

When the clock strikes midnight next Tuesday evening (or in my case, midnight Eastern Standard Time), most of us will automatically begin singing Auld Lang Syne, that classic tune used to ring in the new year. As I was thinking about New Year's earlier this week, I realized that I had no idea why we actually sing that song. I assume I'm not the only one. It turns out that Auld Lang Syne was written in 1788 by Robert Burns, a famous Scottish poet, and set to a popular folk song of the time. The original poem was written in old Scottish dialect (I included the original and a translation on the cover of our Shabbat bulletin) and 'auld lang syne' can be translated as 'old long ago' or 'old long-since'. It was sung on New Year's Eve in Scotland starting centuries ago and now it is sung on New Year's eve in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Hong Kong, Singapore, India and Pakistan. And in Brazil, Portugal, France, Spain, Greece, Poland, and Germany, the song is used to mark a farewell, whether that be a funeral, memorial service, or graduation. Within the US, the song became famous thanks to bandleader Guy Lombardo, who heard the tune and couldn't get it out of his head, arranged the piece for his orchestra in 1929 and played the tune whenever he performed at a New Year's Eve event. His yearly tradition has now become our nation's tradition.

The song is about commemorating the love and friendships of old times – appropriate as we prepare to begin a new year in which we hope to maintain those friendships. As we sing Auld Lang Syne and raise our glasses for a toast, we tend to do so with champagne. And that was my second realization of the week – I had no idea why champagne was the drink of choice at New Year's.

It turns out that in the late fifth century, King Clovis, the reigning monarch of northern France, was fighting to defend his territory. Legend has it that he promised his wife that if he won his next battle, he would convert to Christianity. He won, and in 496 he was baptized in a church in the city of Reims, in the heart of France's Champagne region.

For centuries afterward, kings of France were crowned in Reims, eventually at a great cathedral built there. Before trains and cars, trekking out to Reims was a major undertaking, so after a coronation, the royal court would linger in the Champagne region for a while and partake of the local wines.

As the wine trade picked up over the centuries, and more and more wine was being exported, some of the new barrels weren't opened until spring -- when the wine inside would be fizzy. A little bit of chemistry - when fermentation occurs in a closed container, the carbon dioxide infuses the liquid and forms sparkling wine.

Although this process was happening in other wine regions, Champagne had several advantages. Its major towns were located on rivers at a time when water was the shipping highway of the world. And the region supplied wine not only to the French court in Paris but also to England and Holland -- coastal areas too far north to grow their own grapes -- where sparkling wine was gaining in popularity.

Enter Dom Perignon, a famous monk, who lived at the end of the 17th century. He didn't actually "invent" champagne, but he improved the quality of his abbey's vineyards and its wine and as demand grew, he began packaging the product in bottles, helping to maintain its sparkle. He also figured out how to close the bottles with corks and how to secure the corks with string. In 1728, King Louis XV, a champagne fan, decreed that only Champagne's wines could be shipped in bottles; other French wines were to be shipped in barrels.

With champagne being a hit in the courts of France and England, producers began promoting their sparkling wines in the other major cities of Europe -- even going as far as Russia and the U.S. At first, it was an easy sell to the nobility. But with the rise of industrialization in the 19th century, the nobles were no longer guaranteed to be the wealthiest consumers. Champagne producers dangled their products in front of the newly rich merchant class as an ‘aspirational’ beverage. Of course, these new customers couldn’t afford to drink champagne every day, but they could afford it on special occasions. Soon they began ordering it for all celebrations. Champagne became the drink of choice from weddings to ship christenings to ringing in the New Year.

And that reputation is what champagne marketers continue to offer. The drink’s status has been maintained for centuries by intentional association with opulence.¹

But for Jews, our drink of choice has always been just plain old wine, and on one occasion during the year, we have four cups of it. Passover is *our* opportunity to raise a glass and the reason for drinking those four cups is found in this week’s Torah portion, Va-era. At the end of last week’s portion, Moses cries out to God after Pharaoh has made life worse for the Israelites and increased their workload as slaves. He says, “O, my Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people.” (Ex. 5:22-23)

God responds by saying, “Oh, don’t you worry, Pharaoh is about to see just how powerful I am!” At the beginning of this week’s portion God states, “I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered my covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am Adonai. I will free you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, Adonai, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians.” (Ex. 6:5-7).

