

Celebrating freedom through Israeli wine

How the story of Israeli wine epitomizes Judaism's historic transformation

By GOL KALEV

The question posed annually at the Passover Seder – “Why is this night different from all other nights” – takes on a special meaning this year. No doubt, this year’s Seder will be different, but the unique circumstances can also be an opportunity to relate to aspects of Passover in a different manner than in previous years.

This could be applied to the commandment to drink four cups of wine. Should it be any wine? Or should this year’s four cups be filled with Israeli wine?

“Again shalt thou plant vineyards upon the mountains of Samaria,” assured the Prophet Jeremiah right before the destruction of the First Temple. Indeed, the Jews returned, replanted vineyards throughout Israel, and are now producing award-winning wines in more than 300 wineries.

The story of Israeli wine epitomizes the historic transformation Judaism is going through.

“There is a mental shift in perception of Israeli wines from being something simple for kiddush [sanctifying Shabbat], to being something sophisticated and high-quality, a status symbol,” said Roni Saslove – one of the best-known figures in the Israeli wine industry, who conducts wine workshops for international and domestic audiences.

When asked which wine she would recommend for this year’s Passover, Saslove offered one that is suitable for our times: Light out of Darkness (*Or MeOfel*), from Ya’acov Oryah Winery.

“It is a white wine made from red grapes, with beautiful aromas and a long finish,” she said. “I find it gentle, refreshing and exciting. There is that moment of quiet that wine gives you. This is what this wine delivers, especially in this time of uncertainty and fear.”

Light out of darkness can also be a metaphor for the epic story of Israeli wines. The Bible is filled with references to wine. Most notably, only a year after the events we recount in the Passover Seder, Joshua and Caleb used grapes to try to prove to the nation of Israel that this land was indeed “an exceedingly good land.”

But with the Temple’s destruction, exile and subsequent Muslim rule, under which wine production was prohibited for religious reasons, the grapes of the Holy Land, along with the wine industry, went into long hibernation.

The era of Jewish freedom ended with the Second Temple’s destruction in 70 CE, but Judaism did not evaporate. Instead, it transformed to accommodate the realities of the exile. The core of that second phase of Judaism was the canonization of the Oral Torah. And right there, in that maze of Talmudic richness, Israeli wines were stored, waiting for salvation.

In Tractate Sanhedrin, a famous saying was coined: “When wine goes in, a secret comes out” (*Nihmas yain, yatsa sod*). But the context of this phrase is not just the tendency to divulge secrets after a few sips of wine.

Rabbi Hiyya, who coined this phrase, explained,



▲ View of vineyard and fields in the largely agricultural district of the Adullam region. [David Bena/Wikimedia Commons]

“Wine was given in 70 letters, and secret was given in 70 letters.” This could be interpreted to say that wine is where the secret to Jewish freedom has been stored!

That secret, kept safe for centuries, was unveiled by Theodor Herzl. Long before he devoted his life to Zionism, Herzl received a gift – a bottle of wine from a newly established Israeli winery. Toward the end of the 19th century, after nearly 1,800 years of idleness, Israeli vineyards were beginning to be replanted, and the great secret hidden in their grapes was about to be discovered.

Sure enough, when Israeli wine entered Herzl’s body, a secret came out. He wrote: “The man who first spoke to me of the Palestine colonies also offered me



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'Raise a glass to freedom': Some wines to enjoy over the Seder



▲ Tabor Adama Barbera, 55 NIS



▲ Tulip Espero, 96 NIS



▲ Domaine Netofa Red, 60 NIS



▲ Har Bracha, 160 NIS



▲ Domaine Herzberg, 80 NIS

[Courtesy]



▲ Vineyards of Kabir winery in Elon Moreh on Derech Avot. [Ian McGonigle]

a taste of local cognac [a spirit distilled from wine]. Perhaps the concept of the Jewish state was planted in this bottle.”

