

Why 4 Cups of Wine?

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Passover is coming and I found an incredible text from the Palestinian Talmud that speaks to this moment. It's amazing how something written thousands of years ago can still resonate today. Let me show you what I mean.

As many of you know, this holiday has more symbolism at the table than almost any other ritual celebration. *Everything has meaning*, if not multiple meanings: the parsley, the saltwater, the charoset, the matzah, the maror, and, as we're about to see, 4 cups of wine. Nothing on the seder table is taken for granted. Like Chekhov's gun, EVERYTHING on the table will be used before the evening is done.

Here's the context: Someone looking to compile a bunch of rabbinic ideas as to **why we drink 4 cups of wine (or grape juice!) at the Passover seder** and **what those cups symbolize** placed them together in one section of the Talmud, not surprisingly, the section called *Pesachim*, focusing on the topic of Passover.

In chapter 10 of *Pesachim*, the rabbis ask: **From where do we get the idea, the encouragement and the inspiration to drink and demarcate 4 separate cups of wine at Passover?**

First up to posit the meaning of 4 cups is Rabbi Yochanan.

Rabbi Yochanan says: 4 times do we read in the Torah about God's actions to redeem the Israelites: *v'hotzayti, v'hitzalti, v'ga'alti, v'lakachti*. I'll bring you out. I'll deliver you. I'll redeem you. I will take you to be my people.

These 4 references are all in Exodus chapter 6. Of note, is that God could have just said "I'll free you," and be done with it. But instead, God takes the time to express 4 different commitments to God's people in the process of liberation. For Rabbi Yochanan, each moment was a distinct stage along the way to redemption and each one deserves to be celebrated on its own. Thus, we dedicate a cup of wine to each moment: 4 moments = 4 cups. If this interpretation sounds familiar, it's because this approach makes it into

most *haggadot*. In honor of God's beneficence and might, as seen in our Exodus from Egypt, we drink 4 cups. *L'chayyim!*

Recently I've seen an add-on whereby the seder leader reminds people that to truly appreciate and celebrate our freedom, and to embody our liberation, it is preferred to have someone else fill your cup with wine and for you to fill others'. Unlike other nights, tonight, we are all waited upon like royalty.

But then here comes Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi with a different approach.

Instead of focusing on God, and the liberation that was, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi suggests the 4 cups are based on references in the Torah to the liberation *that had not come to be*.

Stay with me.

In the book of Genesis, Pharaoh throws his wine steward (or cup-bearer) and his baker into prison. These men happen to share a cell with Joseph who has been thrown in jail by his former boss, Mr. and Mrs. Potiphar.

Both the wine steward and the baker share their dreams with Joseph and, because Joseph was given the gift of dream interpretation by God, Joseph predicts that the wine steward will be freed and return to his position, and the baker will be killed.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi finds 4 verses from the wine steward's recounting of his dream, and Joseph's response, and determines that Joseph NOT ONLY understood the meaning of the dream as it related to his re-employment, BUT ALSO saw hints of the eventual redemption of his descendants from Egypt.

- The cup of Pharaoh was in my hand (says the wine steward, #1);
- I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup (#2);
- and gave the cup in Pharaoh's hand (#3)
- (Then Joseph says) You will give the cup in the hand of Pharaoh. (#4)

Now, if you ask me, I don't see any references in these 4 verses to the eventual redemption of the Israelites from Egypt. I see wine. I see cups. Then again, I'm not Joseph. But I DO have an appreciation for what Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi suggests.

If Rabbi Yochanan wanted to celebrate what had been done by God in the past, Rabbi Yehoshua, was interested in celebrating what would be done in the future. It's easy to celebrate the moments that have already happened. On this night, as we remember our past, we are also looking ahead to our future. Maybe the 4 cups are 4 signposts that point to that which is hidden, but may someday soon be revealed. And those hints are worth celebrating with 4 cups.

One of the favorite traditions of Passover is the search for the Afikomen. Even if you only do the 15-minute "we're hungry, when is this going to be over" version, I'm certain many of you have lost hundreds of dollars over the years trying to hold your audience captive. (No pun intended.)

However, as Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches the missing matzah is not the only place where we consider what is hidden and what can be revealed. Each one of the 4 cups can also become an opportunity to reflect on what we see, even if it's out of focus, or barely visible on the horizon, and how we might hold on and shore up our faith.

