

# Cup after CUP

Can I pour you another?

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



**WHO DOESN'T KNOW THE MAH NISHTANA? EVERY** child learns it in school so he can give his parents *nachas* when he recites it at the seder. We ask about the matzah; we ask about the maror; we ask about the dipping; and we even ask about the leaning. But why don't we bother to ask about the four cups of wine that we have at the seder, "...on all other nights, we are not obligated to drink even one cup of wine, but on this night we have four cups?"

Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, better known as the Aruch HaShulchan after the title of his influential halachic work, offers two possible answers. When it comes to matters of salvation or joy, it's universal, ie. to drink wine in celebration is not something unique to the Jewish people. It's hard not to picture people at a wedding raising their glasses for a toast, or a sports team celebrating their victory

by dousing each other with as much, if not more champagne than they manage to drink. *Dovid HaMelech* (King David) explains<sup>1</sup> the difference for us, "I will raise the cup of salvations and in the name of Hashem I will call out!"

In other words, *Dovid HaMelech* is saying that when men raise their glasses to drink in celebration, they bless and acknowledge each other, but when I raise my glass, I don't bless other men, nor do I utter their names from my lips, only "in the name of Hashem I will call out", to Him will I bless and to Him will I give thanks. Therefore, since all men drink wine in celebration of occasions of salvation and joy, a question about why we drink the four cups was not included in the questions of the *Mah Nishtana* because it's not really a question at all. Celebrating with wine is something universal.

## THE FOUR CUPS OF PHARAOH

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem Talmud) asks<sup>2</sup> what the source is for having four cups of wine at the Pesach seder. Among the answers that are given, Rebbe Yehoshua ben Levi says that the four cups at the seder correspond to the "four cups of Pharaoh". We said goodbye forever to Pharaoh at the splitting of the sea, so what does he have to do with the four cups that we drink each year at the seder?

After his brothers sold him, Yosef wound up being transported down to Egypt, where he was sold as a slave, falsely accused of a crime by his owner, and thrown into prison. Following years of languishing in prison, Yosef met two royal servants of Pharaoh who had been sent to prison because Pharaoh had become angry with each of them. Each of these servants of Pharaoh also happened to have a dream on the same night and each of them related his dream to Yosef, who was able to interpret their dreams accurately, which foretold of their impending fate.

The "four cups of Pharaoh" mentioned by Rebbe Yehoshua ben Levi refer to the word *cos*, 'cup', which is mentioned four times in the cupbearer's recounting of his dream to Yosef and in Yosef's subsequent interpretation of the dream: "Pharaoh's **cup** was in my hand..."; "...I squeezed [the grapes] into the **cup** of Pharaoh..."; "...I placed the **cup** in Pharaoh's hand"; and "...you will place Pharaoh's **cup** in his hand..."<sup>3</sup>

But what exactly is the connection between the dream of the cupbearer and the four cups of wine that we drink at the seder on Pesach?

## SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

We need to take a step back and consider why the cupbearer and the chief baker both wound up in prison. Rashi explains that the offense of the cupbearer was that a fly was found in Pharaoh's cup and the offense of the chief baker was that a pebble was found in a loaf of bread that had been served to the king. According to Rashi's explanation, the sin of the cupbearer was

much greater than that of the chief baker because the cup for which the cupbearer was responsible was actually placed directly in the palm of Pharaoh, making it a certainty that the fly would reach Pharaoh and possibly even wind up in his mouth, whereas the pebble was merely in a whole loaf of bread that was placed on the king's table before him, not directly in his hand, and the odds were that the piece of bread that contained the pebble would never even reach the king. Contrary to what logic would dictate, however, Pharaoh decided to return the cupbearer to his position and hang the chief baker! What was Pharaoh thinking?!

And there's more to marvel at: how is it possible that the offenses of the cupbearer and the chief baker happened to occur at precisely the same time? And why did Pharaoh get so angry that he punished them as severely he did? Granted, his servants were careless, but Pharaoh could have just dismissed them both from their posts because

“...ON ALL OTHER NIGHTS, WE ARE NOT OBLIGATED TO DRINK EVEN ONE CUP OF WINE, BUT ON THIS NIGHT WE HAVE FOUR CUPS.”

of their negligence. Such offenses certainly didn't warrant throwing them in prison nor going so far as to issue a death sentence for the one for such a seemingly light offense like this. Finally, why does the Torah call their carelessness by the name “sin”, stating<sup>4</sup> that, “...the king of Egypt's cupbearer and the chief baker sinned against their master, the king of Egypt...”?

### WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

To answer all of the above, the Aruch HaShulchan posits that these two ministers, the cupbearer and the chief baker, hated each other. Each one wanted to trip up the other in order to bring shame upon him in the eyes of Pharaoh and, thereby, have him removed from his post.

So, the cupbearer took a pebble and placed it in the bread of the king in order to trip up the chief baker, and the chief baker took a fly and placed it in the cup of Pharaoh to trip up the cupbearer.

According to this reasoning, the primary offense that each of them committed was daring to act against the other by using things that were so closely connected to the king. But, the offense of the chief baker was much greater than that of the cupbearer, as he shamelessly placed a fly in the very cup that would be placed directly in the hand of the king and from which the king would drink, and, therefore, he was sentenced to death. The cupbearer's actions, on the other hand, were not nearly as brazen, merely placing a pebble inside an entire loaf of



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bread and this is why the cupbearer was returned to his station and allowed to continue serving in his position.

## ANOTHER REASON

The *Yerushalmi* brings another reason for why we drink the four cups of wine at the seder: it corresponds to the four exiles/kingdoms: *Bavel* (Babylon), *Madai* (Persia/Medea), *Yavan* (Greece), and *Edom* (Rome). The simple explanation is that for each salvation from one of these exiles we drink a cup of salvation, as *Dovid HaMelech* writes, “I will raise my cup of salvations”. Accordingly, if there would be only one exile, we would only drink one cup, but since there are four exiles, we are compelled to drink four cups.

The reason for most of our exiles is the sin of *sinas chinam* (baseless hatred). In fact, it was the sin of *sinas chinam* that caused our original exile, the Egyptian exile, whose roots can be traced back to the sale of Yosef by his brothers. It’s well known that *sinas chinam* was responsible for the destruction of Bayis Sheni (the Second Temple), but what’s not as widely known is that our Sages teach<sup>5</sup> that the *sinas chinam* that existed amongst the *gedolei yisrael* (the leaders of the nation) is what caused the destruction of *Bayis Rishon* (the First Temple).

## PHARAOH’S FOUR CUPS AND OUR FOUR CUPS

We can now connect what transpired between the cupbearer and the chief baker with Rebbe Yehoshua ben Levi’s answer that the four cups that we drink at the seder correspond to the four times the word “cup” is mentioned in the dream of Pharaoh’s cupbearer and its subsequent interpretation by Yosef. This idea about the four cups was hinted to Yosef with his being in prison and his being innocent from this sin of *sinas chinam*. These

four cups were made known to Yosef through the dream of the cupbearer and its interpretation. In other words, just as the *sinas chinam* between the cupbearer and the chief baker caused them both to be ejected from Pharaoh’s court and imprisoned, so too, because of the sin of *sinas chinam*, the *Bnei Yisrael* (Children of Israel aka Yaakov) will suffer four exiles and drink four cups of salvation, one cup of wine for each exile.

According to this explanation, we find

that the four cups that we drink at the seder are not in any way a praise for us, but rather something shameful that we brought upon ourselves through the terrible sin of *sinas chinam*. Therefore, because drinking the four cups of wine is not something that brings honour to us, we don’t draw attention to it by asking about the four cups in the questions of the *Mah Nishtana*.

Based upon the Aruch HaShulchan’s Leil Shimurim

“IF THERE WOULD BE ONLY ONE EXILE, WE WOULD ONLY DRINK ONE CUP, BUT SINCE THERE ARE FOUR EXILES, WE ARE COMPELLED TO DRINK FOUR CUPS.”

<sup>1</sup>Tehillim 116:13

<sup>2</sup>Pesachim 68b

<sup>3</sup>Bereishis 40:11 and 13

<sup>4</sup>Bereishis 40:1

<sup>5</sup>See Yoma 9b