

ONEG SHABBAS

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

Did Our Ancestors Drink Only Water in the Desert?

While in the desert, what did our ancestors drink? Certainly, we are reminded of the stories where we read of the difficulties of securing potable water in various *parshiyot*, however, was water the only beverage our ancestors consumed? Ostensibly, when we read of the following in this week's parashah, it would seem that water was, indeed, the only beverage (Deut. 29:3-5):

The LORD has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear until this day. (4) I led you through the wilderness forty years; the clothes on your back did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet; (5) you ate no bread and neither wine nor beer to drink—that you might know that I, The LORD, am your God.

וְלֹא־נָתַן ה' לָכֶם לִב לִדְעַת וְעֵינַיִם לִרְאוֹת וְאָזְנוֹת לִשְׁמָע עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: (ד) וְאִלּוּךְ אֶתְכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בַּמִּדְבָּר לֹא־בָלוּ שְׁלֹמֹתֵיכֶם מֵעֲלֵיכֶם וְנַעֲלֵיךְ לֹא־בָלְתָה מֵעַל רַגְלֵיךְ: (ה) לָחֶם לֹא אָכַלְתֶּם וַיִּין וְשֵׁכָר לֹא שָׁתִיתֶם לְמַעַן תֵּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

From this verse, it seems that our ancestors enjoyed neither wine nor beer while making it through the desert for forty years, leaving water as the only beverage our ancestors drank during their desert sojourn. But is that really so?

Ramban's Perspective

According to Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194–1270) (popularly known as Ramban), no. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 29:5, he begins by explaining this verse as follows (רמב"ן על דברים כ"ט:ה'): "לא אכלתם ויין ושכר לא שיתיתם":

The meaning thereof is "You have not eaten [sufficiently] thereof that you should be able to live by it," for their principal sustenance was the manna. "That you might know that I am The LORD, your God" Who keeps you alive miraculously.

הטעם לא אכלתם ממנו שתוכלו לחיות ממנו כי עיקר מחיתם במן היתה למען תדעו כי אני ה' אלקיכם המחיה אתכם במעשה הנס

In so doing, he positions this bread, wine, and beer verse as meaning that these consumptives were not the primary items consumed in the desert, but not *not* consumed. In his continuing explanation, he offers (ibid.):

Now, it could not mean that they did not eat bread at all, as Scripture [says of Moses], "I neither ate bread nor drank water" (Deut. 9:9), for, on some occasions, Israel did have bread in the wilderness, as it is written, "Thou shalt sell me food for money, that I may eat; and give me water for money, that I may drink; as the children of Esau that dwell in Seir, and the Moabites that dwell in Ar, did unto me" (Deut. 2:28-29).

ואין טעמו שלא אכלו לחם כלל כמו לחם לא אכלתי ומים לא שתייתי (דברים ט"ט: ט') כי בקצת העתים היה לישראל במדבר לחם כמו שכתוב (שם ב כח) אכל בכסף תשיבירי ואכלתי ומים בכסף תתן לי ושתייתי כאשר עשו לי בני עשו היושבים בשעיר והמואבים היושבים בער

Thus, he is clearly arguing from these other verses in Deuteronomy that the manna supplied to them by God, as well as their potable water, were

not the only items they were consuming. He then moves on to cite a Talmudic claim (ibid.):

And our Rabbis mentioned that the merchants of the peoples of the world brought them [various foods] in the desert.

ורבותינו הזכירו (יומא עה) דברים שתגרי אומות העולם מביאים להם במדבר

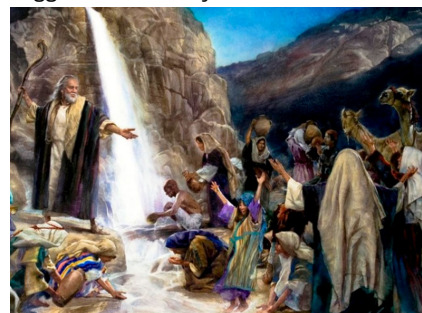
This comes from a statement of a second century sage (Yoma 75b):

Rabbi Elazar ben Perata says: "The manna caused even items that the gentile merchants sold them to be digested."

