

LEHRHAUS

Over Shabbat

Vaethanan

Vol. 9, Issue 42 • 14 Av 5785 / August 8, 2025

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A Different Kind of Ga'on, A Different Kind of Sod

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A few weeks ago, my *rebbe*, Rabbi Dr. Neil Danzig, professor emeritus of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, left this earthly existence for the supernal Yeshiva. His last years were difficult: a stroke had left him without the ability to move, speak, or even focus his eyesight. His health, for as long as I knew him, had always been poor, but he persevered through decades of *yissurim shel ahavah*, enduring the “suffering of love” for the sake of his beloved children and grandchildren.

Rabbi Danzig once shared with me what great figure of the past he hoped to seek out on his arrival in Gan Eden: Rav Saadia Gaon, an Egyptian man who rose to become the head of one of the famously oligarchical and nepotistic Babylonian Yeshivot, and one of the outstanding Jewish personalities of his time. This grammarian, author, translator, thinker, poet, scholar, teacher, and halakhic authority truly embodied the title of *ge'on yaakov*, pride of Jacob. I imagine Rabbi Danzig fulfilling his hope as I write these words of appreciation and mourning for the *ga'on* at whose feet I had the privilege of studying for three years.

My time with Rabbi Danzig began as an accident. After 13 years of day school, I entered college determined to become, of all things, a

chemical engineer. I soon discovered that, contrary to my expectations, I was not done with the dual curriculum, and quickly transferred from the polytechnic institute at which I had matriculated to the joint program at JTS and Columbia University, following my closest high school friend. Still thinking that I would study chemistry (if not engineering), I enrolled in Organic Chemistry. This class conflicted with the first course in JTS's Jewish Thought series, so I registered instead for Advanced Introduction to Rabbinic Literature with Rabbi Danzig. It is no exaggeration to say that the very first class meeting largely set the trajectory of my life.

Rabbi Danzig had his own unique path to that classroom. This yeshiva *bochur* from Brooklyn once merited a *yechidus* with the Lubavitcher Rebbe zt"l due to his already obvious genius. After learning in Israel, he went to Yeshiva University, where he would study for many years. Rabbi Danzig claimed to have sat behind a pillar to avoid being called on in Rav Soloveitchik zt"l's shiur.

It was at YU that he discovered a new *derekh ha-limmud*: that of the academy, studying with Professors Meir Feldblum z"l and Elazar Hurvitz n"y. The latter would eventually direct his dissertation. His doctoral studies led to his dismissal from one Rosh Yeshiva's kollel. But the real change came with the arrival of Shraga Abramson for a visiting professorship in 1975–1976. Up to that point, Rabbi Danzig's research had been focused on Talmud proper, writing on the style of the post-Amoraic Savoraim with attention to the technical term *hassurei mehasra*

("the text is deficient," *Sinai* journal vol. 80, 245–252) different traditions of the number of *Mitzvot* (*Sinai* 83, 153–158) and the development of the term *Baraita* (tannaitic tradition outside of the Mishnah) later in the Amoraic period than previously thought. The latter was actually published twice by the same journal (*Sinai* 85, 217–224; *Sinai* 89, 240–247). Disappointed at the lack of a response, Rabbi Danzig had simply resubmitted his work, and the editors, while discerning readers, apparently suffered from short memories.

Professor Abramson's arrival was epoch-making for Rabbi Danzig. This expert in geonica opened a new world for him. "It was like *sod*," he later remarked to me. When learners encounter the *geonim*, it is usually in citations by the Rishonim. Tosafot are wont to rely on the Halakhot Gedolot and the She'iltot, two codes that emerged from the Babylonian Yeshivot. The Netziv, longtime *rosh yeshiva* of Volozhin, made his name as a *lamdan* with his extensive commentary on the latter, *Ha'amek She'elah*. It must be remembered, though, that prior to the twentieth century, there was a lot less geonic literature. The discovery and publicizing of the Cairo Geniza late in the nineteenth century changed all this. It was, in a very literal sense, like *sod*—hidden away for centuries in the attic of a synagogue. The Geniza made figures like Rav Saadia Gaon, Rav Shmuel bar Hofni, Rav Sherira, and Rav Hai come alive in ways that were unimaginable just a few years before. It was this world, which linked the Talmud to the Rishonim and laid the first pathways of *psak halakhah*,

especially for Jews in the Islamic world, that Rabbi Danzig found so mysterious as a young graduate student. His own scholarship would again widen our window onto this period and its literature. After years of intensive research, especially into the Geniza, Rabbi Danzig produced a work whose published version is modestly titled [*Introduction to the Book "Halakhot Pesukot,"*](#) the earliest of the *geonic* codes attributed to Rav Yehudai Gaon of the eighth century. At over 500 pages, to call it comprehensive or even exhaustive would be an understatement. The published version is densely printed, with hundreds of pages and thousands of footnotes, many of which are miniature articles in their own right, as well as a supplement of dozens of new pages of manuscripts from the Geniza, extensively annotated (JTS Press, 1993 [2nd corrected edition, 1999]). This work became, like Simha Assaf's and Abramson's decades earlier, a standard point of reference for research on geonica. In addition, Rabbi Danzig later inspired the philanthropist and scholar Dov Friedberg to found the "Geniza Project," which has since photographed, digitized, and transcribed much (if not all) of the Geniza materials at libraries all across the globe.

There were years mixed with joy, success, struggle, and loss. Rabbi Danzig met and married the love of his life, Rivka Ausubel, who earned a doctorate in social work at YU in 1981. She later taught both at Penn and at YU, her research focusing on ba'alei teshuva and Orthodox Jews more broadly. Rabbi Danzig once shared the story of their engagement: while on a walk one evening, Rivka asked him what they were going to do. "I

don't know, maybe get something to eat?" he responded. "No," she said, "are we getting married?" "Oh. Yes, if you want to," he said. And that was that. They would go on to have three children together: Hayyim, David, and Sarah. Sarah, who followed her mother's path into social work, survived cancer as a child, an unimaginable struggle for her and her parents.

Rivka was a truly remarkable woman with a spine of tempered steel: on her first day of work at a clinic in Brooklyn, she talked down an armed man, who had shot her colleague in the head at point-blank range, before the police arrived. While still working on his doctorate, Rabbi Danzig took up teaching at a yeshiva high school on Long Island to help support the family, but lost his position soon after a merger between his and another school. Returning home despondent and ashamed, he shared the news with his wife. Rivka shrewdly asked him whether he had gotten the necessary paperwork to apply for unemployment. When he admitted he had not, Rivka marched him back out the door to swallow his pride and get them. He was able, with that money, to rent a small office and complete his dissertation. Rivka herself would tragically be diagnosed years later with multiple sclerosis, and died in 2006. I do not believe Rabbi Danzig ever recovered from this great loss.

