



פרשת ואתחנן - Volume 5, Issue 40 24-25 July 2026 - י"א אב תשפ"ו

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

If you have any comments, compliments, or suggestions, feel free to reach out at [Drew@JewishDrinking.com](mailto:Drew@JewishDrinking.com)



This innovation of permitting idolatrously libated wine is certainly fascinating, since, as you can imagine, it is something that is otherwise forbidden. Of course, so is the unkosher meat, but at least the rabbis in the Talmud discussed it; they didn't, however, discuss wine. As you can imagine, Maimonides received pushback on this novel permission.

### Pushback on Maimonides' Innovation

Rabbi Moses, son of Nahman (1194-1270) (popularly known as Nahmanides and/or Ramban) also expands the Talmudic passage, which includes - for our drinking purposes - vineyards and cisterns (על רמב"ן על דברים וי"ד, ד"ה וְהָיָה כִּי יִבְיָאֲךָ ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ

And in the view of our Rabbis, [the verse] further hints that all the good things found in the 'houses full of good things' were permitted, even if there were items there that are otherwise forbidden by the Torah—such as swine loins, or vineyards planted with forbidden mixtures or uncircumcised fruit.

And even regarding the cisterns, it is possible that, in their hewing, there was a prohibited matter in their plaster, or [the verse] mentioned cisterns metaphorically to emphasize the abundance of goodness, giving them mastery over everything found in the land, both the permitted and the forbidden. Thus, all prohibitions were permitted to them, except for the prohibition of idolatry.

One aspect of Maimonides' writing about this topic that Ramban pushed back was concerning how widely applicable, in both time and place (Ibid.):

And Maimonides' interpretation is not correct, for it was not only for the sake of saving life or due to starvation that [these items] were permitted in time of war. Rather, after they conquered the great and good cities and settled in them, [the Torah] permitted the spoil of their enemies to them – not to every military expedition - but specifically in the land which He swore to our ancestors to give us, as is explicit in the context.

Beyond this disagreement with Maimonides concerning applicability, Ramban also takes issue with Maimonides' approach to idolatrous wine-drinking (and note that, above, Ramban omitted idolatrous wine) (ibid.):

And likewise, [what was said regarding] idolatrous wine which was mentioned is not true, for regarding all prohibitions of idolatry—the idol itself, its appurtenances, and its offerings – everything is forbidden, as it is said: 'You shall utterly detest it and you shall utterly abhor it, for it is a devoted thing' (Deuteronomy 7:26). And if Maimonides only intended to permit their ordinary wine during war, why did we need to state this? If Torah prohibitions were permitted, would rabbinic decrees be forbidden?

וְעַל דַּעַת רַבּוֹתֵינוּ  
(חולין יז) יִרְמֹז עוֹד כִּי  
הַטּוֹב הָיָה אֲשֶׁר  
יִמְצָא בְּבָתִּים  
הַמְּלֵאִים מִתֵּר, אֲפִלוּ  
הֵיוּ שֵׁם דְּבָרִים  
הַנֶּאֱסָרִים בַּתּוֹרָה,  
כְּגוֹן קֹדֶלִי דְחִזְרִי אוּ  
כְרָמִים נְטוּעִים  
כְּלָאִים אוּ עֵרְלָה,

וְאֲפִלוּ בְּבוֹרוֹת יִתְּקֵן  
שֶׁהָיָה בְּחִצְבָתָן דְּבַר  
אֲסוּר בְּטִיחַ אֲשֶׁר  
בָּהֶן, אוּ הִזְכִּיר  
הַבוֹרוֹת דֶּרֶךְ מְלִיצָה  
לְהִזְכִּיר רַבּוּי הַטּוֹבָה,  
וְהַשְׁלִיט אוֹתָם בְּכָל  
הַמְּצָא בָאָרֶץ, בְּמִתֵּר  
וּבְאֲסוּר. וְהִנֵּה הִתִּירוּ  
לָהֶן כָּל הָאֲסוּרִין  
זוּלָּתֵי אֲסוּר ע"ז

