

## WHICH WINES TO DRINK AT THE SEDER THIS YEAR, AND WHY

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**Meir Soloveichik explains how the seder’s four cups of wine elevate the holiday, while two enthusiasts recommend their favorite wines from the great regions of Jewish viticulture.**

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### Meir Soloveichik: The Function of Wine at the Passover Seder

What is the function of wine in the Passover seder, the ceremonial meal through which Jews tell the story of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt? For our point of departure in thinking about this question, we begin not with a rabbinic text about the holiday, but with a wonderful essay by Leon Kass about the traditional Jewish toast *l’hayyim*:

You don’t have to be Jewish to drink *l’hayyim*, to lift a glass “To Life.” Everyone in his right mind believes that life is good and that death is bad. But Jews have always had an unusually keen appreciation of life, and not only because it has been stolen from them so often and so cruelly. The celebration of life—of this life, not the next one—has from the beginning been central to Jewish ethical and religious sensibilities. In the Torah “Be fruitful and multiply” is God’s first blessing and first command. . . . Indeed, so strong is this reverence for life



A farm worker harvests cabernet sauvignon grapes at Tzora Winery in Israel. *David Silverman/Getty Images.*

that the duty of *pikuah nefesh* requires that Jews violate the holy Shabbat in order to save a life. Not by accident do we Jews raise our glasses *l'hayyim*.

Yet, Kass reminds us, Jews have always emphasized that life is sacred because it has a purpose—and ultimately when we toast *l'hayyim* we must bear this purpose in mind. The rabbis who codified the liturgy of the seder had these larger purposes in mind, and they carefully deployed the drinking of wine to help us approach the sanctity of life itself. Wine-drinking at the seder is a response to, and indeed a negation of, two other models of drinking that are embodied in two of the most famous drinking episodes in the history of Western literature: one from sacred scripture and one from Greek philosophy.

The first appearance of wine in the Torah is, to put it mildly, not positive. As the flood waters recede and Noah emerges from the ark, he begins his post-diluvian life by planting a vineyard. The harvest leads to drink, the drinking leads to stupor, and in this state the reader finds him sprawled on the ground, unclothed. Why does he drink? Why upon reemerging from the ark does Noah plant grapes rather than grain, a source of sustenance? The Bible does not explicitly say, but it is not hard to guess. Think of what Noah has just been through. He has experienced nothing less than the watery death of the entire world. Every person outside of his family that he had ever met, everyone he had ever known, had just drowned. How could he not turn to drink?

Thus wine enters human history as a means of escape from life's woes. It is a relief from our troubles. And it is just such a form of drinking that ancient rabbis gave in the source-text for *l'hayyim*. According to the rabbinic compilation known as Midrash Tanhuma, when members of the Sanhedrin, the rabbinic court, finished examining witnesses in a capital case, they were asked, "What is your opinion my masters?" They would answer, the midrash concludes, either "for life" (*l'hayyim*) or "for death" (*l'mitah*). The midrash then notes that if the accused is sentenced to death he is given wine, to dull his pain, so that he too can blunt the experience of death.

Therefore, the text goes on to say, the blessing over wine in the kiddush recited on Sabbaths and festivals is preceded with the words *savri maranan*, "What is your opinion my masters?" after which those listening respond, "*l'hayyim!*" (This is the custom in most Sephardi communities, and of late seems to be catching on among Ashkenazim.) By doing so, they make clear that this drinking is for life, and not for the consolation of one about to die. The meaning of this midrash, perhaps, is that in saying *l'hayyim* as a toast, we emphasize that we are drinking not to dull the experience of death, but to heighten the joys of life, and to reaffirm that, despite its difficulties, our very existence should be savored and sanctified. This way of thinking about wine—consolation from pain or relief and celebration of the fact that we have averted death—is the unfolding way of Noah, who turned to drink to soften his sorrows.

