

KI SEITZEI:

RABBI REUVEN CHAIM KLEIN



Getting Drunk

The Torah stipulates that an adolescent may only be eligible for the capital punishment due to a “rebellious son” (ben sorer u’moreh), if that young man is zollel and sove. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 8:2) states that the rebellious son is only liable for punishment if he sinfully indulges himself in meat and wine, explaining that zollel refers to him fressing meat, while sove refers to him filling up on wine. Such gluttony and swilling portend a dark future for that rebellious kid. To put it bluntly, the word sove teaches us that the rebellious son is only considered rebellious enough if he “gets drunk” on wine. Another term for “getting drunk” is the Hebrew verb shachar and its various inflections (like vayishkar used when describing Noah getting drunk in Gen. 9:21). In the essay before you, we explore these two synonyms for “getting drunk” in Hebrew, and try to show the nuances that each term brings to the table.

Even though the rabbis interpret the word sove as a reference to the rebellious son overindulging specifically in wine, they note that there is no proof to this explication of the verse in Deuteronomy. They do, however, add that there is an allusion to this understanding in a different passage (Prov. 23:20) that juxtaposes a verb form of sove with wine (see Sanhedrin 71a, Sifrei Ki Teitzei §219). This means that the word sove, per se, does not have to mean “getting drunk from wine,” but refers to one who was drinking any type of (intoxicating) beverage, albeit in the context of the rebellious son it refers specifically to wine. Indeed, Maimonides (Laws of Mamrim 7:1) writes that it is only based on a tradition that we know that the rebellious son needs to get drunk on wine in order to be liable for punishment. This implies that the Bible’s wording of sove alone could mean something broader like “getting drunk” even from some other drink.

Indeed, Menachem Ibn Saruk in his work Machberet Menachem defines sove as shichrut (“drunkenness”). And similarly, Rabbi Shlomo of Urbino in his lexicon of Hebrew synonyms Ohel Moed actually lists sove as a fourth synonym for “drinking.” [We discussed the other three synonyms in a previous essay, see “Take a Drink” (Nov. 2022)].

The trilateral SAMECH-BET-ALEPH appears at least eight times in the Bible in the context of one “getting drunk,” or the beverage by which a person achieved that state. For example, when Isaiah criticizes the Jewish People for engaging in questionable business practices, he accuses, “your sava is diluted in water” (Isa. 1:22), charging that wine merchants would regularly dilute their wine in water, but would continue to sell it as though they were hawking unadulterated wine. Targum (on that verse), Rashi (to Bava Batra 15b), and Rabbi Yosef

Kara (to Isa. There) explain that sava actually refers to “wine.” Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866–1935) explains that when a person reaches a certain level of drunkenness, then he is no longer sensitive to taste of the wine he is drinking. Such a person can be described as sava. In such cases, unsavory wine sellers, sommeliers, or bartenders would serve that person wine that had been diluted in water for the full price of unadulterated wine without the drink buyer ever realizing that he had been cheated.

That sava means “wine” is also the opinion of Rashi in his comments to Hos 4:18. Nonetheless, Rashi elsewhere (to Isa. there, Nah. 1:10) seems to understand sava as general term for drinks (see also Rashi to Avodah Zarah 77a who explains that a cognate of this word, savyuta, refers to “wine merchants”). Rabbi Yosef Nechemias (to Prov. 23:20) notes that because drunkards are called sovim, the word sava came to also refer to “wine” itself. [For more about the different Hebrew words for “wine,” see “Words for Wine” – Part 1, Part 2 (March 2022).]

Interestingly, Malbim in his work Yair Ohr on Hebrew synonyms writes that the term sove denotes “drinking” things that could make one drunk (whether or not one has actually become drunk), while shichrut (discussed below) refers specifically to somebody who has drunk such drinks and has indeed become drunk.

As is his wont, Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim (1740–1814) traces the trilateral root SAMECH-BET-ALEPH to the biliteral root SAMECH-BET (with the final ALEPH being extraneous to the core root). That biliteral root gives way to various words that refer to “going around” (like sivuv), which Rabbi Pappenheim explains relates to the drunkard’s habit of “going around” from store to store, or from tavern to tavern, or to whatever other places alcoholic beverages are found. He adds that such is the way of drunkards to always be going around from place to place in order to get to drink different higher quality wines, so that they may recite the blessing HaTov V’HaMeitiv on the upgraded wine (see Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim §175:2). In his glosses to Rabbi Pappenheim’s Yeriot Shlomo, Rabbi Moshe Tzurriel (1938–2023) notes that this last comment was a sarcastic witticism from Rabbi Pappenheim, as in reality drunkards do not care about reciting blessings, but are rather simply looking for new and exciting ways to get their fix.

Rabbi Moshe Tedeschi Ashkenazi (1821–1898) in his work Otzar Nirdafim on Hebrew synonyms writes that sove relates to the biliteral SAMECH-BET in the sense of people sitting “around” a table and drinking together. [In this way, sove may be a cognate of the word mesibah, see my earlier essay

“Party Hardy” (March 2017)].