By that point in his career, Rabbi Danzig was firmly ensconced at the seminary, where, in addition to teaching and research, he also supervised three dissertations. He had begun at Dropsie College in Philadelphia, which was later

absorbed into the University of Pennsylvania as the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies. Decades later, he still felt the loss of this unique institution exclusively dedicated to research and graduate training in Jewish studies, open to anyone regardless of religion, race, or sex. From there, he moved to the nearby Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and finally on to JTS. For much of his career, Rabbi Danzig was the leading expert on the rabbinic material in the Geniza, able to recall even individual manuscript fragments. He also produced a [catalog of the E.N. Adler manuscript collection](#) at JTS which is exemplary in its level of detail and usability (JTS Press, 1997). As others have written and as his scholarship shows, he was virtually unrivaled in his command of the sources and of nearly two centuries of scholarship.

I met him in 2010. Already at that point he was not well. That semester, he missed so many classes that the provost's office began monitoring him more closely. But my experience was life-changing, calling to mind Rabbi Danzig's experience with Abramson. The questions he asked similarly opened up a new world for me—it was like *sod*. I can still remember some of the questions he started off with. Why does the Mishnah look the way it does? Why does it have this particular form? Why does it include so much material about the *Beit Ha-mikdash* despite being produced a century and a half after its destruction? And what is its relationship to the Tosefta, which contains many times the volume of similar material? I knew the basic day-school answers: Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi wrote it because imperial oppression made continued oral

transmission of *Torah She-be'al Peh* impossible, problematically fixing the form and content of Oral Torah; the Tosefta contains material that simply didn't make it into the Mishnah. I learned very quickly that things were far more complex.

Those questions, and others he raised over the next few years, set my "research agenda," such as it was. He further introduced me to the issues of orality in the transmission of rabbinic literature. Indeed, one of his other major scholarly contributions was a lengthy article demonstrating that the Talmud itself was studied and transmitted orally for centuries in the Babylonian Yeshivot (*Bar-Ilan Annual* 30–31, 49–112). Under his direction, I studied the question of the relationship between Mishnah and Tosefta in depth, eventually writing my undergraduate thesis on that issue with regard to Mishnah *Ta'anit* 2:1–5. In his class on rabbinic theology, he showed me the variety of approaches to tradition, novelty, midrash, and authority in the rabbinic canon. (I also took his seminar on Geonim, but it did not pique my interest in quite the same way.) My doctoral dissertation, which I did with Prof. Elizabeth Shanks Alexander at UVA and defended this spring, continues my research on these issues. I worked on characterizing the differences between tannaitic legal writing and its predecessors, and the impact of one such difference, using *masseket Halla* as a case study. I grew in new and unexpected ways studying with Prof. Alexander—I have gone so far as to say that she taught me how to read and write anew, and I owe her a great deal. But as a learner I still consider Rabbi Danzig my *rebbe muvhak*, from

whom I gained *rov hokhmati*, the majority of my knowledge and understanding. It pains me now as then that I was not able to have him as my *doktorvater*. He expressed—not intending, I think, for me to hear it—that he felt much the same way. By the time I was ready to begin the PhD after four years at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah—one of which I spent at Yeshivat Ha-hesder Yerucham, one of the *dati le'umi* world's more venerable yeshivot—he had been transitioned into retirement. His poor health had made it impossible to fulfill his duties as a faculty member.

In addition to this approach, these questions, this content, I imbibed from him the importance of taking earlier scholarship seriously. With Rabbi Danzig, bibliography rose from being scholarship's handmaiden, becoming queen in her own right. Years later, I made a point of studying Zecharia Fränkel's *Darkhei Ha-mishnah* and Nachman Krochmal's *Moreh Nevukhei Ha-zman*, on the literary formulation of rabbinic halakhah, and including them in my work. As my other rebbe, Rabbi Dov Linzer shlit"á commented, I had developed a *geshmak*, a particular pleasure, for academic scholarship. I remain astonished by the breadth and depth of knowledge that Rabbi Danzig still commanded even as his condition worsened. He was, as Prof. Rami Reiner of Ben Gurion University put it after hearing of his passing, *anak shebe'anakim*, a giant among giants. I do not believe it is possible, jump and stretch as I might, for me to reach above his ankle in terms of sheer information.

In my final semester of college, Rabbi Danzig was not teaching any class I could take, so he set aside time to learn with me in *chavruta*, studying *Lulav Hagazul*, the third chapter of *masekhet Sukkah*. I have two key memories from that time: his carefully correcting my pronunciation of the text, and his declaration that so long as a *sefer* was open in front of us, we were still learning even while shmoozing. The latter, I can only assume, was offered at least partly in jest.

Rabbi Danzig believed that my further studies at YCT were initiated at his suggestion. While I am certain that he was confusing me with a colleague, I never corrected him, and will continue to let him have this one, as it is, in a sense, true. On the day I met him, he planted a seed of love and desire for Torah learning that continues to grow. It led to years of study with him and over a decade of postgraduate study. My research is driven by the issues he raised beginning that very day. And even as I don't intend to pursue academia, I am heartened by the fact that he also had gone into *hinnukh* decades earlier.

It is true that by my time, Rabbi Danzig operated more in the *behina* of *megaleh tefah u-mekhaseh tehafayyim*—more remained hidden than he revealed. Only years later, long after graduation, did he share many of the stories I've included here. To this day, I know almost nothing of his spiritual life. I never spent Shabbat with him; I am not even sure I ever prayed *Shacharit* with

him. He remarked once on the astonishment he felt at encountering Mordechai Breuer's groundbreaking *Pirkei Mo'adot*, breathing, like Keats, the pure serene of his clear and bold approach, but I didn't probe further. On a personal level, he never met my wife or my three-year-old son. He had a deep love of classical music—a baby grand piano anchored his small apartment—but I know little more about this aspect of life that was obviously dear to him. When he was unable to make it to my wedding after a fall, I dragged my groomsmen to Teaneck to see him that morning anyway. Not necessarily for a bracha, though I did receive one by text message that evening, but just to be able to see my rebbe at an important moment in my life.