**But drink need not merely** soften our sorrows. "Beer," Benjamin Franklin famously said, "is a sign that God loves us and wants us to be happy." Judaism does not reject the sentiment, but it applies it to a different libation. "Wine brings joy to the heart of men," proclaims Psalm 104; and

according to the Talmud, this why a special blessing is pronounced over wine. Let us, therefore, turn next to joy, and distinguish it from hedonism. To make this distinction clear, we must turn to the most famous drinking party in Western philosophy: Plato's *Symposium*. In the dialogue of that name, the Plato depicts Socrates and some of his Athenian contemporaries drinking wine and discussing love and longing.

It is a common assertion among academic scholars that in establishing the rules and rituals of the seder, the rabbis drew inspiration from the ancient Greek symposium, whose name comes from the words for "drinking together." Many of the practices of the symposium can indeed be found in talmudic descriptions of the seder. For instance, symposiasts ate reclining on pillowed couches; seder participants are likewise required to do so (even if today we lean while sitting on chairs), as the fourth of the Four Questions famously puts it: "on this night, we all recline." At the seder, as at ancient symposia, speeches were made and elevated themes were discussed.

But it is more correct to say that the seder turns the symposium on its head. The formal similarities between the two in fact highlight the profound differences between the two societies. In Plato's *Symposium*, the rituals began only after the meal was concluded. Here is how Plato describes it:

When Socrates had reclined and dined with the rest, they made libations, sang a song to the god, and did all the rest of the customary rites, and then turned to drinking. Then Pausanias . . . began to speak somewhat as follows. "All right, men," he said. "What will be the easiest way for us to drink? Now I tell you that I am really in a very bad way from yesterday's drinking, and I need a rest. I suspect many of you do too, for you were also here yesterday. So consider what would be the easiest way for us to drink."

What this means is that with the dining and religious rites having been disposed of, the participants in Plato's *Symposium* turn to the main business of the evening, drinking and speeches. They establish for themselves a rule that, on this particular night, no one should be obligated to drink to excess—but only because most of the attendees present had already drunk too much at a symposium the night before.

By contrast, at the Passover seder the meal, prayer, discussion, and wine are not disaggregated, but carefully interspersed. The four cups of wine are deliberately spaced out, two before the meal and two after, with most of the intellectual engagement taking place immediately after the first cup. At the symposium, the religious formalities are dispensed with before the drinking and speeches, thereby keeping these two devotions separate. By contrast, the seder arranges storytelling, prayer, food, and drink in a way that reflects and integrates our embodied, full selves.

And to see what the sages truly sought to reject, we need only read on in Plato's *Symposium*. After speeches and dialogue, including Socrates' own eloquent address, the Athenian general Alcibiades interrupts the philosophizing by showing up

in the courtyard, very drunk and shouting loudly, asking where Agathon was and commanding them to lead him to Agathon. . . . And he said, “Men, hail! Will you welcome a man who’s terribly drunk as a fellow drinker?”

What is Alcibiades doing? To understand, we can now look to the four sons of the Haggadah, each of whom asks differently about the nature of the seder, and each of whom in turn receives a different answer. The first, the wise son, asks to be taught the laws of Passover, and is informed of them in their entirety, including the final law, “one does not conclude the seder with an *afikoman*.” The word *afikoman*, often translated “dessert,” has come to refer to the final piece of matzah eaten at the seder’s conclusion, after which nothing else may be eaten. But originally, in rabbinic texts, it referred not to something that was eaten but rather an experience that was to be avoided; the term may itself be an adaptation of the Greek *komos*, or revelry, whence the English word “comedy.” The late chef and rabbi [Gil Marks](#), in his magisterial *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, explains:

At the end of the symposium . . . followed a *komos* (later *comissatio* in Rome), named after an intoxicated reveling group of satyrs who followed around the Greek god of wine and fertility, Dionysus. . . . The host always provided various tidbits—most notably fruits, roasted grains, and nuts—similar to modern beer nuts—to nosh on with the wine to induce the consumption of alcohol. . . . The *komos* served as a ritualistic transition from the intellectual and gastronomic parts of the symposium to its sensual, decadent side, inevitably and intentionally leading to lewdness. As part of the *komos*, the inebriated participants would then proceed (*komatsain*) from house to house, laughing and singing, to persuade others to join them in their drinking, carousing, and orgies. The sages, not wanting the aftermath of the seder to degenerate into the bawdy and lascivious behavior of the *komos*, realized that it was necessary to avoid the excesses of the symposium. Consequently, *afikoman* originally meant in Greek *epi komos/epikomion* (upon the revelry).

