Raising a glass to Israel: Wine, war, and the spirit of Purim

written by David M. Weinberg | 14.03.2025

Even though it is Purim, a Jewish holiday based on the biblical Book of Esther where drinking predominates, I am a bit hesitant to write about wine because of the ongoing war.

My boys are still on the IDF front lines, so many Israeli families have been ravaged by death and injury, and Israeli hostages are still held captive.

In fact, my last full column celebrating the Israeli wine industry ("Drink the fine wines of Israel and defy its detractors") was published in this newspaper on Friday, October 6, 2023 – the eve of Simchat Torah 5783 and what has become known as the "Black Shabbat" – when Hamas invaded southern Israel and massacred and kidnapped more than a thousand Israelis.

By the next morning, it was inappropriate and even embarrassing to read my soaring, celebratory, enthusiastic poetry about Israeli wine wonders.

Since then, I have dared to write only about meaningful wine projects that memorialize fallen Israeli soldiers with personalized barrels and bottles of wine. (See "Toasting IDF heroes," February 9, 2024.)

But with the downfall of Haman's ten modern-day sons – Israel's enemies in Gaza, Beirut, and Tehran: Al-Aruri, Aqil, Deif, Haniyeh, Issa, Kaouk, Nasrallah, Qubaisi, Shukr, and Sinwar – it is fine to again celebrate Jewish redemption and Zionist renaissance by focusing on good (and kosher) Israeli wine.

At the very least, we can drown our enemies in drink – the Hamans of this world who alas exist also in Western intellectual circles and university campuses, not only in the Middle East.

May even greater Israeli victories in the immediate future blot out the memory of the evil men mentioned above as well as the horrible traumas visited upon our brave nation!

IN MY VIEW, the internationally acclaimed Israeli wine sector is much more than yet another "Start-Up Nation" success. Rather, the Israeli wine world is a deep

profession of faith. It is a celebration of the People, Land, and God of Israel reunified.

Wine's unique status in Judaism

Indeed, the fruit of the vine holds unique status in Jewish thought, beyond the elevated status of wine that pertains across civilizations. The reason for this lies in the traverse between Jewish theology and mysticism.

First, the bond between God and the Jewish People is akin to that of the viticulturist and his vine, a relationship of nurturing and enduring love. (See Psalms 80:15 and many more places in scripture.)

Second, Ezekiel prophesized (36:8) that in the days of redemption,the mountains of Israel would be commanded to "shoot forth branches and yield fruit to My People Israel; for they will soon come." Rabbi Abba subsequently taught in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a) that "there is no greater revealed sign of redemption than the agricultural re-blooming of the Land of Israel." So there are Biblical and Zionist echoes in every glass of modern Israeli wine.

Third, the perfumed alcoholic properties of wine can either clarify or cloud one's judgment. They can catapult one's consciousness to a pure world where only God's will reigns supreme (like the world before the rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden) or drag a person into stupor and sin.

In a world where morality and evil are intermingled, and confusion reigns in discerning Godly from earthly, the great challenge is to choose good. "Behold I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Thus, Jews drink wine with lofty goals, especially on Purim when the Amalekite mix of malevolence threatened to obliterate all boundaries of morality and annihilate the Jewish People.

We reject the Shushanite world of wild drunkenness, bloodthirsty passion, and atheistic creed, and instead elevate our thoughts towards a perfected world where God's presence is overwhelmingly dominant.

This is the unusual Purim concept of ad delo yada, to drink to the point where the arrogance of supposedly superior knowledge – which today is sometimes called

“enlightenment” although in extreme it can be Fascist or Marxist – is tempered by mind-bending drink.

The idea is erasure of the insidious gap between good and evil that distances us from God. The idea is an effacement of Amalekite influences and ideologies in our world. Then it is possible to connect to whispers of Divine communion that run all through the universe.

AND SO, we raise a glass (or many glasses) of good wine to say LeChaim, to life; expressing our determination to drive towards the good, articulating our desire to reveal the Divine values embedded in Torah and the eternal ideals latent in Jewish history.

Remember: Judaism is not ascetic. Jewish life is meant to be lived through beauty, bounty, and joy. And if delight is channeled through the right spiritual principles, it can lead to true cleavage with the Almighty.

Halacha, Jewish law, seeks to channel our behavior through correct kavanot – thoughts and intentions. One path to this is mandatory blessings over food, with wine accorded special status.

Wine is the only beverage with a special blessing, boreh pri hagefen: Blessed is God who creates fruit of the vine. Before drinking Israeli wine specifically, an additional blessing can be made (in certain circumstances), known as hatov ve-hametiv: Blessed is God, the Good Lord who does good.

And after drinking Israeli wine (again, specifically Israeli-made wine) there is another special blessing, al haaretz ve-al pri gafna: Blessed is God, the Lord who gives us the Land of Israel and the fruit of its vines.

Properly refracted in this way, pointing to God, wine becomes the preferred drink with which to mark Jewish life-cycle events and holy days, from circumcisions to weddings, and the Sabbath, Purim, and Passover.

Halachic masters have also worked overtime throughout the centuries to insist on “distinctions” when drinking wine, especially to keep Jews and non-Jews from mingling over too much drink, then intermarrying and worshiping foreign gods.

This is the background to Jewish law strictures relating to “kosher” wine, which forbids the consumption of wine produced and poured by non-Jews. (Full

explication of halachic sociology in this matter goes far beyond the confines of this article.)

WHICH LEADS me to a Purim and Passover wine suggestion.

Try newer varieties of grape now being grown in Israel like Dolcetto and Barbera, black wine grapes native to Piedmont in northwest Italy.

Tura Winery of Samaria and Teperberg Winery of the Samson Plains recently have vinified fantastic wines from these grapes. The wines are light and fresh, juicy and aromatic, perfectly matched for drinking in hot Israeli summers.

Other early and outstanding Barbera wines are made by the Lueria and Ramat Naftaly wineries of the upper Galilee.

Overall, to get into the Israeli wine industry, move away from core French varietals like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Chardonnay and toward "Mediterranean" varietals like Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Marselan, Carignan, Sangiovese, Roussanne, and Viognier.

These grapes are typical of the hot climates that pertain in the Rhone Valley and southern France, and Spain and Italy.

Try the Mediterranean-trend wines made by Domaine Netofa, Tulip-MAIA, Kishor, and Jezreel wineries of the lower Galilee; Recanati, Dalton, and Lueria wineries of the upper Galilee; Raziel Winery of the Judean Hills; Vitkin Winery of the Central Plains; and the micro-producers Bazak, Eviatar, Lahat, Maresha, Munitz, Oryah, Shiran, and Telem.

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