

# The Four Kosos: Songs of Silence

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## The Four *Kosos*: a Meaningful Foursome?

Possibly the most popular selection of the otherwise obscure Talmud Yerushalmi explains the symbolism of the four cups of wine that frame the seder night:

*Rabbi Banya states that [the four cups] correspond to the four [languages of] redemption. [The verses state (Shemos 6:6-8)] "I will take you out, I will save you, I will redeem you and I will take you [for Myself as a nation].*

**Talmud Yerushalmi, Pesachim 10:1**

רבי בנייה כנגד ארבע  
גאולות ... והוצאתי  
והצלתי וגאלתי ולקחתני.  
תלמוד ירושלמי י:א

Rabbi Banya teaches that each of the four cups marks a gift, national and individual, bestowed upon us through *yetzias Mitzraim* and highlighted in the pesukim that predict it: Freedom, life, redemption and chosenness.

Yet our practice poses two questions regarding this most familiar commentary: Do our seder nights confirm that the four cups memorialize these four facets of our redemption? Does drinking the wine raise substantial discussion that probes these four elements and does the wine in any way raise our curiosity to delineate each term? Would these four components not receive greater study and attention through a brief but explicit presentation similar to Rabbon Gamliel's three principle mitzvos of the evening, or similar to the four sons or the four questions of the *Ma Nishtana*? Surely the four stages of redemption deserve a more explicit text or a more promising springboard than the four sons or the 13 count of *Echod Mi Yodea* that concludes the evening.

Furthermore, Rav Banya's interpretations, along with other similar approaches in the writings of Chazal, call our attention to what is altogether a halachic stretch. After all, one cup accompanies the Kiddush and is required at every Yom Tov meal. Another cup enhances the Bircas Hamazon, which is the preferred practice after every meal. Is it accurate to call them a foursome and relate them to a parallel and unique foursome of our *yetzias Mitzraim* experience? Are there really four extra cups or are there only two?

## Tosfos' Position

This second question becomes quite pressing upon studying the opinion of Tosfos, *Sukkah* 38a, s.v. *Mi Shehaya*, who view the four cups of wine entirely as "*kosos shel berocho*":

*It seems from here that women are exempt from reciting Hallel on Sukkos and Shavuos because it is a time-bound positive mitzvah. Although the Gemara implies that women are obligated in the four cups of wine on the first nights of Pesach, and the rabbis ostensibly only instituted the four cups to enhance the recitation of Hallel and Maggid, Hallel of Pesach is different because it commemorates the miracle and [women] also were part of the miracle.*

משמע כאן דאשה פטורה מהלל  
דסוכות וכן דעצרת וטעמא משום  
דמצוה שהזמן גרמא היא אע"ג דבהלל  
דלילי פסחים משמע בפרק ערבי  
פסחים (דף קח.) דמחייבי בד' כוסות  
ומסתמא לא תיקנו ד' כוסות אלא  
כדי לומר עליהם הלל ואגדה שאני  
הלל פסח דעל הנס בא ואף הן היו  
באותו הנס.

A “kos shel berocho.” is a cup of wine used to enhance specific berachos or mitzvos, for example, the kos of Kiddush or the kos under a *chupah* (wedding canopy). Tosfos similarly understand the four cups at seder night to be *kosos shel berocho*, each one augmenting a mitzva of the evening: Kiddush, *sipur yetzias Mitzrayim*, Bircas Hamazon and Hallel.<sup>1</sup>

We understand this to be Tosofos' position because they say elsewhere (*Pesachim* 99b s.v. *Lo Yifchesu*) that the halocho does not require every participant to drink the wine. As the leader of the seder drinks the wine, the obligation to drink that cup is fulfilled and each participant can personally opt out, having fulfilled their obligation vicariously. Would Tosfos hold that there is an independent rabbinic obligation to actually drink the wine, similar to the obligation to eat marmor in our time, then they would have to insist on every individual drinking his or her own cup.

Our practice does not follow this position of Tosfos.<sup>2</sup> Maharal writes that he was baffled by the opinion of the Tosfos that the *kosos* are not mandated as independent mitzvos:

***I don't understand this idea because it is impossible that one person can fulfill the mitzvah of the four cups on behalf of others. How is this different from matzoh and marmor? Just as one cannot fulfill matzoh and marmor on behalf of others, so too one cannot fulfill the four cups because it is a mitzvah incumbent on oneself.***

**Gevuros Hashem no. 48**

ולא הבנתי דבר זה דלא שייך  
שיהיה מוציא את אחרים בד' כוסות  
דמאי שנא ממצה ומרור דכמו שאין  
יכול להאחד להוציא את האחר במצה  
ובמרור כך אינו יכול להוציא בד'  
כוסות דמצוה דרמיא עליה הוא.  
גבורות ה' ס' מה

## Rambam's position

Rambam clearly does identify two distinct aspects of the four cups. The first is to add greater festivity and joy to the celebration of our freedom in a manner not unlike a celebratory party. The second, like Tosfos, to enhance the mitzvos of the evening by reciting them with a cup of wine in hand.