רבי אלעזר בן פרטא אומר: אף דברים שתגרי אומות העולם מוכרין להן – מן מפיגין

Whereas Rabbi Elazar ben Perata suggested that they *sold* these

consumptive items, Ramban wrote that they *brought* them. While this could be read as an outright disagreement, Ramban may simply be rephrasing this word as to indicate that these merchants were the source of these consumptive items, rather than disagreeing whether there was a financial transaction or not.



Ramban concludes his commentary on this verse with the following (ibid.):

It is further possible that, from the time the manna descended until they came to Seir, they did not eat bread at all, for they travelled through the great and dreadful wilderness. But, in the fortieth year, they approached inhabited land, and it was said to them, "You are to pass through the border of your brethren the children of Esau; you shall purchase food of them" (Deut. 2:4, 2:6). There it is written, "these forty years The Lord, your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing" (Deut. 2:7). And, from that time on, the Edomites and the Moabites met them with bread and water where prominent Israelites would buy from them for pleasure, neither for necessity, nor for satiety, because their principal sustenance was [still] the manna.

ואפשר עוד כי מעת שירד המן עד בואם אל שעיר לא אכלו לחם כלל כי הלכו במדבר הגדול והנורא אבל בשנת הארבעים קרבו לישוב ונאמר להם (לעיל ב ד ו) ואת העם צו לאמר אתם עוברים בגבול אחיכם בני עשו אכל תשברו מאתם ושם (דברים ב"ז) כתוב זה ארבעים שנה ה' אלהיך עמך לא חסרת דבר ומן העת ההיא היו האדומים והמואבים מקדימים אותם בלחם ובמים והיו גדולי ישראל קונים מהם ואוכלים לתענוג לא לצורך ולא לשבעה ועיקר המחיה שלהם במן

Indeed, it is certainly an intriguing possibility to divide the timing of when these items became available, which makes a lot of sense of the interactions with the Edomites and the Moabites. One thing that seems peculiar, however, in Ramban's concluding commentary regards their beverages.

{continued on next page}

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{continued from previous page}

If our ancestors were already being supplied with manna, I could understand why they would be interested in purchasing bread from these merchants. However, if they already had a supply of potable water, why would prominent Israelites, according to Ramban, buy water “for pleasure”? While it could be that they wanted a classier water, why not suggest that, just as the Israelites of means purchased bread for pleasure, why not also beer and wine for pleasure? Indeed, if we found ourselves in the wilderness for decades, subsisting off of water and manna, wouldn't we purchase bread, beer, and wine for some consumptive variety?

Further Possibility

Building off of Ramban, Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (1270-1340) (popularly known as the Tur) also offered a further possibility (דברים) (כ"ט:ה):

And it is further possible to say that, from the time the manna descended for them until they came to Seir, they did not eat bread at all, for they were traveling in the great and terrible wilderness. But, in the fortieth year, they drew near to settled land, and it was said to them: “And command the people, saying: ‘You are passing through the territory of your brothers, the children of Esau... you shall buy food from them...’” (Deut. 2:4, 6). And there it is written: “For forty years, the Lord, your God, has been with you” (Deut. 2:7). From that time on, the Edomites and the Moabites would bring them bread and water in advance, and the leaders of Israel would buy from them and eat for pleasure, neither out of necessity nor to satisfy hunger. And the main sustenance for them remained the manna.