וְאִין זֶה נִכּוֹן, שְׁלֹא  
בְּשִׁבִיל פְּקוּחַ נֶפֶשׁ אוּ  
רַעְבוֹן בְּלִבֵּד הִתֵּר  
בְּשַׁעַת מְלָחְמָה אֲלָא  
לְאַחַר שֶׁכָּבְשׁוּ הָעָרִים  
הַגְּדוֹלוֹת וְהַטּוֹבוֹת  
וַיִּשְׁבוּ בָּהֶן הִתִּיר לָהֶם  
שָׁלֹל אוּיְבֵיהֶם, וְלֹא  
בְּכָל חִלּוּצֵי צָבָא אֲלָא  
בָּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע  
לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ לָתֵת לָנוּ,  
כְּמוֹ שֶׁמִּפְרָשׁ בְּעִינֵינוּ.

וְכֵן יוֹן נֶסֶךְ שֶׁהִזְכִּיר אִינוֹ  
אֲמַת, שֶׁבְּכָל אֲסוּרֵי ע"ז  
הֵיא עֲצָמָה וּמִשְׁמָשִׁיהָ  
וְתַקְרִבָּתָהּ שְׁלֵה הַכֹּל  
אֲסוּר, שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר (דְּבָרִים  
ז"כ"ו) שֶׁקֶץ תִּשְׁקָצוּ  
וְתַעֲבֹר תִּתְעַבְּבוּ כִּי חָרָם  
הוּא. וְאִם לֹא נִתְּקֵן  
הָרַב אֲלָא לְהִתִּיר סִתָּם  
יִינֹן בְּמִלְחָמָה, וְכִי לָמָּה  
הִצְרַכְנוּ לְדַבֵּר זֶה,  
אֲסוּרֵי תּוֹרָה הִתִּירוּ,  
מִדְּרוֹת שֶׁל דְּבָרֵיהֶם יִהְיוּ  
אֲסוּרוֹת:



Ramban was clearly not happy with Maimonides' suggestion concerning the permissibility of drinking idolatrously-libated wine in the course of conquering. Rather, he found Maimonides' suggestion on this matter to be a shocking overreach.

Rabbi Bahya ben Asher ibn Ḥalawa (1255-1340) (popularly known as Rabbeinu Bahya) similarly wrote (ד"ה ובתי מלאים כל) (רבנו בחי" דברים וי"ד, א"א, ד"ה ובתי מלאים כל) (טו):

And behold, this statement of Maimonides, of blessed memory, is baffling [for his writing] that the Torah certainly permitted all forbidden foods just like permitted ones, even if he has other food to eat. And what would Maimonides, of blessed memory, say if he is hungry? Did the Torah only permit it because of a life-threatening situation? Even without a life-threatening situation, the Torah permitted it! Indeed, Ramban, of blessed memory, already took him to task over this.

והנה זה תמה על הרב ז"ל שהתורה התירה בודאי כל המאכלים האסורים כמותרים ואפילו יש לו מה יאכל, ומה יאמר הרב ז"ל אם הוא רעב, וכי לא התירה התורה אלא מפני פקוח נפש, אפילו בלא פקוח נפש נמי התירה התורה, וכבר תפש עליו בזה הרמב"ן ז"ל,

Likewise regarding what he said - [that one may] drink idolatrous wine – Ramban stated that it is not true that drinking idolatrous wine is permitted, because idolatrous wine is among the prohibitions of idolatry. And if Maimonides intended [to refer to] ordinary Gentile wine, he did not need to state it, for if Torah-forbidden items were permitted, all the more so ordinary Gentile wine, which is [forbidden only] by rabbinic decree.

וכן במה שאמר שותה יין נסך, ואמר שאינו אמת שיהא מותר לשותות יין נסך כי יין נסך מאסורי עבודת אלילים הוא, ואם כוון הרב לסתם יינם, לא היה צריך לומר, כי אם אסורי תורה הותרו כל שכן סתם יינם שהוא מדבריהם.

