

Wine & Grapes

A Jewish love affair for millenia

By Dr's Ari Greenspan and Ari Zivotofsky

The enjoyment of wine and its place in Jewish life are ancient. The Rabbis understood this and stated "and now that the temple is destroyed there is no joy except with wine". Clearly what everyone knew was summed up in Psalms 104 "and wine gladdens the spirit. In Jewish life it was used to sanctify an occasion like a Holiday and the Sabbath. It is used in the formal wedding ceremony and at the circumcision of a baby and even as part of the consoling of a mourner. "wine was only related to to console the mourners"

We know that the Land of Israel was well renown for its grapes. When Moses sent the spies into the land to see its strengths and weaknesses before the people of Israel entered, one of the items brought back to the Jewish camp

was a large cluster of grapes. So significant was this imagery that became an artistic icon representative of the land and even used by the Mistily of tourism as a symbol of Israel.

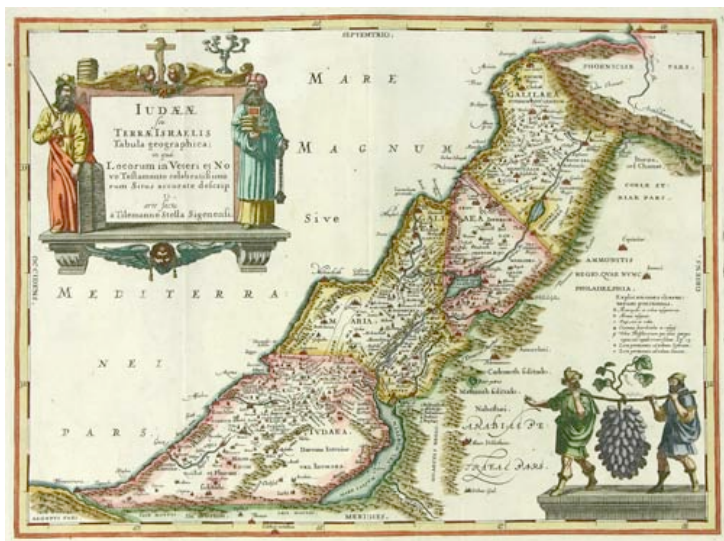
Wine was an integral part of the temple service in libations daily. In other times of Jewish imagery when poor people did

not have the ability to make kiddush on their own, the custom of making it for them in the synagogue developed. In some parts of the world they still do this on friday night after the prayers. During the first 9 days of the month of Av, we refrain from drinking wine in remembrance of the destruction of the temple . On the other hand, without the 4 cups of wine at the Seder one does not fulfill his obligation.

So Central to the symbolism of the Jewish nation and Temple in Jerusalem was the grape, that the wine cluster was chosen to appear on some of the Jewish coins minted during periods of Jewish sovereignty.



During the period that the temple stood, people could bring donations and gifts. When they were gold, they were fashioned into clusters of grapes and hung on a huge golden grapevine right in front of the Temple opening.



The grapes in Israel started their growth in the early spring. It is astounding to see the vines in their growth spurt when they can grow close to 1 centimeter in a day. By Shavuot the clusters are obvious

and the grapes mature August time. They are harvested and in ancient times we pressed out in the fields. The Talmud describes the fact that after the initial press, they were left in a receiving pit for 3 days to ferment and then they were placed in jugs. There are many such ancient wine production facilities found throughout the Land of Israel.



Above we see an ancient pressing floor in a wine press. The grapes were pressed in the upper left area and then the juice would flow to the deep pit where it would remain a few days to begin to ferment.



Early Medieval Haggada with a picture depicting the drinking of one of 4 cups of wine

Every holiday had wine as part of the ritual and the sanctification of the day, the kiddush was stated verbally. In fact so integral were 4 cups of wine for the Passover seder, that the Talmud relates that the poor person should do everything in his power, even to borrow money to have the 4 cups of wine.

WINE HISTORY AND HALACHA

With the drinking of the wine, usually red in those days, the Christians started the odious blood libels in the early middle ages. The claim was that we killed a young Christian child and used his blood mixed with the wine of the seder. Many pogroms and murders of Jews happened as a result of these claims. In fact there were Rabbis who suggested using only white wine at the seder, despite it being considered less qualitative wine, so that nobody could suggest blood was mixed in.



Barrels of wine in a winery in Portugal. The tape and writing over it and onto the wood, are seals to make sure that it is not tampered with when the Rabbi is not present.

Due to halachic concerns of wine made for the use of idol worship, the Jews always made their own. While today the vast majority of wine is commercial in nature, in generations past it was a family or community process. Even today there are small communities that still make their own wine. Take for example the island of Djerba off the coast of Tunisia. The community still has a centralized wine production to provide the needs of their members. The small Jewish compound in the mountains of Ethiopia that helps the Jews until they can get to Israel makes wine for them as well. Commercial production today ensures high quality wines from around the world. Kosher supervision in remote locations enables unusual products that were never before available. For the first time in 500 years since the inquisition kosher wine with an OU is available from Portugal and an unusual sherry from Jerez Spain can be had as well.

During the period of the Temple, there remained ritually pure during the preparation for the priests. This necessitated a mikva, ritual bath, of the grapes from the time that wine was transported in ritually pure and caring of the Jews living and within" were trusted when And the Jews of "Judah" were wine was pure.



was need to make sure that the wine remained ritually pure during the period of production in order to take from it a city complicated procedures and immer anybody who might come in touch with they were picked. Once made, the pure clay vessels that also needed to the Talmud describes that the concern closer to the Temple "from modiin they said that the vessels were pure. similarly trusted when they said that the

The ancient wine cellar
of the Jews of Djerba



In a modern world where as connected most of us are to wine is just drinking it, it is fascinating to see how much of a role it played in the nation's history and most people's daily involvement.