ואפשר עוד לומר כי מעת שירד להם המן עד בואם אל שעיר לא אכלו לחם כלל כי הלכו במדבר הגדול והנורא אבל בשנת הארבעי' קרבו ליישוב ונאמר להם ואת העם צו לאמר אתם עוברים בגבול אחיכם בני עשו אוכל תשברו מאתם וגו' ושם כתיב ארבעים שנה ה' אלקיך עמך ומן העת ההיא היו האדומים והמואבים מקדימים אותם בלחם ובמים והיו גדולי ישראל קונים מהם ואוכלין לתענוג לא לצורך ולא לשבעה ועיקר המחיה שלהם במן

According to the Tur, our ancestors were able to access normal food and drink after a certain point, albeit in small quantities. However, it is interesting that he mentions the wealthy amongst them who may have had further access with further resources to purchase not only water, but wine, as well. Nevertheless, the Tur agrees with Ramban that the sense of the verse is meant to express our reliance of subsistence on the manna that God provided our ancestors; not that there was an absolute absence of either bread, wine, or beer.

Conclusion

Once we consider the possibility that, despite the verse expressly describing our ancestors as having consumed neither bread, beer, nor wine during their sojourning, there are actually ways in which our ancestors may have consumed these items. Once that possibility enters the picture, why not also consider that our ancestors may have actually been eating bread, along with drinking beer and wine during those decades? To that consideration, I say *l'chaim*!

L'chaim 🍷

As opposed to somehow punishing our ancestors by withholding wine and beer in order to know that The LORD is our God, Rabbi Yitzhak ben Yehudah Abarbanel here offers that this withholding was intentionally structured to remove the burdens of ordinary labor, such as agricultural cycles and viticulture, so that our ancestors could be freed from worldly distractions. Instead of struggling with the toil of daily sustenance, they subsisted on manna and miraculous water, direct gifts from God. That's certainly something to drink to. *L'chaim* 🍷

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God & Absence of Wine or Beer

In the conclusion of Deuteronomy 29:5 as seen on the other side of this page, we read the statement, “You drank neither wine nor beer so that you will know that I am The LORD, your God” - how does drinking neither wine nor beer during our ancestors' forty year sojourn in the desert lead to our knowing that The LORD is our God?

A fascinatingly insightful response to this question was composed by Rabbi Yitzhak ben Yehudah Abarbanel (1437-1508), who wrote (ברבנאל) (דברים כ"ט:ה):

You did not eat bread, so that you would not have to occupy yourselves with sowing, harvesting, grinding, kneading, baking, and the other labors required for bread, since you were eating the manna. And you drank neither wine nor beer, which require much labor throughout the year in the vineyards, for He, may He be blessed, gave you water from the flinty rock. And He did all this so that you would know that I am the Lord your God. That is to say, all of this I did in order to perfect you with true knowledge and faith in My divinity, which was the ultimate purpose of all the miracles and wonders. Therefore, it is expressed in the negative: “You did not eat bread and you drank neither wine nor beer,” since the intent was to say that you were not burdened with matters that would trouble you and hinder your perfection—not to announce that He gave you the manna, for this was already stated many times.

And thus Moses said, “So that you may know that I am the Lord,” in the language of the Blessed Name, to hint that it was He Himself, may He be exalted, who said this.

שתתעסקו בזריעה וקצירה וטחינה ולישה ואפיה ושאר המלאכות המחוויבות להעשות ללחם לפי שהייתם אוכלים המן. ויין ושכר לא שתיתם שהוא המצטרך לעבודה רבה כל השנה בכרמים כי הוא ית' נתן לכם מים מצור החלמיש. והוא עשה כי זה למען תדעו כי אני ה' אלהיכם. רוצה לומר כל זה עשיתי להשלימכם בידיעה ואמונה אמיתית מאלהותי שהוא היה תכלית הנסים והנפלאות כלם. ולזה אמר בלשון שולל לחם לא אכלתם ויין ושכר לא שתיתם לפי שהיתה הכוונ' להגיד שלא היו טרודים בדבר יעיק וימנע שלמותם לא להודיע שנתן להם את המן כי זה כבר אמרו פעמים רבות. והנה אמר משה למען תדעו כי אני ה' בלשון השם יתברך לרמוז שהוא ית' אמר כן בעצמו



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