What Rabbeinu Bahya helpfully writes here is to justify Maimonides' words on wine and not make them subject to such withering criticism, since idolatrous wine is an incredibly severe prohibition, along with other idolatrous matters, and reconsidering this wine to simply be gentile wine that is neither idolatrous nor has been idolatrously libated in any way. Nevertheless, Ramban and Rabbeinu Bahya both agree that ordinary gentile wine should be permitted, but idolatrous wine should not be, unlike what Maimonides stated. That is, unless one reads Maimonides as Rabbeinu Bahya does, where idolatrous wine is just a stand-in for ordinary gentile wine.

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# Finding One's Mate in a Vineyard

With Tisha b'Av in our rearview mirror, the next significant Jewish calendrical date is that of Tu b'Av, the 15th of Av. The first text we have on this date is as follows (mTa'anit 4:8):

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
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| Rabban Shimon, son of Gamaliel (2nd century CE), said: "There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur, as on them the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white clothes, so as not to embarrass one who did not have such garments, all of which required immersion. And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards..." | אָמַר רַבִּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל, לֹא הָיוּ יָמִים טוֹבִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּהַמָּשָׁה עֶשֶׂר בָּאָב וְכִיוּם הַכַּפּוּרִים, שֶׁבָּהֶן בָּנוּת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם יוֹצְאוֹת בְּכָלִי לְבָן שְׂאוּלִין, שֶׁלֹּא לְבִישׁ אֶת מִי שְׂאוֹן לוֹ. כָּל הַכֹּלִים טְעוּנִין טְבִילָה. וּבָנוּת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם יוֹצְאוֹת וְחוֹלוֹת בְּכַרְמִים |
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As we seldom encounter texts in the Mishnah concerning mating/paring/dating practices, this description certainly stands out. Surely, one aspect that is apparent is the wistful view of Rabban Shimon, son of Gamaliel, who shares that this took place long ago, prior to the destruction of the Temple, prior to the sad destruction of the Temple, thus serving as a fitting literary juxtaposition to the previous descriptions concerning Tisha b'Av before it in the Mishnah (mTa'anit 4:6-7), which further underscores how Jewish life was happier pre-destruction.

## Questions

The Mishnah's description raises an obvious question: why were these dances held specifically on Yom Kippur and Tu b'Av? These two occasions seem to have almost nothing in common. Yom Kippur is defined by fasting, abstention from physical pleasures, and the prohibition of labor, while Tu b'Av carries none of these restrictions. Third century sages were similarly puzzled. While they readily understood the significance of Yom Kippur, they offered a half-dozen explanations for why the fifteenth of Av should also be celebrated in this way (*Bava Batra* 120b-121a & *Ta'anit* 30b-31).

Yet perhaps these sages were searching for two independent explanations when the Mishnah itself may hint at a single connection. Rather than viewing these as unrelated holidays that coincidentally shared the same custom, perhaps the two dates marked opposite ends of a single seasonal cycle. As discussed on episode 71 of *The Jewish Drinking Show*, "The Wine Festival in the Dead Sea Scrolls," late summer and early fall constituted the grape harvest season in Second Temple Israel, as they still do today. It is therefore possible that, despite the otherwise opposite character of these two days, Tu b'Av and Yom Kippur were temporally located near the opening and closing celebrations of the grape harvest.

Seen in this light, the Jerusalem courtship dances become more than social gatherings. They become ceremonies that both inaugurated and concluded the vineyard season. Such a connection naturally raises another question: what relationship exists between vineyards, wine, and love?

## Why Only the Daughters of Jerusalem?

As to why it was only the daughters of Jerusalem, it may have been that they had a critical mass, bigger than any other town or village throughout Israel pre-destruction of the Temple. One wonders if non-Jerusalemite single Jewesses came to take part in this activity and the description stuck, since most of those dancing were from Jerusalem? Another possibility may have been that other cities were smaller, but Jerusalem was so populous that it may have been harder to more easily connect with other people in such a huge city. Another consideration is that they may have been culturally different so as to want to be able to engage in such massive events.

