

**Whose Blood Are We Spilling? A Second Look at One of Judaism's Most Controversial
Rituals**

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I am indebted to my dear friend Rabbi Ben Skydell of Congregation Orach Chaim of Manhattan's Upper East Side. Rabbi Skydell and I have been preparing Shabbat Hagadol and Shabbat Shuva Derashot together for several years now; he always does the lion's share of the work and his incisive readings and excellent research always help refine and expand our ideas. May we go from strength to strength!

For several months a year or two ago, anyone driving on the Rockaway Turnpike in Queens, just after JFK International Airport, saw a massive billboard featuring a familiar blue bottle to those who regularly purchase kosher wine. It was an ad for Bartenura Moscato D'Asti, that frothy, light, sweet and bubbly beverage that is the staple of so many a Shabbos table. You might think this was not surprising; after all, the road leads into the Five Towns, a heavily Jewish neighborhood absolutely lousy with potential or actual Bartenura consumers. But it seemed that the target audience was a little different; all the people featured in the ad were African Americans. Evidently, Bartenura Moscato D'Asti is an exceedingly popular beverage in the African American club circuit. In 2005, the rapper Li'l Kim featured some lyrics about it in one of her songs, and soon, other rappers started taking note. In 2009, the rapper Drake discovered it and

referred to it in one of his songs as well. It should be noted that the wine was not popular despite its kosher status- it was popular because of it. Harlem resident, community organizer and Bartenura superfan Sydia Simmons told the oenophile website Vinepair¹ that

“Knowing that the Moscato is kosher to me signifies that it’s purer than other wines...I know a lot of people haven’t been involved with making it, and as a pescetarian, I like feeling like my wine is also clean.”

In 2015 alone, through the combined Jewish and Hip Hop communities, Bartenura sold over 4 million bottles of Moscato! Per the same article in Vinepair,

One of the most interesting places to see the two consumers converge is in Crown Heights, where both African Americans and Orthodox Jews have lived in the neighborhood for decades. On a billboard in an area widely trafficked by both groups is an advertisement for Bartenura Blue, it’s very likely both groups think that ad is talking just to them, yet they are both the brand’s largest consumers.

Of course, it is remarkable that a kosher wine of any kind has gained traction and a market share outside the narrow kosher market, let alone in a community that does not overlap with the original clientele in terms of measurable demographics. But it is especially remarkable if one has even a passing awareness of Jewish history, and of the history of halacha.

¹ <http://vinepair.com/wine-blog/blue-bottle-black-america-fell-love-kosher-wine-italy/>

Red, White, or Blue?

In just a few days, we will all sit down together at the Seder, the backbone of which is the four cups of wine consumed throughout. The earliest reference to the practice of the four cups of wine is the Mishnah in tractate Pesachim, at the beginning of the tenth chapter.

משנה מסכת פסחים פרק י

משנה א

[*] ערבי פסחים סמוך למנחה לא יאכל אדם עד שתחשך ואפילו עני שבישראל לא יאכל עד שיסב ולא יפחתו לו מארבע כוסות של יין ואפילו מן התמחוי :

The Mishnah tells us that a person should not sit down to a meal on the evening of passover before sundown, and then asserts that everyone- even the poorest individual- must recline at the Seder and conduct it over four cups of wine, even if the funds for that cup of wine are obtained from communal coffers. The Mishnah continues and describes the placement of each one of the four cups throughout the Seder:

1. The first cup of wine is, of course, kiddush.

משנה ב

[*] מזגו לו כוס ראשון בית שמאי אומרים מברך על היום ואח"כ מברך על היין ובית הלל אומרים מברך על היין ואחר כך מברך על היום :

2. The second cup of wine is poured as a prelude to Maggid, and then imbibed at the end:

משנה ד

[*] מזגו לו כוס שני וכאן הבן שואל אביו ואם אין דעת בבן אביו מלמדו מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה הלילה הזה כולו מצה שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין שאר ירקות הלילה הזה

מרור שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בשר צלי שלוק ומבושל הלילה הזה כולו צלי שבכל הלילות אנו מטבילין פעם אחת הלילה הזה שתי פעמים ולפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח ודורש מארמי אובד אבי עד שיגמור כל הפרשה כולה :

3. The third cup of wine is poured for bentching, and the fourth for the conclusion. The blessing the Mishnah uses to describe this part, the Birkat Hashir, refers to the prayer Nishmat Kol Chai that we recite each Shabbos morning at the conclusion of pesukei dezimrah and that forms the formal conclusion of the nirtzah section of the Haggadah.

