

Passover Raisin Wine, The American Temperance Movement, and Mordecai Noah:

The Origins, Meaning, And Wider Significance Of A Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Religious Practice

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The use of raisin wine on Passover, described by Mordecai Noah (1785–1851) and considered by some in his day to have been a requirement of Jewish law, reflected (1) an old world custom that over time was transformed into a “popular halacha,” (2) a possible vestige of a Marrano practice, and (3) a rabbinically-sanctioned means of observing the commandments when regular kosher wine was unobtainable. Use of the wine demonstrates a desire on the part of nineteenth century American Jews to maintain selected traditions and customs even under difficult “frontier” traditions. The practice enriched Jewish life, served to distinguish Jews from their Christian neighbors, and helped to transform Passover into a time of religious revitalization. Jewish use of raisin wine also became an issue in the American temperance debate. The episode illustrates how American Christians sometimes used Jews as informants, viewed them as repositories of ancient wisdom, and looked to them as potential legitimators of Christian practices. Finally, the raisin wine issue sheds light on American Jewish attitudes to the temperance question as a whole. Mordecai Noah endorsed temperance as an important social cause, even as he warned adherents against extremism. Later Jews, who saw the movement at a more advanced stage, worried about the coercive evangelical fervor and nativism associated with it, and kept their distance. Far from trumpeting the Jewish use of raisin wine, as Noah had done, they questioned, from a ritual point of view, whether such non-fermented wine was permitted at all.

One of the more puzzling customs of nineteenth-century American Jews concerns their use of raisin wine on the holiday of Passover. According to Mordecai M. Noah, from whom we first hear of this custom, “unfermented liquor, or wine free from alcoholic substances . . . is used at the present day at the Passover, [it is] the wine over which the blessing is said.”¹ In a published letter, he provides a recipe for the wine he used:

(1) *The [New York] Evening Star for the Country*, February 19, 1836, p. 2. See Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York, 1981), pp. 104,

. . . take a gallon demijohn, or stone jug; pick three or four pounds of bloom raisins, break off the stems; put the raisins into the demijohn, and fill it with water. Tie a rag over the mouth, and place the demijohn near the fire, or on one side of the fire-place, to keep it warm. In about a week it will be fit for use, making a pure, pleasant, and sweet wine, free from alcohol. It may last from Sunday to Sunday without getting sour or tart; but it is easy to make a small quantity of wine for each time it is to be used. This is the wine we use on the nights of Passover . . .²

In a different article, he called this wine “precisely the liquor used in old times for sacred purposes, and the article which many at this time are anxiously in search of, and which those for whom the Law and the Prophecies were confided will make, as usual, early the ensuing April for the annual celebration of the Passover.”³

Noah — a New York journalist, politician, and playwright, and the most eminent American Jew of his day, now best remembered for his abortive “Ararat Plan” to form a Jewish colony on Grand Island, near Buffalo, New York — was neither a rabbi nor a particularly learned member of his faith. His word, taken alone, might be open to question. In this case, however, we have other evidence that confirms the widespread use of raisin wine on Passover. The *Church Review* in 1849 described “an intelligent Jew in New York” who related “that in his family some water had lately been poured upon raisins, in order to prepare wine for the approaching Passover, and that the mixture had been placed near the stove that it might *ferment*.” Raisin wine is also mentioned in Cyrus Adler’s memoirs of his childhood in Philadelphia (c. 1869), in an 1871 Jewish cookery book, and in a published 1879 account of Jewish customs and ceremonies (see below). Even as late as 1883, “Maftir” (Isidor N. Choynski), the *American Israelite*’s famous West Coast correspondent, referred to “regulation raisin wine” in the course of describing the celebration of Passover in San Francisco.⁴

193 nn.22–23.

(2) Philip S. White and H. R. Pleasants, *The War of Four Thousand Years* (Philadelphia, 1846), p. 293. Elsewhere, Noah provides a variant recipe: “To three gallons of water, five pounds of bloom raisins (the stones or pits extracted) are added; the whole placed in a stone jug with a narrow mouth, covered with a fine linen rag, and placed near the fire constantly for eight or ten days, and then racked off.” (“Temperance Wine,” *Tri-Weekly Journal*, Augusta, Maine, February 25, 1836, p. 3). For modern methods of making raisin wine, see M. A. Amerine, H. W. Berg, and W. V. Cruess, *The Technology of Wine Making* (3rd. ed., Westport, Ct., 1972), pp. 542–43.

(3) “Temperance Wine,” *Tri-Weekly Journal*, Augusta, Maine, February 25, 1836, p. 3.