## Why Vineyards?

If the dances were indeed tied to the grape harvest, another question



naturally follows: why were they held in vineyards at all? The location is striking because it is unique within the Mishnah, since public gatherings are normally described as taking place in courtyards, marketplaces, or other communal spaces within cities (e.g. Ta'anit 2:1, Bikurim 3:2, & Megillah 3:1). While vineyards are not presented elsewhere in the Mishnah as places for communal celebration, we do, however, read of a biblical precedent of vineyards as the site of men taking young women. While an entirely different social dynamic, especially considering consent, we do read of a biblical precedent where men take "the daughters of Shiloh" (similar language to "daughters of Jerusalem") as they are emerging from the vineyards (Judges 21:19-23). One wonders how often young, single Jewesses were in vineyards in the Jerusalem area in the times of the Second Temple.

One distinct advantage of the vineyard is privacy. Dancing outside the city walls created a space set apart from married men and older community members. This provided a secluded environment where young women could dance freely, away from critical eyes, while offering eligible young men an exclusive opportunity to meet prospective spouses.

The location, however, also presented practical challenges. Vineyards are planted in rows that obstruct visibility. How, then, did the women dance? Did they move between the rows? Did they dance along the perimeter of the vineyards? Were open spaces intentionally left for the performances? The Mishnah offers no details, leaving us only to imagine how the physical layout of the vineyards shaped the event.

## When Did the Dancing Occur?

The Mishnah leaves unanswered the question of when these dances took place on these two dates: Did they occupy the entire day, or only a particular portion of it? Were they held in the morning, the afternoon, or toward evening?

The question becomes especially intriguing on Yom Kippur. If the dances occurred late in the afternoon, they would have demonstrated remarkable youthful energy despite a day spent fasting. Both the women dancing and the young men walking from Jerusalem to the vineyards would have done so near the conclusion of one of Judaism's most physically demanding days.

Nighttime presents another possibility. Evening temperatures would certainly have been more comfortable during the heat of late summer. Yet darkness would also have made it much more difficult for the young men to observe the dancers, even if torches illuminated portions of the vineyards. Combined with the rows of grapevines that already limited visibility, nighttime dancing would have posed obvious practical difficulties.

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{Vineyard, continued from page 3}

## The Vineyard as a Seasonal Gathering Place

Another possibility has less to do with symbolism than with the rhythms of agricultural life. Today, many young adults spend summers working in seasonal jobs, such as camps, where they live together for 2-3 months, develop friendships, and create social opportunities beyond their work. Perhaps vineyards functioned similarly during the grape harvest.

Harvesting grapes requires many hands, and vineyards likely needed temporary labor during this busy season. It is conceivable that vineyard owners hired unmarried young people from Jerusalem to assist with the harvest. If these young workers spent weeks together in the vineyards, they would have become familiar not only with the work itself, but also with the landscape. The vineyards could, therefore, have become natural gathering places for recreation and courtship in much the same way that seasonal workplaces often become social communities today.

Within this framework, Tu b'Av may have celebrated the beginning of the harvest season and the formation of these temporary communities, while Yom Kippur marked their conclusion just before the joyous celebrations of Sukkot.

## Was There Drinking?

Finally, a question especially relevant to readers of this publication concerns the possibility of drinking: did these vineyard celebrations involve wine?

The Mishnah is silent, but the setting invites the question. On Tu b'Av, it is conceivable that participants drank wine, perhaps newly fermenting or partially fermented wine, from the earliest grapes already harvested. Such drinking would have complemented both the vineyard setting and the joyful atmosphere of courtship.

Yom Kippur, however, presents the obvious difficulty that drinking would have been prohibited throughout the day. One possible solution is chronological. If the dances occurred late in the afternoon and continued until nightfall, perhaps the celebration continued after the fast ended, when participants could finally eat and drink together. This remains speculative, but it once again highlights how closely the unanswered question of drinking depends upon the unanswered question of timing.