משנה ז

[*] **מזגו לו כוס שלישי** מברך על מזונו רביעי גומר עליו את ההלל ואומר עליו ברכת השיר בין הכוסות הללו אם רוצה לשתות ישתה בין שלישי לרביעי לא ישתה :

Now that we know four cups of wine are required, which kind of wine are we referring to? In order to answer this question, it is important to shift our attention to wine in general, \at ritual observances outside the Seder. When Chazal describe wine, are they referring to red or white wine- and what difference does it make? This question was posed in the Talmud in Tractate Bava Basra:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא בתרא דף צז עמוד ב

בעא מיניה רב כהנא חמוה דרב משרשיא מרבא : חמר חוריין, מהו? אמר ליה : אל תרא יין כי יתאדם :

Rava rejects the possibility that white wine is considered wine, and bases it on the verse in Proverbs, in which King Solomon comments on the evils of excessive drink:

אל תרא יין כי יתאדם כי יתן בכיס [בכוס] עינו יתהלך במישרים.

Do not ogle that wine as it lends its red color to the cup, as it flows on smooth. In the end, it bites like a snake; It spits like a basilisk.

Why is red wine considered the “true” wine? The Rashbam, Rav Shmuel ben Meir (Rashi’s grandson) offers the following explanation:

רשב"ם מסכת בבא בתרא דף צו עמוד ב
אל תרא יין - לשתותו.
כי יתאדם - שמשכר יותר מדאי אלמא יין אדום קודם לנסכים דשכר כתיב בהו.

Simply, red wine is more intoxicating than white wine. This is not just conjecture- it is actually correct that red wine is, in general, higher in alcoholic content than white wine is. Look at the next source on your page- it’s from “Dr. Vinny,” the advice columnist for the venerable Wine Spectator Magazine. Dr. Vinny was asked by Helen S., of Birmingham, Alabama, whether white or red wine has a higher alcohol content.

Dear Dr. Vinny,

Which has a higher alcohol content—red or white wine?

—Helen S., Birmingham, Ala.

Dear Helen,

In general, red wines have higher alcohol content than white wines, but it varies from wine to wine. Remember that alcohol directly correlates to the ripeness (i.e., sugar content) of grapes. As grapes ferment, the sugar converts to alcohol. Red wines tend to be picked at a higher ripeness (more sugar) than white wines, which is a combination of both winemaking style and the physiology of the grape.

If you're ever curious about a wine's alcohol content, check out the percentage of alcohol by volume, which is always listed on the label. That's the law in the U.S.—although the number is a bit of a guesstimate. The regulations allow for as much as 1.5% leeway in either direction, so a label could say 12% alcohol if the wine were actually as much as 13.5% or as little as 10.5%.

—Dr. Vinny

So important is it that wine be red that the Ramban, in his commentary on the passage in Bava Basra, feels that Kiddush performed over white wine is not valid and must be recited again.

חידושי הרמב"ן מסכת בבא בתרא דף צז עמוד ב

מכל מקום לענין קדוש בעינן אדום. ושם מצאתי בירושלמי א"ר ירמיה מצוה לצאת ביין אדום מאי טעמא אל תרא יין כי יתאדם, ומשמע דאפילו בדיעבד לא יצא, דעד שיהיה בהן מראה יין דיעבד הוא, ומצוה לצאת דיעבד נמי הוא, דגמ' דילן לאו לכתחלה בלחוד היא דהא מנא תיתי, אי בעי קרא כעין דכתיב לענין קדוש אפילו דיעבד נמי, ואי לא לכתחלה נמי כשר דהא ראוי וחשוב הוא ועולה על שלחן מלכים, ולית לן בגמרא דילן לא יביא ואם הביא כשר לענין קדוש.

It is worth noting that we don't rule in accordance with this opinion, and many people enjoy white wine for kiddush, though red is still considered preferable. With regard to kiddush and the four cups at the Seder, the requirement for it to be red is even enshrined in our liturgy, specifically in reference to Pesach. Shabbos HaGadol marks the final of five special Shabbasos spread over a seven week period, starting from on or before Rosh Chodesh Adar (in this year, Rosh Chodesh Adar II) known as the Arba Parshiyos. These four- Shekalim, Zachor, Parah and HaChodesh, are marked with special additional maftir and haftarah readings. On Shabbos HaGadol, there is no special maftir though there is a special Haftarah. In many communities, there was a practise- once common and now far less so- of reciting additional prayers in Shachrit and Mussaf on each of

these special Shabbasos, called Yotzros. While it is not one of the special parshiyot in the sense that there is an additional Torah reading, there is also a yotzer for Shabbos HaGadol. The Yotzer closes out with a lengthy and poetic description of all the laws of Pesach, and it is actually from this poem that the song Chasal Siddur Pesach is derived. In the yotzer, the author paraphrases the verse in Mishlei:

יין כי יתאדם. למצוה הוא מקדם. לצאת בו חובת ידי אדם. אם אין קונדיטון ומבשל נגדם : וארבע כוסות
הקלו. צריך שיהא בהן כדי רביעית בלי קלו. אחד אנשים ואחד נשים אלו כאלו.

