

Passing Bread

Understanding an Ancient Custom

Sponsored by Rabbi and Mrs. Dovid Szerer with thanks to Hashem for all His blessings and miracles

To sponsor or subscribe, please e-mail rabbicitron@hotmail.com

In the Torah portion of Miketz, we read that Yosef had a feast with all of his brothers. This took place after Binyamin had been brought to Egypt but before Yosef revealed his true identity. The Torah writes that the brothers “drank and became intoxicated [together] with him.”¹

The Talmud says² that “From the day Yosef was separated from his brothers he did not] taste wine.” The brothers, too, refrained from drinking to the point of inebriation from the time Yosef had been sold. Some say that they, like Yosef, did not drink wine at all. It was only when they all got together for this feast that they all imbibed wine to the point of inebriation although the brothers didn’t yet realize Yosef’s true identity.

22 Years of Sobriety

The Ben Ish Chai gives several reasons³ for why Yosef refrained from drinking wine during these 22 years.

- The verse says,⁴ “Give... wine to those of bitter soul.” Since Yosef had so many hardships during those years, he specifically avoided wine to show that, despite these, he did not consider himself an embittered soul as he trusted that all that G-d did was for the best.
- Yosef was afraid that if he would get drunk, he might reveal (the embarrassing fact) that his own brothers had sold him into slavery.
- Yosef was continually praying that his brothers not be punished for what they had done. Since a drunk person may not pray, he refrained from drinking at all times.

No Wine for the Brothers

¹ Gen. 43:34

² Shabbat 139a

³ Ben Yehoyada on ibid

⁴ Mishlei 31:6

The simple reason why the brothers didn't drink during those years is that they regretted their rash act of selling Yosef into slavery and were doing *teshuvah* (repentance) for this.⁵ The commentaries offer additional explanations for their abstinence:

- The Maharsha points out that the brothers sold Yosef while in the middle of eating a meal. The atmosphere of self-indulgence at that meal (which may have included wine) contributed to their bad decision. To atone for this, they resolved to refrain from the self-indulgence of drinking wine.
- Since the brothers sold Yosef out of anger, they decided to refrain from drinking wine which can enflame one's anger.⁶

Why Drink Now?

The meal that is described in this Torah portion was the first that Yosef had with all of the brothers. He had already seen the fulfillment of his first dream when they all bowed to him. And, he had seen for himself that they were all alive and had heard from them that his father Yaakov was still alive. As such, it is understandable as to why Yosef drank wine during this meal.

The behavior of the brothers is less understandable, however. Since they were not yet aware of Yosef's true identity, why did they drink with him instead of continuing to abstain?

Several explanations are offered:

- The Maharsha writes that the brothers drank because they didn't want to upset the "Egyptian ruler" (Joseph) who was dining with them.
- The Maharal explains⁷ that the brothers thought that Yosef was trying to get them drunk so that they would reveal the "truth" – that they had come to spy out Egypt. If they would refuse to drink wine, this might strengthen Yosef's suspicion of them. They therefore drank wine, showing that they had nothing to hide.
- The Zohar says that one must be careful when drinking wine during the week as it can ignite one's *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). During the Shabbat meal, however, such drinking is recommended as the holiness of the meal elevates the food and drink to a sublime level which does not have a negative side. The meal described in the Torah portion took place on Shabbat⁸ with Yosef, the Tzadik, being like Shabbat, and the brothers being compared to the brothers who were like the weekdays. So, at that meal,

⁵ Iyei HaYam by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Adel (1757 – 1828), on ibid

⁶ Ein Eliyahu on the Ein Yakov by Rabbi Eliyahu ben Binyamin Shik

⁷ In Gur Aryeh on the verse

⁸ See Bereishit Rabbah 92

the brothers sensed the holiness of the moment and sensed that drinking in this environment would not have negative repercussions.⁹

Passing Bread from Hand to Hand

The Rambam writes,¹⁰ “The person who breaks bread should give a slice of bread to each individual, the latter should pick up the piece with his hand. The person who breaks bread should not place the bread into the hand of the person who is eating unless the latter is a mourner.”

The reason for this custom is brought in the Midrash.¹¹ The verse says,¹² “פרשה ציון בידיה אין לה מנחם - Zion stretched out her hands, there was none to comfort her.” The word פרשה can also mean to break bread (as in the word פרוסה/*perusah* which means a slice of bread). The verse can thus be translated as, “Zion (the Jewish people) broke bread herself because there was no one to comfort her (and break the bread for her).” This means that, it is proper for one who is comforting the mourner to recite the blessing of Hamotzie and give a piece of bread to the mourner. This is considered an act of comforting as it symbolizes that other people are caring for the most basic needs of the mourners. (This slice of bread is supposed to be placed directly in the hands of the mourner, as an act of closeness and caring.¹³) On Shabbat, however, when public signs of mourning is forbidden, the Midrash says that the mourner may break the bread himself. (If someone else breaks the bread on Shabbat, he should not place it in the mourner’s hands but rather put it down on the table and the mourner picks it up himself.)

