



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayeishev

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November 23, 2013
Vayeishev

Wine And Grape Jews



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Please, allow me to begin whining – I mean wining.

Let us enter the proverbial vineyard, walking beneath the ripe vines, the triangular clusters holding a strong grip – and grape – on us.

Within these little orbs lie the mysteries of the world and the potency of the finest vintages.

We journey back to the family Rothschild, the barons of banking, chateaus and wine. Then we journey further back to a prison in Egypt, where a young handsome man interprets a dream of wine – and brings freedom to dreams and dreamers for all time to come.

When Pharaoh’s chief bartender related his wine dream, an intriguing Midrash tells us that Joseph replied “you have given me good tidings.” What type of good news did this wine dream contain? We find the answer in a fascinating piece of Talmud which describes the significance of the vine and its four unique features.

From this week’s Torah portion, we learn to become wine stewards and winemakers. We learn the four elements of a grapevine and the secret of freeing ourselves from our inner “prisons” and inhibitions, and discovering greatness. We learn to fulfill our deepest potentials.

Whoever said whining doesn’t help never had this type of wine.

This sermon is picked directly from (what we call) di vine!

WINE AND GRAPE JEWS

1. Purple Haze (Joke)

Rose and Herman, white-haired octogenarians in their sixth decade of marriage, are enjoying some fine Bordeaux on the front porch of their peaceful, suburban home.

Rose sighs contently and says: “You know, I really love you. I love your depth, I love your complexity, I love your maturity, and I love your sophistication. I don’t know how I would ever live without you.”

Herman says to his beloved wife: “Aw, sweetheart, that’s so touching. But, Rose, is that you talking or the wine?”

Says Rose: “Herman, it’s me talking... to the wine.”

2. Wine and Its Connotations

Wine is the most fascinating of things, intoxicating really. People spend vast sums of money on wine, and wine connotes celebration and royalty. At times, wine can almost seem to be alive. Have you ever heard a wine connoisseur describe a particular bottle? *Full-bodied and mature, with hints of sarcasm and a purple disposition; a deep thinker that plays nicely with spicy others...* Tell me, does not at times wine seem more a person than a grape?

Of course, wine can also be something very intimidating, especially if you find yourself in a posh restaurant:

David and Hannah were on their third date. Wishing to impress her, David took her out to a French wine bar – Kosher of course. Acting all nonchalant, coolly sophisticated, David called over the sommelier and, confidently pointing to the menu, saying: “Monsieur, may we please trouble you for a bottle of the Baron von Lichtenvizer?”

To which the proper sommelier crisply replied: “Sir, I’d really love to oblige you, but that is the owner of this fine establishment.”

Wine can be a trap if you take it (or yourself) too seriously. Pronouncing the “t” of Pinot or Cabernet? Faux pas. Drinking wine from a paper cup? Uh oh. Never mind trying to say, “Sauvignon” – especially with a Yiddish accent!

But nevertheless most of us love it. What is it about wine that gets us feeling giddy and celebratory?

Let us uncork this mystery ... with some history.

3. Baron de Rothschild

Let us begin with Baron de Rothschild – a name so closely associated with banking, chateaus, and of course, the finest wines.

But before there was Baron de Rothschild – there was Meyer Amschel Rothschild. Meyer Amschel was born in the year 1774 in the Jewish ghetto of Frankfurt am Maine. And from there he rose to become the father of modern finance and the scion of, perhaps, the wealthiest family in the history of the world, establishing the banking legacy of the Rothschilds.

Meyer Amschel and his wife Gutel had five daughters and five sons. The five sons continued the family business, each in a different country – Germany, Austria, England, Italy, and France, establishing a network of banks and financial institutions across Europe that would give Wall Street something to aspire to.

The youngest son of Meyer Amschel and Gutel, Jacob Meyer de Rothschild, who settled in Paris, purchased Château Lafite, one of France’s top vineyards. Located in the Bordeaux region, it is a business that has remained in the Rothschild family since 1868.

