The Fifth Cup, and Eliyahu haNabi

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BLESSINGS OVER A CUP OF WINE

Reciting a blessing over a cup of wine is an ancient Jewish tradition going back to the Bet haMiqdash, where wine libations were offered at the time that the Leviim (Levites) recited and chanted Psalms (Shira). In this way, the songs and blessings of praise and gratitude were always connected with wine. When a blessing (such as Qiddush, Sheba Berakhot, Habdala, post-Birkat haMazon, etc.) is recited over the wine, the cup of wine is called: "a cup of blessing" (in Hebrew: □□□ □□□□ □□).

We have four cups of blessing because in the Seder, as previously explained, there are three blessings and one song of praise, Hallel (Psalms 113-118).

Now, there is an ancient tradition, mentioned by the Talmud and Maimonides, of reciting a fifth prayer, a famous Psalm of Tehillim, Mizmor 136. The Sages called this Psalm "Hallel haGadol", the great [song of] praise [to HaShem]. It contains 26 verses describing all the acts of kindness that HaShem did for humanity and His people, Israel, and how we show our gratitude to Him. It begins with the creation of the world; it includes our words of appreciation for our freedom from Egypt and the establishment of the Jewish people in the land of Israel. This Psalm, according to Maimonides, is recited in the Seder after the Hallel *over a fifth cup of wine*! Maimonides clarifies that this fifth glass of wine is NOT mandatory but optional. And that, unlike the first four glasses, it was consumed only by the person who recited the prayer and not by the other diners.

Yemenite Jews maintain the custom of drinking a fifth cup of

wine until today. In all Halakhic instances, they strictly follow Maimonides's opinion. As for other communities, the custom is to pour a glass of wine but without drinking it.

WHY ELIYAHU HANABI?

This fifth cup of wine is said to be "for Eliyahu haNabi." Let's clarify this. The Sages debated for centuries whether or not one should drink the fifth cup of wine. While there are several explanations for this debate, I will present just one of those explanations.

The four cups of wine remind us of the four expressions of redemption mentioned in the Tora during our Exodus from Egypt:

In Shemot (Exodus, chapter 6), HaShem says to Moshe:

(6) … go and tell the Israelites: "I am HaShem, and I will *rescue you* from the oppression of the Egyptians. I will *free* you from their bondage and *redeem* you with a great display of [My] power and incredible acts of justice. (7) And *I will take you* as My people; and be your God.

Thus, with the first cup, the Qiddush, we remember that HaShem put an end to our oppression by ending our slavery. The second cup reminds us that HaShem brought us out of Egypt. The third cup reminds us that in doing so, HaShem displayed all His power: the ten plagues, the opening of the sea, etc. And the fourth cup reminds us that HaShem chose us and took us among all peoples to be His chosen people.

But, the following verse expresses a fifth idea: (8) *And I will bring you to the land of Israel,* a concept mentioned by Psalm 136 as well!

For centuries, and before 1948, there was a discussion among the Rabbis regarding this fifth concept: although we are free, and we are the chosen people, *we do not have the land of Israel.* What is the point then to recite the fifth blessing

and praise God for something we lost, i.e., our sovereignty in our land, Israel? The Rabbis did not settle this debate, and as a compromise between the two opinions, we serve the fifth cup, but we don't drink it. Now, whenever there is an unsolved debate among the Rabbis, it is said that when Eliyahu haNabi would come [announcing the arrival of Mashiach], then we will have our Sanhedrin (or National Supreme Court), and those Judges would then solve every Halakhic doubts …. and this is how the fifth cup become popularly known as the cup of Eliyahu haNabi.

ISRAEL

It is worth mentioning that in our times when we B"H have our sovereign State of Israel, many Rabbis, Sepharadim, and Ashkenazim (such as Rabbi Hayim David haLevi z'l or Rabbi Shelomo Goren, z" l and others) hold that we should return to the custom of "drinking" the fifth glass of wine because B" H we have the gift of the land of Israel back!

For this reason, many Jews who live in Israel tend to *serve and drink* the fifth cup of wine in honor of Erets Israel.

MAY HASHEM SEND US VERY SOON (PERHAPS EVEN BEFORE THIS COMING PESACH) ELIYAHU HANABI, ANNOUNCING THE ARRIVAL OF OUR MASHIACH TSIDQUENU. THEN WE WILL HAVE THE MERIT OF CELEBRATING ALL TOGETHER IN ISRAEL OUR DEFINITIVE REDEMPTION.

AMEN!

For more information on the fifth cup, see this interesting article in Hebrew by Rabbi Moshe Tsuriel