Whenever I would tell him about my dissertation, he would always note that in Bavel, they continued the practice of separating *halla* as rabbinic halakhah *kedei shelo tishtakah torat halla me-yisrael*, in order that the Torah of *halla* not be forgotten in Israel (that formulation is from Rambam, [Hilkhhot Bikkurim 5:7](#), based on *Bekhorot* 27a). To be honest, I am not sure that he appreciated the goal of the dissertation. He was not one for the contemporary trends in rabbinics scholarship from which I productively drew. Try as I might, I could not find any place to include his note in the final draft, as my readers frowned upon anything not in service of my thesis. I can cite it here to different ends. Following God's example, we often remark on the passing of a great scholar *haval al de'avdin velo mishtakehin*, woe for those who are lost and whose like cannot be found

([Sanhedrin 111a](#)). I don't hope to find another *ga'on* like him or encounter another source of mystery and wonder like the one he introduced me to, another palace whose center remains enticingly out of reach. But I am certain that he and his Torah will not be forgotten.

May his memory be a blessing.

Still We Rejoice: How Halakhah Guides Emotional Complexity

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A few months ago the latest stage launched in a prolonged war. Israelis were running in and out of bomb shelters and endured sleepless nights as ballistic missiles from Iran lit up the skies, threatening death and destruction. Over the past two years, we have suffered the deaths of over 500 Israeli soldiers, in addition to the almost 1200 citizens and soldiers murdered on October 7th. We have cried over the pain of 251 hostages, and heard testimonies of the inhuman conditions they were subjected to in Gaza. We await the release of the remaining hostages daily.

Yet despite our anger, our frustrations, our pain and our trauma – our joy is not canceled.

On October 7th, we still had *Simkhat Torah*. During the weeks that followed, we still celebrated weddings and *bnei mitzvah*. True, they looked a little different. But we know how to hold onto

multiple emotions, how to embrace the whole gamut of human experience.

On the face of it, this is shocking. How do we continue to rejoice and find pleasure in the small things in life when our world is falling apart? How do we create joy in an ocean of sorrow?

The question of how to create happiness when our overwhelming emotion is suffering is not a new one. The Torah commands us, “And you should rejoice on your festivals” (Deuteronomy 16:4). The Talmud teaches that even a mourner, who generally engages in mourning practices, is required to rejoice on a festival (*Moed Katan* 14b). This seems like a nearly impossible demand. Can the Torah really expect us to generate emotions artificially, manifesting joy amidst deep suffering?

The Talmud (*Pesachim* 109a) concretizes this *mitzvah*, citing different opinions of how a person fulfills the obligation. According to one opinion, men rejoice with wine and women with new clothing. According to another opinion, during the time of the First and Second Temples everyone celebrated by eating meat, but now everyone celebrates by drinking wine.

Fascinatingly, the Talmud does not focus on a person’s inner state of being. Rather, it stresses physical, outward actions. It seems, then, that we are not asked to generate any emotions but simply to go through the motions. Perhaps internal emotion is irrelevant. We can be in a state of deep sorrow, and yet still fulfill the command to rejoice, still go through the motions, still show that we are

not inhibited by our emotions, but can rise above them. Stoically, we can celebrate our holidays while experiencing deep pain for our brothers and sisters stuck in Gazan tunnels.

This approach also applies to the command to love a fellow Jew. There, too, though the instruction “you shall love your fellow as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) seems to require generating a feeling of love, the rabbinic commentaries focus instead on actions that reflect an expression of love – visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, accompanying the dead, engaging in burial, and rejoicing with a bride and groom (*Misneh Torah*, Laws of Mourning 14:1). All these deeds are possible to perform without experiencing accompanying internal emotions. Halakhah, perhaps, does not attempt to control the inner state, as long as the external conduct reflects the desired feeling. The Torah recognizes that controlling one’s inner state is nearly impossible. Yet life must go on; we must sometimes act in ways that do not reflect how we are feeling inside.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this approach is not adopted by many of the commentators with regards to the *mitzvah* to rejoice. They maintain that the Torah makes even higher demands of us – to actually produce an internal sensation of joy. In this *mitzvah*, the Torah teaches that by engaging in physical actions we can artificially manufacture emotions that did not previously exist – by eating meat, drinking wine, and wearing new clothing we create a feeling of happiness. This notion is highlighted by an opinion cited by Rabbi Eliezer of Metz, (*Yere'im* 427), a 12th century scholar, who

says that in addition to the specific Talmudic examples, a person can fulfill the obligation to be happy by engaging in any enjoyable, joy-inducing action. *Sefer HaHinukh*, an anonymous 13th century work, frequently invokes this philosophical principle of Jewish law, that “*aharei ha-pe’ulot nimshakhim ha-levavot*,” meaning that the heart, our internal state, is drawn after our actions (see, for example, *Mitzvah* 16). Through drinking wine and eating meat, we can create happiness even in the heart of a mourner.

What is particularly striking about this understanding of the *mitzvah*, however, is that we are well aware that physical pleasures do not cause lasting happiness. The command, then, is not to produce a lasting emotion but rather a momentary sensation. Despite overwhelming grief, it is within our capability to construct pockets of joy in which to experience some happiness.

We find a similar sentiment regarding the emotion of sadness itself. Following the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Jewish people wanted to go to extreme measures to mourn, including never eating meat and never drinking wine (*Bava Batra* 60b). Rabbi Yehoshua, a rabbinic leader of the period, convinced them that this kind of unbounded mourning was unsustainable and taught them that the proper way to mourn was to allow for small reminders of loss in all parts of their lives. When a person plasters a house, he must leave one section unplastered. When a person has a feast, he must leave one dish out. When a woman adorns herself, she must leave off

one piece of jewelry. These practices use concrete reminders to produce a momentary feeling of absence and loss during moments that are meant to be happy. Similarly, a mourner cannot manufacture sustained happiness, nor is that the goal. However, through other aforementioned actions, one can create moments of joy amidst his sorrow.

Perhaps this is why the Torah does not attempt to command an internal sensation of love for a fellow Jew. Love of another should be a sustained emotion rather than a momentary one. Since that is impossible to manufacture artificially, Halakhah is forced to hold back from requiring emotions and instead requires only outward expressions.

However, it is imprecise to describe these rituals as actively creating a feeling of sorrow. The customs described – leaving part of the house unplastered and leaving out a part of a meal or one piece of jewelry – do not cause one to be upset. Indeed, a person is still excited about building his new house, and still enjoys a lavish meal. Rather, these elements cause a noticeable lack in an otherwise pure sensation. Marring the completeness of the happiness creates a space for another opposing emotion to be expressed and experienced. Sorrow already exists by dint of the fact that the Temple is in ruin; the sensitive Jew feels it deep within his soul. The change in behavior produces a space from which grief can emerge.

