



Dream Foods

Rabbi Ephraim Nisenbaum



There is a mitzvah for every man and woman to drink four cups of wine at the Pesach Seder. The Yerushalmi¹ offers several explanations for the four cups. One reason is to celebrate the four stages of redemption mentioned in the Torah: 1. I will take you out, 2. I will save you, 3. I will redeem you, and 4. I will take you to Me for a nation. Another explanation is that the four cups represent freedom from the four exiles: 1. Bavel, 2. Persia, 3. Greece, and 4. Rome.

Rav Yehoshua ben Levi in the Yerushalmi suggests another reason. When Yosef was in prison in Egypt, Pharaoh's sar hamashkin, the wine butler, and the sar ha'ofim, the baker, both related their dreams to Yosef. The wine butler dreamed of three branches of blossoming grapes that he squeezed into Pharaoh's cup. Yosef interpreted the dream to mean that in three days the butler would be restored to his post and continue to serve Pharaoh. In this little dialogue the word *kos*, or cup, is mentioned four times. To commemorate this we are required to drink four cups at the Seder.

Rav Yehoshua's reason seems quite puzzling. What is the connection between the butler's dream and Pesach? Furthermore, what is so special about the butler's dream that it even requires any commemoration?

Let us return to Yosef's interpretation of the dreams. The baker's dream seems somewhat similar to that of the butler. He saw three baskets of delicacies on his head, and birds were eating from the top basket. Yosef interpreted the dream to mean that in three days time Pharaoh would hang the baker and birds would eat his flesh.

The commentators wonder how Yosef knew to interpret the dreams so differently.² One explanation might be that the wine butler dreamed about being restored to his position, to be able to pour Pharaoh's cup once again. Yosef understood that if a person in the depths of prison can still dream about freedom and returning to his original post, Hashem would certainly help him achieve his goal. The baker, however, had no such dream. He despaired of serving Pharaoh and merely saw birds eating his delicacies. Without pining for his release, there was no way the baker could be saved.

That is the message of the cups in the butler's dream. A person in exile must always dream about freedom and its accompanying responsibilities before he will be allowed to realize those dreams. The Rabbis instituted the four cups of wine to recall the butler's dream. They remind us of the danger of hopelessness and of the importance of keeping the dream of freedom alive throughout exile.

This may help us understand something else too. The Talmud³ rules that women are also obligated to drink the four cups. Although it is a time-bound mitzvah and women are usually exempt from time-bound mitzvos, they are obligated to drink the four cups of wine since they were also involved in the miracle. Why does the Talmud use this reasoning only in regard to the four cups? Women's involvement in the miracle should obligate them in all the other mitzvos of the Seder too, such as discussing the Exodus and reciting the Hallel.⁴ Indeed, the Poskim explain women's obligation in

discussing the Exodus and Hallel for the same reason.⁵ Why does the Talmud not mention the other mitzvos too?

Rashbam⁶ understands the reason that women were involved in the miracle to mean that the redemption from Egypt was primarily due to the merit of the righteous women. The men in Egypt buckled under the pressure of the back-breaking labor, and they despaired of any future. It was the women who encouraged their husbands to strengthen their faith in Hashem and the redemption. The women personified the very essence of what the four cups represent! It is no wonder that the Talmud offers this reason for the woman's obligation to drink the four cups.

The importance of this dream can also be seen elsewhere during the Seder. The marror is dipped into charoses, a mixture of apple, nuts, cinnamon and wine. The Shulchan Aruch⁷ says that the thick charoses mixture is reminiscent of the mortar the Jews were forced to use when building the cities of Pison and Ramses in Egypt. It seems odd that the symbol of back-breaking labor would be mixed with the sweet-tasting apple.

Rashbam⁸ suggests that the apple alludes to the apple orchards in Egypt. The Talmud⁹ describes how the Jewish women enticed their husbands to beget children, despite Pharaoh's decree to kill the newborn boys. The women would then go to the fragrant apple orchards to bear their children, away from the eyes of the Egyptians.

This, then, is the symbolism of the charoses mixture; it is the faith and optimistic dreams for the future set in the midst of the harsh reality of slavery.

The foods of the Seder serve as stark reminder for the Jew to constantly strengthen his faith, to dream during the bleak darkness of Exile of that final day when "a new light will shine over Zion."¹⁰ May it be speedily in our days! Rashbam suggests that the apple alludes to the apple orchards in Egypt. The Talmud describes how the Jewish women enticed their husbands to beget children, despite Pharaoh's decree to kill the newborn boys. The women would then go to the fragrant apple orchards to bear their children, away from the eyes of the Egyptians.

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The foods of the Seder serve as stark reminder for the Jew to constantly strengthen his faith, to dream during the bleak darkness of Exile of that final day when "a new light will shine over Zion." May it be speedily in our days!

May we merit to observe the laws of Pesach properly and thereby reap their benefits. 🍷

1 Pesachim 10:1

2 see Dubner Maggid's Ohel yaakov

3 Pesachim 108b

4 Women's obligation to eat matzah and marror is learned from a different source. (Pesachim 43b)

5 See Chayei Adam (130:12) and Tosafos (Succah 38a)

6 (ibid.)

7 (473:5)

8 Pesachim 116a

9 Sotah 11b

10 Shacharis