

# The Fifth Cup

Avi Heller '90 | BronfmanTorah | Mezora 2016

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Avi Heller (BYFI '90) is originally from Denver and has been working for the Manhattan Jewish Experience (which helps connects 20-30 somethings in Manhattan to traditional Jewish learning and life) for the last 7 years. He just recently left there to begin working for the Orthodox Union as their Regional Director for Synagogues in New Jersey and Rockland County. He and his family are moving to Teaneck this summer. Avi is a huge Broncos fan, a total word nerd, a sucker for a good dvar Torah and likes to meet interesting people.

One of the most anticipated moments of the Passover seder – especially for children – is the moment when we open the door for Elijah the Prophet, whose full cup of wine stands there regally in the center of the table. When I was a child, in my imagination, Eliyahu visited every Passover seder the world over and took a sip of wine. I vividly remember staring at the cup to see if the wine rippled from his drinking. If it did, I would quickly look around, just to make sure that no one had shaken the table. (I wanted a true paranormal sighting.)

At a dinner I attended a few years back, an Elijah's Cup was presented to Rabbi

Shlomo Riskin, the former Rabbi of the Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan and the founder of the Israeli city of Efrat and Ohr Torah Stone institutions. It was a truly enormous silver chalice, certainly large enough all by itself to hold all the other cups of wine from the seder. Since there are only four cups at the seder, the Cup of Elijah is the fifth cup. It is different from all the other cups, as we only pour one (not one for each person) and put it in the center of the table. Plus, no one drinks it<sup>[1]</sup>. (I also remember as a child a spirited debate about what to do with the wine afterwards. Can you just pour the prophet's wine back into the bottle!?!<sup>[2]</sup>) We do not usually connect it to the other four cups because of these differences. But perhaps it is. When Rabbi Riskin accepted the award, he commented, surprisingly, that at his seder, they actually drink FIVE cups of wine, not four, for "we have already returned." As it turns out – mythbuster of the week – not everyone drinks four cups of wine at their seder. Some drink five. It was the custom of the Maharal of Prague to drink five cups, as well as a number of Chassidic dynasties (including Radzin and Psishcha) and, now, it is an emerging custom among Modern Orthodox Zionists in the land of Israel<sup>[3]</sup>.

Where does this come from and what does it mean? If we go back to the Mishna (one of the early sources of Jewish law, Pesachim 10:1), it teaches that even poor people (who would usually conserve their food and drink) must "not have less than 4 cups of wine, even [if collected] from the soup kitchen." The drinking of the four cups of wine, *arba kosot*, is a sign of our freedom and celebration this seder night and all Jews, regardless of their economic status, have a right to feel this way. You might note that the language is a bit ambiguous, as it only sets four cups as a minimum, not as a maximum.

Further in the Mishna and in the Talmud (the next layer of Jewish law after the Mishna, Pesachim 117b-118a) it is taught that each cup corresponds to the doing of a *mitzva* (ritual act) on the seder night: cup one is the *kiddush*, cup two is the *haggada*, cup 3 is the *benching* (grace after meals) and cup four is the *hallel*, the psalms of praise we sing at the end of the seder. However, Rabbi Tarfon (a sage of the Talmud) suggests that we also say "the Great Hallel."<sup>[4]</sup> Here, we are caught on the horns of a textual problem. While Rashi (*R. Shlomo Yizchaki, France, 10<sup>th</sup> c*) and others had a text before them that

said that Rabbi Tarfon was adding this recitation to the FOURTH cup, Rav Amram Gaon, R. Isaac Al-Fasi (aka the Rif), Maimonides (aka Rambam) and other authorities had a version that said that he meant to add a FIFTH cup. Thus Maimonides writes (*Laws of chametz and matza 8:10*): “and he should pour a fifth cup and say the Great Hallel upon it, but this cup is not obligatory like the [other] four cups.” On the one hand, Maimonides seems to indicate that one may, but only if they so choose, drink the fifth cup. On the other, he only says to “pour it”, not to drink it. So, perhaps he meant it to be a fifth cup on the table that we don’t drink. In the classical sources, there is already a doubt as to whether or not to follow the practice (and text) of Rashi or the Rambam. Not an easy choice!

It may seem, based on the prevalence of four cups, that Jewish tradition has made its choice. Yet, there is an intriguing tradition that, whenever we have a doubt about Jewish law that we cannot resolve, we set it aside until Elijah comes. At that time, he will resolve our doubts and tell us the right answer<sup>[5]</sup>. Thus, the fifth cup is Elijah’s cup, for we need to wait for him to answer the question of whether or not we should drink five cups of wine at our seder. According to this, we all have a fifth cup, but it is waiting for Elijah to redeem it.

