

WINE, WOES, AND WRITING OUR STORY OF REDEMPTION

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At the Seder, we vacillate between two positions, slavery and freedom, reliving experiences of suffering and salvation. On this pendulum, the role of the four cups of wine would seemingly be to swing us strongly to the side of freedom and celebration. As the Talmud says about the importance of wine on holidays, “There is no joy other than wine” (Talmud Bavli Pesahim 109a).¹ Historically, the Greco-Roman practice in the Sages’ surrounding culture also featured wine to increase the joy of the meal at important banquets. But when we look more deeply into religious associations with wine, it takes on a more complex role at the Seder and might actually intersect with the experience of suffering, not just the experience of joy.

The Talmud discusses the religious valences of wine in multiple places. In addition to the discussion in Massekhet Pesahim about drinking wine at the Seder, there are extended interpretations of the meanings of wine in Sanhedrin, regarding the rebellious son (בן סורר ומורה),² and in Yoma, regarding the prohibition of drinking on Yom Kippur. All of these passages draw heavily on characterizations of wine in Proverbs, particularly chapter 23. When we read these parts of the Talmud as intertexts, we see that wine at the Seder plays an important, delicate, and even dangerous role, as we tell our annual story of “degradation to praise” (גנות לשבח), relating how we move from a sense of our degrada-

tion to a sense of our worth and value.

When Massekhet Pesahim gives guidelines on the nature of wine used at the Seder, one sage asserts that, even if it is diluted, the wine must have both the taste and the appearance of wine.³ A verse from Proverbs that alludes to the color of wine comes to support this halakhic requirement: “Do not ogle that red wine, as it lends its color to the cup, as it flows on smoothly” (Proverbs 23:31). But when we look at the broader context of this chapter of Proverbs, and the way this chapter is invoked in other parts of the Talmud, this brief proof-text is rather ironic. Brought in connection to the night when we indulge in four cups of wine, this passage of Proverbs actually speaks of the dangers of drinking:

משלי כג: כב-כא, כט-לג

אל־תִּהְיֶה בְּסֻבָּאֵי־יֵין
בְּזִלְזִלִּי בְּשֵׁר לְמוֹ:
כִּי־סֹבֵא זֶזֶלֶל יִנְרֵשׁ
וְזָרְעִים תִּלְבִּישׁ נֹמֵה:
לְמִי אוֹי לְמִי אֲבוֹי
לְמִי (מְדַיִּנִּים) לְמִי שִׂי
לְמִי פִצְעִים חֲנָם
לְמִי חֲכָלִלוֹת עֵינַיִם:
לְמִי אֲחָזְרִים עַל־הֵיָן
לְבָאִים לְחִקֹּר מִמֶּסֶד:
אל־תִּרְאֶה יֵין כִּי יִתְאַדֵּם
כִּי־יִתֵּן (בְּבוֹס) עֵינֹו
יִתְהַלֵּךְ בְּמִשְׁרָיִם:
אֲחָרִיתוֹ כְּנֹחַשׁ יִשָּׁךְ
וּכְצִפְעָנִי יִפְרֹשׁ:
עֵינָיו יִרְאוּ זָרוֹת
וְלִבָּהּ יִדְבֵּר תִּהְפֹּכֹת:

Proverbs 23:20-21, 29-33

²⁰Do not be of those who
guzzle wine,
Or glut themselves on meat;
²¹For guzzlers and gluttons will
be impoverished,
And drowsing will clothe you in
tatters...
²⁹Who cries, “Woe!” who, “Alas!”,
Who has quarrels, who
complaints;
Who has wounds without
cause;
Who has bleary eyes?
³⁰Those whom wine keeps till
the small hours,
Those who gather to drain the
cups.
³¹Do not ogle that red wine
As it lends its color to the cup,
As it flows on smoothly;
³²In the end, it bites like a
snake;
It spits like a basilisk.
³³Your eyes will see strange
sights;
Your heart will speak distorted
things.

Wine can be disastrous. Abusing alcohol can lead to a cycle of desperation and harm. This is most evocatively demonstrated by another interpretation of “Do not ogle that red wine”—the very same verse Rava uses to prove the Seder needs red wine. This verse is also invoked to remark that one must not even look at wine “because it could end in blood” (Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 70a).

On Seder night—especially in the times of eating the *pesah* sacrifice—

1 Wine and alcohol in general is obviously a complex topic which can't be addressed satisfactorily in this medium. Struggling with addiction is real, and we are lucky to live in a time where there are many resources to help. This literary reading is in no way meant to compete with sound medical and psychological expertise. I do hope it offers an understanding of what wine is meant to do at the Seder so that the practice can be appreciated and be made more accessible, even to those for whom it would be dangerous to actually drink wine.

2 See Deuteronomy 21:18ff.

3 See Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim 472:11 on the preference for red wine at the Seder. While this is preferred by some, red wine is not required by all halakhic authorities. Even the preference for red falls away if white wine is deemed “better” for any reason.

we seem to do exactly what Proverbs chides us not to do: we guzzle wine and glut ourselves on meat!⁴ What purpose do the four cups of wine serve, if they can be so dangerous?