Herzl knew what to do with that secret, and he planted the seeds for a miraculous new era of Jewish freedom. Hence, it should only be natural that the freedom we celebrate on Passover should be coronated with Israeli wines. With so many superb wines to choose from, a few wine experts offer their recommendations.

“FOR THE four cups I’ve now started to drink rosé,” explained Gary Landsman, who brings Israeli wine experience to American audiences. “I like the Tabor Adama Barbera Rosé. I find it easy to drink on its own, and rosés are usually lower in alcohol, which works great for the four cups.”

Selling Israeli wine abroad has been met by various challenges, including the high price of Israeli wines relative to those from other regions. But perhaps the

primary hurdle has been the perception that Saslove alluded to; the lack of awareness that Israeli wineries are now producing top-quality, award-winning wines.

The false association of sophisticated Israeli wine with cheaper kiddush wines gets amplified by their locations in wine stores. Italian wines are shelved under “Italy” and Chilean wines under “Chile,” but Israeli wines?

“In more than 90% of the cases, Israeli wines are still in the kosher section,” Landsman maintained. “There are some stores that promote Mediterranean wines, but by and large if you want an Israeli wine, you are likely to have to find it in the kosher section.” This, of course, curtails the purchase of Israeli wine by the general non-Jewish population.

Most Israeli wines are indeed kosher, but the classification of wines produced in Israel with a religious tag also signals a wider failure to recognize the transformation that Judaism is going through. From

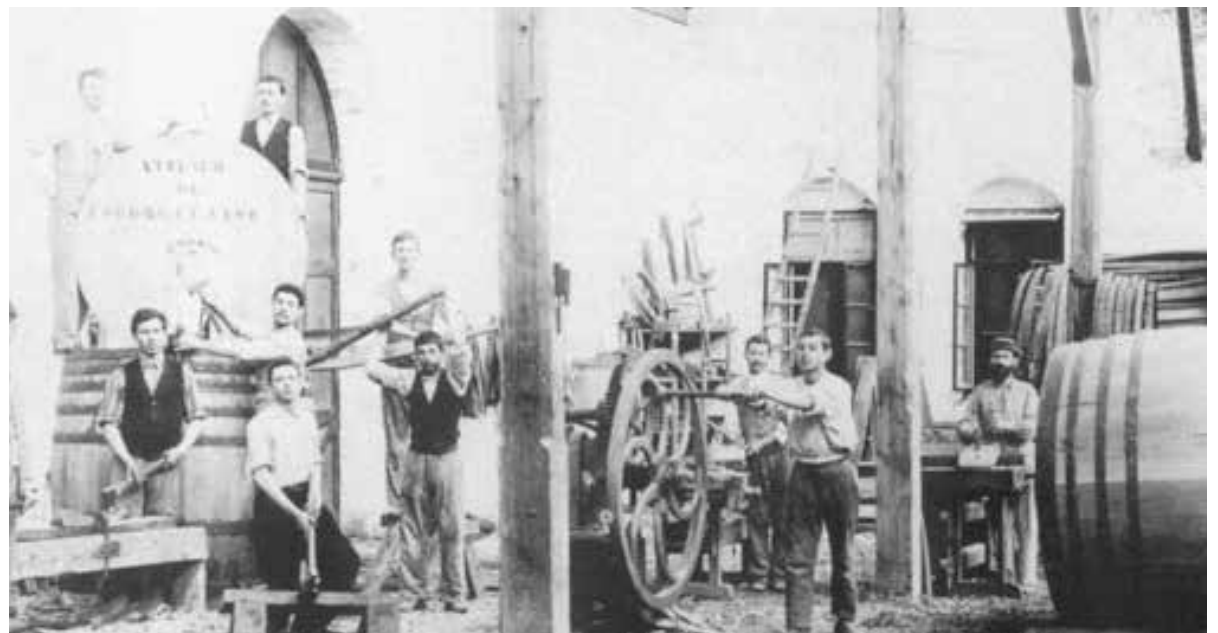
Yiddish to Hebrew, from a charity-case to hi-tech, from Yentel to Wonder Woman, from being dependent on the mercy of the world, to being a beacon of humanity.