We have in the very scene in which Alcibiades crashes the party Plato’s own description of a *komos*. At the end of dialogue, yet another crowd of *komos* celebrants arrive. Thus in several small words said to the wise son we find the Jewish rejection of Athenian hedonism. Wine is obligatory at the seder, but within limits and tied always to a higher purpose: it is there to deepen our gratitude to God and to further sanctify our reenactment of our national deliverance.

**But there is an** even more profound difference between a symposium and a seder. Consider: the women present in Plato’s *Symposium* are servants and entertainers, whereas at the seder they are participants. And then there is the most important difference of all, which I noted in a previous contribution to [Mosaic](#), the role of children.

Children are entirely absent from the *Symposium*, probably because their presence would interfere with the conversation. The seder, by contrast, begins with activities designed specifically to provoke the children to ask questions. And only after the children have sought an

explanation can the retelling of the Exodus commence. Likewise, the four sons and various biblical verses cited by the Haggadah all stress that the essence of the seder ritual is parents explaining the meaning of Passover to their children. Generations are joined in discussion and dialogue, and the young are linked not only to their elder, but to all the ancestors who have come before. Only after this occurs is the second cup of wine imbibed, not in escapism or hedonism, but in celebration of the miracles of yesteryear, and the unforgettable family memories that have been formed that evening.

Family, it should be noted, is one thing that is not very important to Socrates. Neither in the *Symposium* nor in any other dialogues are Socrates' family present. And as he lives, so does he die: when his wife and child come to him in prison he has them taken away so that his last moments can unfold in the presence of his students. Emily Wilson, author of *The Death of Socrates*, biting notes that as much as she admires her subject's intellectual courage and lively mind, she also finds that it is "hard to respect a man who neglected his wife and sons in order to spend his time drinking and chatting with his friends about the definitions of common words."

**Wilson's observation returns us** to something essential about the meaning of *l'hayyim*: the translation "to life," known to Jew and Gentile alike because of the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, is not quite accurate. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has pointed out that *hayyim* in Hebrew exists only in the plural; and the meaning, perhaps, of the Jewish toast *l'hayyim* is that life is rendered meaningful when it is shared, and this, for Jews, is most ideally achieved in the joining of generations, of past and posterity.

What this means is that in constructing the seder, in emphasizing the obligations of transmission, in raising our glasses to the joining of our lives with one another, the sages were not only responding to Greece and Rome, but also to an even older empire that looms large over Passover. Again to quote Kass: "Unlike the death-defying Egyptians, those ancient precursors of the quest for bodily immortality, the Children of Israel do not mummify or embalm their dead; we bury our ancestors but keep them alive in memory, and, accepting our mortality, we look forward to the next generation." That difference, ultimately, is what we savor when we pronounce *l'hayyim*.

Another one of Socrates' students, Xenophon, records his master saying that "wine moistens and tempers the spirit and lulls the cares of the mind to rest. It revives our joys and is oil to the dying flame of life." This is well put, but the Jewish joys that the seder wine revives emphasize the very form of transmission that allowed us to outlast the cities of Greece and the Roman empire that followed. In a wonderful sermon, Rabbi Norman Lamm noted the extraordinary irony of the fact that today, so many centuries after the fall of Rome, the reclining and drinking style of a Greco-Roman feast is recalled, relived, and truly remembered only by Jews on Passover evening. And because we are not recreating the symposium, but reversing it, the way we celebrate it highlights why it is only the Jews who remain.

This past pandemic year has been one in which the word *l'hayyim* has taken on a new resonance. We understand life's fragility; and we understand how we might have taken togetherness for granted, and what a gift it is to join generations. There are many this year who will be so missed, and whose presence will still be felt. And many of us, thanks to the advent of vaccines, know now what a gift it is merely for grandchildren to spend time with their grandparents, to hug them, to discuss Passover with them, and how this is rightly a source of profound joy.