Château Lafite is a premier winery, which, legend has it, was once visited by Thomas Jefferson.¹ Indeed, a vintage he is said to have sampled, became the most expensive bottle of wine to ever sell at auction – this was a bottle of 1787 Chateau Lafite, which went for an astronomical \$156,000.

Yes, people pay out of their nose for a drink that enters the mouth and is never heard of again. This underscores the great value of wine and the esteem viniculture holds in high society.

What would cause someone to pay so much for a bottle of wine? There must be more to wine than meets the eye – or the palate.

4. Kosher Wine

Baron Rothschild is also a name associated with *kosher* wines (a phenomenon which has taken off in the past 25 years), thanks to the youngest son of Jacob Meyer – Baron Edmond Benjamin James de Rothschild.

Baron Rothschild inherited parts of his father's estate, including Château Lafite. And, as an ardent Zionist, he began providing assistance to Jews who immigrated to Palestine in the second half of the 19th century, planting vineyards near Rishon LeZion, south-east of Jaffa. French rootstock was imported, and the Baron sent his own wine specialists to advise the pioneers in this enterprise. Later, a second winery was established in Zichron Ya'akov, situated on Mount Carmel just south of Haifa.²

Today, Carmel Winery is by far the largest winery in Israel, producing wines of all varieties, even boutique wines, such as the acclaimed Yatir – and exporting to more than 40 countries.

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Mayer_Rothschild

²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carmel_Winery.

5. Parshat Vayeishev: The Original Rothschild And Connoisseur

Now what does this all have to do with us?

Last I checked, no one in this community was in the market for a wine exceeding \$56, never mind \$156,000. Additionally, also last time I checked this was a synagogue, a place of spirituality, religion, prayer and Torah. What does all this wine talk – essentially, whining – have to do with the Torah, specifically this week’s Torah reading, *Parshat Vayeishev*?

Well, some three thousand years prior to the Rothschild dynasty, there lived in the Middle East a man name Joseph, who became the first banker, financier, baron, and wine connoisseur.

However this week’s reading does not give a clue as to all that, for it ends with Joseph languishing behind Egyptian bars (and I don’t mean wine bars) – serving time in prison for a crime he did not commit.

But, to really understand how Joseph got out of prison to become the “Rothschild” of Egypt – the Viceroy and Chief Financial Officer of the Empire, second in command only to Pharaoh – we must first look, wherein the seeds of this ascendancy are planted. And these seeds are all about grapes, which are all about wine.

6. A Dream Connoisseur

Joseph, is perhaps the most harassed hero in the Torah. I mean, Moses was no slouch either when it came to being harassed – but Joseph, man, Joseph was first almost killed by his brothers, then sold into slavery (for some flip-flop sandals no less), then chased by his boss’s wife, and then thrown into prison.

He was sitting in prison, when two new prisoners came in, one the Pharaoh’s chief mixologist/bartender/sommelier/butler/cocktailor/master of drink, the second the Pharaoh’s head baker and pastry chef.

While in prison each of these two had a dream. This, as the Torah relates, is the wine steward's dream, which he asked Joseph to interpret:

The chief sommelier related his dream to Joseph, and he said to him, "In my dream, behold, a vine is before me. And on the vine are three tendrils, and it seemed to be blossoming, and its buds came out; its clusters ripened into grapes. And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I placed the cup on Pharaoh's palm."³

And Joseph said to him... In another three days, Pharaoh will number you, and he will restore you to your position, and you will place Pharaoh's cup into his hand, according to previous custom, when you were his sommelier.⁴

Joseph interprets the wine steward's dream of a grape's release of its juices to the freedom of wine in a cup as a symbol for his release from prison to freedom.

Said Joseph: "The vine has the three tendrils, beginning to blossom and bud, then bearing grapes. You squeeze them into Pharaoh's cup held in his hand, making a fine wine drink. This is the story of your freedom. In three days, the vine containing budding and blossoming fruit will bear grapes which will be squeezed, thus freeing you from bondage."