Whether or not wine was actually consumed, the symbolism remains compelling. The dances took place not merely in agricultural fields but in the very place where the grapes destined to become Israel's most celebrated beverage were grown. Even if no wine was yet poured, the vineyards themselves formed the natural setting for a celebration that intertwined love, harvest, and the promise of wine.

## Conclusion

Whether or not wine was actually drunk on these occasions, the vineyards themselves provide a powerful metaphor. A vineyard is a place where something small and full of promise gradually matures into something far greater. Grapes become wine through time, care, and cultivation; so too, youthful attraction has the potential to mature into enduring love, marriage, and the establishment of families. Holding these dances among the vines therefore symbolically situated the search for one's spouse in the very place where another of Judaism's greatest sources of joy begins its own journey toward fulfillment. As the Song of Songs famously intertwines love and wine (Song of Songs 1:2), the choice of venue may have embodied that very relationship. As we look forward to Tu b'Av, may we all enjoy this festive day, wine, and, of course, love.

L'chaim 

# Medal-Winning Gins

With the first-ever kosher-certified spirits competition having taken place last month, consumers in the market for gins may be curious about medal-winning gins at the inaugural Kosher Spirits Awards (in alphabetical order):

### Silver Medals

- Song Dog Farm Distillery Gin (certified by the Chicago Rabbinical Council)
- Weldon Mills Distillery House Gin (certified by OK Kosher)
- Woodacre Spirits Woodacre Gin (certified by the Orthodox Union)

### Bronze Medals

- 3 Hamlets Gin (certified by OK Kosher)



{Gentile Wine, continued from page 2}

## Considering the Need

Despite Ramban's criticisms of Maimonides seeming too lenient on aspects of this situation, Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575) understood an aspect of what Maimonides wrote on this as demonstrating a limitation (כסף משנה על משנה תורה, הלכות מלכים ומלחמות ח"א):

Maimonides opined that this [permission to eat non-kosher food] applies specifically when kosher food is not readily available to him at that moment. However, if kosher food is readily available before him, he must not abandon the permitted food to eat the forbidden food. Therefore, Maimonides wrote: "If he grows hungry and finds nothing to eat." His intention here does not refer to someone in a life-threatening situation due to starvation, for that is obvious, and would apply even to someone who is not among the vanguard troops, but rather to a situation where he is merely hungry to eat and kosher food is not readily available to him, as I have written. He also holds that "necks of swine" was not meant exclusively, but rather the same rule applies to all forbidden foods.

וסובר רבינו היינו דוקא היכא דלא שכיח ליה היתרא באותה שעה אבל אי שכיח קמיה היתרא לית ליה למישבק היתרא ולמיכל איסורא ולכן כתב אם ירעב ולא ימצא מה יאכל. ואין כוונתו במי שהוא מסוכן מחמת רעבון דהא פשיטא ואפילו אינו מחלוצי צבא נמי אלא כשתאב לאכול ולא שכיח ליה היתרא וכמו שכתבתי וסובר ג"כ שקדלי דחזיר לאו דוקא אלא ה"ה לכל איסור מאכלות

While Rabbi Karo presents a compelling limitation to this consumption of gentile food when conquering, he did not mention drinking wine, yet wine is a part of this topic. According to Rabbi Karo, how would he understand the wine-drinking aspect of this matter? Whereas one could see the necessity of eating owing to hunger, but what about wine? Would simple thirst be enough, or would one drink wine even in a celebratory fashion?

## Conclusion

As part of receiving, amongst other items, vineyards we did not plant, when we entered into the land, this is to be understood as a wonderful way of enjoying latchkey properties, including the wherewithal to make wine, as well as to eventually drink said wine. In a felicitous expansion of a consumptive permissibility in the Talmud, Maimonides permits even idolatrously-libated wine, which seems like quite the leniency! Yet, his permissibility received such significant pushback in the centuries to follow. While these rabbinic writers did not agree with him on such a level of leniency, they did advocate for the permissibility of nonidolatrously libated wine.

L'chaim 