It is this perspective on life that we will have in mind when we raise our glasses at the seder, not in emulation of Noah's escapism, nor of Greek hedonism, but to engage in a very different celebration of life—and of life that is about more than ourselves. Once again, Kass has put it best:

Let us cleave to our ancient wisdom and lift our voices and properly toast *l'hayyim*, to life beyond our own, to the life of our grandchildren and their grandchildren. May they, God willing, know health and long life, but especially so that they may also know the pursuit of truth and righteousness and holiness. And may they hand down and perpetuate this pursuit of what is humanly finest to succeeding generations for all time to come.

### **Joshua E. London: Four Cups from the Diaspora**

“Since the Exodus,” the 19th-century German poet Heinrich Heine famously put it, “freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent.” At the Passover seder, the Hebraic ideal of freedom speaks most loudly—with the four requisite cups of wine keeping its throat from getting dry.

Wine, after all, is accorded special status in Jewish tradition. An ever-present feature of Jewish religious observance, it is considered powerful and sublime. On Jewish festivals we are enjoined to be joyous, and to do so with wine. As the Psalmist (104:15) writes, “Wine brings joy to the heart of man,” and the Talmud concludes that no festivity is complete without the consumption of this beverage.

Wine has its own distinctive blessing, “Blessed art Thou . . . Who creates the fruit of the vine,” not said over any other fruit or beverage. Moreover, many rituals involve reciting this, and other prayers, over a cup of wine: the best known is the kiddush recited before Sabbath and festival meals, but wine is also part of wedding and circumcision ceremonies, and at times the benediction after eating—not to mention the libations that accompanied sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple. And then there are the four cups of the seder.

The 16th-century sage Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, better known as the Maharal of Prague, saw a mystical meaning in the drink, claiming that it is not wholly of this world, but “has a Divine aspect to it, for it ‘gladdens God and man’ [Judges 9:13].” Like esoteric teachings, wrote the Maharal, wine comes from the inside of the grape, in which it is hidden—and itself has its

own hidden spiritual dimension. Thus one who uses wine properly can find spiritual elevation, but one who misuses it “acquires a form of death.”

Examining the same verse in the book of Judges, Rabbi Aḥai Gaon, the 8th-century author of the oldest known post-talmudic collection of homilies, asks how exactly wine can gladden God. His answer: it fills man’s heart with joy, leading him to sing praises to the Lord, which in turn bring Him gladness. This reasoning helps us understand the seder’s four cups, as the purpose of the entire exercise is not only to retell the story of the Exodus, but also to rejoice and sing praises to God.

The Talmud also explains the drinking of wine as a symbol of freedom (*P’saḥim* 117b). Indeed, the classic prooftext for the seder’s four cups is Exodus 6:6-7, which uses four different phrases to denote God’s liberation of the Israelites: “Therefore, say to the children of Israel, ‘I am the Lord, and *I will bring you out* from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and *I will save you* from their enslavement, and *I will redeem you*. . . . And *I will take you to Me* as a people.’” In other words, at the seder every participant is obligated to consume four cups of wine as an expression of freedom, rooted in the shared experience of being taken by God out of Egypt, saved from a life of bondage, and redeemed and ennobled through God’s revelation, in order to fulfill the promise of being a Holy Nation, ultimately in the Holy Land of Israel.

The Talmud also connects each of the four cups with a specific aspect of the seder, each of which emphasizes exultation of God, in keeping with Aḥai Gaon’s explanation of wine’s sanctity. As on other festival eves, the meal begins with kiddush (literally, “sanctification”), a prayer praising God for choosing the people of Israel and giving them His holidays, recited with a cup of wine in hand. Upon concluding the main narrative segment of the Haggadah, we then praise God for redeeming us and drink the second cup. After the meal, having emerged from this shared relived experience at the seder—and finished *fressing*—we then praise God for the food and drain the third cup. The evening proceeds with *Hallel*, a prayer whose name means “praise” and which consists of Psalms 113-118, at the end of which we imbibe the fourth and final cup of wine.

