

Dear, dear, dear friends of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation – we can't say precisely how dear because our tax records are currently under audit but we plan to release them just as soon as we can edit them sufficiently – we are so, so, so glad to welcome you to the Harvonah Memorial Lecture for this year. Did we say "glad?" We're overjoyed, ecstatic, thrilled – to put a fine point on it, we're happy. Why? Well, maybe it's the wine. OR maybe it's because we have teachings of such import to impart (or export; we're flexible) to such diligent students of Harvonah – may he be remembered for good – as yourselves that we have been examining the calendar (between vacations), watching the clock (between naps), and counting the minutes (at least as high as 3) until we could address you again this year. You see, although you have already been enlightened again and again and again and again (but who's counting?) about Harvonah's supreme importance to the holiday of Purim, that enlightenment will seem like the deepest darkness and the most profound ignorance compared to the much lighter, brighter, and even blinding light (you may need sunglasses) that we are prepared to shine in your direction this year. And to tell the truth, the sage scholars of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation are feeling pretty good about themselves right about now, and many of them have been high-fiving each other at the headquarters of the Foundation, whose exact location cannot be revealed except upon receipt of an extremely substantial donation (operators are standing by), and otherwise expressing their joy. Ok, that probably is the wine.

In any case, we are now prepared to reveal to you the amazing, astounding, and frankly disturbing results of our research, research that has led our sage scholars to plumb the depths of every glass (good to the last drop), to search deeply into neglected corners (in hopes of finding a forgotten bottle), and to interrogate their most basic assumptions (maybe beer before liquor is really just fine). Now it can be revealed. Ok, not then, but now: Harvonah is not only central to the holiday of Purim but also central to another holiday of some small significance (what could possibly compare to Purim?) whose meaning otherwise escapes our grasp. Of course we're talking about the holiday of... Pesach! "What?!" we hear you cry. "How could this be??" we hear you ask. "Are you crazy?!" we hear you exclaim, followed by some really unrepeatable suggestions that we suspect are anatomically impossible. Well, we will explain and answer all of your questions (at least the easy ones) and satisfy all of your doubts by presenting this year the incontrovertible evidence found in the dog-eared pages (can we help it if our dog loves to study?) of the original manuscripts of a heretofore and perhaps in previous generations blessedly obscure tractate of the Talmud known as *Masechet Pur-ach v'Pes-im*, and our lecture this year comes from the text and commentaries on page 117b:

"Our rabbis taught: We know that Harvonah was present in Egypt and that only with his help did the Israelites go free from slavery. One of the *minim* – literally, a really mean person but here indicating "anybody who disagreed with the rabbis about anything" – asked Rabbi Hamra M'vash'la: How could you possibly know that?! He answered him, or maybe it was someone else entirely who came up behind him and said: Learn it from the first plague, as it is written, "and all the water that was in the Nile turned to *dam* [blood]" (Exodus 7:20). Do not read *dam* [blood] but rather *sam* [intoxicant] – the water turned into wine. And who could have done such a thing? Although both Moses and Aaron are mentioned at the beginning of the verse, as it is written, "Moses and Aaron did it," it continues "he [singular] lifted up the staff and struck the water." "He?" "He" is "Hu"? And who is he? Only Harvonah, as it is written, "He [Harvonah] said" (Esther 7:9). Harvonah turned the waters of the Nile into wine, and the Egyptians became too drunk to distinguish between free people and slaves.

Rashi examines at length every other appearance of the word "blood" in the Tanach and what would happen if they all actually meant "wine." He finds that there are 31 such occurrences and concludes that drinking is the key to the salvation of the Jewish people. He notes that references to wine are particularly prevalent and goes on to suggest that drinking wine is the true route to heaven, especially wine produced at his vineyard, whose grapes are particularly knowledgable, and on sale this week. Rashi's commentary then descends into unintelligible garble with only a few distinguishable words, such as "toga," "more," "party," and "pineapple" (*anas* in Old French).