It has been noted by several scholars that the word sove (spelled with an initial SAMECH and a final ALEPH) is related to its homonym sava (spelled with an initial SIN and a final AYIN), as the latter term refers to something “full/satisfied/content” (seviah), and the former refers to a person who continues to drink and intoxicate himself even after he is totally satisfied. This point was made by Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh of Carpentras (in Aholei Yehuda), Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (in his comments to Gen. 24:25, Deut. 21:19), Rabbi Shimon Yehuda Leib Goldblit (in Leshon Chachamim), and Rabbi Dr. Asher Weiser (in Mikra V’Lashon). Rabbi Hirsch also suggests a connection between SAMECH-BET-ALEPH with the root TZADI-MEM-ALEPH, based on the interchangeability of the letters SAMECH and TZADI, as well as the letters BET and MEM.

One of the sons of Kush is given as Sva, or Seba in English (Gen. 10:7, I Chron. 1:9). Sva’s descendants – the Sabaeans – are mentioned again later in the Bible when Isaiah refers to them alongside the Kushites (Isa. 43:3, 45:14). In another place, the prophet Ezekiel refers to people called savaim (Ezek. 23:42), which Radak (there) explains refers to the Sabean people. Yet, in his Sefer Shorashim, Radak writes that these people were actually “drunkards.” [Targum Jonathan and Rashi (there) explains that savaim refer to merchants who “go around,” thus seeing savaim as a cognate of sivuv.]

Moving to the word shachar, it should be noted that there are different forms of this word in Biblical Hebrew, but all of them ultimately trace back to the trilateral root SHIN-KAF-REISH. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, some declensions of this root refer to the verb of “getting drunk,” and according to Even Shoshan’s Biblical concordance this usage occurs 19 times in the Bible. In another three cases, there is a noun shikaron (Jer. 13:13, Ezek. 23:33, 39:19) that refers to “drunkenness/intoxication,” which also happens to also be the name of a city in the tribal territory of Judah (see Josh. 15:11). Finally, this root also gives way to a noun sheichar that refers to a specific beverage that is used to render one “drunk.” That word appears 23 times in the Bible. A post-Biblical inflection of this root is the word shikur (“drunkard”), which is the etymon of the Yiddish word shikur/schicker.

Regarding the noun sheichar, Rabbi Moshe Tedeschi Ashkenazi argues that technically this word refers to any alcoholic or intoxicating beverage, but that when it is used in the Bible it sometimes refers strictly to strong wine. For example, Num. 6:3 forbids the Nazirite from drinking shechar, with Targum Onkelos and Rashi (there) explaining that sheichar

in that context refers specifically to “old wine,” which is more likely to render one who drinks it intoxicated (as opposed to yayin in that verse, which refers to “new wine,” which is less intoxicating). Similarly, when the Torah commands that a libation of sheichar should accompany the daily Tamid sacrifice (Num. 28:7), Rashi (there) explains that this refers to “intoxicating wine.” Interestingly, when Rashi (to Zevachim 91a) again mentions this, he adds that sheichar is an expression of seviah (“satisfaction”), as though pouring that oenological product down the altar’s pipes is “satisfying” the thirst of those hollow tubes.

But sometimes sheichar in the Bible could refer to other intoxicating drinks: for example, Lev. 10:9 forbids one from drinking sheichar before entering the Temple, and there is ample reason to understand that even if one partook of other intoxicating substances besides wine, one may be liable for this prohibition (see Nazir 4a, Krisus 13bm and Nachmanides to Lev. 10:9). That said, sheichar in Rabbinic Hebrew refers to what we call “beer/mead” (for example, see Pesachim 3:1).

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Ex. 13:12) offers a somewhat cryptic comment connecting shachar (“intoxication”) with the words sheger (“issuing/sending forth”), shir (“song”) and sheker (“lie/falsehood”). These connections are based on the interchangeability of the letters KAF, GIMMEL, YOD, and KUF. Rabbi Hirsch explains that all of these terms refer to something which is “born from oneself,” but does not give more detail. Dr. Lawrence Resnick in his work 1,000 Words (which elucidates the word connections made by Rabbi Hirsch) explains that all four words signify a production coming from within – whether mentally or physically: sheger refers to one’s live offspring, the handiwork of one’s own reproductive system; shir refers to an enthusiastic expression of one’s own mental vision, shechar refers to the drunken state wherein the imagination forms a reality of its own making; and sheker refers to something made up of cloth, a total falsehood, which consciously presents one’s falsities as true.

Rabbi Aharon Marcus (1843–1916) proposes that the trilateral root SHIN-KAF-REISH actually derives from the biliteral root KAF-REISH, with the initial SHIN as peripheral to the radical stem. The root KAF-REISH(-KAF-REISH), in turn, refers to “dancing” – like when King David was said to be micharker before the Ark (II Sam. 6:14, 6:16). He explains that “getting drunk” causes dizziness as though one’s head was “dancing” around. [For more about the Hebrew words for “dancing,” you’ll have to wait for my future article on the topic...]