That the wines of these four cups should be kosher is an important consideration. If the dramatic rise in sales of kosher wine in the weeks before Passover is any indication, even those Jews not normally in the habit of drinking kosher wine still make a point of using it for the seder. The laws governing what wine may be consumed are distinct from the other laws of kashrut, in that they concern not ingredients, but who produces and handles the wine. To simplify a complex body of regulations with their own history: wine, to be considered kosher, must be made by a Sabbath-observant Jew, a special requirement introduced precisely because both Jews and Gentiles use the beverage for sacred purposes.

As a result, kashrut has never, in and of itself, posed any sort of barrier to quality or excellence in wine production. The universal keys to excellent wine are, first and foremost, quality grapes, followed by a serious, technically proficient winemaker, and also, ideally, a critical and demanding consumer base to keep producers competitive.

The historically poor reputation of kosher wine is largely an artifact of the Jewish condition in the Diaspora. Thankfully, producer and consumer advances over the last 40 years have rendered this reputation undeserved. In the United States, as a matter of happenstance, kosher wine was long made from Concorde grapes, and thus tended to be red and cloyingly sweet. Little consideration was given to quality. But the days of having no choice but to chug down four cups of Manischewitz extra-heavy Malaga at the Passover seder are long gone. Those that still turn to such wine do so out of preference, whether taste or nostalgia, rather than necessity.

To the contrary, the Talmud stresses that the cups of wine, which are drunk as a sort of toast to freedom, should be a source of joy and pleasure. But what that meant in talmudic times was something different from what we think of now. Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Jews of antiquity always diluted their wine. Greeks and Romans used honey, spices, resin, oils, and the like for this purpose, but Jews usually mixed in water at a ratio of three parts water to one-part wine. The Talmud goes so far as to say that drinking undiluted wine at the seder is not a true celebration of freedom, since it is unappealing. Thus Moses Maimonides stresses that the wine of the four cups should be mixed with water so that drinking it is “pleasant,” and the ratio should be whatever an individual finds most enjoyable.

We can conclude then that, in our days, we have a positive religious obligation to give thought and care to wine selection. With this in mind, here are four suggestions of Diaspora kosher wines—see David Weinberg’s contribution for Israeli options—to fill the four cups, and fulfill the mitzvah thereof. I purposefully aimed to keep them affordable (Passover is expensive enough!) and reasonably easy to find, while also maintaining a little variety. (For the scrupulous kosher consumer, I have noted which wines are *m’vushal*, and which are not; the latter require a particular degree of stringent handling after opening.)

**First Cup: Hagafen, Brut Rose, Napa Valley, California, 2017** (\$48; *m’vushal*)

I usually like to start the seder on a light but grand, pleasurable, and festive note. So, for kiddush I recommend this lovely, refreshing, delicious, and bubbly wine—with fine, concentrated bubbles, enchanting aromas, and the bright, clean, flavors of strawberry, watermelon, and stone fruits, with hints of brioche, beautifully balanced with lively acidity. Hard to put down and easy to gulp for those whose custom is to drink the first cup as quickly as possible.

**Second Cup: Cantina Giuliano, Vermentino, Costa Toscano i.g.t., Tuscany, 2019** (\$19; not *m’vushal*).

The cup drunk after the retelling of the Exodus should be not only tasty and of high quality, but to my mind should also serve as an *aperitivo* to stimulate appetites for the meal. This fabulous Tuscan Vermentino is a crisp, refreshing, and lovely white with a nose of honeysuckle, white pepper, apricot, citrus, almonds, and gooseberry, and flavors of white peach, underripe apricot, citrus, guava, and perhaps a hint of underripe pineapple. With palate-tingling acidity and enticing minerality, it hankers for good food.

**Third Cup: Elvi Wines, Herenza, Rioja, 2019** (\$18; *m’vushal*).



For the cup that accompanies the grace after meals, I look for refreshment, pleasure, and flavor—something that will nicely complement the feast that’s just been concluded and add agreeably to the happy flavors of the night. The Elvi Rioja, which consistently has an impressive quality-to-price ratio, offers some true Rioja character, with lovely and bright notes of plum, sour cherry, raspberry, vanilla, black pepper, and some very agreeable earthiness.