Based on this model, perhaps it is impossible to generate an emotion artificially, even temporarily,

and therefore the Torah cannot command that. The approach instead is to tap into an emotion that already exists. We are complex beings, such that even while experiencing immense joy, we are nevertheless aware of the tragedy that the *Beit HaMikdash* is in ruins. Often we try to suppress contradictory feelings. However, we can use concrete reminders to allow this complexity to emerge. At our time of rejoicing – when building a new house, enjoying a feast, or dressing up in jewelry – we remove some of the happiness and tap into the sadness that already exists innate within us.

Perhaps rejoicing on a festival can be understood in the same way. Despite our suffering, the festival itself provides a presence of joy that we can tap into. Through our actions, we can then create a space into which happiness can emerge. This approach is suggested by some of the commentators. Rabbi Yosef Hayyim suggests that the purpose of drinking wine is to cause one to forget financial worries which might have been exacerbated as a result of increased spending for the holiday (*Ben Yehoyada Pesahim* 109a). Rabbi Shlomo Luria asserts that wine removes the pain of exile which prevents a person from being able to truly experience the delight of the festival (*Yam Shel Shlomo Beitzah* 2:5). According to both, the purpose of the wine is to remove sadness. This enables happiness to emerge, thus fulfilling the command to rejoice. Similarly, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sofer understands the obligation to be happy to

mean that one is not allowed to talk about sad things or engage in anything that will cause a person pain or worry (*Kaf HaHayyim Orah Hayyim* 529:2). It is noteworthy that he does not require people to talk of happy things. Removing that which would cause grief is sufficient to allow for the already existing joy to permeate one's existence.

According to *Sefer HaHinukh (Mitzvah 488)*, this is one purpose of the festivals. Just as a person needs to eat and sleep, so too a person needs happiness. The Torah gives us the outlet to rejoice on festivals so that this natural human need can be fulfilled in the service of God. In contrast to the approach that the Torah commands us to artificially manufacture feelings foreign to oneself, this approach recognizes the sensitivity to human nature that the Torah shows by enabling us to express our true emotions.

Throughout these past two years, Jews suffering the war in Israel and historic antisemitism in the diaspora have neither just acted in ways that express happiness, nor have we just artificially manufactured joy. Rather, we have looked deep inside and found that happiness and hope continue to exist, despite our pain and suffering. This has been highlighted by countless stories featured often in the news and via social media of simple expressions of happiness amidst the fear and terror. One recent example is the [video](#)¹ of a man sitting in a house full of rubble playing the

¹ Published at "[MOVING FOOTAGE: Man Sits On Piano In His Destroyed Home Playing](#) [ה' יתברך תמיד אוהב אותי](#)," *Yeshiva World News* (June 19, 2025), available at

<https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/liveblogs/live-blog/2414654/moving-footage-man-sits-on-piano-in-his-destroyed-home-playing-%D7%94->

piano, miraculously left untouched. He plays and sings the following words – “*Hashem yitbarakh tamid ohev oti ve-tamid yihyeh li rak tov*” – “God always loves me, and I will always have only good.” These profound moments of joy are what the Torah intends for us. If our sadness is genuine, it won’t leave us, even for a moment. Yet we can still make space for other feelings. We can choose to create pockets of joy in our life at the same time as other genuine albeit contradictory emotions.

Wine Not? The Missing Holiday Whose Time Has Come

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The fifteenth of Av – among the most minor of minor festivals on the Jewish calendar – is marked in the diaspora primarily by the omission of the post-Amidah *tahanun*-supplications. In Israel, the day was reclaimed with the first Aliyah for the founding of Rishon Lezion in 1882, its grape-harvest festival thereafter, a date for kibbutz dances – recalling Biblical vineyard dances – beginning in the immediate pre-state era, and today is primarily marked as an Israeli answer to Valentine’s day, reflecting a Mishnaic ([Ta’anit 4:8](#)) digression on the nature of those dances.

The day, which is treated in precisely one Mishnah and one passage in the Talmudic corpus ([Ta’anit](#)

[%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%9A-%D7%AA%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%93-](#)

[30b-31a](#), secondarily cited in [Bava Batra 121a](#)), nonetheless plays an outsized role in that reference: it is given six possible etiologies, one more than the five provided for each of the fast days enumerated in the preceding Mishnayot, and thus appears to interpret the Mishnah as offering Tu Be-Av as an antidote of sorts to the great national day of mourning observed six days prior.

The passage makes an appearance once elsewhere in the late antique Rabbinic corpus -- in [Eikha Rabbah, Petihta 33](#) – which ends the passage with a dilation on one particular cause: the ceasing of the deaths of the Jews in the wilderness. The Bavli understands that this fact was ascertained by dint of the resumption of Divine communication with Moses ([Devarim 2:16-17](#)), which itself arguably deserves celebration. The version in the late antique Eretzysraeli Midrash cites a different view:

Rabbi Avin and Rabbi Yohanan said: It is the day that the digging for those who died in the wilderness was halted. Rabbi Levi said: Every eve of the ninth of Av, Moses would dispatch a herald to the entire camp, saying: ‘Go out and dig,’ and they would go out and dig graves and sleep in them. In the morning, he would dispatch a herald saying: ‘Rise and separate the dead from the living,’ and they would stand

[%D7%90%D7%95%D7%94%D7%91-%D7%90%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%99.html](#)

and take themselves out. Fifteen thousand and more were subtracted, for a total of six hundred thousand. In the fortieth year, the last one, they did so and found themselves intact. They said: It appears that we were mistaken in our calculation, and they did the same on the tenth, the eleventh, the twelfth, the thirteenth, and the fourteenth. When the moon was full, they said: It appears that the Holy One blessed be He abrogated the decree from upon us, and they then rendered it a holiday.¹

What does one make of this Aggadah?

It took me until 2024 to appreciate the sort of experience described in the Midrash, one which Israelis of my parents' generation experienced in June of 1967: of laying down to sleep under the threat of night-time annihilation, of furious vengeance promised by a vicious foe, with immediate reprisal deferred by a day, then two, then three – then almost certainly on Monday, with the US President in the situation room – and then after the Wednesday Arab league meeting, then promised on social media for Thursday, then for certain on the ninth of Av... living and working with the obligatory steely resolve, but, admittedly, tinged with a dose of anxiety, if not existential dread. A friend in the U.S. asked if our show of sangfroid expresses Israelis' *bitahon*, trust in God.

