

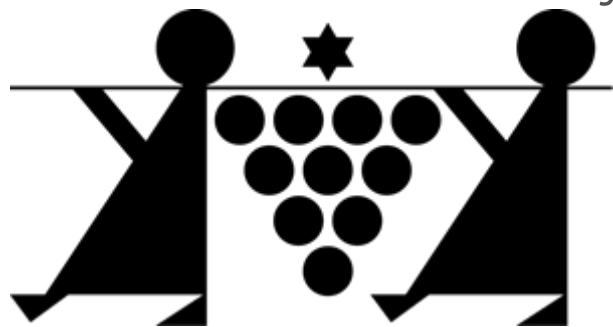
ONEG SHABBAS

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

The Bounty of Grapes



When Israel's Ministry of Tourism was created in 1964, what logo did they choose to represent their ministry? A scene depicted in our Torah portion

related to drinking! The scene I am describing is that of the tourists bringing back a big bunch of grapes on a pole. And, as readers of this publication understand, these grapes are meant to signal the bountifulness of the land, as well as their ability to make a lot of wine, as well as good-tasting wine.

When Did They Visit?

It was no accident that these tourists found a big bunch of grapes, since, as our Torah portion describes it, these scouts visited during **ימי בכורי ענבים** "the days of the first ripe grapes" (Num. 13:20).

As to when this was, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi) wrote that it was **ד"ה בכורי ענבים** (רש"י על במדבר י"ג:כ):

The days when the grapes were ripening at its early stage of growth. **ימים שהענבים מתבשלים בבכור**

Thus, it was in the summer, perhaps late July-early August. To be in Israel at this time of year also means it is pretty warm for these tourists. A fuller description of this time of year is that of Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1470-1550) (popularly known as Sforno), who wrote **ד"ה ויהימים ימי בכורי ענבים**:

The fruit for which the land is famous had not even fully ripened as yet as it was still early in the season. Even so, what they would see would be enough to convince them of the excellence of the land. **ולא היו הפירות שנשתבחה בהם בשלמותם עדיין מכל מקום בטח משה רבינו שגודל הפירות וטעמם גם באותו הזמן יספיק להעיד על שבח הארץ וטובה**

Bringing the Bounty

When these scouts come upon these grapes, they are seeking to accomplish the task set out to them by Moshe of **ולקחתם מפרי הארץ**. You shall take from amongst the fruits of the land" (Num. 13:20), which they clearly do (Num. 13:23):

They reached the wadi of Cluster, and there they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes and they carried it on a pole with two, and some pomegranates and figs. **ויבאו עד-נחל אשכול ויכרתו משם זמורה ואשכול ענבים אחד וישארוהו במוט בשנים ומן הרמנים ומן התאנים**

This would certainly seem to be a straightforward depiction as reflected in the logo for the Israel Ministry of Tourism, albeit without the pomegranates and figs. Yet, some rabbis perceived the bounty brought back by these scouts as somehow even more impressive. Moreover, also take note that the name of the ravine where they had reached is named after a cluster of grapes, so it is quite the vinous reference.

Talmudic Expansion of Fruit

It is quite curious that despite it seeming quite simply that this massive cluster of grapes required a pole to be carried by two of the scouts, the rabbis discuss the possibilities that there may have been a multiplicity of poles and scouts, beginning with the second century sage, Rabbi Yehudah (*Sotah* 34a):

Rabbi Yehudah says: "...Isn't it understandable when it stated "on a pole", do I not already know that it was carried by two? What is the verse to be understood as teaching upon 'with two'? With two poles." **אמר רבי יהודה: ממשמע שנתאמר "במוט", איני יודע שבשנים? מה תלמוד לומר "בשנים" – בשני מוטות.**

It would seem that Rabbi Yehudah's close reading of the verse in our Torah portion yields that it should have been obvious that, if there was a pole used to carry this bunch of grapes, then there should be no need to describe it as having been carried by two of these scouts. In his reading, this mention of two is describing that there was not merely one pole, but a doubling of this pole used to transport these grapes. Ostensibly, that would require four of these scouts to carry these poles.