Fourth Cup: **Binah, Celeste, Aromatic White Wine, Pennsylvania, 2019** (\$18-20; available directly from the winery at [binahwinery.com](http://binahwinery.com), or from [kosherwine.com](http://kosherwine.com)).

To accompany *Hallel*, I generally want a wine that is tasty and satisfying, and that will also add to the mental buzz of happy flavors and thoughts from the evening’s program. The Binah Celeste is a wonderfully pleasing, distinctly perfumed, beautifully balanced, semisweet blend of the French-American hybrid grape varieties Cayuga White (46 percent), Vidal Blanc (47 percent), and the distinctly aromatic Traminette (7 percent), all grown in Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Valley. Vaguely German in style, with fresh citrus and stone fruit notes, as well as peach, pear, and lime, and with floral and spice accents. Distinctive and delicious. *L’hayyim!*

### **David M. Weinberg: Four Cups from Israel**

In 1890, Baron Edmond de Rothschild’s new winery in Rishon LeZion, one of the first agricultural communities to be founded by Zionist pioneers, took in its first harvest.

David Yudelevich, one of the winery workers, described the scene in his journal: “The bell rang at 4 am to wake up the army of young and old, men and women and children, armed with pruning shears. The carts overflowing with grapes began streaming into the crushing vats, . . . and we all sang: ‘Awaken oh people of Israel. Your youth has returned to the Land. Your redemption is near.’”

One hundred and thirty years after this dramatic and emotional first harvest, the wines that Israel is producing are excellent, even internationally acclaimed. One of the world’s top wine journals, *Wine Spectator*, devoted a 2016 cover story to Israeli wines with the headline “Surprising quality from an emerging region.”

Over the past decade, Israeli wineries have garnered top-flight international awards for their products. The Carmel 2006 Shiraz won the International Trophy at the Decanter World Wine Awards, and the Golan Heights Winery received the Gran Vinitaly award for best global producer of wine in 2011. For Israel, these are unprecedented distinctions in two of the world’s toughest wine competitions.

Robert Parker’s *Wine Advocate* magazine, highly regarded for its rankings, gave Yatir Forest and Domaine du Castel Grand Vin scores of 93 points or more. Six Israeli wines from the Golan, Gvaot, Psagot, Shiloh, and Tulip wineries won gold medals at the 2020 Decanter World Wine

Awards. Two of these went to the Shiloh Winery, which also earned seven silvers and four bronze.

Another of the gold-medalists, the Psagot winery in the Binyamin region to the north of Jerusalem, received the highest Decanter score of any Israeli wine, with 96 points for its Psagot Peak (a blend of Rhone Valley varietals: Syrah, Petite Syrah, and Mourvèdre). But it earned far greater recognition just a few months ago, when then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited it to celebrate U.S. recognition of settlements as legitimate expressions of Jewish rights in Israel. Its owner, Yaakov Berg, is a passionate fighter against European boycotts of “settlement produce” and a global marketer of biblically inspired packages of food and health products from the West Bank.

However, quality grape-growing and winemaking is more than simply another Israeli “start-up nation” agricultural innovation. To me, the Israeli wine revolution is a sign of Divine favor; what Jewish tradition calls a *siman muvhak*—an undeniable, stark indication of support from the Heavens.

Consider the following: In the heyday of King Solomon’s reign in the 10th century BCE, it is said that “Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan to Beersheba” (1Kings 5:5). Wine played a central role in Temple libations and celebrations, and in all community festivities. And in recent years, Israeli archaeologists have discovered hundreds of ancient wine presses and wine-storage amphorae from the First and Second Commonwealth periods.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jewish agriculture and viticulture in the Land of Israel went into decline, and in the 7th century the Muslim conquerors of the Holy Land literally ripped every grapevine out of the ground. This put an end to wine production for hundreds of years, while the Land of Israel lay desolate and neglected. Just 150 years ago, Mark Twain visited the Land of Israel and noted how utterly barren he found it.