(4) “Professor Stuart on the Wine Question,” *Church Review* 2 (April 1849), p. 186;

Traditional Jewish sources shed only limited light on why this practice arose. We know from the Talmud (T.B. Baba Batra 97a) that raisin wine, like other wines less than forty days old, was permitted to be used for the regular kiddush, although in the temple ritual it was only acceptable *bedi'avad* (post-facto). The Gaonim considered wine made by soaking raisins in water to be somewhat less desirable than that made from pressed grapes, but deemed it nevertheless acceptable. Rav Amram Gaon (likely influenced by the *Halakhot Gedolot*), for example, ruled in his *Seder* (order of ritual) that "if one cannot find wine within a reasonable distance from one's home, or if one is on board ship and cannot obtain any wine, one may obtain wine for the four Passover cups by soaking raisins in water."⁵ Louis Ginzberg has shown that this Gaonic view, implying as it does that raisin wine may be employed only as a last resort, was not subsequently accepted by the great codifiers of Spain, France and Germany. Their decisions and subsequent responsa held that raisin wine is perfectly acceptable for ritual purposes, and not inferior in any way. Ginzberg dismisses the most important exception to this generalization, Rabbi Abele Gumbiner (*Magen Avraham*), who ruled in the seventeenth century that "it is better to use fermented wine," as being simply in error. Preponderant rabbinic opinion, he shows, considered unfermented raisin wine and fermented grape wine to be equal in status.⁶ In all of Ginzberg's citations, however, there is no evidence at all that anybody actually considered raisin wine to be *superior* to fermented wine, and certainly nobody who maintained, as Noah did, that it was *required* to be used on Passover. The ritual practiced by nineteenth century American Jews must derive from some non-rabbinic source.

Three explanations suggest themselves. First, the use of raisin wine probably began as an old world custom. Brought to America by Jewish immigrants, the custom may later have been raised to a higher status,

Cyrus Adler, *I Have Considered the Days* (Philadelphia, 1941), p. 9; Esther Jacobs Levy, *Jewish Cookery Book* (Philadelphia, 1871; reprinted Garden Grove, Calif., 1982), pp. 8, 177; Emanuel M. Myers, *The Jews, Their Customs and Ceremonies, With a Full Account of all Their Religious Observances from the Cradle to the Grave . . .* (New York, 1879), p. 27; *American Israelite* (May 11, 1883), p. 373. For a contemporary reference, see Anne London and Bertha Kahn Bishov, *The Complete American Jewish Cookbook* (New York, 1971), p. 22.

(5) *Seder Rav Amram Ha-Shalem*, ed. Aryeh Leib Frumkin (Jerusalem, 1912) II, p. 226. For other sources, see Levi Ginzberg, *Teshuvah Bidvar Yenot Ha-Keshirim Ve-Ha-Pesulim Le-Mitsva* (New York, 1922), pp. 13, 26, 36-37, 48, 56-61, 65-66, 71; partially translated in *American Jewish Year Book* 25(1923-24)401-425. For the circumstances of this responsa, see text below, at n. 44.

(6) L. Ginzberg, *Teshuvah*, pp. 58-61. See, however, Jehiel Epstein, *Arukh ha-Shulhan* (New York, 1961 [1907]), OH 202:15, who questions the practice, even while admitting that it is too widespread in his area (Belorussia) to be stopped.

becoming a matter of principle ("regulation raisin wine") rather than choice. This transition from custom to "law" (or "popular halacha") is a familiar one, and would have been all the more likely in a country like America where competent rabbis were few and far between. But while likely, this cannot be proved.

What can now be shown is that raisin wine was commonly used for ritual purposes by Jews throughout Europe. It is mentioned not only in responsa and halachic literature,⁷ but in nineteenth and twentieth century Jewish cookbooks as well⁸ — sometimes in connection with Passover, sometimes not. This seems, then, to be the most likely source of the raisin wine practice. What remains unexplained is why this practice arose, and why some American Jews elevated it into a matter of law.

The second and more historically interesting explanation for the use of raisin wine on Passover is provided by Mordecai Noah himself. Raisin wine, he wrote, "is the wine we use on the nights of Passover, because it is free from fermentation, as we are strictly prohibited not only from eating leavened bread, but from drinking fermented liquors."⁹ Moses Stuart of Andover Theological Seminary, considered to be one of America's leading biblical scholars, interpreted the biblical prohibition (Exodus 13:3, 7) against eating leaven on Passover in a similar way, based, it seems, on information that he had received from Jewish informants:

The great mass of the Jews have ever understood this prohibition as extending to *fermented wine* or *strong drink*, as well as to bread. The word is essentially the same, which designates the *fermentation* of bread and that of liquors. Hence the Jews, the world over, with few exceptions, have kept the Passover with *unfermented wine*.¹⁰

(7) The North African custom is recorded in Shimon b. Tsemakh Duran, *Sefer Yavin Shmuah* (Livorno, 1744; reprinted Jerusalem, 1970), "Ma'amar Khamets," p. 34a. For the Lithuanian custom, see Ginzberg, *Teshuvah*, pp. 66, 71; for Belorussia, see above n. 6.