Even composure needs to be interrogated, though. How can I be certain that my confidence is in God, and not in *kohi ve-otzem yadi* (my power and the strength of my hand) of the mighty IDF, or worse, the fickle New Rome across the pond? What of *shema yigrom ha-het* – maybe punishment is due, particularly in this inauspicious time, and anxiety is what piety demands? In any event, the emergence of the metaphoric Jewish full moon, defying the crescent, is surely worth more than a mere missed *tahanun*.

The crescendo of this experience came with the twelve-day Israel-Iran war only two months ago, unfortunately with casualties, albeit far fewer than we had feared. By a twist of fate, I was abroad for the entire war, worrying as my family woke each night to head down to the Mamad, to be delivered, thank God, to a new Middle East whose implications are continuing to unfold. (This event coincided not with the mourning period for Jerusalem, but the more recent vintage, mostly forgotten, fast of 20 Sivan, commemorating the martyrdom wrought on defenseless Jews of Blois and of Poland, later, by Khmielnitsky and his Cossacks – but the implications of that “coincidence” are for another time.)

Temporally speaking, the event of survival during the fortieth year in the desert is the first of the six reasons given for celebrating Tu Be-Av, and thus suggests it as an etiology for the choice of the precise date of the annual grape harvest festival – with ripening of grapes in the Levant occurring in

¹ Translations from Sefaria unless otherwise noted.

mid-August² – marked by dances in the vineyards around the tabernacle in Shilo ([Judges 21:19](#)), which itself seems a likely catalyst from some of the other events associated with the fifteenth of Av in the Talmudic account. Vineyard dances around the central pilgrimage site would have been the logical place to inaugurate intertribal exogamy, the next event which Tu Be-Av celebrates, and later, the Bible itself records these vineyards as the locus of Benjamitic reintegration, à la *Sabinae raptae*, the marital abduction of Sabine women by Romulus' men in the foundation myth of Rome.

But why celebrate the survival of expected doom with a wine festival?

1. A Full-bodied Festival

After the threatened (and ultimately, in October, consummated) Iran attack of 2024 – threatened in early August, during the mourning period leading up to the ninth of Av, a week of re-living the Midrash Eikha, trading in gallows humor at my workplace, a hospital a mere block from HaKirya (IDF headquarters), the most symbolic military installation and a known target for our foes,³ worrying nightly for my daughter in Herzliya, my

² Carey Ellen Walsh, [The fruit of the vine: viticulture in ancient Israel](#) (Brill, 2000), 185-186.

³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20120606173431/http://israeldefense.com/?CategoryID=484&ArticleID=941>

son-in-law on his base in the South, our own family in Beit Shemesh, not spared in prior missile attacks, and friends the country over – the aromas and tastes of a particularly complex blend for Friday night Kiddush on Shabbat Hazon, after five days of privation, made the question seem to answer itself. But how to put this into words?

Wine enjoys a special place in Jewish ritual law. The wine-grape, alone among fruits, merits a special blessing for its primary product – *borei peri ha-gafen* – and a special category for its Berakha Ahrona, the *al ha-gefen* blessing. It is the focus of the invocations that convene and adjourn the Sabbath and festivals, for which the imperative of 'remember' is presumed to reference the memory-stirring properties of wine.⁴ It is an Halakhic superfood.

Recent research bears out the late antique Rabbinic intuition. It has long been argued that the ideal wine, in the words of French chef and "Pope of Gastronomy" Paul Bocuse, "satisfies perfectly all five senses: vision by its color; smell by its bouquet; touch by its freshness; taste by its flavor; and hearing by its 'glou-glou'."⁵ But in his *Neuroenology*, the late Yale neuroscientist Gordon Shepherd goes much further: he elucidates the

⁴ This is based on one reading of the Gemara ([Pesahim 106a](#)) that derives the need for wine from the verse, "Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it."

⁵ Gordon M. Shepherd, [Neurogastronomy: how the brain creates flavor and why it matters](#) (Columbia University Press, 2011), 145.

highly complex sensory and motor pathways of wine ingestion and tasting, and further demonstrates that “creating the flavors of wine engages more of the brain than any other human experience,”⁶ involving activation of central brain systems for memory, emotion, motivation, reward, and language.

The extraordinary embodied and “embrained” experience of wine is best understood by poets, not by scientists. Indeed, it did not go unnoticed by the greatest of ours: wine-poetry, playful, real, edgy but never transgressive,⁷ was a favorite genre of the Andalusian poets. No less than R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol, the Ba’al ha-Azharot and author of *Shomron Kol Titen*, the haunting, wrenching, yearning coda to the Kinnot of both evening and morning of Tish’a Be-Av in the eastern Ashkenazic tradition, shared these thoughts on the fruit of the vine:

שִׁפְתַּי מִזְרֵק מִנְשֻׁקֵי שִׁפְתֵי / בְּשִׁמְשׁ זָרְחָה עַל כַּף עֵמִיתִי
בְּמִימֵי הַגִּפְנִים בְּעֶרְהָ אֵשׁ / וְתֹאכְלֵנִי וְלֹא תֹאכַל לְסוּתִי
וְעוֹד לֹא רָאִיתָה עֵינַי כְּמִרְאֵה / זְכוּכִית יַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם דְּמוּתִי
אֲשֶׁר בִּלְטָה יְדָבֵר לִי עֵסִיסוֹ: / וְחָדַל טָרֵם יְבַעֲתָךְ שְׂאֵתִי
וְאִיכָה תַעֲרֹךְ שִׁמְשׁ לְאוּרִי / וְלִי יִתְרוֹן עָלַי שִׁמְשׁ בְּצִאֲתִי
לְמַעַן כִּי גִוְיָתָה עֲרָמָה / וְהִסְפִּיר וְהִשְׁהֵם בְּסוּתִי
וְאִיךָ תִשְׁוֶה דְבָרֵי הַמְהַלְלִ / לְאִישׁ גָּזַל מֵעַט מִתְאַוִּיתִי
שְׂתִינִיחוּ וְהִבְרַק מִפִּזּוֹ / לְגִרְשׁ הָאֵפֶלָה מִנּוּתִי
יִפְזֹר בְּעֵדָה תִּרְשִׁישׁ וְשֵׁהֶם / וְיִפְיֵץ בְּאַפְסִיָה שְׂנָתִי
וְיִתְפָּאֵר בְּפֹחַ זָהָב עָלַי עַב / תִּלְקַט שְׂרָשְׁרוֹת זָהָב בְּבֵיתִי
וּמְיֻמָּה כְּמִי נִשְׁלַג שְׁנִיר אוֹ / כְּמוֹ שִׁירַת שְׁלֵמָה הַקֶּהֶתִי.

