

ONEG SHABBAS

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

The Drinking Story in Ruth

As there is a tradition to read the book of Ruth on this holiday of Shavuot, how can we not mention the drinking story within this book? Indeed, this drinking story helps moves things along in a certain relationship.

Naomi's Plan - Catch Boaz Post-Drinking

When we read the verses of Ruth approaching Boaz at the outset of chapter three, it seems quite clear that the idea is to approach him when he is perhaps most susceptible to being approached, as designed by her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 3:2-4):

"...Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you were close to. He will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor tonight. (3) So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down to the threshing floor. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. (4) When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what you are to do."

ועתה הלא בעל מדעתנו אשר היית את-נערותיו הנה-הוא זרה את-גרן השערים הלילה: (ג) ורחצת | וסכת ושמת שמלתך עליך | ורדת הגרן אל-תדעני לאיש עד כלתו לאכל ולשתות: (ד) והי בשכבו | ודעת את-המקום אשר ישכב שם ובאת וגלית מרגלותיו ושכבת והוא יגיד לך את אשר תעשין

Of course, as we read here, the plan is to catch him following not only his eating, but also his drinking. Clearly, the idea is to catch him in a good mood.

Ruth's Approaching - Catching Boaz in a Good Mood

Not only does Naomi's plan get well-executed by Ruth, but she catches him in a particularly good mood (Ruth 3:6-7):

She went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. (7) Boaz ate and drank, and in a cheerful mood went to lie down beside the grainpile. Then she went over stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down.

ותרד הגרן ותעש ככל אשר-צויתה חמותה: (ז) ויאכל בעו ושתי ויטב לבו ויבא לשכב בקצה הערמה ותבא בליל ותגל מרגלותיו ותשכב

Not only had he finished eating, as well as drinking, but the text also informs us that he was feeling quite good - perhaps he was buzzed, providing him

to be in a really good mood. While this is both a well-designed and well-executed plan to catch Boaz in a good mood, it should come as no surprise to any of the readers of this publication how susceptible Boaz would be to a young, pretty lady in this state. While this drinking story amidst the book of Ruth seems pretty straightforward, there's another aspect that goes overlooked in its telling - the order of words. While



one expects the verbs "he ate and he drank" to be next to each other, yet Boaz' name appears between these two verbs, which is a bit peculiar.

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Considering the Custom of Drinking Beer on Shavuot

With Shavuot here, an unexpected custom associated with this holiday



is that of drinking beer. Beer? Yes, beer, which is certainly an unexpected beverage. Regarding this practice, Rabbi Gavriel Zinner wrote (גבריאלי ג'ו):

There are some who are accustomed to drink beer on the night of Shavuot

In his footnote to that line, he writes:

Rabbi Shmuel Greenberger wrote (Responsa Fragrant Blends (\$15): "I remember when water was poured [on the hands] by my teacher, Rabbi Mordechai Yehudah Leib Winkler (1844-1932), may his memory protect us, author of *Mordechai's Garments*, that he was particular about preserving old customs so that they would not be lost, heaven forbid. One time, the synagogue gabbai did not prepare beer for the night of Shavuot, as was the custom from ancient times. He then commanded his students that they should bring back beer for themselves, as he said, 'The custom of Israel is Torah', referencing Rashi's commentary on *Shabbat* 88a that God cupped the children of Israel within Mt. Sinai - that it's a reference to a beer barrel."

יש נוהגין לשתות שר בליל שבועות בשו"ת מרקחות בשמים (גרינבערגער) סימן ט"ו כתב וזכירנא בעת יצקי מים על ידי מורי הגה"ק בעל לבושי מרדכי זכרונו יגן עלינו שדוקק על כל מנהג ישן שלא יתבטל חש ושלום פעם אחת לא הכין הגבאי בבית הכנסת שר על ליל שבועות כנהוג של משנים קדמוניות ציוה על תלמידיו שלכו בעצמם להביאו ואמר מנהג ישראל תורה כי רש"י פירש במסכת שבת דף פ"ח עמוד א' כפה עליהם ההר כגיגית - כגיגית קוב"א שמטילין בו שר עד כאן דבריו

This Talmudic text is the following (*Shabbat* 88a):

"...and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount" (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: "This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a tub, and said to them: 'If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.'" ויִתְצַבּוּ בְּתַהֲתִית הַהַר, אָמַר רַב אֲבָדִימִי בַר חָמָא בַר חָסָא: מִלְמַד שְׁכֻפָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הַהַר כְּגִיגִית, וְאָמַר לֵיהֶם: אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוֹטָב, וְאִם לֹא – שָׁם תִּהְיֶה קְבֻרַתְכֶם.

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Demonstration of Jews' Holiness

Picking-up on this atypical literary arrangement, two sixteenth century rabbis identify what this may mean. One intriguing approach is articulated by Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac de Uçeda (1545-1604), who wrote (אגרת שמואל על רות ג'ז):

The text does not say that "he ate and then he **drank** Boaz" to teach us that, at the time of his eating, he was Boaz, but then, after his **drinking**, he was changed into another man. "And then his heart became good" - as if he was no longer Boaz, because then the wine had entered him; and then, with all this, the text shows us the apparent difference between holy Jews as opposed to the rest of the world. That in this situation, for someone else to have eaten, **drank**, and become gladdened of heart, when a beautiful, perfumed, well-adorned, and clean-from-dipping woman were to have approached him while he was lying down - and, with all of this - he swore his desire so that he would not come upon her. ... And this is to inform us the praiseworthiness of Boaz - informing us that he ate, he **drank**, and his heart was good, and with all of this he did not sin, because if it weren't for this, what is this text coming to inform us?

