

Pesach

Mortal “Pair-il” : Zugot on the Seder Night

Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne

Passover is a night of questions; a night for doing strange things and then asking ourselves why. The tractate of the Talmud, Pesachim, that deals with our holiday is filled with both questions and answers that explain the actions we take during the Seder. And on page 100a, the rabbis of the Mishnah inform us as follows:

“One may not drink fewer than four cups of wine, even if one needs to use the communal charity funds to afford it.”
"ולא יפחתו לו מארבע כוסות של יין ואפילו מן התמחוי."

Clearly, the rabbis take these four cups very seriously and the Gemara, understandably, is perplexed as to why. We, who have been at sedarim before, might think we know what the Gemara’s question is and what the answer will be. The question I anticipated was: Why do we need four cups? And at least in my haggadot — and we have many in my house — I read that the four cups represent the four languages of redemption: וְלִקַּחְתִּי, וְגֹאֲלֹתִי, וְהִצַּלְתִּי, וְהוֹצַאתִי -- I will take you out, I will save you, I will redeem you, and I will take you.

That’s not the conversation that follows. On page 109b, the Gemara asks:

“How could the rabbis establish a mitzvah that commands a person to put themselves in danger? After all, we have a braita that says ‘A person should not eat in pairs or drink in pairs...’”
“היכי מתקני רבנן מידי דאתי בה לידי סכנה? והתניא לא יאכל אדם תרי ולא ישתה תרי...”

The Gemara is referring to the deep-seated belief among the Jews of late antiquity, especially those living in Babylon, that doing things in pairs opens a person up to malevolent influence and bad luck. This folk practice carries on through today, and there are still communities where avoiding זוגות — zugot or zugos — is consistently done.

And, if you are like me, you suddenly want to know why. What is so bad about pairs? According to the Gemara, we are careful about pairs because it is a הלכה משה מסיני, a principle given to Moses at Sinai and thus one that neither has nor needs a prooftext. Which does provide an answer, albeit not a very satisfying one. Recent scholarship offers another possibility.

Living, as they were, in the Persian Empire during late antiquity, the rabbis were surrounded by practicing Zoroastrians. One of the tenets of Zoroastrianism is that there are two great deities who are struggling in the world, one good and one evil. As Jews, we reject the idea of more than one God; and the dualism that is so central to Zoroastrianism is anathema to us. It makes sense, then, to avoid things that come in twos. There is, unfortunately, no way to prove or disprove this assertion, but it makes for a good story. No wonder the rabbis would warn against the dangers of

dualism and ask us — the singular nation — to live in a world that appreciates the singleness of God and avoids the balance of forces implied by pairs.

In any event, we can appreciate the danger that the rabbis of the Gemara believed they could be put in. The Gemara goes on to provide two very different answers as to why we can drink in pairs on the Seder night.

Rav Nachman focuses on the nature of the seder night.

Rav Nachman says that the pasuk calls Passover a “night of guarding”, which means a night when one is guarded from evil influence and demons. "אמר רב נחמן אמר קרא ליל שמורים ליל המשומר ובא מן המזיקין"

According to Rav Nachman, there is something inherently special about Passover night that protects one from those out to do us harm. The commandment to drink four cups can stand because God is watching over us and will protect us from any harm.

Other rabbis disagree and provide a different explanation of how we are protected even when drinking in zugot.

“רבא אמר כוס של ברכה מצטרף לטובה ואינו מצטרף לרעה. רבינא אמר ארבעה כסי תקינו רבנן דרך חירות כל חד וחד מצוה באפי נפשה הוא.”

Rava says that the third cup, the cup said after birkat hamazon, only combines with the others “for good” and not “for ill”. That is, because it is used as part of fulfilling a different mitzvah, it can be counted as a cup of wine for good things — like reaching the correct count for the four languages of redemption — but not for bad things. So it’s really three cups and one cup and that’s not pairs. Ravina takes that argument even further and says that because each cup represents a single expression of redemption, each is an individual mitzvah, and so they do not combine at all. So it’s as if we are only drinking one cup, just four times.

All of these explanations solve the problem raised by the Gemara: there is no need to fear drinking zugot on Passover night and the rabbis did not establish a mitzvah that puts us in danger. And yet there is a fundamental distinction in the way that Rav Nachman understands the source of our safety differently than Rava and Ravina. In the latter case, we who drink four cups are protected through a loophole. These four cups are not really four, they are three and one. Or they are one and one and one and one. They are designed so as not to attract any danger. Nothing has changed about the world, but the rabbis have carefully constructed ritual so that it operates in a safe manner.

Rav Nachman’s approach is completely different. According to him, the world is changed on Passover. That which is usually threatening is held at bay. That which ordinarily requires caution can be done without fear. If Passover truly is a ליל שמורים, a night when we are protected, then it is not just the effects of zugot that we are protected from, but from all sorts of mischief. The practical

distinction, what students of the Gemara call the נפקא מינה, between the two interpretations is that Rava and Ravina's answer provides an exception only for the four cups, while Rav Nachman's applies more broadly and creates a zone of safety around Passover itself. Not a loophole, but a suit of armor.

Maybe on most nights we are afraid that being the minority in a dominant culture of polytheists will seep into our worldview, but not on Passover. On Passover, we are protected from the implications of pairs and we can let our guard down. Passover is our night, our triumph, our time to shine. It's a time to be brave and say that normally we are afraid, but on this night and for this mitzvah, we can take the good from this set of four and leave the chaff. There is value in caution, which is why we exercise it, but excessive caution can cut us off from the path forward. It is no coincidence that the purpose of drinking these pairs is to evoke the four languages of redemption, the ultimate expression of movement and progression.

So although this is an interpretive debate that the Gemara doesn't settle one way or another, Rav Nachman's explanation of שמורים ליל is one we can take to heart. Caution has its place, but not here and not now. Passover is a time for bravery, a time to step further than we might otherwise. And for those concerned about the end of Passover when the malevolent influence of pairs reigns again, let us also take to heart the words of the Gemara:

The Principle is as follows: All who care about pairs, the	כללא דמילתא כל דקפיד קפדי
malevolence of pairs care about them. But those who do not care,	בהדיה ודלא קפיד לא קפיד
the malevolence does not care about them either.	בהדיה

There is no better time to begin being brave and trust that, as we seek to do mitzvot and fulfill God's will in the world, we can do so without fear.



Rabbanit Dr. Elizabeth Shayne came to Maharat after receiving her Ph.D from University of California, Santa Barbara, where she studied the past, present, and future of digital reading. Rabbanit Liz writes and teaches about everything from the hypertext history of the Talmud to the future of robots in halakha, while also innovating new ways to teach Torah online. She is a Wexner Graduate Fellow/Davidson Scholar, and interned at the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob, and Sefaria. Rabbanit Liz plans to use her expertise to create more and better learning opportunities for all those who study and love Torah.