Rendered to English by the acclaimed poet and translator Peter Cole,⁸

The lip of the cup kissing mine in my
friend’s hand was like the sun;
A fire burned in the vine’s water, devouring
me but not my gown.
No eye had ever seen a finer mirror making
a man in my image:
whose sweetness said to me, silently:
“Stop, before you’re struck by my splendor.
How could you liken my light to the sun,
whose might I surpass by far—
when its body is naked and bare, and mine
is covered with gems?
How could you ever compare my flow to a
man who steals my desire?”

⁶ Gordon M. Shepherd, *Neuroenology: how the brain creates the taste of wine* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 2.

⁷ Raymond P. Scheindlin, "The Wine-Drinking Party in Medieval Hebrew Poetry." *Passed around by a Crescent* (Ergon-Verlag, 2022), 275-290.

⁸ Solomon Ibn Gabirol. *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*, Peter Cole, transl. (Princeton University Press, 2001), 75.

We drank it and lightning flashed and
drove the darkness out of my dwelling

and replaced it with crystal and onyx,
dispersing my sleep through its rooms.

It gloried in gold above a cloud which
gathered golden chains in my home,

and the rains were cold as the snow of
Senir or Samuel the Levite's poems.

In addition to assigning signifiers to the sensate enchantments of the chalice, the content of the poem demonstrates striking verisimilitude. As the verses progress, the wine seems to have its effect: the similes become more abstruse and unmoored from reality, and the translator admits difficulty in parsing their meaning. Most fittingly, the piece closes with a stunning show of impaired judgment: an abrupt, gratuitous frontal attack on the most powerful of his poet-colleagues, Granadan military commander Isma'il ibn Naghrillah (*Shemu'el ha-Nagid*), ibn Gabirol's erstwhile patron. The verse is known to have caused its author an awful headache.⁹

In engaging all of the senses and all of the brain, wine stands alone, towering above other gastronomic experiences, in a class of its own, requiring its own blessing, meriting even an additional blessing – *ha-tov ve-hameitiv* – for a superior oenological experience. Its complex engagement of memory centers make it the

⁹ Ibid., 234.

¹⁰ Warren Zev Harvey, "Did Ibn Gabirol Write Adon 'Olam?" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 88:1 (2020) 57-72.

proper adjuvant for *zakhor*, the imperative to remember the Sabbath and Festivals. And it is the perfect vehicle for fully reengaging our embodied selves, the great gift returned to us by God, as depicted in another Gabirolean¹⁰ verse –

I entrust my spirit to His hand,
when sleeping and when awake.

With my body my soul will stay; the
Lord is with me, I need not fear¹¹

-- precisely when enduring a period in which this fear is quite warranted, when surviving through the night is by no means guaranteed.

2. Libations of Land

On June 13, 1972, in a Yiddish excursus on the weekly Torah portion at the conclusion of a Talmud shiur at the Morya synagogue in Manhattan, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik offered an explanation for the juxtaposition of the Sin of the Spies with the commandment regarding libation-offerings:

What does "*eretz okhelet yoshveha*," 'a land that consumes its inhabitants' ([Numbers 13:32](#)) mean? ...[that] in order to make an ordinary livelihood, it is necessary to work all day. In many countries,

¹¹ Translation from the 2018 RCA Siddur Avodat HaLev, 417.

such as America, a man can earn a good income and live luxuriously; he can do nothing at all and still make money. However, there are certain countries in which it is very difficult for men to earn enough to support themselves; not only must they labor day and night, but their wives and children must also work so that they may eke out a meager subsistence. Such a country is an *eretz okhelet yoshveha*. It is possible to exist in such a land, but it is impossible to live a full life in regard to one's career hopes and ambitions — in that land, one cannot achieve what he can achieve in another land. This was the *dibbat ha-aretz* (slander of the Land): that the inhabitants of the land had to slave to make a living.

God wished to inform the nation that this was a lie. Thus, immediately following the account of the sin of the Spies, we find the portion of the *minhat nesakhim*, the meal-offering and its libations, which symbolizes not the existence of man, but his success; the offering served to thank God for fulfilling the man's goals, dreams

and aspirations. When is this offering to be brought? *Ki tavo'u el eretz moshevoteikhem*, upon entering the land. ([Numbers 15:2](#)). This proves that the land is not 'a land that consumes its inhabitants,' for if it was, man would find only frustration, and there would be no occasion to bring a libation-offering, which symbolizes success.¹²

By accounts of those close to him, with regard to the delights of the vine, Rav Soloveitchik had a stereotypical Litvak palate — he was partial to grape juice.¹³ However, the idea that wine expresses the goals, dreams and aspirations of man on his land — a very particular piece of land, and what happens on that land — did not escape his notice. It is given sinews in an account of a confessed "*terroiriste*," in his words — one who appreciated the *terroir*, the taste and flavor imparted to wine by the environment that produced it. This thinker is none other than the late Chief R. Jonathan Sacks' philosophy mentor, Roger Scruton.

The 'this worldly' nature of the heightened consciousness that comes to us through wine means that, in attempting to describe the knowledge that it imparts, we look

¹² Translated and transcribed from an audio recording with the assistance of R. Emanuel Holzer, of blessed memory, in June, 1994.

¹³ R. David Holzer, personal communication.

for features of our actual world, features that might be, as it were, epitomized, commemorated and celebrated in its flavours. Hence the traditional perception of fine wine as the taste of a terroir - where that means not merely the soil, but the customs and ceremonies that sanctified it and put it, so to speak, in communion with the drinker. The use of theological language here is, I believe, no accident. Although wine tells no lies about a transcendental realm, it sanctifies the immanent reality, acquainting us with its hidden subjectivity, presenting it under the aspect of Brahman. That is why it is so effective a symbol of the incarnation. In savouring it we are knowing - by acquaintance, as it were - the history, geography and customs of a community.

Since ancient times, therefore, wines have been associated with definite places, and been accepted not so much as the taste of those places, as the flavour imparted to

them by the enterprise of settlement. Wine of Byblos was one of the principal exports of the Phoenicians, and old Falernian was made legendary by Horace. Those who conjure with the magical names of Burgundy, Bordeaux and the Rhine and Moselle are not just showing off: they are deploying the best and most reliable description of a cherished taste, which is inseparable from the idea and the history of the settlement that produced it.¹⁴

Of course, this aspect could not feature in ibn Gabirol's wine-poetry, his drink denuded of native soil, like the poet; it surfaces instead in *Shomron Kol Titen*: "Tiglath-Pileser consumed my fruit."