(8) I am indebted to Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for an invaluable letter that, among other valuable comments, documents the presence of raisin wine (often associated with Passover) in at least half a dozen European Jewish cookbooks in her possession. See, especially, Rebecca Wolf, *Kochbuch fuer Israelitische Frauen* (Berlin, 1875), p. 173.

(9) White and Pleasants, *War of Four Thousand Years*, p. 293. Temperance advocate Edward Delavan, who asked Noah the question that solicited this response, believed, perhaps on this basis, that unfermented wine was also used at the Last Supper: "We know that our Lord and his disciples had met to celebrate the feast of the Passover; and we know that the Jews were scrupulous in using at this ceremony none but unleavened bread and unfermented wine" [Edward C. Delavan (ed.), *Temperance Essays and Selections from Different Authors* (Albany, 1865), p. 59].

(10) Moses Stuart, *Scriptural View of the Wine Question, in a Letter to the Rev. Dr. Nott*.

From the point of view of Jewish law, of course, both Noah and Stuart were quite wrong. The prohibition against leaven refers to grain only, and there is no prohibition at all against the use of fermented wine. Indeed, the Talmud (Pesachim 35a; 40a) specifically stipulates that from a ritual perspective, "the juice of fruits produces no leavening." Nor is there any doubt whatsoever that Jews used fermented wine on Passover both in the rabbinic period, and in all of the centuries thereafter.¹¹

That, however, may be quite beside the point. If, as the quotations from Noah and Stuart suggest, American Jews believed that fermented beverages were prohibited on Passover, that would certainly explain why they used raisin wine on Passover, however much they may have been in error. Just as the Secret Jews (Marranos) in Spain and Portugal are known to have been scrupulous in their adherence to various peculiar rituals in the erroneous belief that they reflected Jewish law,¹² so may have American Jews, whose knowledge of rabbinic teachings was not much better. Indeed, there is some evidence that the raisin wine practice may actually be a vestige of a Marrano tradition. According to Nahum Slouschz, who visited the Marrano community in Lisbon, Portugal early in the twentieth century, Passover was the holiest day in the calendar of these secret Jews, and in order to celebrate it properly they clandestinely prepared for themselves special unfermented grape juice during the weeks before the holiday — something that they did not apparently do at any other time of the year.¹³ One of Mordecai Noah's great-grandfathers was Dr. Samuel Nuñez (Ribeiro), "physician of the grand inquisitor" in Lisbon, and as a boy, Noah heard first-hand from his great-grandmother how the family had practiced Jewish rites secretly when they lived there.¹⁴ Could this be the source of his raisin wine explanation? To be sure, this would still not explain why American Jews

(New York, 1848), p. 20 as quoted in *Church Review*, 2(April 1849)186. Professor Jacob R. Marcus has suggested to me that Stuart's informant may have been the grammarian James (Joshua) Seixas, the converted son of Shearith Israel's famous minister, Gershom Seixas.

(11) The laws of *hamets* (leavened bread) are conveniently summarized in *Encyclopedia Talmudit* (Jerusalem, 1980), vol. 16, pp. 57–107 [in Hebrew]; on the Jewish view of wine, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), vol. 16, col. 538–540.

(12) On Marrano practices, see Cecil Roth, "The Religion of the Marranos," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 22(1931–2)1–33; Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto* (New York, 1971), pp. 35–42; Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: The Life and Work of Isaac Orobio de Castro* (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 22–39 [in Hebrew].

(13) Nahum Slouschz, *Ha-Anusim Be-Portugal* (Tel Aviv, 1932), pp. 129–130 [in Hebrew].

(14) J. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 2–3, 163 n. 8; Richard D. Barnett, "Zipra Nunes's Story," in Bertram W. Korn (ed.), *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus* (Waltham & New York, 1976), pp. 47–61.

continued to use raisin wine on Passover long into the nineteenth century, even after they had heard from competent authorities that there was no prohibition at all on the use of wine made from the fermented juice of grapes. But it may explain why Noah (and others) associated raisin wine particularly with Passover, justified its use on the basis of what they believed to be Jewish law, and were far less scrupulous on other occasions (like the Sabbath and other festivals) when wine also forms part of the traditional ritual.