Since placing the bread in the hands of the mourner is a sign of comfort, it is considered inauspicious to do this for one who is not mourning.¹⁴

Nowadays

Some say¹⁵ that the custom of placing the bread directly in the hands of the mourner applied in the days when every person would eat at his own small table. The mourner would not have his

⁹ Shem MiShmuel, pages 160 and 161

¹⁰ Laws of Brachot 7:5, cited in Shulchan Aruch O.C. 167:18 and Shulchan Aruch HaRav 167:21

¹¹ Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei, beginning of Remez 947

Interestingly, when the Rashba was asked about this custom (Vol. 1 of his responsa, Siman 278) he replied that he had known the reason but that he forgot it. He promised to send another letter with the answer should he remember it.

¹² Eicha 1:17

¹³ The Midrash does not mention this explicitly but it may be inferred from the words פרשה ציון בידיה which means she (Zion) took the bread with her own hands. Indicating, that it is preferred for the bread to be placed in her hands by others.

¹⁴ Elya Rabbah 24. But see the Levush (14) who writes, “The one cutting the bread *need not* place it directly in the hands of the assembled.”

¹⁵ Nefesh Chayah on O.C. *ibid*, by Rabbi Reuven Margolis of Lemberg and Tel Aviv 1889 – 1971

own table (as a sign of mourning), so one who broke the bread would instead place the bread directly in his hands. Nowadays, when we all sit at a large table, this custom would seem unnecessary.

Custom of the Tzaddikim

Rabbi Chaim Elazar Shapiro Shapiro, the Munkacher Rebbe, pointed out¹⁶ that there were many Tzaddikim who were not particular about this custom. For example, the Chozeh of Lublin would have a *Tish* (gathering of Chassidim for an auspicious occasion) on Shabbos with many Chassidim in attendance. His table only had room for 10 or 12 people to sit while the rest of the Chassidim would stand. Yet, he would give them all *shirayim* (pieces) of his challah (as is the custom of many Rebbes). These pieces of challah would be passed, with his knowledge and blessing, from hand to hand.

In addition, Rabbi Shapiro points out, the Arizal doesn't mention this custom. Nor did the Ba'al Shem Tov and his successors speak about it. Generally, he adds, people are not particular about this matter, even great Torah scholars.

Although the Midrash does mention the custom of breaking bread for the mourner and that he may do it for himself on Shabbat,¹⁷ it doesn't say explicitly that the bread should be placed in his hands. Nor does it say that this should not be done for other people. These customs are first mentioned in the Rambam and the Avudraham.¹⁸ As such, Rabbi Shapiro writes, it is possible that it was simply a custom that was kept in his time. When such a custom is in place it should be followed. But in a place where it is no longer customary, one need not follow this custom. As the Talmud says,¹⁹ “כל דקפיד קפדי בהדיה ודלא קפיד לא קפדי בהדיה” – If one is particular about something (i.e., doing something which is inauspicious), he can be affected badly if he doesn't follow that custom. But if one is not particular, he will not be affected.”

In Practice

Since the Shulchan Aruch of Rabbi Yosef Karro, the Alter Rebbe's Shulchan Aruch, the Mishnah Berurah,²⁰ and the Yalkut Yosef²¹ all quote this custom, it is proper to follow it.

Only the HaMotzie Piece

¹⁶ In Nimukei Orach Chaim on 167:18

¹⁷ Rabbi Shapiro writes that he couldn't find it in the Midrash except for the fact that it is quoted in the Bait Yosef and in Rashi on the verse in Eicha. (See In fact, it is in the Yalkut Shimoni as mentioned above.)

¹⁸ Page 316 as quoted in the Bait Yosef, end of Siman 167

¹⁹ Pesachim 110b

²⁰ 167:88 – 90

²¹ 167:16

Rabbi Shmuel Vosner ob”m rules²² that this custom applies only to the piece of bread over which the *hamotzie* blessing is recited whereas other pieces of bread may be passed from hand to hand.

Throwing it Instead

I have heard that some people throw the pieces of *hamotzie* bread instead of handing them to people. One reason for this might be to avoid the issue of passing the bread directly to a person’s hand. This practice is questionable as the Shulchan Aruch rules²³ that it is forbidden to throw bread even in a manner that will not ruin it.²⁴ Despite this issue, Rabbi Shimon Sofer (of Erlau, Hungary 1850 – 1944) writes²⁵ that his father the Ketav Sofer (Rabbi Shmuel Binyamin Sofer 1815 – 1872, son of the famed Chatam Sofer) would throw the pieces of *hamotzie* bread after cutting them. He explains that since one’s table represents the altar (*mizbe’ach*) and the bread represents the sacrifices, it is proper to throw the bread on to the table just as the limbs of the sacrifices were thrown onto the altar. Since one is throwing them for a good reason it is not considered that one is treating the bread disrespectfully.

May we soon experience the comforting of Zion with the coming of Moshiach.

Wishing you a Happy Chanukah, a Shabbat Shalom UMevorach and a Chodesh Tov!

Copyright 2018 by Rabbi Aryeh Citron

²² Kovetz MiBais Levi, vol. 3 pg. 48

²³ 171:1

²⁴ But see Piskei Teshuvot 171:2 who quotes various early and late authorities (Rishonim and Acharonim) who hold that one may throw bread in a manner that does not ruin it.

²⁵ Responsa Hitorerut Teshuvah, vol. 1:178 (The Piskei Teshuvot cites responsa 121. This seems to be an error.)