), we know that they died only due to the wine. That is why the verse showed affection to Aaron and directed the divine speech to him alone, as it is stated: '[The Lord spoke to Aaron saying]: "Neither wine nor beer shall you drink"' (Lev. 10:8-9)."	רבי פנחס בשם רבי לוי אמר משל למלך שהיה לו בן בית נאמן, מצאו עומד על פתח חביות, והתני את ראשו בשתיקה, ונמנה בן בית אחר תחתיו, ואין אנו יודעים מפני מה הרג את הראשון, אלא ממה שמצוה את השני ואמר לא תכנס בפתח חביות, אנו יודעים שמתוך כך הרג הראשון, כך (ויקרא ט, יב): ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל אותם, ואין אנו יודעים מפני מה מתו, אלא ממה שמצוה את אהרן ואמר לו (ויקרא י, ט): יין ושכר אל תשת, אנו יודעים מתוך כך שלא מתו אלא מפני ה'יין, לכך חבבו הכתוב לאהרן ויחד אליו הדבור בפני עצמו, שנאמר: יין ושכר אל תשת
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### Alternative Midrashic Explanations

However, is it really so clear that it was on account of their sacrificing under the influence? We read of a few third century rabbis who provided some alternative possibilities (ויקרא רבה כ:ט):

Rabbi Manei of She'av, Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin, and Rabbi Yohanan in the name of Rabbi Levi said: "Due to four matters Aaron's sons died, and death is written regarding all of them:

1) Because they were intoxicated with wine, and death is written in its regard, as it is stated: 'You shall not drink wine or intoxicating drink, [you, nor your sons with you, upon your entry into the Tent of Meeting, that you not die]' (Lev. 10:9).

2) Because they were lacking vestments, and death is written in its regard, as it is stated: 'They shall be on Aaron and his sons [whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting...so they will not bear iniquity and die]' (Ex. 28:43). What were they lacking? It was the robe, in whose regard death is written, as it is stated: 'It shall be on Aaron to serve...[and he will not die]' (Ex. 28:35).

3) Because they entered without washing hands and feet, as it is stated: 'They shall wash their hands and their feet, and they will not die' (Ex. 30:21), and it is written: 'When they come to the Tent of Meeting they shall wash in water' (Ex. 30:20).

4) And because they did not have children, and death is written in its regard; that is what is written: 'Nadav and Avihu died before the Lord...and they had no children' (Num. 3:4)."

Abba Hanin says: "It is because they did not have wives, as it is written: 'And atone for himself and for his household' (Lev. 16:6); 'his household' - this is his wife."

רבי מני דשאב ורבי יהושע דסיכנין ורבי יוחנן בשם רבי לוי אמרו בשביל ארבעה דברים מתו בני אהרן, ובכלן כתיב בהן מיתה, על שהיו שתויי יין, וכתיב בו מיתה, שנאמר (ויקרא י, ט): יין ושכר אל תשת. ועל ידי שהיו מחסרי בגדים, וכתיב בו מיתה, שנאמר (שמות כח, מג): והיו על אהרן ועל בניו, ומה היו חסרין, מעיל, שכתוב בו מיתה, שנאמר (שמות כח, לה): והיה על אהרן לשרת, ועל ידי שנגכסו בלא רחיצת ידים ורגלים, שנאמר (שמות ל, כא): ורחצו ידיהם ורגליהם ולא ימתו, וכתיב (שמות ל, כ): בבגם אל אהל מועד ירחצו מים, ועל ידי שלא היו להם בנים, וכתיב בו מיתה, הדא הוא דכתיב (במדבר ג, ד): וימת נדב ואביהוא. אבא חנין אומר על ידי שלא היו להם נשים, דכתיב (ויקרא טז, ו): וכפר בעדו ובעד ביתו, ביתו זו אשתו.

### Alternative Explanation to Aharon's Sons' Deaths

Nevertheless, there is still something missing in this description of Nadav's and Avihu's deaths. After all, it was a strange fire, so what was going on?

I found the explanation of Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) to be quite fascinating (רמב"ן על ויקרא י:ט):

The reason why this commandment was given at that time, was in order that the priest should not go astray through the intoxicating effect of wine, and thus come to entertain some improper thought which might cause his death, as happened to [Aharon's] sons. It is possible that when the Rabbis interpreted that Nadav and Avihu died because they entered the Sanctuary whilst intoxicated by wine, they meant to say that it was because of the wine they had drunk that they erred in the matter of the strange fire, but not that their punishment actually was because they had drunk the wine, since they had not yet been warned against it.

הטעם בצואה הזאת עתה שלא יתעה הכהן בשכרות היין ויבא לידי מחשבה שאינה כהוגן וימות בה כאשר עשו בניו ויתכן כי מה שדרשו (ויק"ר יב א) שהיו נדב ואביהוא שתויי יין לומר כי מפני יינם טעו באש זרה לא שהיה העונש מפני היין כי עדיין לא הוזהרו ממנו

# Beer's Introduction in the Torah: A Prohibition

## Beer's Introduction in the Bible

Part of this prohibition in Lev. 10:9 is the first Biblical appearance of beer, which is only surprising that beer had not been previously mentioned.



(על ויקרא י:ט, ד"ה ושכר

העשוי ממיין חטה או דבש או תמרים כי היין משחית הדעת לשותיו ויתערבו לו הדברים.

However, it makes great sense that God would make beer off-limits for serving on-duty, as it, too, is alcoholic, just like wine. This may be beer's most notable appearance in the Torah, as it only appears several further times (Num. 6.3 (x2) & 28.7 and Deut. 14.26 & 29.5). While we do not typically associate beer with being a Biblical beverage, archaeological evidence of it in the land of Israel goes back even further than the earliest archaeological evidence of wine. As to this word meaning beer, Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) (popularly known as Ibn Ezra) describes this beverage as the following (אבן עזרא)

## Prohibiting Beer in the Torah

It is certainly understandable that beer would be included in this prohibition, as it contributes to intoxication, as does wine, since if wine were the only prohibited beverage, perhaps beer could be consumed, either while on the job or before going to work. However, with not only this first appearance in the Torah, but even its subsequent appearance in Numbers 6:3, being prohibitive against drinking it, one might get the sense it is a beverage to be altogether avoided. Yet, these are the only two such prohibitive aspects of beer in the Torah.

## Conclusion

While the first Biblical appearance of beer occurs in a proscriptive context, it is not a beverage that is intended to be always avoided. Really, the bigger surprise is that beer had not been previously mentioned in the Torah.

## L'chaim 🍷

Rather, their punishment was because they erred with respect to the fire of God, as I have alluded to.

I have found this explanation quite fascinating, as it does not squarely place the problem on Nadav and Avihu for simply having been intoxicated, but rather due to their having offered a strange fire.

## Conclusion

While it is unclear precisely what was problematic about the strange fire that Nadav and Avihu brought, it is not entirely clear that they did so while intoxicated. At the same time, it is hard to consider that drinking had not been a part of the equation, as this prohibition is immediately juxtaposed to this tragic story.

Whether or not Nadav and Avihu had engaged in buzzed or drunken sacrificing, clearly, the prohibition against kohanim from drinking on the job was put in place to ensure that priestly duties are carried out appropriately and soberly. Indeed, there is a time and a place for drinking and there is a time and a place for not drinking.

## L'chaim 🍷