The third and unquestionably most important explanation for the Passover raisin wine custom, although Noah never mentioned it, is the simple fact that commercially-produced kosher wine was unavailable in any quantity in America, at least up to the Civil War. Only by making it themselves could American Jews be certain that the wine they were imbibing was ritually acceptable. Raisin wine, as Noah's recipe demonstrates, is exceedingly easy to produce, and was in fact the wine recommended by Jewish tradition to those who for whatever reason could obtain no other kind. We have already seen that Rav Amram Gaon's ninth century *Seder* advocated "soaking raisins in water" in these cases, and the same recommendation was made by the later seventeenth century authority, Rabbi David ben Samuel Ha-Levi (*Taz*). "In those countries where wine is not readily available . . .," he wrote in his famous commentary on the *Shulkhan Arukh* (OH 472:12), "it is best to make it from raisins." Raisin wine, according to these authorities, was a measure of last resort: it offered Jews who lived far from wine-making areas or could not obtain kosher wine elsewhere a means of observing the commandments. Because the commandments connected with wine on Passover are particularly stringent — no yeast-based fermenting agent may be employed, all wine-making implements must be made kosher-for-Passover, and non-grape substitutes for wine are impermissible — the making of raisin wine was understandably more associated with this holiday than with any other time of the year.

The above-mentioned "intelligent Jew in New York," questioned on this matter in 1849, understood this situation very well. He told the writer in the *Church Review* that Jews made their own raisin wine because "they feared to use the wines in common use, lest they should contain spirits procured from grain, which they consider as containing in them a sort of *leaven*, against which the Jews, in their Passover, guard with the greatest care."¹⁵ There was another reason too, which perhaps the "intelligent Jew" did not care to reveal to a Christian audience, and that

(15) *Church Review* II (April 1849), p. 186.

was the prohibition, derived from the Bible (Daniel 1:8), against Jews making any use at all of wine employed for non-Jewish religious purposes (T.B. Ab.Zarah, 29b). Reverend Emanuel M. Myers, writing on Jewish customs and ceremonies for a Jewish audience in 1879, explained the use of raisin wine on precisely this basis: "The reason why the ordinary wine was not used," he wrote, "is this — in former years it was made chiefly in France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, and was always consecrated for Catholic or Pontifical use; therefore, after having been once consecrated for those purposes, it could not be used for *our* religious purposes."¹⁶ Myers did not mention the fact that the rabbis as an extra stringency also prohibited the use of wine belonging to or handled by Gentiles (*stam yenam*). This rabbinic injunction, however, was largely observed in the breach in America, following a pattern of laxity already noticed in Europe.¹⁷

Significantly, those who explained the use of raisin wine on the basis of America's frontier conditions never considered the product to be ritually superior to regular fermented wine — in notable contrast to Mordecai Noah. The reason put forward by Myers is not even limited to Passover: it explains why some Jews used raisin wine all the year round "for sanctification and for all other religious purposes." This variant of the raisin wine practice is mentioned not only by Myers, but also in an 1871 Jewish cookery book ("It is usual on Friday for persons of our faith to use raisin wine to say the blessing of the sanctification").¹⁸ The custom of manufacturing home-made kosher wine for use on a weekly basis is also mentioned in oral testimony collected from Jews in Boston, Massachusetts and Portland, Oregon.¹⁹

As commercially produced kosher wine became more widely available, first through imports and later domestically, home-made alterna-

(16) Myers, *The Jews, Their Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 27.

(17) Noah certainly drank Gentile wine; see Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, p. 141. For laxity among European Jews, see H. J. Zimmels, *Ashkenazim and Sephardim* (London, 1958), p. 211; and Azriel Shohet, *Beginnings of the Haskalah Among German Jewry* (Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 139–141 [in Hebrew].

(18) Myers, *The Jews, Their Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 27; Levy, *Jewish Cookery Book*, p. 177; cf. p. 8: "wine, usually made in this country with raisins."

(19) Joan Nathan (Gerson), "Food," *B'nai B'rith International Jewish Monthly* 99(November 1984)54: "In Portland, Oregon, before the advent of bottled kosher wine, Jews fermented a Friday night kiddush drink from cherries, and in Boston, from Concord grapes." In a personal communication to me (November 20, 1984), Ms. Nathan reports that her information came "from an elderly woman in Boston" and "an elderly Jew I met in San Francisco." Note that according to Jewish law, wine made from cherries (or any other fruit except grapes and grape derivatives) is not ritually acceptable for Friday night kiddush.

tives naturally fell into disuse. By 1870, imported kosher wines appeared on the market for Passover, and soon thereafter kosher wine from California began to flow East — although how reliable the *kashrut* of this wine was soon became the subject of a major dispute between two of New York's most learned Orthodox rabbis. In any case, by 1879 the practice of making and using raisin wine for ritual purposes had noticeably declined. Myers, writing in that year, observed that "since its manufacture in Germany and Australia [sic], the wines from those countries are frequently used, and the old style of boiling down the raisins is retained only from religious scruples, or motives of economy."²⁰

The three explanations offered here for the ritual use of raisin wine by early American Jews are by no means incompatible. Although no single explanation covers all of the data presented, all three together explain a great deal. The use of raisin wine on Passover, we have concluded, reflected (1) an old world custom, (2) a Marrano practice, and (3) a rabbinically-sanctioned means of observing the commandments when regular kosher wine was unobtainable. As imported and domestic kosher wines became more widely available for purchase, the use of raisin wine declined.

