

Pesach

A Fifth Cup of Wine at the Seder

 Adapted from the works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe
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Adapted from *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. XXVII, p. 48ff.

Before He redeemed the Jewish people from Egypt, G-d promised Moshe:¹ “I will release you from the Egyptian bondage, I will save you from their hard labor, I will redeem you with an outstretched arm..., and I will take you as My nation.... And I will bring you to the land which I swore to your ancestors.”

The standard text of the *Jerusalem Talmud*² refers to the first four of these promises as “the four promises of redemption” and explains that to recall them, we drink four cups of wine we drink at the Seder on Pesach.

There is, however, an alternate version of that text which also considers “I will bring you...” as a promise of redemption, bringing the number to five. And accordingly, that version speaks of drinking five cups of wine.

Similarly, in the *Babylonian Talmud*, although the standard published text mentions only four cups of wine, the version of *Pesachim* 118a possessed by the *Geonim*³ states: “ ‘On the fifth cup, one should recite the Great *Hallel*,’ these are the words of Rabbi Tarfon.”

This difference of opinion was perpetuated in later generations. Thus, when outlining the procedure of the *Seder* in the final chapter of *Hilchos Chametz U'Matzah*, the *Rambam* states:⁴

Afterwards, he washes his hands and recites the Grace After Meals over a third cup [of wine], and drinks it.

Afterwards, he pours out a fourth cup of wine, and completes the *Hallel* over it, reciting upon it the blessing of song... then he recites the blessing *borei pri hagafen*, [and drinks the wine].

Afterwards, he should not taste anything the entire night except water.

In respect for the version of *Pesachim* 118a possessed by the *Geonim*, the *Rambam* continues:

One may pour a fifth cup and recite the Great *Hallel* over it, i.e., from “Praise G-d, for He is good,”⁵ until “By the waters of Babylon.”

This cup is not an obligation like the other cups.

In his gloss to the *Mishneh Torah*, Rabbeinu Manoach states: “From this, one can infer that it is forbidden to drink wine after drinking the four cups. For if one would surmise that it is permitted, why must one recite the Great *Hallel* over [the fifth cup]?”

“Instead, implied is that one should not drink [another cup]. But if one desires to drink, one must recite over that cup songs of praise related to the exodus from Egypt, as one recites over the fourth cup. Otherwise, it is forbidden for one to drink.”

Rabbeinu Manoach’s statements imply that the *Rambam* considers the fifth cup as optional; if a person desires to drink a fifth cup of wine, he must do so under these conditions. It appears, however, that the matter is left totally to the person’s own decision.⁶

It is difficult to reconcile such a conception with the wording employed by the *Rambam*: “This cup is not an obligation like the other cups.” Implied is that there is an obligation to drink a fifth cup, merely that this obligation is not as powerful as that concerning the other four cups.⁷

Upon deeper consideration, the *Rambam*’s approach can be appreciated from a careful analysis of his specific wording. When referring to each of the four cups of wine, the *Rambam* mentions specifically, “recit[ing] the blessing *borei pri hagafen* and drink[ing] the cup [of wine].”⁸ With regard to the fifth cup, by contrast, he speaks of “pour[ing] the fifth cup and reciting the Great *Hallel* over it” without mentioning the recitation of the blessing or the drinking of the cup of wine. And if one looks again at the wording he uses, it is obvious why. Directly before mentioning the fifth cup, the *Rambam* states: “He should not taste anything the entire night except water.” After stating that a person should not drink anything but water after drinking the fourth cup, the *Rambam* would not say that one may drink a fifth cup.

What then *is* the *Rambam* saying? That we may pour a fifth cup, recite the Great *Hallel* over it, and then pour it back without drinking from it. We find parallels in other situations. For example, when one begins a meal on Friday, finishes eating before sunset, but does not recite grace until after sunset, one may recite grace over a cup of wine. It is, however, forbidden to drink from that cup of wine until after *Kiddush* is recited.⁹ In this and other instances, we see that significance is granted to prayers recited over wine, even though that wine is not drunk.

What is the rationale for such a ruling? It is possible to say that Rabbi Tarfon differs with the Sages who require four cups to be drunk. Thus on one hand, it appears that the *halachah* follows the opinion which requires four cups and forbids drinking any more. On the other hand, the fact that the *Talmud* discusses and debates Rabbi Tarfon’s view indicates that it is given a certain degree of importance.

How then should one conduct himself? Since the majority opinion forbids drinking more than four cups, that opinion is followed, and only four cups are drunk. On the other hand, in deference to Rabbi Tarfon’s opinion, a fifth cup is poured, the Great *Hallel* is recited over it, but as stated above, it is not drunk in compliance with the view that drinking it is prohibited.

Alternatively, it can be explained that Rabbi Tarfon himself does not speak of drinking the fifth cup. To refer to the wording in the version of the *Talmud* cited previously: “On the fifth cup, one should recite the Great *Hallel*.” No mention is made of drinking it. For there is a distinction between the fifth cup and the other four cups.

Each of the other four cups of wine is connected with a blessing that plays an integral part in the *Seder*: The first cup is associated with the blessing of the *Kiddush*. The second cup is connected with the blessing *asher gealanu*, which concludes the first part of the *Haggadah*. The third cup is connected with the Grace After Meals, and the fourth cup with the blessing of song that concludes the *Haggadah*. The fifth cup, by contrast, even according to Rabbi Tarfon, is not connected with a particular blessing, or any specific phase in the *Seder*. And therefore, it is of a different nature, and it is not drunk.

