

PESACH

Passover Wine; Iraqi Whine

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Question # 1

Our mothers always told us that it's a sin to waste food.

Yet, at every Passover Seder, we take perfectly good wine and spill it out of our cups. What is the reason for this custom?

Question #2

Every major holiday is accompanied by the recitation of Hallel, a collection of songs of praise to G-d from the Book of Psalms. On the first two days of Passover, we recite the complete Hallel. After the beginning of the holiday, we recite a shorter version of the Hallel. This "Short Form" of Hallel seems to imply that the middle and final days of Passover are, compared to the first days, a relatively "minor" holiday. Why?

Let me share with you a segment of a message I wrote to you a while back. ("Singing the Red Sea Blues") It pertains to an event that took place on the seventh day of Passover:

It was to be a day of miracles. The Egyptian sorcerers had called the Plagues in Egypt "the finger of G-d." (Exodus, 8:15) Today, at the Red Sea, they would soon see '...the great HAND" (Ibid, 14:31) of G-d. (Based on these verses, the Talmud concludes that there were five times as many plagues at the Red Sea than there were in Egypt. It's simple math: One finger of G-d produced ten plagues. A hand of G-d would therefore consist of fifty plagues. -- See your Passover Haggadah for additional equations.)

The Egyptian cavalry was in hot pursuit. The king had changed his mind once again. He wanted his slaves back. He saddled his horse and chariot and pursued the Israelites. Israel had no place to turn. The Egyptians were behind them and the Red Sea was in front of them.

The Israelites were terrified. "Weren't there enough graves for us in Egypt, that you took us to die in the desert" they asked Moses. "What have you done to us by taking us out of Egypt?" (v.11)

Moses assured them that G-d would fight for them and put an end to Egyptian aggression once and for all. They would soon see the end of the Egyptian army.

That's when all of nature was turned upside-down.

Moses raised his hand over the sea, and G-d brought a strong east wind all night, and made the sea into dry land. (That part of the miracle we all know about. The verse continues--) *AND THE WATERS SPLIT.* (14:21)

The Red Sea was already dry. *THE WATERS SPLIT.* Rashi tells us, based on the Medrash Rabbah, that this miracle was absolutely undeniable. When the Red Sea opened to accommodate the escaping Israelites, every body of water on the face of the earth split open as well. Every lake, swimming pool, and bottle of Perrier testified to the world that G-d was performing miracles for his People.

But what good is a miraculous escape route if your enemies can continue to pursue you? The waters came back and covered the cavalry and the chariots. Of the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not a single one survived. (Ibid, v. 28)

There could be no question as to the majesty of G-d. There could be no doubt that, as the Egyptians themselves proclaimed shortly before drowning in the sea, "G-d is fighting for them against Egypt!" (v. 25)

The Hand of G-d was apparent for all to see. The Children of Israel burst into a song that we still recite every day to remind us of this extraordinary event. According to the Talmud, all of Israel achieved a level of prophecy that exceeded the prophecies of Ezekiel. "THIS is my G-d," they proclaimed, "and I will glorify Him!" (Ibid, 15:2) THIS is my G-d. The Presence of G-d was so clearly manifest at that moment that it was almost as if they could point to Him.

Imagine the inspiration! Imagine the holiness! G-d has declared Himself Master of Creation and has saved his precious children from certain death. He has inflicted upon the enemies of Israel a punishment that they justly deserved. Moses and the Sons of Israel sang... (Ibid, v. 1) Miriam and the Daughters of Israel sang and danced. (v. 20-21). It was a song of praise and thanksgiving. G-d's children, every one a prophet, were proclaiming the greatness of G-d.

It was a sacred symphony; a song of praise totally unprecedented in world history. It was such an exalted event that the angels themselves could not be silent. They too, wanted to join in and sing to G-d. (After all, that's what angels DO. They sing praises to G-d!)

G-d silenced them. "How can you sing," He asked, "when My creations are drowning in the sea?" (Talmud, Megillah, 10b)

Amazing. No one deserved to drown more than the Egyptians. They had, after all, drowned Jewish babies in the Nile. Rashi points out that every Egyptian received the EXACT punishment that was coming to him: ... they sank to the bottom like a stone (v. 5)...the mighty sank deep like lead (v. 10) ... Your wrath ...

consumed them like straw. (v. 7) Lead sinks faster than a stone, which sinks faster than straw. The more wicked the Egyptian, the more severe and agonizing the punishment. The "relatively decent" murderers got to perish quickly.

It is axiomatic in Jewish theology that G-d rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. This act of destroying the enemies of Israel was a great day in our history. Moses, Miriam, and the Nation of Israel sang a sublime song of praise that has become part of our daily liturgy. It was okay for us to sing. Why not the angels?

Moses and the Israelites were personally saved. If G-d had not drowned the Egyptians, you and I would not be here to tell the story. It was a personal salvation for you and me. Therefore, we sing.

For the angels, however, it was a different story. They were never threatened; they were in no danger. For them, there was no positive side. G-d's children were drowning, and that was a tragedy. A necessary tragedy, but a tragedy nonetheless.

The Egyptians, like the rest of mankind, were children of Adam and Eve. We are all created in the Image of G-d. We have the potential to accomplish tremendous things. The Egyptians were brilliant mathematicians and engineers. But while, in matters material, they succeeded fantastically, when it came to decency and morality, they failed miserably.

Nothing is more tragic than failed potential.

(END OF SEGMENT)

Wine is a symbol of joy. We celebrate happy occasions with wine; wine was an integral part of the Temple Service.

As we thank G-d for saving us from the Egyptians, we have to stop and remember that human suffering is nothing to celebrate.

We recall each of the Ten Plagues that G-d inflicted upon the wicked Egyptians for refusing to let us go. We hold our wine goblets aloft in praise for G-d's great miracles. But our joy is incomplete.

Egyptians, children of G-d, suffered immensely during the Ten Plagues. How can we celebrate another human being's suffering, EVEN THOUGH HE DESERVES IT??!!

Therefore, we spill a drop of wine, we mitigate our celebration by removing some wine from our cups. We cut back on the Psalms recited in the Hallel, to demonstrate that our celebration is bittersweet.

Last week I conducted a Model Seder in a nursing home. During the Model Seder, I noticed that there was a television on. The picture on the screen showed a joint effort between U.S. Marines and Iraqi citizens in toppling a statue of a fiend.

I was struck by the irony. We Jews are celebrating our freedom from slavery in ancient Egypt. The Iraqi people today are celebrating their freedom from slavery. That freedom does not come without cost.

Thank G-d, U.S. casualties were RELATIVELY few. Thousands upon thousands of Iraqis fell. That is nothing to celebrate.

Every dead Iraqi soldier means another Iraqi mother, and/or wife, and/or child, mourning a loved one.

What a shame it had to be that way.

That statue of Saddam Hussein was pointing its despicable finger in the direction of Jerusalem. It's the one thing in his miserable life that he got right.

Let us all pray that the future will be one of peace and harmony.

"Next Year in Jerusalem!"

Have a Happy and Kosher Passover.

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