The significance of this set of conclusions transcends the custom itself. The use of raisin wine, trivial as it may at first glance seem, demonstrates a usually overlooked desire on the part of many nineteenth century American Jews to maintain various traditional customs and practices, especially foodways, even if observing them under American conditions entailed some degree of hardship. The history of religious reform during this period tends to obscure the no-less-important story of religious continuity. Practices like the use of raisin wine, handed down from parent to child and maintained even by those who did not understand why, gave substance to Jewish life, preserving both links to the past and ties to Jews worldwide. Moreover, they functioned to dis-

(20) Myers, *The Jews, Their Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 27. I have been unable to determine precisely when kosher wines began to be imported into the United States. Hyman B. Grinstein in his *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* (Philadelphia, 1948), p. 576 n. 56, reports that "there were a number of grocers in the city, especially in the 1850s, who sold Passover groceries. Passover wine was dispersed as well." Uncharacteristically, however, he offers no evidence in support of this claim. Advertisements in the *Occident* 18 (March 7, 1861), p. 2A list a wide variety of available Passover products, but not kosher wine, nor have I found any subsequent advertisements for kosher wine in the *Occident* up through 1867. Imported Kosher Passover wine is advertised in the [New York] *Jewish Times*, April 15, 1870, p. 112. For the dispute over the *kashrut* of California wines, see J. D. Eisenstein (ed.), *Otzar Yisrael Encyclopedia* (New York, 1907), vol. I, p. 167; s.v. "Aronson, Moshe ben Aharon". (I am indebted to Prof. Moshe Sherman for this last reference.)

tinguish Jews from their Christian neighbors — if not on a daily basis, the way the ordinary dietary laws did, then at least for a brief period during the year, in our case during Passover. Research into the nineteenth-century ritual practices of American Jews has scarcely begun, but on the basis of what we do know it may already be hypothesized that customs like the use of raisin wine (or, for that matter, the widespread consumption of *matzah*) helped to transform holiday celebrations into full-scale religious revitalization rites. Holidays, we know, brought American Jews together. Even back-country Jews, during the spring and fall holiday seasons, frequently travelled to communities with synagogues, seeking to observe the holidays with their fellow Jews. At these times, if not at others, American Jews stepped back from the non-Jewish world in which most of them freely mixed, and rededicated themselves to their own community, customs and history.²¹

II.

So far, we have examined the raisin wine custom from an internal Jewish perspective only, relating it to Jewish law, to old world traditions and to American Jewish communal and religious history. As some of the sources cited indicate, however, the use of raisin wine was by no means a matter of concern to American Jews alone. Christians, for their own reasons, expressed considerable interest in the practice. They thought that it reflected a ritual requirement dating back to the time of Jesus, and used it to justify claims by supporters of the Temperance Movement that “wine” when spoken of favorably in the Bible “always” meant “unfermented wine, or the pure juice of the grape.”²²

The American Temperance Movement, launched early in the nineteenth-century by reform-minded Calvinist ministers, achieved national popularity, along with so many other religious and social reforms, beginning late in the 1820s. During the 1830s, per capita consumption of liquor declined markedly in America, and more and more citizens voluntarily signed temperance pledges. Reform did not come about fast enough for anti-liquor crusaders, however, and by the end of the decade many came to advocate “total temperance” (teetotalism) and a “dry

(21) This “revitalization” aspect of Jewish festival observances in America has been insufficiently stressed. See, for example, Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew* (Detroit, 1970), vol. 2, p. 978: “Country Jews came into Jewish centers from the surrounding areas, and transients and businessmen on the road made every effort to be in town at that time of the year. . . .” See also Grinstein, *Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, p. 411.

(22) White and Pleasants, *The War of Four Thousand Years*, p. 41.

America." Temperance leaders, who formerly had confined themselves to attacking the baleful effect of "spiritous liquors," now lashed out against beer and wine as well. They also entered the political arena by seeking to impose legal restrictions on liquor. State prohibition laws multiplied in the 1850s, and in 1919 a national prohibition amendment was ratified: the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution.²³

Religion played a significant role in the Temperance Movement. Religious language permeated its tracts; ministers and prominent Church laymen dominated its leadership; and several denominations, notably the Methodists, openly aligned themselves with its stated aims. As temperance advocates broadened their attack to include wine, this posed a problem. Wine, after all, was praised in the Bible, featured prominently in such New Testament episodes as the Marriage of Cana (John 2:1-11) and the Last Supper (Matt. 26:27-29), and was used by most churchmen in communion services. Attacking it was not the same as attacking the use of distilled liquor. Even writers in the religious press charged that the "Total Abstinence doctrine" stood "opposed to the teachings of the Saviour."²⁴