The Israeli Professional Enology & Viticulture Organization (IPEVO) produced a map with fifteen distinct regions defined by topography, climate, and soils – ranging from volcanic tuff and basalt in the Golan down to loess desert soils in the Negev, with varying mixtures of Terra Rossa and Rendzina upon limestone on distinct regions in between.¹⁵ Israelites did not invent winemaking – that distinction belongs to Eastern Anatolia and Transcaucasia,¹⁶ roughly where the Bible has Noah

¹⁴ Roger Scruton, [*I drink therefore I am: A philosopher's guide to wine*](#) (A&C Black, 2009), 134-135.

¹⁵ Julia Harding, Jancis Robinson, and Tara Q. Thomas, eds. [*The Oxford Companion to Wine*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2023), 2361-2363 (ebook).

¹⁶ Stefan K. Estreicher, "The beginning of wine and viticulture," *Physica Status Solidi C* 14:7 (2017): 1700008.

set down his Ark and plant a vineyard ([Genesis 9:20](#)) – but the Levant became a center of ancient viticulture, and remained so until the Islamic conquest of 634 brought it to a halt. Biblical references to wine are legion, but reach their apogee in Song of Songs, in which, as R. Yaakov Medan explains,¹⁷ the Jewish people are depicted as an embodied entity in the form of their settled land, replete with names and descriptions of its towns and many verdant (and desert) landscapes. Grapes, vineyards and wine are both features of the beloved and a potent symbol of the love between the couple (e.g. [7:3](#), [7:10](#), [8:2-3](#), et al.) which, to be sure, is superior to wine ([1:2](#)) – but wine is an apt metaphor.

Wine is a very human product of our land, but it is possible only with the hand of God, and so an apt metaphor for love in either direction. Several ancient cultures, from Ugarit to Mesopotamia to the Hittites, associated the transformation of must to wine – the fermentation process, in which liquid began to bubble and foam, almost magically – with the direct involvement of a deity; “dew transformed into foaming wine by El” (KTU 1.22 i 18b-20).¹⁸ Similarly, in the Biblical text, Divine blessing is associated with wine-grapes

([Isaiah 65:8](#)). A sip of a good vintage of Castel Grand Vin should be enough to convince one that even the scientific discovery of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* need not revise that assessment.

It is precisely the destruction and exile from the land that eclipsed the entire fifteenth of Av holiday complex – “Gone is the joy of our hearts; Our dancing (*meholenu*) is turned into mourning” – the fifteenth of Av and its associated festivities were rendered a season of mourning; not merely because destruction coincided with them calendrically, but because the *mahol*-dances of the vineyards, the grape harvest, the celebration of experiencing the land through its wine was rendered impossible by destruction and exile.

Wine was torn from our land, but we took our viticulture with us. Haym Soloveitchik argues that Jews engaged in viticulture, and even cornered the wine market almost immediately after they crossed the Alps¹⁹ – roughly during the same period as consolidation of Islamic rule over the Holy Land. There is perhaps an unexplored linkage here with Daniel Boyarin’s “traveling homeland” of the Jewish people, and it is interesting that

17 Archived at <https://www.hatanakh.com/lessons/%D7%94%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%97%D7%AA-%D7%A7%D7%93%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%A8-%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D> and accessed on August 11, 2024.

¹⁸ Rebekah Welton, "Yahweh the Wrathful Vintner: Blood and Wine-making Metaphors in Isaiah 49:26a and 63:6." *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* 4:3 (2022), 19-41.

¹⁹ Haym Soloveitchik, “Halakhah, Taboo, and the Origin of Jewish Moneylending in Germany.” *Collected Essays: Volume I* (Liverpool University Press, 2013), 224–236.

during the Nine Days, when we deprive ourselves of wine to recall our loss of the Land, we permit it for the celebration of Talmud tractate completion, the *siyum masekhet*.

Tu Be-Av 1882 was a temporal watershed. Something new but quite old was reborn with the establishment by Baron Edmond de Rothschild – then owner of Bordeaux’s Château Lafite Rothschild – of the wineries at Rishon LeZion and Zichron Yaacov, where my paternal great-grandfather Samuel Holzer stomped grapes in a four-year interlude between escaping conscription in Galicia and seeking Stateside medical treatment for his brother’s malaria, a more usual gift of the land in those dreary days.

In 1890, when the Carmel winery produced wine in the Holy Land after more than a millennium, the blessing-variant *‘al ha-aretz ve-al peri gafnah* – on the Land and *its* wine – was retrieved from liturgical oblivion. The grapes were and are mostly descendants of those that Tosafist forebears tended in northern climes – Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc, and various whites (although some varieties survived the Caliphs, mostly as table grapes, such as Dabouki, Hamdani, Jandali and the reds Baladi Asmar and Bittuni)²⁰ – but the experience of *terroir* was restored to the Jewish people. There are now some three hundred Israeli wineries. In the recent

collection on alcohol and religion entitled *Holy Waters*, an anthropologist describes how the strongest sense of oenological concretization of repatriation and re-indigenization continues among vintners of Judea and Samaria in particular – Amos, Beit El, Har Bracha, Tura, Drimia, Gat Shomron, Tom – who “live... and act... out [the temporality of redemption] as narrative, biography, and history.”²¹

And alongside Judean Cabernets, there are other sorts of hybrids. In my own Beit Shemesh, the Corona Minyan I attended was hosted by R. Geoff Rochwarger, a *talmid hakham* who invested in a local vineyard, Katlav, after he first made Aliyah, out of an idealistic sense of connecting to the land through the unique mitzvot that it proffers. A few years later, with the appreciation and understanding of wine from that venture, he became partners with wine luminary Jeff Morgan in the ultra-premier boutique Covenant winery, which produces in both California and Israel, thus being first to straddle that temporal watershed, with grapes and world-class expertise from the *golah* thriving in the Holy Land, even while continuing to produce in the diaspora – not unlike the situation of world Jewry today.

The Israelites of the wilderness were freed from territorial limbo on the fifteenth of Av; that moment, those who remained knew that they

²⁰ Karen MacNeil, [The Wine Bible 3rd Edition](#) (Workman Publishing, 2022), 1457-1470 (ebook).

²¹ Ian McGonigle, "Again you will plant vineyards': Prophecy, Jewish Settlement, and Temporal Dissonance in the Occupied West Bank," in Ryan Lemasters and Stephen Covell, eds., [Holy Waters](#) (Routledge, 2024), 33-57.

would enter the Holy Land. And so it is a fitting festival for them – and for us, who each day can savor that land because we are already embodied in it, and it embodied in us, in an eternal relationship with our Partner in winemaking.

