

Why Do We Pour Wine from Our Cup When Reciting the Ten Plagues?

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It's a well-known *minhag* (custom) of the Passover seder to pour wine from our cup during the recitation of the Ten Plagues. The common explanation for this practice, certainly in liberal and progressive circles, is that we lessen the quantity of wine in our cup as a sign of compassion for all, including those who hate us: we take no joy in the suffering that the plagues wrought upon the Egyptians. This explanation is rooted in a famous Talmudic passage [1]:

ואמר רבי יוחנן: מאי דכתיב ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה?
בקשו מלאכי השרת לומר שירה, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: מעשה ידי טובעין בים ואתם אומרים שירה?

R. Yochanan said: What is the meaning of the verse (Exodus 14:20): “[The pillar of cloud] came between the army of the Egyptians and the army of Israel... so that one could not come near the other all through the night”?

The angels sought to sing for joy, but the Holy One said to them: You would sing while My creatures are drowning in the sea?

The Talmud brings Rabbi Yochanan's *d'rash* as part of its answer to the question ומי חדי הקדוש – “does the Holy One rejoice at the downfall of the wicked?” The answer given here is, obviously, “no,” which would imply that *we* shouldn't rejoice, either. So we pour wine out of our cups.

But there's a problem with this explanation. If God doesn't rejoice at the suffering of the wicked, and if God forbade the angels from singing as the Egyptians drowned, why were Moses, Miriam, and all Israel permitted to recite the Song of the Sea (*shirat hayam*, Exodus 15)? We might say that this was God's reluctant concession to human weakness, yet the Talmud follows Rabbi Yochanan's statement with a retort by Rabbi Elazar b. Padat: אבל אמר רבי אלעזר: הוא אינו שש, אבל “God doesn't rejoice, but God permits others to rejoice,” which suggests that Heaven had no objection to the Israelites' celebration on the shore following their redemption.

There's another problem, too: a parallel version of this *d'rash* asserts that God prohibited the angels from rejoicing for a very different reason. [2]

אז ישיר, בשעה שהיו ישראל חונים על הים באו מלאכי השרת לקלס להקב"ה, ולא הניחן הקדוש ברוך הוא, שנאמר ולא קרב זה אל זה וגו' ... למי היו דומין, למלך שנשבה בנו, לבש נקמה באויביו והלך להביא אותו. ובאו הבריות לומר לו אימנו, אמר להן לכשאני פודה את בני אתם מקלסין אותי, כך ישראל היו נתונים בצרה בים, באו מלאכי השרת לקלס להקב"ה נוף בהם, אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא בניי נתונים בצרה, ואתם מקלסין לפני?

“Then Moses and the Israelites sang” (Exodus 15:1). When Israel was encamped at the shore of the sea, the ministering angels sought to sing God's praise, but the Holy One did not permit them to do so, as it says (Exodus 14:20) “so that one could not come near the other all through the night”... What does this resemble? It resembles the case of a king whose son has been taken captive. The king prepares for war upon his enemy to rescue

his son. His people come before him to sing anthems of praise. He tells them: you may praise me when I rescue my son. Similarly, Israel was endangered at the sea, and when the angels came to sing God's praise God rebuked them: you would sing while My children are in danger?

In this version, God's complaint to the angels is not that they would rejoice at the downfall of the Egyptians. On the contrary, God's position is that it is entirely proper to rejoice at that event but not *before* it takes place. Without entering into the academic debate [3] over which version of God's conversation with the angels is the "original" one, we can certainly see that two contradictory ideas are presented here. And for us, this raises the question: why do we pour wine from our cup when we recite the plagues? When we do so, are we demonstrating our compassion for the Egyptians? Or – just in case that second version of the story is the "right" one, are we pouring out the wine for some other reason?

Far be it from us to oppose compassion. But we'd like to point out a detail from the halakhic literature that offers us another possibility. In *Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 473:7, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the author of the authoritative Ashkenazic glosses upon that work, writes the following:

ונוהגין לזרוק מעט מן הכוס באצבע כשמגיע לדם ואש ותמרות עשן, וכן כשמזכיר המכות דצ"ך עד"ש
באח"ב בכלל ובפרט ט"ז פעמים

The custom is to pour a bit of wine from the cup with one's index finger at the recitation of "blood, fire, and pillars of smoke" and of the plagues, both separately and collectively, [4] a total of sixteen times.

Especially important for our purposes is Isserles's requirement that the pouring be done with the index finger (אצבע, *etzba*). We know of other ways to accomplish the pouring, such as by using the little finger or the ring finger, or by pouring a bit of wine directly from the cup. Yet Isserles specifies the index finger. And in *Darkhei Moshe*, his commentary to the *Tur (Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 473), he tells us why.

ונוהגים לזרוק מן הכוס באצבע לרמוז על מה שנאמר אצבע אלהים היא ודלא כמו שמצאתי כתוב
בהגהות מנהגים דיש לזרוק בזרת שהוא הקטן.

The index finger is an allusion to Exodus 8:15: *etzba Elohim hi*, "it is the finger of God." Thus, we should not do as we find written elsewhere that we pour with the little finger.

By using Exodus 8:15 as his proof-text, Isserles links the pouring out of the wine to God's punishment of the Egyptians rather than to God's compassion for them. "Punishment" need not connote vengeance but *justice*. After all, it is the finger of *Elohim*, the Divine name traditionally understood to refer to God acting according to the attribute of justice (*midat hadin*) as opposed to the attribute of mercy or compassion (*midat haraḥamim*). True, the justice meted out upon the Egyptians involved force and violence. We need not rejoice over that fact, but we ought to acknowledge its necessity. Our people's liberation from bondage required "signs and wonders," plagues, and the destruction of the Egyptian army. Just so, justice in our communities and in our world frequently happens only because we fight for it. To acknowledge that fact is not to celebrate force and violence but simply to recognize reality.

In his version of the custom, then, Isserles tends to favor the “justice” explanation for the pouring out of the wine as against the “compassion” explanation. Is he right?

We’re not here to decide that question. Nor do we have to. No less an authority than R. Yehiel M. Epstein, in *Arukh Hashulḥan Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 473, par. 24, rules that one may perform this ritual in whatever way one is accustomed to doing so: with the index finger, the ring finger, the little finger, or directly from the cup. If any of those customs is acceptable, it follows that neither rationale for the practice - compassion for the Egyptians nor compassion for their suffering - is the exclusively correct one. Our point, rather, is that when we pour out the wine at the seder we emphasize simultaneously two themes that are different, in many ways contradictory and yet intertwined. We do not choose - we must not choose - between justice and mercy; we insist that both be observed. At the moment we express our compassion for the drowning Egyptians we *also* identify with the vision of the prophets that justice be done and freedom be achieved.

And we do so no matter *how* we pour wine from our cup.

[1] *B. Megilah* 10b. See also *B. Sanhedrin* 39b.

[2] *Midrash Tanḥuma* (ed. Buber), *B’shalah*, par. 13.

[3] Yosef Heinemann, *Agadot v’toldoteihen* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), pp. 175-179; Shalom Rosenberg, “V’shu al shirat hamalakhim,” *Akdamut* 7 (1999), pp. 71-88.

[4] “Collectively” refers to the recitation of the *simanim*, i.e., the abbreviations for the plagues: דצ"ך עד"ש באה"ב