To counter this charge, supporters of abstinence sought to prove that wine, when written about approvingly in the Bible, meant unfermented wine, or grape juice. An exhaustive study of relevant biblical passages, prepared in England and publicized in America by the retired Albany merchant, Edward C. Delavan, concluded that:

About 60 texts of the authorized version refer to wine (or what is supposed to be wine) with approbation, where the context shows or implies it to be a natural or unfermented product. Not more than 52 texts exist which can be *proved*, by the context, to refer to *intoxicating* wine — and not one of these is connected with the Divine blessing. On the contrary, one half of them describe it as an evil, as a mocker and stupifier, or *prohibit* it either in general, or in special cases.²⁵

The dubious scholarly credibility of this and related studies is less important than the fact that they were undertaken in the first place. Evangelical reformers, as a rule, required the cloak of biblical sanction to give an aura of Divine legitimacy to their campaigns. For them to have condemned what the Bible permitted (or vice versa) would have

(23) W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, 1979), pp. 187-222; John Kraut, *The Origins of Prohibition* (New York, 1925).

(24) Delavan (ed.), *Temperance Essays*, p. 46.

(25) *Ibid.*, p. 259.

been unthinkable, for it was tantamount to saying that the Bible was less than a perfect guide to human actions. This meant that research into the "biblical view" of subjects like temperance became almost entirely deductive: proponents and opponents alike began with their conclusions and searched for supporting proof-texts. Highly charged disputes over the biblical view of wine, like later disputes over the biblical view of slavery, took on, for this reason, exceptional significance. Scholarly debates over what the Bible said mirrored popular debates over what contemporary social policy should be.²⁶

American Jews became involved in these debates because of their supposed expertise in Scriptural matters. Protestants viewed them as "guardians of the Scripture," and believed that Jews preserved ancient traditions that shed light on what the Bible meant. Through the nineteenth century one finds American Jews called upon to answer questions regarding the "Jewish view" of any number of controverted issues from slavery (on which, of course, Jewish "experts" expressed a multitude of opinions), to whether baptism should be performed at infancy or later.²⁷ This phenomenon sheds considerable light on Jewish-Christian relations as a whole during this period, and is in some ways reminiscent of what transpired earlier between Jews and Christian Hebraists in Europe. That Jews, given this situation, were also asked to give evidence on the question of temperance comes as no surprise at all.

The particular question that Edward C. Delavan posed to Mordecai Noah concerned the kind of wine used by Jews at the "Feast of Passover". This was, of course, the "feast" that Jesus was assumed to have been celebrating during the Last Supper, so the answer — assuming, as Delavan and many Evangelical Christians did, that contemporary Jewish practices reflected ancient ones — could simultaneously shed light on two issues: first, the meaning of wine in the Pentateuch, and second, the kind of wine used at the Passover seder celebrated by Jesus with his disciples. More immediately, the answer also seemed certain to play a part in the debate over the limits of temperance, particularly the hotly contested question of whether unfermented wine should be substituted for fermented wine at Christian communion.

Noah certainly understood that his words on this occasion would car-

(26) For a subtle analysis of the "Good Book" and the problem of slavery, see David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, 1975), pp. 523-556.

(27) See Nahum M. Sarna and Jonathan D. Sarna, "Jewish Bible Scholarship and Translations in the United States," in E. S. Frerichs (ed.), *The Bible and Bibles in America* (Atlanta, 1988), pp. 90-92.

ry weight. In his newspaper, the New York *Evening Star*, he went so far as to make the implications of what he was saying explicit:

Unfermented liquor, or wine free from alcoholic substances, was only used, in those times, as it is used at the present day: at the Passover; the wine over which the blessing is said; the wine, probably, used at the Last Supper; and the wine that should be used at the communion table.²⁸

Noah also made sure that his statement achieved wide publicity, and was no doubt pleased to see himself widely quoted. According to the biographer of the noted reformer Arthur Tappan, his statement proved especially welcome in “total temperance” circles:

It was not a little annoying to those who assailed Mr. Tappan with their ridicule in consequence of his claiming that the wine created at the marriage festival at Cana must have been unfermented wine, that a distinguished Jew in New York, during the controversy, stated in his daily paper that unfermented wine was used at the Passover by the Israelites. The editor, MORDECAI MANASSEH [sic] NOAH, was deemed good authority, and his testimony corroborated the statements of Mr. Tappan, and aided the friends of “pure wine.”²⁹

From a broader perspective, Noah’s comments also bespoke the unself-conscious way in which he often sought to merge his social thought and his Judaism in an effort to achieve an American-Jewish synthesis.