However, a rabbi in the subsequent century expanded Rabbi Yehudah's description even further, adding poles to this carrying set-up (*Sotah* 34a):

Rabbi Yitzhak said: "Scales and scales of scales. How so? Eight of the spies carried the cluster, one of them carried a pomegranate, and one carried a fig. Joshua and Caleb did not carry anything." **אמר רבי יצחק: טורטני, וטורטני דטורטני, הא כיצד? שמונה נשאו אשכול, אחד נשא רימון, ואחד נשא תאנה. יהושע וכלב לא נשאו כלום**



While I am not sure from which language this loanword of טורטני derives (the closest I have found [so far] is that Middle Persian's *tarāzu* (if you know whence this word derives, please let me know)), Rabbi Yitzhak is describing a set-up where each of these poles is carried by four of these tourists, which is quite the arrangement!

It seems that these descriptions by Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yitzhak yield quite the large cluster of grapes. Indeed, as one recent description has it (Constanza Cordoni, "Rabbinic Readings of the Spies' Episode (Numbers 13-14)", *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, vol. 28 (2025), 9.):

The grapes in the Bavli's depiction are not simply large, they are unnaturally large; so a question that occupies late antique sages and those who organized their statements in the Babylonian midrash that has come down to us is how two human beings could have carried the gigantic cluster as Num. 13:23 seems to suggest. The cluster of grapes must have been carried not by two men but on two poles, they conjecture; or on even more poles, by eight people (B. Sot. 34a). Two further spies would carry a fig and a pomegranate, while Joshua and Caleb would not carry anything.



As Prof. Cordoni describes it, while the Biblical description provides the sense to readers that this was such a large bunch of grapes that it required a pole and two men to carry it, these Talmudic descriptions yield an even larger and heavier bunch of grapes, which is all the more impressive. Either way, this bunch of grapes clearly is quite impressive, demonstrating the bounty of grapes, which, in turn, means this land is a great land for wine-making.

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Describing Eight Carriers

While I am not sure from which language the loanword טורטני derives that Rabbi Yitzhak uses (the closest I have found [so far] is that Middle Persian's *tarāzu* (if you know whence this word derives, please let me know)), Rabbi Yitzhak is describing a set-up where each of these poles is carried by four of these tourists; how does it work?

One description is provided by Rashi, who describes it as follows (רש"י על) (סוטה ל"ד א'; ד"ה אמר רבי יצחק טורטני וטורטני דטורטני):

A burden, and a burden beneath a burden, such that the ones below assist the ones above. And with each there were two poles. How so? Two poles would go side by side, and four people would carry them. And two other poles – and four people – would carry them, and they would be positioned diagonally beneath the two upper ones: one pole for one end and one pole for the other end, and they would proceed in a diagonal arrangement	משאוי ומשאוי תחת משאוי שהתחתונים מסייעין את העליונים ובכל אחד היו שני מוטות כיצד שני מוטות הולכין זה אצל זה וארבעה נושאים אותם ושני מוטות אחרים וארבעה בני אדם נושאים אותם והם באלכסון מתחת שנים העליונים מוט אחד לראש האחד ומוט אחד לראש השני והולכין באלכסון
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Despite having read this description, I am struggling to picture exactly the set-up on it (so, if you have a good way of describing them or, even better, depicting them visually, I would greatly appreciate it). However, what is clear is that Rashi sought to further describe the physical structuring of this carrying apparatus needed to both carry and support this massive cluster of grapes.

While many post-Talmudic rabbis mentioned these expansive enumerations of the poles needed to carry this cluster and the men involved, including Rashi (and others), not all did.