ויאכל בועז וישת וייטב לבו וגומר לא אמר ויאכל וישת בועז להורות כי בעת האכילה הי' בועז אבל אחר השתיה נשתנה לאיש אחר וייטיב לבו וכאילו אין זה בועז כי נכנס יין בקרבו ועם כל זה ראה מראה ההפרש שבין ישראל הקדושים לאומת העולם כי בכאן אחר שאכל ושתה והוטב לבו ובאה לו כמשכבו אשה יפת תואר מקושטת מבוסמת וטהורה בטבילה ותגל מרגלותיו ועם כל זה נשבע ליצרו שלא לבוא עליה ... ולהודיענו שבחו של בועז הודיענו שאכל ושתה יוטב לבו ועם כל זה לא חטא דאי לאו הכי מאי אתי לאשמועינן

According to Rabbi de Uçeda, while it seems he is about to describe Boaz as being a changed man on account of the wine he drank, he then changes course and uses it to describe how differently Jews behave versus gentiles in their sexual conduct, especially while slightly intoxicated. Of course, it still could yet be that something may, indeed, have happened that night in that bed between the two of them, even if the text does not indicate that, but it is certainly an intriguing rhetorical question with which he ends.

Level of Drinking

Another sixteenth century rabbi considered this language and went in a different direction, as we read of Rabbi Moshe Alshikh (1508-1593) having written (עיני משה על רות ג'ז):

And here there was a place to say that it was not just because the wine passed and he lay down and fell asleep immediately. For this, the text preceded to say "And Boaz ate"; and preceded his name to the **drinking** that you might think that the main part of his activity was from the wine, except that "he ate", which is to say that the main activity in which he took part was the eating. So why is it that the text says that "he is Boaz"? This is to say that, after he ate, "he **drank** and his heart was gladdened", although his **drinking** was not to the point of getting drunk, rather it was enough **drinking** that he was simply feeling good.

והנה היה מקום לומר כי אין זה רק כי יין עברו וישכב וירדם מיד לזה הקדים ואמר ויאכל בועז והקדים שמו אל השתיה לומר על יעלה על רוחך כי עשה עיקר מהיין כ"א ויאכל בועז כל' כי לא עשה עיקר רק מהאכילה למה שהוא בועז אלא שאחרי כן וישת וייטב לבו כ"א שתה ואין לשכרה רק שיעור כדי שוייטב לבו בלבד

{Beer, continued from previous page}

The connection between this story and beer is made by Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi) who describes this curious term of "tub" (Rashi, *Shabbat* 88a, SV גיגית (see also Rashi, *Shabbat* 109a, SV ללגית)):

A vat in which we put beer.

קובא שמטילין בה שכר

While it is entirely unclear how far back this custom goes, it seems that it was already seen as a longstanding tradition (at least in eastern Europe) by the 19th century.

While this reference seems to be entirely on its own, an avid reader of this publication pointed out the following description of what Shavuot was like in eastern Europe (Alexander Z. Gurwitz, *Memories of Two Generations: A Yiddish Life in Russia and Texas*, ed. Bryan Edward Stone, trans. Rabbi Amram Prero (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2016), 116):



On the first night of Shavuot, all the men and boys gathered in the synagogue, there to study until past midnight. It was my father's annual practice to bring a large barrel of beer—about fifty to sixty quarts—as his gift to the people studying Torah on Shavuot evening. We did, in fact, study the entire Torah, a small section of every weekly portion, and then we studied the Mishnah (oral law), the Prophets, and the Writings. What we were doing, you understand, was actually experiencing, taking into ourselves, the Torah, which we were celebrating on this festival.

While we don't typically see this custom practiced in our synagogues of having kegs of beer to enjoy these days, it is certainly a lovely way of incorporating beer into one of our holidays. While you may now be considering tapping a keg of beer for your Shavuot enjoyment, perhaps you may still end up enjoying beer over the holiday.

L'chaim

According to Rabbi Alshikh, this anomalous phrasing is to show us readers that Boaz' primary activity was eating, with drinking being only a secondary activity; so much so that he hadn't gotten drunk from the wine, simply buzzed. Otherwise, Rabbi Alshikh points out, on account of his not having gotten drunk, he is able to be alert enough to see this lovely young lady at his feet.

Conclusion

While it is easily a strategic idea to approach a man in whom one is interested while he has been drinking, as demonstrated by Naomi's planning and Ruth's execution, the anomalous arrangement of the separation of "eating" from "drinking" prompts a couple of sixteenth century rabbis to point out a couple of possibilities of reading strategies for understanding this different wording. Whether it demonstrates the chastity of Israel or simply that Boaz didn't get drunk that night, there may be more to this drinking than appears.

L'chaim