Noah’s “testimony” did not go unchallenged. Temperance moderates, seeking to refute him, followed the strategy of their opponents, and likewise sought evidence from Jewish informants. An unnamed New York Rabbi (“or Reader”), probably Samuel Isaacs, revealed that English Jews used fermented wine on Passover, and not raisin wine. “In London,” he explained to an inquiring Christian, “the wine merchants furnish the Jews with wine, that is fermented liquor, such as they can depend upon as free from spirits distilled from grain; and that thus they are relieved from the necessity of preparing their wine for themselves.”³⁰ Two American Christian missionaries in the Middle East, Eli Smith and Daniel Ladd, went even further. They denied that wine, whether in the Bible or in contemporary “Syria,” was *ever* unfermented.

(28) *Evening Star for the Country*, February 19, 1836, p. 2; see “Temperance Wine,” *Tri-Weekly Journal* [Augusta Maine], February 25, 1836, p. 3.

(29) Lewis Tappan, *The Life of Arthur Tappan* (New York, 1870), p. 105.

(30) *Church Review* II (April 1849), p. 186.

Smith, with typical thoroughness, described three methods of wine-making on Mount Lebanon, and reported that "when the people were inquired of for unfermented wines, they stared and said they never heard of such a thing." Ladd admitted to the widespread use of unfermented "grape-molasses" in the Middle East, made by boiling the grape must down into a syrup, but insisted that in the eyes of local residents this product was not wine at all: "Besides being used commonly as an article of food, it is drunk with water just as farmers drink molasses and water, in summer, in New England." As for Mordecai Noah's testimony regarding the use of raisin wine on Passover, Ladd, writing from Cyprus, again on the basis of evidence obtained from Jewish (as well as formerly Jewish) informants, suggested that there must be "some mistake":

I have made diligent inquiries of Jews and others in this country, and especially of an educated, converted German Jew, a missionary of the London Jews' Society, whether they know of any such practice, and the result is that no one ever heard of it, except that very poor Jews in Europe, who on account of their poverty cannot obtain wine, do sometimes make such a decoction, and use it as the best substitute for wine at the Passover; and on other occasions, when they need wine for religious purposes.³¹

As we know, the moderates were right. Most Jews did not (and do not) habitually use raisin wine on Passover, nor is the use of raisin wine mandated either by the Bible³² or by later rabbinic authorities. The source of the raisin wine custom described by Mordecai Noah, however disputed it may be, clearly had nothing to do with temperance, and the practice could shed no light whatsoever on whether fermented wine or grape juice should be offered at Christian communion. Nevertheless, the fact that Christian Americans brought Jewish "expert testimony" to bear on the temperance question remains highly significant. It reveals much about the way Christians tended to relate to Jewish leaders in nineteenth-century America, how they used them as resources, viewed them as repositories of ancient wisdom, and looked to them as potential legitimators of Christian practices. It also reveals much about the way some Jewish leaders responded to these Christian overtures, how they took on the roles that Christians assigned to them, turned them to ad-

(31) *Ibid.*, pp. 191–193.

(32) Haim Beinart, "Yayin," *Encyclopedia Biblica* (Jerusalem, 1958), pp. 675–82 [in Hebrew]; J. F. Ross, "Wine," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, 1962), pp. 849–852.

vantage, and frequently performed as experts whether they were qualified to do so or not. In other times and places, Jews, even if thoroughly knowledgeable, would likely have been reluctant to intervene in mooted questions bearing on internal Christian affairs; not so in nineteenth-century America. Indeed, in Noah's case, he clearly relished the opportunity to share "Jewish wisdom" with his Christian friends, and, as we have seen, carefully shaped the meager information he had into conclusions that they would find relevant.

III.

Having explained both the raisin wine practice itself and its role in the American temperance debate, it remains to explore the temperance views of Mordecai Noah, and how they related to those of the Jewish community as a whole. This is not so simple as it seems, for although Noah's specific comments on raisin wine aided extremist voices within the temperance movement, most of what he wrote on the subject followed a far more moderate course. What's more, even as a moderate, Noah went further than most later American Jewish leaders did: they either ignored the temperance cause or opposed it. Why, one wonders, did Noah not do likewise?