Various efforts have been made to change this perception about Israeli wine, including through the Israel Museum’s annual Wine Festival, the Jerusalem Wine Salon (of which the writer is founder), and the Jerusalem Wine Club, which helps acquaint wine consumers with smaller Israeli boutique wineries, primarily through its “Wine of the Month” program.

Eli Poch, the wine club’s founder, recommends the Domaine Netofa Red.

“It’s a medium-body blend of Grenache and Syrah, easy drinking with flavors of red cherries and strawberries and a bit of white pepper,” he said.

Similarly, The Wine Temple, located in an 1874 Templar wine cellar in Jerusalem, was established to raise awareness of Israeli wines, showcasing 60 boutique Israeli wineries, many of whose products are



▲ Winemaking barrel shop in 1890s Zichron Yaakov. [Wikimedia Commons]

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not available to purchase outside of the winery.

Wine Temple founder Eli Winberg, said that drinking Israeli wine is a good way to connect to Israel.

"From ultra-Orthodox to non-Jews, everyone can connect to Israel through Israeli wines because they come from all over the country. [As you travel through] the 450 kilometers of the State of Israel, you can learn about the land by tasting its wines."

Indeed, one organization facilitates an even deeper connection to the Land of Israel through wines – by planting vineyards.

ADAM SCOTT BELLOS, founder of Wine on the Vine explained, "Wine tells the story of the Israeli people. It is part of both our ancient identity and our modern one."

Wine on the Vine invites people to donate a vineyard, in a similar way that Diaspora Jews historically donated trees. This helps strengthen the centrality of Israel in Jewish identity, and does so through a fun

and relatable concept: wine.

Bellos underscored that wine is integral to the Jewish religion and tradition.

"[The biblical interpreter] Rashi had a vineyard. Judah washed his clothes in wine instead of water. That is the reason that in the Chagall windows in Hadassah Medical Center, the window of Judah is red. Other than the menorah, there is nothing better than wine that explains our cultural, religious and national identity."

Bellos recommended the Domaine Herzberg Malbec.

"The winemaker was a biochemist who has a unique approach to wine," he noted. He also recommends Tulip Espero, noting its great value.

Israeli wines, however, are not just a conduit for Diaspora Jews to connect to their Judaism through Israel. Israeli wines are also a fleet of ambassadors of Israel, and they can indeed still travel.

Prof. Ian McGonigle, a Harvard-trained anthropologist now teaching at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, specializes in contemporary Middle Eastern societies. His academic work took him in a surprise direction – making a documentary film about wineries in Judea and Samaria.

"The wine route from Shechem [Nablus] to Hebron is also the path of the patriarchs, Derech Ha'Avot, and each winery on the route has its own story to

tell, many of which powerfully relate to the biblical stories," he explained. "This makes for an opportunity to better understand the communities of Judea and Samaria through the lens of winemaking, and specifically to showcase the importance of wine as a way to reconnect to the land."

McGonigle recommended two wines from opposite ends of the route of the patriarchs. From the northern end, Har Bracha Highlander Special Reserve 2014 Cabernet Franc, and from its southern end, La Forêt Blanche, Yaar Levanon 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon.

"The Yaar Levanon is made with grapes from the Sde Calev Vineyard." This is where Caleb (at times spelled Calev or Kalev) and Joshua are believed to have fetched those grapes that first demonstrated to the Jews how exceedingly good this land is.

This exceedingly good land now produces exceedingly good wines, made with a secret ingredient, just as Herzl envisioned in Altneuland: "That soil was unproductive for others, but for us it was a good soil. Because we fertilized it with our love." ♦

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