Wine made red, prepared for the mitzvah ahead, for a person to discharge his obligations. If there is none, spiced and cooked wine are acceptable. Each of these cups must contain a revi'it without leniency; men and women have the same requirement.

If you need any further proof, I commend to your attention an article and a picture, found in your source sheet. Rabbi Mendel Jacobs is a Chabad Shaliach in Glasgow, the son of Rabbi Chaim and Sora Jacobs, who have been the head Chabad Shluchim in Scotland for 45 years. In fact, Rabbi Mendel Jacobs is the only Scottish-born Rabbi living in Scotland. A number of years ago, a congregant informed him that several different ethnic groups have registered special tartans with the Scottish Register of Tartans. Per the website of the Registry,

The Scottish Register of Tartans was established by an act of the Scottish Parliament in 2008, to protect, promote and preserve tartan. The Register is a database of tartan designs, maintained by the National Records of Scotland. Anyone, from anywhere in the world, can register a new tartan (individuals, schools and corporate groups as well as professional designers and weavers) providing that it meets our criteria for registration...

There is a Polish Tartan and a Sikh Tartan, so this congregant suggested that there should be an official Jewish Tartan as well. Rabbi Jacobs got to work and, together with a recognized Tartan expert named Brian Wilton, they designed the beautiful Tartan you can find in your source sheets. The blue and white, per Rabbi Jacobs, stem from the blue and white of the Israeli flag and the Scottish saltire; the silver is a reference to the adornments found on a Sefer Torah, the gold evokes the Aron Kodesh in the Mishkan, and the red is a reference to the red kiddush wine.

Red Wine At The Seder

We know that we need four cups of wine for the Seder night, and we know that for the rest of the year, wine is supposed to be red. It would make sense that the same requirement for red wine would apply at the Seder, for the same reason- red wine possesses intoxicating properties that simply are not available in other grape based beverages. But a look at the explanations provided for this practice specifically on the Seder night yields a different picture altogether. The Talmud describes the requirement for red wine in terms of its appearance, not its intoxicating qualities. Indeed, it marshals the same verse from Mishlei in support of this assertion:

אַל תִּרְא יַיִן כִּי יִתְאַדָּם כִּי יִתֵּן בְּכִיס [בְּכֹס] עֵינֵינוּ יִתְהַלֵּךְ בְּמִישְׁרִים.

Don't gaze upon wine, when it becomes red. From this verse, the Talmud learns that wine must have a red appearance, aside from the way it tastes. Indeed, the Rashbam himself focuses on the red appearance of the red wine, and, his earlier comments notwithstanding, does not address the issue of intoxication. Rashi and the Rashbam both explain that the appearance is of critical importance, and that appearance must be red.

רש"י מסכת פסחים דף קח עמוד ב

אל תרא יין כי יתאדם - אלמא יין מראה בעי.

רשב"ם מסכת פסחים דף קח עמוד ב
ומראה. שיהא אדום:

What is it about the redness of the wine on the Seder night that makes it such a crucial ingredient of the Seder experience? There are three reasons offered among early commentators. Rabbi Issac of Vienna, in his Halachic work Or Zarua, explains that the redness of the wine is evocative of three types of blood: the blood of the Jewish children that Pharaoh is said to have bathed in to cure a hideous skin condition, the blood of the Korban Pesach and the blood drawn during a bris milah.

ספר אור זרוע חלק ב - הלכות פסחים סימן רנו

יין כי יתאדם. בערבי פסחים מפיק מקרא דמצוה לחזור אחר יין אדום דכתיב אל תרא יין כי יתאדם פ"י אל תחמדנו כמו ראיתי אבותיכם ומדאצטריך קרא לזוהר עליו מכלל דמעלי ולפי הפשט אל תרא אל תבזה כמו אל תראוני שאני שחרחרת וגו' וגם יין אדום **זכר לדבר שהיה פרעה שוחט תינוקות כשנצטרע ועוד זכר לדם פסח ודם מילה קונדיטון.**

Taking a different approach, the Magen Avraham and Peri Megadim both invoke yet another instance of blood that was part of the Egyptian experience. In the same way that redness of the Charoset is meant to evoke the mortar of the bricks the Jews built with in Egypt, the redness of the wine is meant to evoke the plague of blood that ranged throughout Egypt.