Very nice. But what lesson does this story hold for us? For what purpose does the Torah share this episode with us?

The Midrash⁵ says that after the wine steward came and related his dream to Joseph, Joseph said to him, "You have given me good tidings, so too will I deliver good tidings to you, that in another three days you will be free."

What positive tidings for Joseph were contained and hinted at in the drink master's dream?

³Genesis 40:9-11.

⁴Genesis 40:12-13.

⁵Bereishit Rabba 88:5.

That same Midrash explains that in the verses about the dream, the word *kos*, meaning “cup,” is mentioned four times, and that this is the basis of the four cups of wine we drink at the Passover Seder, corresponding to the four expressions of redemption in the Torah.⁶

Very nice, but again, what is the significance of all this?

7. The Talmud’s Vine Take

The Talmud,⁷ focusing upon the above verses, presents us with a diverse smorgasbord of homiletic interpretations. In so doing, it takes the details of the butler’s dreams to be symbolic of a much greater message.

The Talmud bases many of these interpretations upon a passage from Psalms: *You uprooted a vine from Egypt; You drove out nations and planted it.*⁸ This is clearly an analogy for the Jewish people, comparing them to a grapevine that was languishing in the acrid soil of Egyptian bondage. But then God uprooted and freed this grapevine, and planted it in the Holy Land of Israel where it could be free to flourish and ultimately produce grapes and wine.

The Talmud first explains this dream in a historical context:

R. Eliezer said: “The *‘vine’* is the world, the *‘three tendrils’* are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; *‘and it seemed to be blossoming, and its buds came out,’* these are the matriarchs; *‘its clusters ripened into grapes’*, these are the tribes.”

Thus, according to this interpretation, the wine steward’s dream was really a message for Joseph – and for us, sitting here a few thousand years later. It is a description of our ancestry, so that when we find ourselves in prison (whatever type of confinement it may be) we will be reminded that we are part of a much bigger story, at the end of which lies transcendence and redemption.

⁶ Exodus 6:6-7.

⁷ Chulin 92a.

⁸ Psalms 80:9.

But the Talmud is not satisfied with this interpretation alone (is it ever?) and continues:

Thereupon R. Joshua said to him: "Is a man shown what *has* happened? Surely he is only shown what *is to* happen! Therefore, I say: The '*vine*' is the Torah, the '*three tendrils*' are Moses, Aaron and Miriam; '*and it seemed to be blossoming, and its buds came out,*' these are the Sanhedrin; '*its clusters ripened into grapes*' are the righteous people of every generation.

The Talmud adds this second interpretation because the first interpretation merely recalls the past, which Joseph already knew as it was his family history. This second interpretation, on the other hand, provides hope for Joseph, as it tells him that the wine steward's dream is, in essence, a vision of the future of the Jewish people – a future that is hinged on Joseph's freedom and ascendancy to the leadership of Egypt.

This helps us understand what the Midrash is referring to when it says that Joseph stated, "You have given me good tidings, so too will I deliver good tidings to you..." For this vision of grapes, vines, etc. is indeed very good news for Joseph, foreseeing his freedom and rise to greatness and even more – the freedom and liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt (in all four dimensions corresponding to the four cups), as the Midrash explains.

8. Heard It On The Grapevine: What It All Means

This explains how prisoner Joseph was infused with hope. But it still does not explain what does it all means to our lives today? What can a dream of vines and wines that occurred in an Egyptian prison over 3,000 years ago possibly teach us here and now about freedom and liberation?

The Talmud sheds some light on the matter:

R. Simeon b. Lakish said: "The Jewish people are likened to a vine: its branches are the businessmen, its clusters the scholars, its leaves the common people, its twigs those in Israel that are devoid of learning. This is what was meant by ... 'Let the clusters pray for the leaves, for were it not for the leaves the clusters could not exist.'"