However, there is another – and perhaps more meaningful -- explanation of why this is Elijah’s cup. The **Jerusalem Talmud** explains that there is a hint in the Torah to why we drink four cups of wine at the seder. The hint is that when God promises Moses that He will take the Jews out of Egypt, He uses four discrete expressions of redemption, called the four *leshonot shel ge’ula*:

“Therefore, say to the Jewish people: ‘I am Hashem, and I will remove you from under the toil of Egypt, and I will save you from their servitude, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments, and I will take you to Me as a nation, and be for you a God, so that you shall know that I am Hashem your God, who took you out of the toil of Egypt.’” (*Exodus 6: 6-7*)

The most popular explanation for the four cups of wine at the seder is they correspond to these four expressions of redemption. While there is much to talk

about in explaining the meaning of each expression and how it corresponds to each cup of wine, let's just note for the moment that there are four of them. Four expressions, four cups of wine. However, it has been pointed out (*Ra'avad I in Orchot Chaim*) that there is also a fifth expression of redemption, in the verse immediately following the first four, which completes the speech made by God to Moses: "And I shall bring you to the land that I promised to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and I will give it to you as an inheritance, I am Hashem" (*Exodus 6:8*)

The fifth expression is the fifth cup of wine! However, the fifth expression is also different than the first four. God does not bring the Israelites into the Holy Land until much later in the story. Plus, though it is an expression of redemption, it is not about the exodus from Egypt as much as coming home to Israel. Lastly, though God took us out of Egypt long ago, we have now spent thousands of years in exile, waiting to go home. The final redemption – the coming of the Messiah, the ingathering of the exiles, the re-building of the Temple – these things have not yet happened. Talking about coming home on the seder night is more apt to make us melancholy than euphoric.

Perhaps the idea of pouring the fifth cup and leaving it on the able – undrunk – was a sort of prayer to God that He should bring the final redemption. After all, it is part of our tradition that the Messiah will come in this month of Passover.

Before the Messiah comes, Elijah the Prophet arrives, as his harbinger, to tell us to prepare for him. Originally, there was a custom of opening our door on Passover to show that we feel safe on this night, *leil shimmurim*; nothing can harm us. Just like the Jews on the night of Passover painted their doorposts with blood and were not subject to the Death of the First Born (they were protected by God), we too are protected on this night. Later in Jewish history, the opening of the door was connected to the coming of Elijah! It was a sort of prayer that just as God redeemed us on the night of Egypt, He should redeem us on this night as well. Thus, the custom was to open the door at night, so that our faith would help bring Elijah and the Messiah<sup>[6]</sup>. When Elijah will come to announce the coming of the Messiah, we will all pack up and move to the land of Israel. The image is that of a new Exodus, mirroring the original one.

Thus, the final, fifth cup expresses the fulfillment of the fifth expression of

redemption: “I will bring you to the land...” When Elijah comes, we will actually drink the fifth cup! Until then, it stands – undrunk – on our tables. We need Elijah’s arrival to fulfill the conditions under which it can be drunk, celebrating our final redemption. That is why it is Elijah’s cup.

Now we can also understand why Rabbi Riskin and other who live in the modern state of Israel drink a fifth cup at their seders. They believe that the state of Israel in 2014 is part of what we call “*reishit tzmichat ge’ulateinu*”, the first flowering of our redemption. Even though Elijah has not yet come, we have already returned to the land. Therefore, the redemption has begun and we may drink the fifth cup!

The reclamation of the fifth cup represents an optimistic view of the state of Israel and a gradual view of Jewish redemption. Without cataclysm or fanfare, we can see ourselves moving towards redemption in the Holy Land. Our fears often present the view that we are slipping into the corrosiveness of corruption, dissent and immorality, that our generation’s knowledge, commitment or future is bleaker than that which came before. The fifth cup is a dissenting view, that our cups overflow more than we sometimes are prepared to admit.

So...four cups not enough for you? Move to Israel!

May God bring about the redemption of the Jewish people speedily in our days.

Shabbat shalom!

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[1] There is a custom some have to leave a little space in our fourth cups so that a little wine from Elijah’s cup can be added to each person’s cup.

[2] Some do pour it back. Others save it for Kiddush the following day, see *Shirat Miryam* haggada by Yosef Tzvi Rimon p.335.

[3] As an example in the Haggada *hegyonei halacha* of R Yitzchak Mirsky, he includes an instructional note after the fourth cup that for those who drink a fifth cup of wine, they should delay saying the *al*

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*hamichya* until after the final cup. When I asked Rabbi Riskin afterwards, he clarified that, in his home, they also make a blessing on the fifth cup.

[4] This refers to Psalm 136 (a psalm we say each Shabbat morning, in which every line ends with “ki 'olam chasdo”, “for his kindness endures forever.”) This is different than the regular Hallel, which is Psalms 113-117.

[5] Cited in the haggada of Rav Aviner in the name of the Hafla'a and the Gra. The Gra, however, apparently did not have the custom of using a *kos shel eliyahu*.

[6] See Rema in Orach Chaim 480. Mishna Berura ad loc (10) mentions that the cup is connected to Eliyahu, but not why.



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