Despite all this, modern Israel has become an internationally acclaimed wine center—just 150 years after Ze’ev Teperberg led the first Jewish grape harvest of modern times, and 130 years after Rothschild’s first harvest. How and why?

Some would start to answer this question by speaking of climate, soil conditions, and grape varieties—all of which are worthy topics. But I would prefer to look to the patriarch Jacob, who prophesied on his deathbed that, in the Land of Israel, the beverage would become so abundant that Judah “shall wash his garments in wine and his clothes in the blood of grapes” and that “his eyes will be shot red with wine” (Genesis 49:11-12). Centuries later, the prophet Ezekiel declared that in the days of redemption God would command the mountains of the Holy Land to “shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to My people Israel; for they will soon come.”

It seems, then, that these biblical prophecies are coming true. Over the past century, the Land of Israel has awakened, giving forth fruit to its indigenous people as they return to, and renew, their ancient homeland.

I am overwhelmed with amazement at the “redemption” involved in Israel’s modern wine revolution. For me, there are biblical and Zionist echoes in every glass of good Israeli wine, and drinking it is a deep profession of faith. It is a celebration of the people, land, and God of Israel reunified.

It is noteworthy that halakhah, Jewish law, reflects the special status of wine made in Israel. Before drinking such wine, an additional blessing can be made in certain circumstances, known as *ha-tov v’ha-metiv*: Blessed is the Good One who does good—a blessing that is otherwise reserved for truly special circumstances such as the birth of a child. And only after drinking Israeli wine does one give thanks by intoning another special blessing: “Blessed is God, the Lord who gives us the Land of Israel and the fruit of *its* vines,” as opposed to the usual “for the land and the vine.”

**Passover marks** the beginning of the Israelites’ journey from slavery in Egypt to sovereignty in the Promised Land. It thus seems appropriate to drink wine from Israel for the seder’s four requisite cups, which parallel, as Josh London points out, the four phrases used in Exodus 6:6-7 to describe Divine redemption.

Below, I offer a selection of superb wines grown in very different Israeli terroirs—ranging from the volcanic Golan to the clay and terra rossa of the Galilee and the West Bank, and from the medium-heavy and loamy soils of the Sharon and Samson plains to the loess of the northern Negev.

*For the first cup at the seder (kiddush)*, pour wines from Pierre Miodownick’s boutique winery called **Domaine Netofa**.

For decades, Miodownick was the chief winemaker in Europe for Royal Wines, overseeing kosher wine produced in five countries, including some of most rarified French chateaus like Rothschild’s Chateau Laffite. He began planting his own vineyards in the Lower Galilee around Mount Tabor in 2006, with an emphasis on varietals native to Spain, Portugal, and the Rhone Valley in southern France—such as Grenache, Mourvèdre, Syrah, Tempranillo, Touriga Nacional, and Roussanne. Pierre argues that these grapes are more suited to Israel’s Mediterranean climate than the classic Bordeaux or Burgundy varietals.

His winery in the town of Mitzpe Netofa (north of the Golani junction) has a stunningly appointed tasting room and is worth visiting. His flagship Dor Syrah is remarkable (made from grapes grown in the Ein Dor Valley), but this wine may be too heavy for the first cup of wine at the seder. Try the just-released Netofa Tel Qasser Moursyr 2018, an exhilarating medium-body Mourvèdre, blended with a small bit of Syrah.

*For the second cup of wine (Maggid)*, pour wines from **Bat Shlomo**, a winery named for Betty Salomon (Shlomo), Baron Edmond de Rothschild’s mother.

The winery was established by an American immigrant and prominent entrepreneur, Elie Wurtman. Bat Shlomo's Napa Valley-trained winemaker Ari Erle makes a velvety Chardonnay (scored at 90 points by Robert Parker), and a full-bodied, smooth Bordeaux blend called Betty's Cuvée. If you prefer a lighter wine, try the winery's rosé. On your next trip to Israel, make sure to visit the winery's sleek new tasting room in a beautifully refurbished old home in the historic and quaint Bat Shlomo village near Zichron Yaakov on the coastal plain.