The Jewish people are like a vine, which contains four features, each representative of a unique archetype:

- The Branches – those who are the foundation and support of the entire community due to their charitable acts of giving and kindness.
- The Clusters – the wise sages who are ripe with ideas, scholarship, and deep juices.
- The Leaves – the common folk who create context, protections and shade for the rest.
- The Twigs – the frail, undeveloped, uneducated and underprivileged, who have not had the opportunity to study and have not yet reached their full growth potential.

9. From Collective to Personal

Just as it is with the collective – the vine of the Jewish people as a whole – so it is with our personal character traits as well. (Or at least, we can infer that, given a little poetic license.)

- The Branches – we each possess foundational elements that support and sustain our lives, our livelihood and income, as well as which provide our emotional sustenance (our loved ones, our faith, our community).
- The Clusters – the grapes within us are our intelligence and wisdom, and nuggets of inspiration that when squeezed produce the most divine vintages of wine.
- The Leaves – these are our protective shields, which give us shelter from the hazardous elements of life and which shade us from unsavory influences.
- The Twigs – these are our weaker and more frail elements, which are still undeveloped and have yet to reach their full growth potential and robustness of character.

10. Squeezing Your Grape and Producing Your Wine

The good tidings that the wine steward's wine dream brought Joseph are also our good tidings – conveying to us a secret formula how to free ourselves from our own inner “prisons,” from all those forces (psychological, emotional and physical) that inhibit our moves and cause us to be fearful and tentative.

Said the wine steward: *“In my dream, behold, a vine is before me. And on the vine are three tendrils, and it seemed to be blossoming, and its buds came out; its clusters ripened into grapes.”*

Behold, each of us is a vine bearing grapes that are about to blossom, with its buds emerging and clusters ripening – grapes waiting for their rich wine to be released. We each contain enormous potential, but it is trapped in a grape, like a prisoner in jail.

Wine is symbolic of being freed from prison, because wine does not come ready made; it is produced by squeezing the grapes and extracting the wine.

“And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I placed the cup on Pharaoh's palm.”

The way we release the wine is by squeezing the grapes – by the pressures of deadlines, the expectations to produce great things, the pushing of the envelope of our comfort zones. These are the factors that compel us to produce our finest wines.

This dream brought Joseph good tidings – foreshadowing his release from his “grape” when he, too, would be squeezed in order that he draw out his deepest, innermost resources. And it brought the same good tidings to us.

But not only the vine itself; each of its components is necessary to produce the wine. By looking at ourselves as a whole or individually we can identify the four features that define us, and the one that may stand out in our present state: The branch, the cluster, the leaf and the twig.

These four features define the entire spectrum of the human condition and experience, and each is indispensable. No matter who you are or where you stand – whether you are a supporting branch-pillar, a clustered scholar, a protecting leaf or a weak twig – no vine will grow and no wine will flow.

In short: Prison is wine stuck in a grape. But a wine can only be produced from a healthy vine in which all of the elements – the branches, clusters, leaves and twigs – come together as one. If we remove or compromise even one element, we will not have wine.

11. In conclusion: Grape Expectations

Benjamin Franklin, the great American thinker, inventor, and founding father, once said that, “In wine there is wisdom, in beer there is freedom, and in water there is bacteria.”

The purity and potency of wine does not allow for corrupting and outside influences. (Anyone who has ever been to a kosher winery has undoubtedly been amazed at the level of control – of climate, light, temperature, and quality that goes into the winemaking process.) This purity and potency is the realization of a dream that is contained within a vine, grape, and tendril.

The reason wine has such an incredible mystique and royal association – indeed, the reason wine is so closely associated with spirituality and religious ritual is simply this:

Wine is the realization of an object’s ultimate potential. It was a simple grape; now it is a divine wine.

And this is why the wine parallels us human beings. Our wine is the part of us where our deepest potential is realized.

Let us each look at our potential, with all its specific features, and commit to doing whatever it takes to release our inner wine.

If we embrace the vine in its entirety, we shall come to produce the finest vintage.

Some might even call it - Di'Vine!

Shabbat Shalom!