

Tzav

Allan Myers, March 19, 2022

In this week's sedra, we learn a great deal about the dedication of the Mishkan but what is sometimes overlooked is that, for seven days until Aaron and his sons had been initiated into the priesthood, Moses himself carried out the priestly duties.

One of the rules for the priests was abstinence from wine while they were on duty. Indeed, there is speculation that Aaron's sons, Nadab and Avihu, who we'll read about in next week's sedra, had flouted this rule, with tragic consequences.

Nowadays, many Jewish religious ceremonies, include wine. Indeed, some synagogues have instituted "Kiddush clubs", where the members absent themselves from part of the Shabbat service in order to practice the ancient Scottish art of whisky tasting.

On Pesach we are commanded to drink four cups of wine (right to the bottom!) and on Purim, we are commanded to get so drunk that we should be unable to distinguish Mordechai's blessings from Haman's curses but on other festivals, such as Simchat Torah, when we are commanded to be joyful, opinion remains divided as to whether our celebrations should lead us to inebriation.

The rabbis asked (in Mishna Berachot) how is it that we say the blessing borei p'ri ha'etz over all fruit except grapes. The Gemara answers that it could be because, unlike other fruits, the material of the grape becomes improved when wine is produced. But, asks the Gemara, why, then, don't we change the blessing over oil to reflect the fact that olives produce oil that is so much improved over other oil producing substances. The answer the Gemara gives is that it is not possible to change the blessing over oil because the fruit of the olive tree is the same as the fruit of other things that produce oil. Furthermore, the rabbis maintain that wine sustains you but oil doesn't sustain you. The proof for this is that Rava used to drink wine on Erev Pesach so that he would acquire an appetite for matzah. However, they conclude that only a large quantity of wine gives you an appetite. The proof text for this is "wine cheers the heart of man"

This phrase comes from a beautiful prayer commonly called Borechi Nafshi – Bless the Lord, My Soul, which we say on Rosh Chodesh. Actually it's Psalm 104. Usually I hear it gabbled in Hebrew in about two minutes but, on closer examination, you find a description of God and how He has "spread out the heavens like a curtain"; how He established the earth and covered it with water, which provides drink to all the wild beasts and the birds of the air; how He sated the earth with fruit, grass and vegetation so that man could produce what later became the ingredients of Kiddush – "bread from the earth" and "wine to cheer the heart of man". This latter phrase epitomizes, for me, the balance of life – we work hard but should derive pleasure in the process.

When I read this psalm I try to appreciate all of God's wonders and marvel at how He gave us the tools to live our lives.

The psalm also tells me that God's bounty has been provided both for work and for play; that while we are producing our daily bread, whether it's at the coalface, the chalk face, in the office or on the farm, we should have time to "cheer our hearts".

According to the French proverb, a day without wine is like a day without sunshine. So, whether your tippie is Pouilly-Fuissé or Palwin's Number 10 – enjoy!