פרי מגדים אורח חיים אשל אברהם סימן תעב ס"ק יג

(יג) אדום. עיין מ"א. היינו יין ענבים שיש לו מראה אדמימות, זכר למכת דם במצרים, כחרוסת זכר לטיט.

Later, Rav Yaakov Chaim Sofer, the great Sephardic posek, offered a third reason in his work Kaf HaChaim. He explained that this blood is meant to evoke the end of days and the messianic era, one that is ushered in with the verse from the book of Yeshaya- **מי זה בא מאדום** - who is this

coming from Edom (or “redness”). Rav Sofer has some basis for his assertion. Some years ago, Professor Israel Jacob Yuval of Hebrew University ignited a firestorm of controversy with the publication of his book, *Two Nations in Your Womb-Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Among the main sources of controversy surrounding this book was Professor Yuval’s assertion that the Christians who accused Jews of wanting Christian blood were merely exaggerating what they accurately saw- that the Jews of that time placed a high value on God spilling the blood of our enemies. An example of this practice, according to Professor Yuval, is the practice of spilling drops from our cup at the Seder. We are taught that it is to commemorate the ten plagues in Egypt. However, based on the commentary of the Maharil, one of the earliest codifiers of minhag Ashkenaz, he suggests that it was actually originally instituted to evoke the spilling of the blood of our enemies at the end of days.

That is, just as God punished the Egyptians by smiting the firstborn, so will he smite and annihilate the nations of the world in the final redemption. This is the view underlying several seder customs and sections of the Haggadah. There is an Ashkenazic custom to spill drops of wine from the glass at the mention of each of the ten plagues of Egypt, alluding to messianic vengeance. This is explained in *Sefer Maharil*: “He [God] will save us from all these [plagues] and bring them upon our foes.” *Sefer Amarkal* cites a homily in the name of Rabbi Eleazar Rokeah, according to which one spills out sixteen drops of wine (ten drops on the mention of the plagues; three drops for their mnemonic acronym; and three drops for “blood and fire and pillars of smoke”), corresponding to “the sword of the Holy One blessed be He [that has] sixteen sides.” This explanation of Rokeah does not

appear in the printed edition of his book but does appear in Manuscript Oxford-Bodleian 1103. From the original wording, it follows that this custom was current in Ashkenaz even before 1096:

For each word they put their finger in the cup of wine, which they sprinkle outside. Such is the custom of our forefathers, and thus did our Rabbi Eleazar Hagadol and all the members of his household, and so did Rabbenu Kalymous the Elder and all his family. And so did Rabbi Eleazar Hazan and Rabbenu Shmuel the Prophet and the sons of Rabbenu Abraham and Rabbenu Judah he-Hasid, the father of wisdom. And also my father and teacher, Rabbenu Judah b. Kalonymous. And one is not to ridicule the custom of our holy forefathers, for thereby one sprinkles outside of the cup sixteen times, against the sword of the Holy One blessed be He which has sixteen sides.

The Taz

In light of all this Halachic precedent and the rich imagery of blood red wine being poured at our Seder tables, linking us with the rivers of blood spilled by our ancestors, a comment of the Taz-Rav David HaLevi Segal- seems all the more surprising.

ט"ז אורח חיים סימן תעב ס"ק ט

(ט) (פמ"ג) אחר יין אדום. - דכתיב אל תרא יין כי יתאדם ש"מ שהאדם דומי' הוא מעלה והקפיד הטו' כאן בד' כוסות בזה ולא בקידוש בסי' ער"ב דיש עוד רמז לאדום זכר לדם שהי' פרעה שוחט בני ישראל והאידנא נמנעו מליקח יין אדום מפני עלילות שקרים בעו"ה :