*For the third cup of wine (Grace after the Meal),* pour wines from **Tura**, Erez and Vered Ben-Saadon's winery in the town of Rechelim in the Samaritan highlands.

This young couple started out growing grapes in 1997 on Mount Bracha, near Nablus (Shechem). That vineyard is now considered one of the finest in the entire country, producing bold and fruity grapes in excellent conditions of viticulture (2,800 feet above sea level: hot and dry during the day, very cold at night), and it supplies grapes to many wineries across Israel. After a while, it became clear to the Ben-Saadons that they should produce their own wines, and olive oil too.

Erez is the winemaker, and Vered the marketing and public-affairs manager—a job that she does with great flair and charm. Part of any visit to their tasting room involves hearing Vered's remarkable personal story. Her grandfather was a Nazi. As penance for his sins, she, along with her mother and sister, converted to Judaism, inspired by the return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland.

Like Yaacov Berg, Vered is a high-profile activist for Jewish communities in the West Bank. She was a driving force behind the publication of the *Comprehensive Guide to Israeli Wines 2016*, which makes a point of including Israeli wineries in the West Bank.

For Passover, drink the high-end Bordeaux blend called Tura Mountain Peak, or the peppery Mountain Heights Shiraz. These big, bold, and smooth wines from the heights of Samaria will beautifully accompany the hearty meat dishes traditionally served at the seder. If you are preparing lighter fare, pour the Tura Mountain Vista Snow, a dry white wine that blends Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay.

*For the fourth cup (Hallel),* pour the wines of **Teperberg**, the country's oldest winery.

Teperberg produces over eight million bottles a year, including several hundred thousand high-end wines, under the auspices of its erudite and universally beloved winemaker, Shiki Rauchberger, who studied viticulture and enology at UC Davis and the Hebrew University's faculty of agriculture in Rehovot. Everybody in Israeli winemaking consults with, and admires, Shiki.

You have at least three fantastic choices here, depending on budget. Teperberg's Legacy series Cabernet Franc is world-class (Decanter World Wine Award score: 96!); the Essence series Malbec is unique (and less expensive); and the Inspire series Devotage (a Malbec-Marselan blend) is a quality-for-price star. They are great wines that should grace the table of any serious connoisseur and can grace your Passover holiday meals throughout the week.

*For the fifth cup (Elijah's Cup),* drink the wines of **Matar**, the kosher label from Tal Pelter's winery on Kibbutz Ein Zivan in the Golan Heights.

What? Drink a fifth cup at the seder? Well, yes!

The prevalent custom is to pour but not drink wine for the fifth cup, leaving it to Elijah the prophet to waft in the open doorway, "drink" from that centrally placed cup, and herald future redemption. But there is an Israeli custom, advanced by the great rabbinical scholar Menachem Kasher of blessed memory, to drink the "Cup of Elijah" in celebration of the establishment of modern Israel. This parallels a *fifth* phrase from Genesis 6:8, "And I will **bring** you to the land I promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

In the Bible and in Jewish tradition, Elijah is known as the "Gileadite," from the ancient name for the Golan Heights, so drinking Golan wine is most appropriate for this cup.

Try the elegant Matar "Cumulus" wine or the top-end "CB"—both of which blend Golan-grown Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot. They are finely tuned, complex masterpieces of winemaking.

*Finally, for dessert at the meal itself* (which usually precedes drinking the ritual third cup), try one of these wonderful, sweet dessert wines: Golan Mount Odem Inbar Port (it tastes like a fine brandy with maple and toffee flavors), Netofa LBV Port, Tzora Or Gewürztraminer (it tastes like liquid honey), Bat Shlomo Ice Wine, or best of all, Ya'acov Oryah's Old Musketeer 2008, a dessert wine barreled for twelve years and made from late-harvested Muscat of Alexandria blended with some Chardonnay. An absolute treat.

Before retiring from the Passover seder table, don't forget to thank God and His intrepid Israeli winemaker-emissaries for this exquisite bounty.