‘Why do we drink four cups of wine at the seder?’ the rabbis ask in the Talmud. The answer, according to Rabbi Yochanan is, “This corresponds to the four statements of redemption (in the Torah): I will remove you, I will save you, I will redeem you, I will take you.”² These are the four statements God makes to Moses in Va-era. These verses of Torah become the paradigmatic emblem of Jewish redemption throughout our history. The Ramban, otherwise known as Nachmanides, who lived in 12th century Spain, saw each of these four statements, ‘I will remove you’, ‘I will save you’, ‘I will redeem you’, ‘I will take you’, as four stages on the path towards complete freedom.

The first step, ‘I will remove you’ is the cessation of external bondage, the end of external oppression. In the book of Exodus, this happens with the Israelite’s literal move out of the land of Egypt and the start of their journey through the desert. However, just because you are freed from bondage does not make you free, so the next step, “I will deliver you,” refers to the ability to leave the sovereignty and former control of the oppressors; to make sure they no longer have power over you, even if just by association. This occurs over time, as the Israelites come to realize that they are no longer being controlled by Pharaoh and that Moses is leading them towards a Promised Land. The second stage is the struggle to overcome a ‘slave mentality’.

¹ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-12-31/why-do-we-drink-champagne-on-new-year-s-eve-.html>

² JT Pesachim 10:1

The third stage of freedom, ‘I will redeem you’ has to do with one’s ability to re-orient a set of values. How can we redefine what matters in life and understand that the values of our oppressors were not our values? I’m sure you remember the countless times the Israelites complain during their journey through the desert. ‘There’s no water’, ‘there’s no food’, ‘we were better off in Egypt where there was abundance and everything we needed to survive!’ The temptation of returning to Egypt and slavery was merely a distraction from the greater challenge of understanding that there was a new set of rules, of guidelines that would determine how these Israelites were to live their lives. In Egypt, the Israelites had witnessed the power of influence, of ostentatiousness, of controlling others. But when God brings the plagues, which begin in this week’s portion and continue next week, and when they cross the Red Sea, and when manna falls from heaven, the Israelites come to understand that there is a force in the world much more powerful than humans. There is an aspect to the world that is beyond our comprehension and it is bigger than we could ever imagine. Recognizing that force is the third step towards freedom.

But ‘I will redeem you’ is not the final stage in the quest for freedom. The final stage is ‘I will take you’. This refers to God taking the Israelites to be God’s people and according to tradition, that occurs as the Israelites stood at the base of Mt. Sinai and received the Ten Commandments. Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson states, “Ultimately, freedom is much more than the absence of external restraint. Freedom is the ability to assume responsibility for one’s own life and for one’s community as well. We are most free, most fully human, when we help ourselves and others to live up to our best potential as caring human beings and as serious Jews.”³

But the rabbis were troubled by something. There’s actually one more statement God makes in this week’s portion, alongside the four we just discussed. In the next verse, verse 8, it states, “I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession.” (Ex. 6:8) Why isn’t ‘I will bring you’ included in the list of steps towards freedom? Why don’t we have **five** cups of wine during the Seder? It turns out that there is a fifth cup, but we just don’t drink from it. Know what it is? The Cup of Elijah. The fifth cup represents the collective redemption for **all** people, a freedom that may not come for a long time, but one for which we continuously strive. The first four cups, ‘I will remove you’, ‘I will save you’, ‘I will redeem you’, ‘I will take you’, are in many ways about the personal journey from slavery to freedom, but the fifth cup, ‘I will bring you to the land’ is purely communal. It is about moving the world to a collective sense of freedom. And since that’s going to take awhile, we leave that cup filled, untouched, throughout the seder.

So as you toast with champagne and ring in the New Year with Auld Lang Syne next week, think about those other cups of wine we’ll drink in just a few months. How will 2014 be a year in which you free yourself of one more event, habit, relationship, mental state, that enslaves you? How will you move through a progression that begins with the declaration, “I will **remove** you from my life!” to “I will **save** myself from this negativity” to “I will **redeem** myself by re-orienting my values,” to “I will **take** this new approach into my life from this day forward!” And as you think of ways in which you will start anew in 2014, don’t forget that fifth cup. How can we, together, work towards the eradication of all forms of slavery, towards a world in which all can live as if they have entered the Promised Land.

May 2014 be a good year for you.

³ Shavit Artson, Bradley The Bedside Torah. Pg. 103.

Rabbi Joel Nickerson - Va-era 5774 – 12/27/13

Shabbat shalom and Happy New Year.