The Taz claims that nowadays, in the time in which he lived (17th Century Poland), they refrained from using red wine, because of the prevalence of blood libels. It is worth giving a brief biographical sketch of the life of the Taz to understand the times in which he was living. Two

years after the publication of his magnum opus, his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, he was forced to flee his home in the town of Ostrog, in Volhynia, the region in Central Europe encompassing parts of Belarus, Poland and Ukraine. The reason he had to flee was the Cossack insurrection of 1648-1649 led by Bogdan Cnmielnicki, a time that has become known in halachic parlance as the גזירות ת"ח ות"ט. The hallmark of this time period was rampant massacres and pogroms carried out against Jewish communities in that region, and the Taz and his family fled, but not before two of the Taz's children, Mordechai and Shlomo, were killed. Equally ubiquitous during that time were blood libels, various iterations of the canard that Jewish people need the blood of Christian children for the purpose of baking Matzos or other ritual observance. These accusations were inevitably followed by a pogrom; in several cases, these accusations were "bolstered" by the "discovery" of the body of a young Christian boy. There have been several such boys who have been canonized, and one, Gavriil Beloskosky, is venerated as a martyr by the Russian Orthodox Church. Indeed, one of the earliest recorded cases of a blood libel predated the Taz by five centuries, in which a massacre ensued after the body of a young boy in England named William of Norwich was discovered riddled with stab wounds; the accusation was that he was killed by Jews. Of course, the presence of actual dead Christian children was not necessary for the propagation of this canard. One of the popular lies spread about Jewish practice originated during the time of the Frankist uprising in the 18th century, in which a man named Jacob Frank proclaimed himself the Heir of Shabtai Zvi and to be the reincarnation of the Messiah. In this context, he sought to discredit established Jewish texts and rituals and supplant them with Christian symbolism instead, and especially sought to discredit the Talmud. The followers of Jacob Frank pointed to an enigmatic passage in the Haggadah for proof that the Jewish people

required Christian blood for the rituals of the Seder night. The Haggadah tells us that Rabbi Yehuda offered a mnemonic device to remember the plagues: Detzach, Adash, Be'achav. Countless explanations are offered for this acronym, a deep analysis of which is beyond the scope of our discussion today. The Frankists, however, said that this passage is actually a mnemonic device that masks a malicious intent:

ד. ,בתג המסח לילה ראשונה מנהג בעלי התלמוד למלאות כוס יין ובאצבע
זרת היד ימנית טובל בהכוס חורק היין ססה ססה לארץ ואומר העשרה מכות
מצרים בסדרן בתורה: דם, צמרדע... והרמבים כתב בהלכות שביתת יום,
דף מ' ע"ב: ר' יהודה היה נוהג בהם סימנים: דצ"ך קריש באח"ב...
מה היה לר' יהודה ליתן סימנים ולחלקם לשלשה תבות ז... הרבנים
מסרשים לפני המון עם, אלו כסימנים לראשי תבות דעשרה מכות מצרים,
ובפני עצמם בקבלה רמזות בראשי תבות אלו לדם נוצרים כזה: דים צי.י.כ.ים
כלנו על דרך שיעשו בראותו איש חכמים בירושלים... ונראה
שהוא לרמז סוד זה של דם נוצרים וללכנ עליהם על שהם מאמינים בשלוש
(לפיכך חלקום לשלש תיבות).

Indeed, not only do the letters themselves stand for this secret message about crucifying Jesus; the fact that the letters are grouped into three was itself proof of a conspiracy against trinitarians.

Given the circumstances in which the Taz lived, the circumstances that had reigned for centuries in Europe by that time, it's not surprising that he counseled caution and offered a leniency in the avoidance of the use of red wine, substituting white wine- previously thought to be a cheap imitation, halachically inferior beverage- instead. It also explains why the popularity of Bartenura today is so historically remarkable: White wine used to be the symbol of our persecution, and

now it's a symbol of our acceptance and popularity; Red wine used to be something we avoided for fear of persecution, and now it is an essential color in the Jewish Tartan!

However, a second look will reveal an interpretive path that not only eschews the white wine, regardless of the consequence, but embraced the use of red wine- by an exact contemporary of the Taz who lived under remarkably similar circumstances. His name was Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropol, and he was one of the most colorful, bizarre and tragic characters of the last several hundred years (in a market saturated with competition).

In actuality, very little is known about Rabbi Shimson's life. In the words of the scholar Yehuda Liebes, he was a man

“...of mystical spirituality, all of whose days were spent in his own private, imaginary world who never touched the outer shell of reality until just before his awesome and impressive death, a death which R. Samson had wished for himself and for which he had prepared his entire life.”

That death occurred publicly on the third of Menachem av, 1648, in the synagogue of the town of Polonnye. Rabbi Shimshon had gathered together the leading Rabbis and community leaders in the town to pray together for the removal of the decree and then, according to some accounts, recited a prayer he had clearly composed some time in advance to be recited on the occasion of his martyrdom. Wrapped in his Tefillin and in the midst of exhorting all present to repent, he was killed by Cossacks in the presence of the townspeople along with many others. Who was this Rabbi Shimson, and why is he relevant for our discussion?