Rabbinic Commentators Sticking with Two Carrying

Despite the above-mentioned views amongst Talmudic rabbis, as well as Medieval commentators, there were still subsequent rabbinic commentators that describe how the scouts carried back this cluster of grapes as being simply two, including Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344) (popularly known as Ralbag), who wrote (ד"ה וישארו במוט בשנים) (ד"ה בשנים):

Behold - according to the plain reading of the verse, it would seem that two of them carried the pole upon which the cluster of grapes was - one from the head of one and one at the head of the other, or perhaps it would have described that the pole was on two poles and they carried four poles. But the first explanation seems more appropriate according to the plain reading of the text. However, our sages, of blessed memory, chose the side of sailing and tall tales that they were scales and scales on scales.	הנה לפי הפשט יראה ששנים נושא המוט שהיה בו אשכול האחד מן הראש האחד והאחר מן הראש השני או ירצה בזה שהמוט היה בשנים מוטות והיו נושאים אותו ד' והביאור הראשון נראה יותר לפי הפשט ואולם לרבותי ז"ל על צד ההפלה והגוזמא שהיו טורטני וטורטני דטורטני
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Indeed, this pushing back on this notion of all of these poles and men needed to carry this one bunch of grapes certainly seems quite fantastical and not particularly realistic. Indeed, perhaps the Talmudic rabbis were simply pointing out how big these grape bunches could have been, yet, that doesn't reflect the reality as described in the our Torah portion, according to Ralbag.

Bronze Medalists

With the first-ever kosher-certified spirits competition having taken place this month, here are the bronze medalists (in alphabetical order):

- 3 Hamlets Gin
- 3 Hamlets Gin Hibiscus Ginger
- Catocin Creek AppleJack
- Dead Drop Old Fashioned RTD
- Dray 25 Lavender Lime-flavored Vodka
- El Tequilaño Platinum Blanco Tequila
- KOVAL Single Barrel Bourbon
- New Riff Kosher Single Barrel Bourbon
- Rabbit Hole Heigold High Rye Double Malt Bourbon
- Tekiah Blanco Tequila
- Thresh & Winnow Straight Bourbon Finished in Brandy Casks
- Tip Top Proper Cocktails Old Fashioned
- Tip Top Proper Cocktails Margarita
- Tip Top Proper Cocktails Bee's Knees
- Tip Top Proper Cocktails Mai Tai
- Weldon Mills Reserve Straight Bourbon Whiskey
- Weldon Mills Select Straight Bourbon Whiskey



Another subsequent rabbi who thought that, according to the Biblical text, it seems as if it were simply just two men carrying it, was Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855), who wrote (ביאור יש"ר על התורה, במדבר י"ג:כ"ג), (ד"ה בשנים):

According to its straightforward reading, it was carried by two men.	לפי פשוטו בשני אנשים
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Compromise?

Does one have to describe the carrying as done by only eight or two men? Apparently not, as Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) (popularly known as the Netziv) cleverly wrote (ד"ה וישארו במוט בשנים):

According to how it's written, there were two who carried it until all of the men were gathered. From there, they carried the bunch of grapes until the wilderness of Paran. And then eight of the men carried it, as it is in the Talmud (*Sotah* 34a). And had the scriptural verse not stated "two", I would have considered that the explanation of "and they carried it on a pole" as describing each of them carrying it a little bit of the way. From here, scripture describes that the pole rested on the shoulder(s) of two of them together.

כמשמעו, המה השנים נושאו עד אשר נתקבצו כל האנשים, ומשם נושא את האשכול עד מדבר פארן, ואז נושא שמונה אנשים, כדאיתא בסוטה (לד, א). ואי לא כתיב "בשנים" הוה אמינא דפירושו "וישאוהו במוט" – כל אחד מהם נושא מקצת הדרך, משום הכי פירש הכתוב דשניהם הניחו המוט על הכתף ביחד



Conclusion

Ultimately, no matter how these scouts carried this bunch of grapes, they certainly found it to be a surprisingly bountiful bunch and were clearly very excited about these grapes. While grapes are certainly edible, grapes were - and are - treasured for their wine-making possibilities. This is certainly exciting to enter into our land to know that it will have such a wondrous capacity for massive amounts of wine. Certainly, it is a fitting land for the children of Israel, especially to visit to tour (and drink the wine there).

L'chaim