Okay. We have 2 ideas down, 3 more to go.

Next up is Rabbi Levi, who comes along to drop in just one line: the cups correspond to the 4 kingdoms. That's it.

This is a real insider-moment for Talmud readers. You have to know the reference from the Book of Daniel or Hosea or Zachariah: the 4 Kingdoms are Babylon, Medo-Persia¹, Greece, and Rome, 4 nations who oppressed, conquered, and took away our dominion.

And then, quickly shifting to the next idea, the rabbis suggest something much darker: the theme of the 4 cups is retribution and revenge. In the Days to Come, when God punishes the Gentiles (an un-nuanced category for those who oppressed the Jews), they will be forced to drink the *wine of wrath*, they will consume only the *dregs*, and while coals rain down upon them, *their cups will be filled with fire, sulphur and burning wind*. (Can I get that to go?)

This particular reading is based on 4 references to cups/wine drawn primarily from the book of Jeremiah, the prophet who foresaw our exile and

¹ Medo-Persia was an ancient empire that included parts of modern-day Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and India. It was made up of the Medes and the Persians, and was centered north of the Persian Gulf.

subjugation to the Babylonian Empire. To be clear, this text didn't consider Righteous Gentiles or any nuance at all when thinking about our enemies. It came from an *us vs. them* world view, and, most likely, this was a moment to wishfully imagine the day when God would deliver a blow to our enemies that was long overdue.

Take a moment to imagine this playing out at your Passover seder. As you raise your first cup, you toast the person or the group that made your life miserable and you imagine them finally receiving the punishment they deserve.

While I don't love seeing a vengeful or wrathful side to our Judaism, this is a holiday that celebrates our God in what my kids may call "Beast Mode." As part of our redemption, God exacts epic revenge on those who held us captive for hundreds of years. So, arguably, the entire setting of the Passover seder is one in which such ideas *might* find a good home.

Additionally, the Torah often talks about a system in which obedience leads to reward and disobedience leads to punishment; and many commentators would argue you need *both* to be true for the system to have integrity. The fate of the wicked shapes the future of the good.

But I still don't love it.

Because right now we are living through a time when reward and punishment, good and evil, victim and perpetrator, are inviting division and tempting violence both in Israel and in the United States. How will we endure? How will we move from this experience of oppression to one of redemption? In this highly flammable moment, it feels dangerous to surface textual sparks that speak of violence and revenge.

However, the passage from the Talmud doesn't end here. It has one final thought that leads to a *nechemta*, a comforting idea, before it concludes.

The last theory on why we drink 4 cups comes through a reflection by Rabbi Abun on what the phrase "the portion of their cup" means. This was part of the verse that spoke about fire, sulphur and burning wind...remember the drink we wanted "to go"? Rabbi Abun looks at this verse and this particular phrase, and determines that it is a reference to a double cup (a double shot?) *like the kind you drink after a thermal bath.*

Still with me? We've just moved into a shvitz.

So imagine you've been sitting in the shvitz for however long people sat in the shvitz, and now you're hot. You're dehydrated. You're wondering, "What should I drink next?" The answer? Something to cool you down.

Ooh, and you know what? You should probably *double the amount of that drink* to help restore your body temp and electrolytes so you will feel restored and fully repaired.

So, too, at the End of Days...when we are at our most exhausted and depleted, having endured innumerable stressors and sufferings, The Holy One will let Israel drink 4 cups of consolation – a drink that will be cooling, salvific, and restorative.

I love this one the most not only for its message, but also because it's the only one that links up the desired message (salvific beverages will be consumed) with the action (please consume the beverage in front of you). I.e. As you remember God's promise to provide *future* cups of consolation, you are also DRINKING FROM A CUP in the midst of a ritual that invites you to bring together the past, present and future.

Which could lead you to wonder, is it possible to taste a little bit of that restoration at the seder table tonight?

Okay. To review, why do we drink 4 cups?

- **Option 1: Remember God's act of redemption.**
- **Option 2: Remember the moments when redemption was only a dream, a hint, a wisp of faith that someday we would be free.**
- **Option 3: Remember our enemies.**
- **Option 4: Actually, don't just remember our enemies; imagine bringing them down with cups of revenge.**
- **Option 5: Here is the consolation you have been waiting for.**

Why do I love these excerpts from Talmud? (It's not just because I love wine!) First, we should all be thinking about Passover. It's only a few weeks away. ☺ Second, this text and the questions and answers it provides, feel like a mirror of humanity that is still true today. When we are in moments of pain and suffering, *and when we are past them and recounting that*

moment in time, we often swing from gratitude, faith and consolation (thank God, please God, draw near to us God) to feelings of anger, rage and revenge (never forget, never forgive, the enemy will get what's coming to them).