To some scholars of Kabbalah like Gershom Scholem, R. Shimshon was known in his day as one of the greatest Kabbalists in Eastern Europe, who maintained correspondence with some of the leading Kabbalists of his time. Liebes finds precious little evidence to support this assertion. In fact, many of the writings that Rabbi Samson quotes in his magnum opus, the commentary Dan Yadin on the Kabbalistic work Sefer Karnayim, were actually composed by him, as was, apparently, the text of the Sefer Karnayim itself. In some cases, passages that R. Shimshon quotes from other kabbalists with intent to disagree with their explanation are not to be found anywhere in their writings, but rather were a figment of Rabbi Shimshon's imagination. Liebes explains that Rabbi Shimshon was not a forger who maliciously put his own words into the mouths of others; rather, he was a person who lived life in a completely parallel world in which reality and mystical fantasy merged to the degree that he had difficulty telling them apart, and that the vast library of kabbalistic writings from which Rabbi Shimshon quoted extensively existed exclusively in the supernal realm.

What is clear from Rabbi Shimshon's writings is that he was intent on waging an intense and personal battle with Christianity, a battle over which he was prepared to die and, as we have seen, welcomed the opportunity to do so. Christianity represented a force of evil and impurity and the venerated figures in the Christian religion- the so called son of God, his mother and the teachings of the faith- were all viewed by him as impure demons that had to be counteracted with the recitation of holy names and countervailing positive spiritual forces. Indeed, according to Liebes, it seems obvious that Rabbi Shimshon studied Christian writings and wove motifs from them into

his own writing, with the purpose of counteracting them. It is with this background to this remarkable figure that we turn our attention to his commentary on the Haggadah, and a prayer he recited over the four cups of wine. Through a series of gematriyaos, he “proves” that the “blood” (as referenced by the redness of the wine in the four cups) is the key ingredient in the forces of purity overpowering the forces of impurity, and assured those who recited this prayer that referring to this blood would “spill the blood of those who come to kill you.” According to Gabriel Wasserman in his Haggadah published last year, R. Shimshon was reversing the idea of the blood libel, at least on a theoretical/imaginative level; instead of Jews being accused of actually spilling Christian blood for ritual purposes, Jews would now have a ritual in which they prayed for the spilling of Christian blood.

Remember that the Taz and R' Shimshon lived at almost exactly the same time, not too far away from one another, which makes their differing reactions all the more amazing. According to R. Shimshon's mystical worldview, white wine simply would not do because the symbolism of the red wine is simply too strong, and too necessary, to do without it. The world he was living in was a world in which the Christians- the perpetrators of the blood libel- represented the forces of impurity that had to be subverted no matter the cost, and God's justice in this world could only be carried out through vengeance, a paramount value that permeated every aspect of the Rav Shimshon's blurred mystical reality. Rather than temper his messianic aspirations out of concern for what others would think, his fervent desire for swift divine retribution fueled his religious mission and only served to amplify it. The bloody messianic future was not one that could be abandoned; it had to be embraced, and even hastened. For the Taz, too, red wine was laden with

symbolism. However, rather than view that symbolism as a surpassing value that exceeded all others, the Taz adopted a much more pragmatic approach. The Taz looked at the same reality- and remember that two of his sons were martyred- and decided that it was unwise, and therefore unnecessary to make brazen and provocative gestures that stoked the fires of an angry enemy. Better not to deal with the symbolism of the red wine; for the sake of longer term gains, it was worth making compromises to live another day. Red wine as opposed to white wine was a halachic issue, to be sure- but it was not going to be the hill on which we died.

As you can see, a seemingly inconsequential remark about the color of wine yields a world of discussion touching on some of the most difficult periods and foundational discussions in Jewish history. That itself is a critical lesson; never dismiss a text as being unimportant or unworthy of attention, because there are likely to be hidden depths to be plumbed. If that were the only lesson to be learned here, dayenu- it would be enough, but it is not. Contained in a simple discussion about the color of wine is one of the most the deepest challenges that faces us on the Seder night. Given that our life experience is different from our forbears, how should we experience our Seder, which takes place in a radically different era? It's easy to deride Professor Yuval's reading of history as false, lacking in historic merit and dangerous, but that would be intellectually dishonest. It's easy to dismiss Rav Shimon of Ostropol's world view as the product of a delusional and fervid imagination, and his burning desire for martyrdom as similar to the kind of barbaric brutality practised against us by some of our worst enemies, who are prepared to die in the religion. However, as eccentric as R' Shimon was, we must remember that his world view predates him by several centuries, going back at least to 13th and 14th Century Germany and