3. Dissolving Dissonance

There is a bug, which turns out to be a feature, of wine: intoxication. With Jewish migration eastward to non-wine-producing parts of Europe, Poland and Lithuania, wine was out of reach for most even for ritual purposes, replaced by steeped unfermented raisin “wine” and other concoctions;²² while taverns did have wine available – the Ba’al Shem Tov himself is reported to have sourced some for his wife’s inn, and served it to his Hasidim²³ – to a great extent, the drink of Jews became ‘wine of the locale,’ *hamar medinah* – rye-based, unaged neutral spirit – vodka.²⁴ The stimulation of all senses and tastes of *terroir* may have been lost, but the mind-altering nature of the substance was conditionally embraced by Hassidic masters – as Vadim Putzu notes in his entry in *Holy*

Waters, it served as a means to *avodah begashmiyut*, raising the fallen sparks; as a devotional dilettante’s quick-and-easy path to *devekut*, mystical union; or as a path to *petihat halev*, ‘opening of the heart,’ to the acquisition of *mohin*, the supernal emanations of the sefirotic pleroma — “an enhancement of one’s intellectual and spiritual faculties.”²⁵

Scruton describes the effect as follows.

...And I would go further and say that we idle and sensual creatures, whose attempts at sainthood begin each morning and have fizzled out by late afternoon, can nevertheless gain some apprehension of the atman²⁶ by taking a glass of wine in the evening, and so perceiving a path to the inwardness of things. To take that path requires sacrifice and renunciation; and you certainly cannot achieve the goal of philosophy merely by swallowing a

²² Jonathan D. Sarna, "Passover Raisin Wine, The American Temperance Movement, and Mordecai Noah: The Origins, Meaning, And Wider Significance Of A Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Religious Practice." *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1988): 269-288.

²³ See Moshe Idel, “‘The Besht Passed His Hand over His Face’: On the Besht’s Influence on His Followers—Some Remarks,” in *After Spirituality: Studies in Mystical Traditions*, eds. Philip Wexler and Jonathan Garb (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 89–106. I am indebted to Prof. Vadim Putzu for this reference.

²⁴ Glenn Dynner, *Yankel's tavern: Jews, liquor, and life in the kingdom of Poland* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 20.

²⁵ Vadim Putzu, "Cultural Enology: What Wine Can Teach Us about Religion (And About Jewish Kabbalah and Hasidism in Particular)" in Lemasters and Covell, eds., *Holy Waters*, 58-76, 63.

²⁶ The “self of being” in the Hindu Upanishads (c. 800-300 BCE).

drug, whatever people might have thought in those early enthusiasms for mescaline and LSD.

However, wine shines a light along that path, and the beam it casts reaches far into the inner darkness, highlighting the puzzling forms of things with a glow of subjectivity. Wine, properly drunk, transfigures the world at which you look, illuminating that which is precisely most mysterious in the contingent beings surrounding you, which is the fact that they are - and also that they might not have been. The contingency of each thing glows in its aspect, and for a moment you are aware that individuality and identity are the outward forms taken by a single inner fire, and that this fire is also you.²⁷

Like a near-death experience, wine has a way of blunting the differences that don't matter, the neurotic heuristics that structure the thoughtworld of anxious people when they are abstemious. The Iranologist Touraj Daryaee notes²⁸ that the Achaemenids – and the Sasanids after them – used wine in moderation when discussing important matters, to enhance

awareness and consciousness and “and reject torment.” (As per Herodotus, they would review decisions the next day to be sure they hadn't gone beyond moderation, a step apparently skipped in Esther [1:21](#) and [7:9](#) – in which a king's immoderation worked decidedly in our favor.) This policy served the largest empire in ancient history in good stead for over two hundred years.

In Halakhah, this ‘social glue’ born of smoothing edges is reflected in the idea that wine creates *kevi'ut*, a cohesive social group for drinking purposes, similar to bread in the context of a meal. The Mishnah ([Ta'anit 4:8](#)) describes how this effect – and its root, bibulous transfiguration – was applied to mate selection.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur, as on them the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white clothes, which each woman borrowed from another. Why were they borrowed? They did this so as not to embarrass one who did not have her own white garments. All the garments that the women borrowed require immersion, as those who previously wore them

²⁷ Scruton, *I drink therefore I am*, 115.

²⁸ Touraj Daryaee, "Herodotus on drinking wine in the Achaemenid world: Greek and Persian perceptions," [Iranian](#)

[languages and culture. Essays in honor of Gernot Ludwig Windfuhr](#) (2012), 38-43.

might have been ritually impure. And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards. And what would they say? Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself for a wife. Do not set your eyes toward beauty, but set your eyes toward a good family, as the verse states: “Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised” ([Proverbs 31:30](#)), and it further says: “Give her the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.” ([Proverbs 31:31](#)).

Taken too far, of course, wine can blunt differences that *do* matter, like cursed Haman and blessed Mordechai – *viz.* Lot and his daughters. But the properly effective use of wine is categorically different from this; in the words of G. K. Chesterson, “There is a mystical substance, and it can give monstrous pleasures or call down monstrous punishments. [It is a] mistake... [to] regard wine as a drug and not as a drink.”²⁹

So the day of awakening to life became the day when meaningless differences would be cast aside, when the tribes would marry one another without regard to family of origin, social status, bank statement or physiognomy, when feuds

would be set aside, and when everyone – wealthy and poor – would have reason to rejoice, whether with wine, or, for even the poorest, wood – Tu B’Av was also the festival for bringing wood-offerings to the sanctuary. When the threat of desert annihilation receded, not merely Tu Be-Av but all of the commemorative holidays – all with moderate wine consumption and the problematization of individuality and identity – would assume something of that role.

You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the [family of the] Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities... and you shall have nothing but joy. ([Deuteronomy 16:14-15](#))

As we awoke to a new fifteenth of Av, with the triumph of *terroir* over terror, is it too much to hope that God bless us with vinous conviviality: to overcome that narcissism of small differences, and, with that fire that burns in the vine’s water, perceive that inner fire that is also within all of us?

כִּי אַתָּה ה' בָּאֵשׁ הִצַּתָּהּ, וּבָאֵשׁ אַתָּה עֲתִיד לְבִנוּתָהּ.

“For You, God, have set it aflame, and it is with fire that You will, in the future, rebuild it.”³⁰ (Tish’a B’Av *Nahem* prayer)

²⁹ Gilbert Keith Chesterson, [George Bernard Shaw](#) (John Lane, 1910), 55.

³⁰ Translation is my own.

May it be so, speedily in our time. Until then,
l'chaim.

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