There are those¹⁰ who associate the fifth cup with the cup poured for the prophet Eliyahu. They explain that since there is an unresolved Talmudic question regarding the matter, a cup is poured for Eliyahu, regarding whom it is said:¹¹ “The Tishbite will resolve questions and difficulties,” i.e., in the Era of the Redemption, when Eliyahu will resolve all the questions of Jewish law left open throughout the centuries, he will also resolve the questions regarding this cup of wine.

Notwithstanding the cleverness of this interpretation, when a discerning look is taken at this issue, it becomes obvious that the two subjects are distinct in nature. With regard to the fifth cup of wine, the *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*¹² summarizes the different opinions mentioned above, and rules: “From the early generations onward, it has become the universally accepted Jewish custom not to drink wine after [having drunk] four cups.... Others forbid drinking any beverage.... Their words should be heeded unless there is a dire necessity.... [In such an instance,] if no other beverages are available, only wine, a fifth cup [of wine] is permitted to be drunk, provided the Great *Hallel* is recited.”

With regard to the cup of Eliyahu, a custom not mentioned by the *Rambam* but rather originated by the Ashkenazic community,¹³ the *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* writes:¹⁴ “It is customary in these countries to pour another cup of wine, besides those poured for those attending [the *Seder*]. This is called the cup of Eliyahu the prophet.”

From the fact that the two practices are mentioned in separate sections of the *Shulchan Aruch* and in different contexts, it would appear that they are discrete entities.¹⁵ This is also reflected by the fact that Ashkenazic practice regards the fifth cup as permitted only in situations of necessity, but in such situations grants this leniency to every individual. The cup of Eliyahu, by contrast, is a universal practice but is not related to any particular individual. Instead, one cup is poured for every household.

Every practice mandated by *Nigleh*, the revealed tradition of Torah law, has its parallel in *pnimiyus haTorah*, the mystic dimension of the Torah which guides our spiritual development. In general, our Divine service is associated with four levels, corresponding to the four letters of G-d's name ה-ו-ה-י. These spiritual rungs can be achieved by our service. The fifth cup is associated with a fifth level, a transcendent peak that cannot be attained through any mortal initiative. Nevertheless, when a person has consummated the four levels of Divine service that depend on his efforts, he creates a suitable spiritual setting for the revelation of the fifth level.¹⁶ This level is associated with the fifth cup of wine.

Since this refers to an advanced rung of spiritual accomplishment, as a whole, this endeavor is above the scope of people in our age of spiritual darkness. Therefore, this practice is not the prevalent custom in the present age.

The cup of Eliyahu, by contrast, has a future orientation. It was instituted as an expression of our faith in the coming of *Mashiach* and Eliyahu's arrival as his herald. This faith is present in every Jew, and indeed is given more powerful expression in the present generation described as *ikvesa diMeshicha*, the age when *Mashiach's* approaching footsteps can be heard. For as we draw closer to the Era of the Redemption, the faith in the coming of *Mashiach* has intensified. As such, the cup of Eliyahu is a universally accepted practice showing our eagerness to hear the herald's announcement that the time of our Redemption has come.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Shmos* 6:6-8.
2. *Pesachim* 10:1.
3. Cited by Rabbeinu Yitzchak Alfasi. The version of the *beraisa* stated in our texts of the *Talmud* is "On the fourth cup,..."
4. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Chametz U'Matzah* 8:10.
5. *Tehillim*, Psalm 136.
6. See also the *Tur (Orach Chayim* 481) which quotes a question posed to Rav Saadia Gaon: "If one desires to drink a fifth cup...."
7. Rabbeinu Nissim mentions two opinions regarding the fifth cup. According to the second opinion, it is a *mitzvah min hamuvchar*, "the choicest way of observing the *mitzvah*," to drink five cups, indicating that it is preferable to drink five cups. The *Rambam* does not subscribe to the view quoted by Rabbeinu Nissim, for he does not use the expression *mitzvah min hamuvchar*. There is, however, an association between these two conceptions. Note also the *Raavad's* notes to Rabbeinu Yitzchak Alfasi's *Halachos* which state that "it is a *mitzvah*" to follow Rabbi Tarfon's view.
8. *Hilchos Chametz U'Matzah* 8:1,5, and 10.
9. *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim* 271:6); see also *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Shabbos* 29:13.
10. *Ta'amei HaMinhagim*, sec. 551, mentions this concept in the name of the Vilna Gaon.
11. *Tosafos Yom Tov* and of tractate *Edius; Shaloh* 409a.
12. *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* 481, based on the *Ramah*.
13. See the *Haggadah* of the *Maharil*, and the *Chok Yaakov* 480:6.
14. *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* 480:8.
15. The association of the two practices is also made in the *Haggadah* of the *Maharil*. Nevertheless, according to the *Rambam's* conception, and according to the development of the concepts in the works of the *Halachists*, it is obvious that they are distinct issues.
16. [To quote a like, but not identical concept: We are commanded (*Vayikra* 23:16) to count fifty days of the *Omer*. In practice, we count only forty-nine, the fiftieth day being the holiday of *Shavuos*. In *Chassidus* (see following essay), it is explained that forty-nine equals seven times seven, i.e., it refers to the full range of our seven emotional qualities which are structured as a set of seven, each one including the other. These qualities are within our potential — and hence, we have the responsibility — to refine and elevate. After we have accomplished this endeavor and created a proper setting — the fiftieth level — a sublime peak identified with the fiftieth gate of understanding is revealed from above.]

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