France. Moreover, it survives him to this very day, which you can see if you perform a cursory review of our prayers. Consider these examples:

1. Each Shabbos, we recite the prayer Av Harachamim, composed to commemorate the massacre of the Jewish communities in the Rhineland. In communities following German Jewish practice, this prayer is recited twice yearly- on the Shabbasos before Shavuot and Tisha B'Av. In many other communities, however, it is recited each week. During the Omer, even on Shabbatot when one normally would not do so like Shabbos Mevarchim, it is still recited because these massacres occurred during the Omer period. In it, we pray that God "avenge before our eyes the spilled blood of Your servant." Rav Tzvi Yehuda HaKohen Kook, the Rosh Yeshiva of Mercaz Harav and son of Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, had a personal practice of reciting the Av Harachamim every single Shabbos without exception, because he knew personally many of the great Torah scholars who were murdered during the Holocaust. In it, we pray that "The one who seeks blood remembered them, and did not forget the cries of the humble."
2. Indeed, this is one of the lines in the Avinu Malkeinu prayer we recite each fast day, and then again between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We pray that "our father and our king, avenge the spilled blood of your servant before our eyes."
3. God forbid, if someone dies Al kiddush Hashem, we say "Hashem Yikom Damav"- may God avenge his blood. This is a saying we have heard all too frequently, especially in recent months or years, when so many of our brethren have paid the ultimate price at the hands of those who wish to eradicate us.

4. Finally, as we open the door for Eliyahu HaNavi, we intone the prayer in which we ask God to “pour out your wrath upon the nations that know you not, and the kingdoms that do not call in your name.” There is voluminous literature about the meaning of this prayer, and much of it is apologetic. The notion that we ask God to pour his wrath over other nations of the world can induce discomfort over its seeming incongruence with the current state of interfaith relations. An alternative prayer has gained some currency as a result, one that frames these desires in the positive. It is a version found in a Haggadah manuscript from the early 16th century, and reads as follows:

שֶׁפֶךְ אֱהָבָתְךָ עַל הַגּוֹיִים אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּךָ
וְעַל מַמְלָכוֹת אֲשֶׁר בִּשְׁמֶךָ קוֹרְאִים
בְּגִלְלַת חֲסָדִים שֶׁהֵם עוֹשִׂים עִם זֶרַע יַעֲקֹב
וּמִגִּנִּים עַל עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִפְּנֵי אוֹכְלֵיהֶם.
יִזְכּוּ לִרְאוֹת בְּסִכַּת בְּחִירְךָ
וְלִשְׂמֹחַ בְּשִׂמְחַת גּוֹיְךָ

Pour out your love on the nations who know You
And on kingdoms who call Your name.
For the good which they do for the seed of Jacob
And they shield Your people Israel from their enemies.
May they merit to see the good of Your chosen }
And to rejoice in the joy of Your nation.

This prayer was first published by the bibliographer Naftali Ben-Menahem in 1963, the product of a blessed discovery by Rabbi Chaim Bloch (1881-ca. 1970), illuminated in in a beautiful manuscript on parchment from the estate of the great Rabbinic leader of the Austro Hungarian

empire, Rabbi Shimshon Wertheimer (1658-1724)². The manuscript was said to be from a Haggadah edited in Worms in 1521 by “Yehudah b”r Yekutiel, the grandson of Rashi”, but the manuscript was lost during the Holocaust. Since then, however, a number of scholars have pointed out that this is likely not the authorship of the prayer at all. You see, Chaim Bloch himself was a shady character. He had published letters from the Baal Shem Tov to his disciples that were proven to be forgeries, and letter from the Maharal of Prague that had also been shown to be a fake. A notorious Neturei Karta sympathizer, he had previously published letters from 300 Rabbis against Zionism that were later proven, by Rav Shmuel HaKohen Weingarten, to be forgeries as well. In all likelihood, it was Chaim Bloch himself who composed the prayer, out of a desire to avoid causing offense to non-Jews and discredit Zionists who fought for Jewish sovereignty.