The Talmud expounds on this same passage in Proverbs at length in its discussion of the wayward and rebellious son (בן סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֵד), whose crime, according to the Talmud, is an overindulgence in wine and meat (Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 70a-b). This hyperlink to the rebellious son offers an eerily resonant mirror image for the Seder, especially as some traditions assert that the rebellious son must have indulged in meat and wine while in a group (*haburah*), just as, on Pesah, the *korban pesah* is meant to be shared together in a *haburah*.⁵ Furthermore, at the Seder, we meet a version of the rebellious son: the wicked son of the four sons fame. Seeing our own indulgence in wine through the lens of the rebellious son as an intertext to Seder night, we might have to allow ourselves to *identify with* the rebellious and wicked sons in these two passages, rather than “othering” these two characters as very different from ourselves. Indeed, the Talmud interprets three of our biblical ancestors as versions of “rebellious sons” in their own right because of their abuse of wine (Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 70a). The first was Adam, presuming that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was a grapevine, and the actual enticement to partake was that of drinking wine. The second was Noah, who sinned with wine upon coming out of the ark and “should have learned from his ancestor Adam.” The third is Shlomo, who is rebuked by his mother, Batsheva, for his indulgence in wine. Rather than rebellious or wicked sons who stand on the margins of our story, these central “rebellious sons” are characters with whom the tradition invites us to identify, woven into the fabric of our religious inheritance.⁶

The story of Shlomo’s indulgence in wine is particularly resonant for

our experience of the Seder, because it involved being seduced by Pharaoh’s daughter. Shlomo drinks too much wine on the same night as dedicating the new Temple he built, and he is seduced by his wife, the daughter of Pharaoh, so that he oversleeps, and the people are waiting for him at the Temple. At this moment, on the very day of its dedication, God decrees that the Temple will in the future be destroyed. On the day the Temple was built, its unmaking was already set into motion. Building the Temple is the last stage in the story of the Exodus, and we see in this *midrash* that the day marking our ultimate arc into freedom also saw us already taking a step back in the direction of unwinding the Exodus, back towards the lowliness of Egypt. And how did that occur? Through wine.

Applying these teachings to our four cups of wine at the Seder, we see that our celebration of freedom on Pesah is complicated. Seder-gone-wrong could plunge us back into the depths of Egypt, like Shlomo seduced by Pharaoh’s daughter. The four cups of wine are no longer merely a symbol of abounding joy and freedom. Wine at the Seder might also hit us in the lowest points of our story, in our degradation, where we are told we *must* begin the Seder—as the Mishnah instructs, “מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח” (We begin with degradation and emerge into praise).⁷ Wine not only expresses the climax of the story where we emerge triumphantly as free people; it also meets us in our disappointments and dead ends, as “slaves.”

What is this wine meant to do if it intersects with this side of our story? Our Seder wine is not meant to be the wine of wallowing or drowning in sorrow. It is meant to serve an important purpose as we tell our story. The Gemara observes that “wine enters, and secrets come out” (Talmud Bavli Eruvin 65a).⁸ Drinking our four cups of wine at the Seder might actually be intended to do just that: to

draw out our secrets, to reveal our innermost questions and hidden intuitions, as we do the neverending work of narrating our identity from a “lowly” place of degradation. In this way, the four cups of wine are truly integral to the act of Maggid and *sipur yetziat mitzrayim* (telling the story of the Exodus). They are the very conduit that allows for unveiling our narrative.

We see this allusion to wine and narrative in another one of the Talmud’s extended exegeses of wine and Proverbs 23, in Yoma, where there appears, seemingly out of nowhere, a verse from Proverbs 12:

תלמוד בבלי יומא עה.
“דאגה בלב איש ישחנה” (משלי
יב:כה)... ישיחנה לאחרים.

Talmud Bavli Yoma 75a

“If there is worry in a man’s heart, let him quash it (yashenah)” (Proverbs 12:25)... He should tell it (yeshenah) to others.

The only good that could come from drinking wine, instead of repressing our worries, is that the wine draws the heavy thoughts out of us, so we might discuss them with others, who help us work through them. This may be much less dramatic a narrative arc “From degradation to praise” than the miracles of the redemption through the plagues and God’s outstretched arm. But in the face of things holding us back from redemption in our own lives—personally and communally—it is a significant step to draw our sorrows out from the depths of our hearts and into the realm of articulation, listening, and company.

In this framework, where wine at the Seder may link to our woes rather than to celebrating the joys of freedom, there are boundaries on our wine consumption, perhaps as a reminder not to fall into the dangers of “those whom wine keeps till

4 Note that this ancient source predates our medical knowledge of the nature of addiction.

5 See the extended discussions of this in Mishnah Pesahim, roughly chapters 7-9.

6 For more detailed discussion of the בן סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֵד, see R. Avital Campbell Hochstein’s recent PhD dissertation, “Formations of Youth and Adolescence in Talmudic Discourse: A Study of Sugiot on the ‘Wild and Unruly Child’” (Bar Ilan, January 2020).

7 Mishnah Pesahim 10:4 forms the core arc of all versions of the narrative we tell at Seder night.

8 Playing on the fact that “יין” - wine” (10 + 10 + 50 = 70) has the same *gematria*, numerical value, as “סוד” - secret” (60 + 6 + 4 = 70).

the small hours, those who gather to drain the cups” in the verses from Proverbs. We don’t drink any more wine after the *afikoman*, which must be eaten by midnight, even though, as we know from the story of the Sages that opens Maggid, we can keep talking of redemption until dawn. The four cups of wine become a targeted intervention to reach us in the state where we feel stuck, and, through speech and connection, transform our worries into what will nourish our joy. This transformative speech, *sippur yetziat mitzrayyim*, spills over into a life of its own, no longer dependent on wine, and brings us closer to the dawn of redemption.

For a variety of reasons, people may or may not actually drink wine at the Seder. For medical reasons, or due to the dangers of addiction, it may be problematic and prohibited for some of us to drink wine. Hopefully, this excursion into the meanings and purpose of wine can help us realize that, whatever we drink at the Seder, the desire is to create a context that allows us to “reveal our secrets.” Seder is meant to go deep, to allow us to notice and articulate the ways we feel stuck, to draw out our worries and speak of possible pathways towards improvement, and experience *sippur yetziat mitzrayyim*, speech that does the work of redemption. ♦