Thus, in fulfillment of the first aspect of the four cups, the Rambam writes:

*In each generation, one must present oneself as if one is personally leaving the bondage of Egypt ...*

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם להראות את עצמו כאילו  
הוא בעצמו יצא עתה משעבוד מצרים ... לפיכך

<sup>1</sup> R. Chaim Soloveitchik inferred this idea from a comment of Tosfos, *Pesachim* 99b, s.v. *Lo Yifchesu*. See *Haggadah Shel Pesach Mibeis Levi*, pg. 104.

<sup>2</sup> *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Siman* 472.

Therefore, when one eats on the night [of the seder], one must eat and drink in a reclined manner like a free person and each person, whether man or woman, must drink that night four cups of wine.

**Rambam, Hilchos Chametz Umatzoh 7:6-7**

כשסועד אדם בלילה הזה צריך לאכול ולשתות והוא מיסב דרך חירות וכל אחד ואחד בין אנשים בין נשים חייב לשתות בלילה הזה ארבעה כוסות של יין.

**רמב"ם, הל' המין ומצה ז:ו-ז**

The Rambam obligates every participant to drink from them and juxtaposes this mitzvah with the biblical duty, incumbent on every generation, to view themselves, on seder night, as newly redeemed and celebrating newly found freedoms. Additionally, Rambam, *Hilchos Chametz Umatzoh 7:9*, assigns to each *kos* a specific part of the Haggadah and rules that if one drinks all four cups at once, without spreading them through the seder, one will have duly rejoiced but in so doing, only fulfilled one aspect of the four cups.

The rule that to fully accomplish the mitzvah of the four cups one needs to spread them out over the mitzvos of the seder is found in the Talmud Bavli, *Peaschim 108b*. The Talmud Bavli further points out that if one drinks a wine concentrate unfit for general drinking before it was diluted properly, then one has satisfied the mitzvah of making Kiddush. However, by drinking wine that would not appear at a festivity, one has not yet celebrated his freedom in the manner required by Chazal.

In other words, Rambam understands that Chazal wove together both the independent obligation to drink four cups with the four separate cups of wine that strengthen the fulfillment of four separate mitzvos of the evening. The two parallel obligations add different observances of the quality of wine and the timing of the cups. Accordingly, the four cups are meaningful beyond the mitzvos that they support. This additional meaning, in Rambam's view, is to celebrate our freedom anew. According to Rabbi Banya, the purpose of this aspect of the four *kosos* is to recall the four stages of our redemption.

## *Kos Shel Berocho*

Does Rabbi Banya's explanation of the four *kosos* fit with Tosfos' opinion? Can one assume that the four *kosos* are all the ordinary *kosos shel berocho* that we find on many occasions, and still see a message in each *kos*? Whether we follow Tosfos or Rambam, the four cups may help us understand the idea of a *kos shel berocho* as we practice it so often throughout the year.

Indeed, it seems to me that our familiarity with the *kos shel berocho*, seeing it every Shabbos at Kiddush and every Motzai Shabbos at Havdalah, twice at every *chupa* and at every *Sheva Berochos*, has left it largely unexplored. How does the presence of wine at a bris or at a wedding enhance the event? When Chazal (*Peaschim 106a*) taught us “*zochreihu al hayayin*,” to announce the sanctity of Shabbos with wine in hand, what did they want us to understand, express or experience that is not captured by the text?

Our curiosity should be further piqued as we recall the many ways in which Chazal ask us to celebrate the very cup of wine. It should be cleaned and filled full with untouched wine, received in two hands, held in the right, raised and focused upon, and finally, allocated lovingly.<sup>3</sup>

The *Machzor Vitri*, born out of the *bais hamedrash* of Rashi, in his discussion of the four *kosos*, advances the Gemoro's phrase (*Berochos* 35a) “*ein shira elo al hayayin*—there can be no song without wine.” Whereas many of the Chachmei Ashkenaz<sup>4</sup> and the Maharitz Gayis, *Hilchos Kiddush*, as well attach this phrase to Kiddush and Bircas Hamazon, it becomes particularly instructive in the context of seder night. After all, there is the full Hallel, the Hallel Hagadol (the extended Hallel at the end of the seder), *Nishmas*, the closing piyutim, the Bircas Shir (the closing *berochos* of Hallel), the matzoh and the Torah of young and old, but apparently without the wine all of these songs are incomplete.

The phrase “*ein shira elo al hayayin*” has its root in the *nesachim*, the wine libations in the *Bais Hamikdosh*. There, too, are the songs and the symphony of the Leviim, the majesty of the *bigdei kehuna* (the priestly garments) and the surreal sense of Hashem's presence. What could the wine possibly add to the song?

Perhaps that is precisely the idea to which we are directed. There is the song that cannot be expressed. In fact, what words could we put together that would express our appreciation for the promise of freedom (*vehotzeisi*), for being snatched from oppression and death (*vehitzalti*), for the catharsis of redemption (*vegoa'alti*) and for the dreams of nationhood (*velokachti*)? The cup of wine simply reminds us that there are sublime songs that are present, songs that would be terribly diminished by the limitations of the human tongue.