Eliminating the prayer of shefoch chamatecha is an attempt to whitewash our past, and to read our current reality into the historical circumstances our ancestors faced, and therein lies our first challenge. On the very night when we speak about our past, we cannot ignore what actually occurred then, or we are forgers of history at the optimal time for us to remember it. The very wine we drink at the Seder speaks to this bloody past, and to a hope that granted strength to generations of Jews living under oppressive tyranny and persecution. The prayer that God alone will one day exact swift, bloody, public and retributive justice against the enemies of His people who oppressed them is one that fortified Jewish communities in their darkest hour and sustained their souls at times when all seemed lost. However, the Taz’s pragmatic world view, in which he permitted eschewing red wine at the Seder, is one that allowed Jews to survive physically in some

² <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/dressing-as-elijah-pouring-out-love/>

of the most adverse conditions by deciding what was critically important and worth fighting for, and what wasn't. But the Taz's compromises were the product of an era in which Jewish life was under relentless attack, a time when red wine evoking bloodshed in your seder goblet could result in the real thing shortly thereafter. The Taz's pragmatism, and his compromises, were thoroughly warranted, and therein lies our second, deeply troubling challenge. Do we compromise on our dreams, aspirations and principles because we live in a world that is less than ideal, or do we retain our dreams- as fantastic as they may seem- as a source of strength and spiritual sustenance? Invoking the imagery of blood libels for us takes us back to a medieval time period when these things were common; it's not reflective of our reality today, we tell ourselves. We are blessed not to live in the same world that the Taz did, so the compromises that we make are rarely on the level of life and death. Given that the majority of our decisions nowadays are not matters of life and death, what effect do our compromises have on the totality of our being and the richness of our Jewish lives? A story is told about the Gerrer Rebbe, I believe it was Rav Yisroel Alter, the Bais Yisroel. One of his Chassidim asked him, "When does a person who returned to Judaism stop being a baal teshuvah?" The Rebbe replied, "When he starts talking during davening." In his legendarily pithy way, the Rebbe was saying that a returnee to Judaism can be said to be "mainstreamed" when they abandon any pretense of spiritual ambition and inspiration, and are therefore indistinguishable from their "FFB" brethren. Hopefully, we have all had dreams at some point, aspirations for something better and more meaningful out of life- but real life intrudes and we end up compromising. Were we once much more enthused about observance and connection with Judaism than we are now? Did we have educational and religious aspirations for our children that we have sacrificed in the hope of what we might deem more realistic goals?

Pragmatism has many advantages, but it can also come with costs, and that leads to the final challenge presented by the red wine on the Seder night.

Not long ago, Shaya came home with his siddur, the collection of all the tefillot the children say in Nitzanim at Akiba. It just melts your heart to see these adorable kids belting out songs and parts of davening and it gives me immense nachas to hear that Shaya knows all the words of age appropriate davening, like Modeh Ani, Shema and Bentching, to name just a few. At the beginning of davening each morning, the girls stand up first and sing a song, and then say the girls' beracha-she'asani kirtzono. The boys then stand up and sing the same song, followed by the boys' beracha. Not the one you think; the beracha they make is the one on tzitzis. The song the boys and girls sing is identical, with some changes reflective of gender:

1 2 3, 1 2 3

This is the girl's song, yes that's right

We live by the Torah day and night,

I'm a Jewish yaldah as you can see,

Thank you Hashem for making me.

When Shaya brought home the siddur, I decided to look inside, because I shopped even more nachas when I can follow along with what he's saying. That's when I noticed something interesting. The version Shaya was singing was the torah shebe'al peh, the oral version. But the written version had been different by two words, which completely changed the nature of the song:

1 2 3, 1 2 3

This is the girl's song, yes that's right

We fight for the Torah day and night

I'm not an expert educator, but we are blessed that Shaya's teachers are. Therefore, I assume that substituting the words "live by" for "fight for" is a psychologically sound educational practice; these are young children, after all and they should associate Judaism with positivity and happiness, not belligerence and anger. They also don't need a song to encourage them to fight! But as we grow older, we have to ask ourselves whether there is still a benefit to making the same substitution. Are we satisfied with the status quo, such that our Judaism is something to be preserved or just "live by," or are there concepts and ideals and people we will not give up on, that we will fight for and upon which we will not compromise at all? To be sure, an uncompromising approach in which everything is a matter of principle has its downsides as well. It leads to an embattled world view in which battles may be won but wars are lost, and to a warped sense of religious perspective. But it also means that there are things we care about enough that we are willing to fight for them- and what we fight for often defines who we really are.

This year, as we sit at the Seder table, we will raise our cups of wine and down them four times throughout the Seder. Surrounded by family and friends and in a society in which we are blessed not to be persecuted and hounded by our oppressors, the wine will no doubt be red. Let us ask ourselves the uncomfortable questions that raises. Is our world view historically attuned such that red wine reflects it? In our religious lives, are we as uncompromising as the usage of red wine would suggest? Have we sacrificed principles for pragmatism? Let us pray that we can provide positive answers to the challenge at the bottom of the cup.