



From Start to Finish

Let's take a look at two words found at the *Seder*. One, מוֹזֵג, appears at the beginning, and the other, נְרִצָּה, is at the end.

Mozeg

This is actually the first word in the Haggadah. Before *Ha Lachma Anya*, even before *kiddush*, is the phrase: מוֹזְגִים כּוֹס רֵאשׁוֹן. Generally translated as “pour the first cup,” this might seem like a simple instruction, and not worthy of much notice.

However, this is not what was meant. While *mozeg* does mean “pour” in modern Hebrew, that wasn't the original meaning of the word. It appears in Biblical Hebrew once – in the noun form מִזְג, in Shir HaShirim 7:3.¹ In Rabbinic Hebrew, it is much more common. The word means “to mix,” specifically to mix wine. (*Mezeg* is parallel to the English word “temper,” which also means “to mix.” This is why we call the climate *mezeg avir* – which literally means “the composition of the weather,” which is parallel to the original meaning of the related word “temperature.”)

Why did they need to mix their wine? We see from Talmudic sources that wine was mixed with water, generally three parts water to one part wine.² Since today we never mix wine with water, a common explanation is that the wine of that time was much stronger than the wine today.

However, there's a problem with that explanation. Before the discovery and spread of distillation in medieval times, no wine could ever reach a higher alcohol content than 14%. So why did they mix the wine with water?

In the Greek and Roman period, it was customary to dilute wine with water because of the presence of strong herbal toxins from the spices and herbs that were added during the preparation.

The presence of these spices are found in the commentaries on Isaiah,³ and in the Book of Maccabees (III 5:45) it says that the elephants were driven to madness before battle by giving them “wine mixed with frankincense.”

Since the Rabbis wanted to ensure the *Seder* Night did not degenerate into drunken revelry, they instructed the participants to dilute their wine with water at the beginning of the evening.

Later, when those spices were no longer added to the wine, there was no need to mix it with water before drinking, and the meaning of the word took on its modern sense of “pour.” Yet even today, some still maintain the custom of adding some water to their cups of wine.

Nirtzah

The Haggadah contains a song to help the participants remember, via rhyme, the various actions they need to perform throughout the *Seder*. The last section, however, is not an instruction per se, but more of a description of this final stage. This is the נְרִצָּה section, which is followed by various songs after the *Seder* is completed.

What does נְרִצָּה mean though? It is sometimes translated as “(all is) accepted” or “acceptance.” The source appears to be this verse in Kohelet: כִּי כִבֵּר רָצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיךָ, “...for your action was long ago approved by G-d” (Kohelet 9:7).

Nirtzah is therefore a time when after all of the Pesach service is completed, we can enjoy the fact that G-d approved of our actions.

This understanding reflects the fact that in Biblical Hebrew, the verb רָצָה meant “to be pleased with, to be favorable to.” That is the most common meaning. Similarly, the related noun רְצוֹן means “goodwill, favor.”

But other scholars disagree, and say this is not the best translation for that verse. They say the phrase should be translated as “for your action was long ago *desired* by G-d.” This sense of *ratzah* is the one commonly used today – “to want.” This sense is very common in Rabbinic Hebrew, but is rarely found in Biblical Hebrew.

Ratzon also changed meanings. While as we said, in Biblical Hebrew it meant “favor,” in later Rabbinic writings it came to mean “will” (as in a person's intention).

The sense of *ratzah* meaning “to be pleased” still has footing in Modern Hebrew. The related word מְרִצָּה means “satisfied.”

Hopefully at the end of the *Seder*, both meanings of the word apply. G-d has desired our service, and accepted it with favor.

1 Other forms based on the sister root, מִסַּךְ, appear a number of times in Biblical verses.

2 Shabbat 77a, Niddah 19a.

3 Shadal on 5:22 and Da'at Mikra on 19:14.

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