The testimonies from some of the freed hostages in Israel reveal that their endurance was sometimes fueled by faith and sometimes by rage. One asked for wax to celebrate Hanukkah and also refused to clean her captor's home on Shabbat. Another refused to get on his knees even at gunpoint. So many focused on reuniting with family and friends, but also survived, if for no other reason, than to spite their enemy.

This text from the Palestinian Talmud is from the late 4th/5th century CE, and here we are in 2025, many of us swinging between counting our blessings, trying to center the joy and gratitude we feel, AND considering the fate of our enemies and wishing there was an Uber-app that could deliver hot cups of fire and sulphur to them all.

And where does the text end up? With a *nechemta*. One that echoes endurance through faith, not fanaticism. One that shares comfort not cruelty.

God knew that humans would not be angels. We have our moments, if not our years and decades in which God and history have good reason to wonder "Is this earth-drawn innovation called Adam worth all the pain?" But we are also capable of reaching for holiness. Striving to be righteous. We are capable of enduring pain and emerging more compassionate, even as we feel our hearts harden.

Maybe the gift of our ancestors is to leave us this pathway filled with hope and faith, and also rage and revenge, so that they can prove to us, "We get it. We've been there, too." We are not the first generation to struggle, nor will we be the last. Knowing this, maybe the rabbis kept all the feelings and uncomfortable thoughts "in" rather than redact or sanitize, to allow us NOT ONLY to have an honest reflection of who we are, BUT ALSO to invite us to make a choice, this year, and every year, as to how we want to celebrate. What do we want to remember? What message do we need to lift up to invite a different outcome than what we see before us today?

This is a question for all of us: What do you want your 4 cups to represent this year? The text is not prescriptive. There isn't a final decision where the

editor makes it clear: this is the way you should be drinking and toasting at seder. Rather, it's a reveal of the multivocality that was, and still is, true of Jewish tradition. It's the invitation for the reader (that means ALL of us) to determine, "This year, what will the 4 cups mean for me?"

This Passover, before we conclude the meal and give one final *L'chayyim*, will we make an effort to guide the conversation towards consolation?

Will we find the words to describe a future of relief from our exhaustion?

Of partnership instead of isolation?

Of strength that comes through love?

This year, may we be like Joseph, and catch a glimpse of redemption in the cup that we hold. May the seeds of freedom and abundance, planted thousands of years ago, break through (again) and blossom. May this season be one of renewal and restoration for us all.

Jerusalem Talmud Pesachim 10:1 (Sefaria translation)

From where the Four Cups?

Rebbi Joḥanan in the name of Rebbi Benaiah: Corresponding to the four deliveries: *Therefore, say to the Children of Israel, I am the Eternal, and I shall take you out, etc. And I shall take you as My people, etc. I shall take you, I shall save you, I shall free you, I shall take you.*

Rebbi Joshua ben Levi said, corresponding to the four cups of Pharaoh: *The cup of Pharaoh was in my hand; I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and gave the cup in Pharaoh's hand. You will give the cup in the hand of Pharaoh.*

Rebbi Levi said, corresponding to the four kingdoms.

But our teachers say, corresponding to the four cups of doom that the Holy One, praise to Him, will make the Gentiles drink at the end of days. *Truly, so said the Eternal, the God of Israel, to me: take this cup of the wine of wrath. The golden cup of Babylon is in the hand of the Eternal. Truly a cup is in the hand of the Eternal, intoxicating wine, fully to be mixed; He shall sprinkle from it but its dregs shall be drunk, squeezed to the last, by all the wicked of the earth. He shall let coals rain on the wicked; fire, sulphur, and*

burning wind is the portion of their cup. What does *the portion of their cup* mean? R. Abun said: a double cup like the double cup taken after a thermal bath.

And in accordance with this correspondingly the Holy One, praised be He, will let Israel drink four cups of consolation at the End of Days: *The Eternal is the portion of my part and my cup. You anointed my head with oil; my cup is overflowing. I shall lift up the cup of salvations counts for two.*