Perhaps Chazal understood that every sacrifice brought in Mikdash, from those that inspire introspection, achieve forgiveness and reconnect one to Hashem to those that create the daily discipline of the Mikdash ritual, speak to the privilege of housing Hashem's presence in this world. Now, would any imaginable lyrics capture that?

Similarly in our own lives the appreciation of the gift of Shabbos, its access to sanctity and to the spiritual moment, its refreshing disconnect and familial reconnect, finds much greater expression for us in the soulful music of *Kabolas Shabbos* than in any liturgy that we could pen. Hence Chazal established “*zochreihu al hayayin*.” So too, the *bris* and the *chupa*, events that are rich with legacy and promise, memories and aspirations challenge us to find the words that would do justice to our thoughts and emotions. The silent cup of wine reminds us of the great songs that silently reverberate in our hearts.

I believe that this insight can be found in a midrash that records a discussion about a feast that takes place in the future, where Hashem celebrates the accomplishments of His children:

*Hashem will one day prepare a feast for the righteous on the day that He provides kindness to the descendants of Yitzchak. After they eat and drink, they will give Avraham*

עתיד הקדוש ברוך הוא לעשות סעודה לצדיקים ביום שיגמל חסדו לזרעו של יצחק. לאחר שאוכלין ושותין נותנין לו לאברהם אבינו כוס של ברכה לברך,

<sup>3</sup> *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Siman* 183.

<sup>4</sup> See Tosafos, *Pesachim* 106b, s.v. *Mekadesh*.

*Avinu a cup of wine to recite [Birkas Hamazon]. He says: I will not recite it because I begot Yishmael. They say to Yitzchak, "Take the cup and bless." He says, I will not recite it because I begot Esav. They say to Ya'akov "Take the cup and bless." He says, I will not recite it because I married two sisters and the Torah would later prohibit that. They say to Moshe, "Take the cup and bless." He says, I will not recite it because I did not merit entering the Land of Israel during my lifetime or after death. They say to Yehoshua, "Take the cup and bless." He says, I will not recite it because I never merited having a son ... They say to Dovid, "Take the cup and bless." He says, it is appropriate for me to bless, as it states, "I will raise the cup of salvation and I will call out with the name of Hashem."*

**Pesachim 119b**

ואומר להן: איני מברך, שיצא ממני ישמעאל. אומר לו ליצחק: טול וברך! אומר להן: איני מברך, שיצא ממני עשו. אומר לו ליעקב: טול וברך! אומר להם: איני מברך, שנשאתי שתי אחיות בחייהן, שעתידיה תורה לאוסרן עלי. אומר לו למשה: טול וברך, אומר להם: איני מברך, שלא זכיתי ליכנס לארץ ישראל לא בחיי ולא במותי. אומר לו ליהושע, טול וברך! אומר להן: איני מברך, שלא זכיתי לבן דכתיב יהושע בן נון בן יהושע בן נון בן נון בן נון. אומר לו לדוד: טול וברך: אומר להן: אני אברך, ולי נאה לברך, שנאמר כוס ישועות אשא ובשם ה' אקרא.

**פסחים קיט:**

In the conversation, each points to their personal vulnerability and finds themselves unworthy of taking the lead. It is only when Dovid proclaims “*kos yeshuos eso*, I will take the cup of salvation,” reciting his Birkas Hamazon with his *kos shel berocho* in hand, does he bring the meal to a thankful conclusion. In so doing, Dovid, the master lyricist of all time, showed that with a raised cup of wine in hand, perhaps giving recognition to the humbling and shortcoming of our language, one can sometimes soar beyond human weaknesses.

## A Closing Thought

I believe there may be another way to read this midrash. Avraham will refuse to lead the song as he is consumed with the pain of fathering Yishmael; Yitzchak will refuse because he is too shaken by the disappointment of raising an Eisov; Yaakov will feel unworthy as he married two sisters that will ultimately be prohibited by the Torah; Moshe Rabbeinu will see himself as censured as he was barred from entering Israel; Yehoshua will feel similarly distanced from Hashem for his prayers for a son went unanswered.

Dovid Hamelech will indeed accept the *kos* and explain that he does deserve to hold it, as his mantra was not guilt or disappointment, but rather to savor the moments of Divine assistance, even when those moments are only temporary. Dovid Hamelech was able to let go of the larger worries of his life—and they were many and seeming unending—long enough to dwell on the happiness of moments of grace and success.

The midrash is teaching us that often the happiest moments of life visit hearts that ache with pain and worry and even sadness. The *kos shel berocho* expresses for us that this is a moment of great joy that may have to be shared with our lingering doubts and painful worries. The *kos* expresses of us that the moment of joy has a beautiful song even if we are not ready to give it full voice.

The same is certainly true regarding the night of seder. Whereas most families will enjoy the Yom Tov and the seder nights with family, there are too many homes who will be reminded of

those who should have a seat at the table and are not there. Looking around the table can often bring both the overwhelming gratitude for what one has and the heartache of those unfulfilled dreams and prayers, all at once. Chazal remind us of the triumph of Dovid Hamelech to find the joys—maybe even the lesser joys of life—and to give them their moment—even as they are the silent song of the *kos* that we hold.