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, take issue with Rashi, as it is written in the Book of Psalms: "Far better is it to own an orchard than to drink all the wine therein" (Psalm 163:4), and as it is written in the Book of Proverbs: "Don't drink so much, you old codger" (Proverbs 59:25). They realize that the gematria of 31 (the number of appearances of the word "blood") is *lo* [no], and they deduce from this that the water of the Nile was NOT turned to wine but rather only metaphorically became like wine, i.e., red, and that Harvonah simply happened to be in the right place at the right time. Instead, the real question is, as usual, one no one asked: why does this teaching come to us in the name of Rabbi Hamra M'vash'la? Doesn't he argue in 17 other places in the Talmud that wine is actually the primordial element that gave rise to all others?! (See for example Masechet Ha-Kol Yeino 62a.) They then reconcile the conflict that they just created by saying that Aaron is actually a perfect anagram for Harvonah and that Aaron was well known for turning water into wine and back again long before it was popular. Then, as usual, they end their comment without actually getting to what they were supposedly talking about.

Modern commentators note that both wine and blood were dashed against the altar in the Israelite cult, so they were equivalently taboo or, as some call it, "holy." Therefore, the substitution of one for the other as is done in this story forms a complete proof of theories from the 19th century that everyone has forgotten but which remain deeply relevant if only one could remember them and figure out what in the world they have to do with the Talmud. In addition, they argue, this story reveals much about the relationship between the ancient rabbis and the *minim*, who, although usually thought to be in opposition to each other, actually commonly went out drinking together until they couldn't remember whose opinion was whose.

One day Rav S'chayah said to Rabbi Mayim: Do you know the story of Harvonah at the shores of the sea? He replied: You're going to tell me no matter what I say, so just go ahead. He said to him: At the sea, when they saw the Egyptian army coming after them, the Israelites cried out to Moses, and Moses cried out to God. To whom did God cry out? To Harvonah, and his name is the sign of it: Herev [sword] - O [O] - Na [uncooked], as if to say, "Swords are coming, eunuch!" At once, Harvonah dug a gigantic hole in the sand and part of the sea flowed into it, creating a path for the Israelites to walk on dry land through the midst of the sea. Rav Shlili said: *Ini?! - literally, the beginning of a children's nursery rhyme, but here meaning "that is the most ridiculous story I've ever heard."* But didn't Rav S'chayah also teach that the sea parted immediately when the Israelites cried out? Rabbi Hiyuvi replied: *La kashya*, meaning "stop asking me for cash all the time!" The sand turned to wine and Harvonah quickly drank it.

Rashi wakes up in time to comment that this is just what happens when you start listening to wild drashes and not paying attention to the simple meaning of the text – you end up drinking a desert full of sand for no reason. God had no need to cry out to Harvonah because Harvonah had already noticed a stake standing 50 amot tall out in the desert, as it is written, “a stake 50 amot tall” (Esther 7:9). When Harvonah pointed this out, God caused all of the water from the center of the sea to be hung – or perhaps impaled – on the stake, leaving the path for the Israelites to walk through on dry land. So in the future, Rashi says in disgust, let’s just stick to the plain meaning of the text, shall we?

Tosafot get really excited about digging holes in the sand and quickly run through 50 other stories in the Talmud that involve digging. Unfortunately, they quickly discover that none of them involve Harvonah, the sea, Egypt, or God. Undeterred, they switch to a complete catalogue of medieval drinking games and manage to find their way clear to acknowledging that old Rashi really did have a point about wine after all, after which their way becomes very muddled indeed and involves a lot of grammatical errors and misquoted bits of the Talmud until sputtering to a halt.

Modern commentators compare the stories found in this passage to Greek myths, Persian legends, Norse folktales – in general, anything and everything as long as it has no connection whatsoever to the Israelites, the Tanach, or Judaism. Unsurprisingly, they find that its motifs are common but that they are put together here in unusual ways that speak to both the uniqueness of the Jewish character and the universal nature of everything under the sun, making them feel so good about themselves and the human race that they are cheated out of their shirts by the next person they meet and have to work out their good feelings toward humanity on the streets.

The experts at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation recommend that all who want to view themselves as righteous should follow Harvonah’s example by finding a large body of water, drinking as much as possible, and trying to pay very close attention whenever you run across an enormously large stake. Thus will we merit the time of Moshiach, may it come speedily in our days, Amen, Selah.

This concludes the Harvonah Memorial Lecture for this year. Please always remember and never forget to donate generously to the Harvonah Memorial Foundation to continue its support of this lecture series. Note that many halachic authorities (only 99% of whom have at one time or another been paid advisors for the Harvonah Memorial Foundation) argue that this support constitutes *matanot la’evyonim* – the mitzvah of giving gifts to those in need that is mandated on Purim. As a friendly reminder, you can find the Foundation and donate on the web at: www.withoutharvonahwherewouldyoube.org

Hag Sameah!