Recent scholarship on the American temperance movement suggests three major lines of interpretation that bear on this question. First, as W. J. Rorabaugh has stressed, alcohol became "pervasive in American society" during the very years that Mordecai Noah was growing up. Indeed, "during the first third of the nineteenth century the typical American annually drank more distilled liquor than at any other time in our history." The temperance movement in its early stages was thus more than just a new crusade against an eternal vice; instead, it was a rational response to a nationwide social problem of alarming dimensions. Beyond this, as Paul Johnson has pointed out in a recent review-essay, temperance is now seen as "crucial to the making of a distinctively middle-class way of life in the nineteenth-century." The movement emphasized respectability and individual moral accomplishment, attacked violence and irresponsibility, and welcomed those who sought to improve their social and economic lot. Yet, on the other hand, temperance also had a dark side. It spearheaded, in Johnson's words, "a century-long bourgeois assault upon the mores of immigrants and working people." Attacking the saloon and the "workingman's club," temperance advocates, many of them evangelical Protestants, stressed religion and the church. Temperance reform, religious revival, the quest for national social con-

formity, and, in many cases, anti-Catholicism and anti-immigrant nativism, were all bound up together in one symbol-laden package.³³

Mordecai Noah began speaking out on the temperance issue when it was still in its early phases. At the time, temperance was, for the most part, a voluntary self-help movement. While it depicted the ill-effects of excessive imbibing, it advocated neither total abstinence nor coercive laws. Aware of the problems caused by alcoholism, and eager to help young men who sought to rise, as he had done, from poverty to respectability, Noah preached the virtues of temperance within the context of self-improvement and the quest for success. "Beware of intemperance," he thus warned youthful members of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen in 1822, "it is the rock upon which many worthy men have split. It is to the abuse of ardent spirits to which we have a right to attribute all that private misery, all that distress of families, loss of health and happiness, which are too frequently visible in populous cities." At other times, Noah praised those who substituted hot coffee for spiritous liquor in winter, lauded by name a former drunk who became "thoroughly respectable," and supported mild legislation aimed at raising the price of liquor (its rapidly falling price was considered a major factor behind its increasing use and abuse) and at licensing those stores that sold it.³⁴ But he never went further. Indeed, in 1836, he specifically condemned more extreme measures. "We have no doubt in our own minds," he wrote in his newspaper, "that moderate and cautious use of stimulating drink . . . is a much better remedy for intemperance than violent efforts to restrain and repress all consumption of it." Only very late in his life did he advocate "total abstinence," and then only as a voluntary measure for those "who never know, as we do, when to stop."³⁵

Why then did Noah, with his comments on raisin wine, play into the hands of temperance extremists who sought to prohibit all alcoholic beverages, even the fermented wine traditionally used at Christian communion? The answer seems to be that he had no such intention. In his newspaper, the *Evening Star*, he prefaced his discussion of raisin wine

(33) W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic*, pp. 7, 20, 187–222; Paul Johnson, "Bottoms Up: Drinking, Temperance, and the Social Historians," *Reviews in American History* 13:1(March 1985)48–53.

(34) Mordecai M. Noah, *An Address Delivered Before the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York on the Opening of the Mechanic Institution* (New York, 1822), p. 18; *National Advocate*, December 6, 1817, p. 2; September 4, 1818, p. 2; July 31, 1821, p. 2; August 1, 1821, p. 2; March 8, 1822, p. 2.

(35) *Evening Star for the Country*, February 12, 1836, p. 2; *Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger*, June 30, 1847, p. 2.

with a long discussion of fermented wine in the Bible, and concluded that “patriarchs, legislators, kings, priests, and generals all partook of it.” “We must not attempt to carry a good measure into effect by perverting the truth,” he warned. “It is the *abuse* of wine, not its use that is complained of.” He insisted in the same article that “the cause of temperance, and a better cause cannot exist, must not be sustained by striving to prove that wine was not used by the distinguished personages spoken of in holy writ.” According to Noah, then, Jews in Bible times only used unfermented wine on one occasion, “as it is used at the present day: at the Passover.” Because Christian communion took as its model the Passover seder, he urged that raisin wine be used at the communion table as well.³⁶

Edward Delavan and other temperance maximalists cleverly seized on the last part of Noah’s statement, ignoring the rest, and asked him to expand on the subject of the Jewish use of raisin wine. They gave publicity only to this one aspect of his analysis, wrenched it out of context, and employed it to buttress their own anti-alcohol claims.³⁷ Noah himself, however, continued to write in a quite different and more moderate vein. Perhaps significantly, when he was next queried about temperance in the Bible, specifically “whether Jews, in the times of their kings, were not remarkably abstemious and temperate,” he made no mention at all of raisin wine, possibly from fear that his words might once again be misconstrued. Instead, he quoted the prophet Isaiah (5:11) to prove that some Israelites abused alcohol, and then reminded his readers that Solomon (“and he was a wise man”) wrote that “wine maketh the heart glad (Ps. 104:15; cf. Eccles. 10:19).”³⁸

Noah’s experience with his raisin wine comments calls to mind what happened to another nineteenth-century American Jew who spoke out on a current issue of the day from a “biblical” perspective. On the National Fast Day (January 4, 1861), called by President James Buchanan on the very eve of the Civil War, Rabbi Morris Raphall of New York delivered a well-publicized address entitled “The Bible View of Slavery.” Raphall’s remarks, filled with strident attacks on abolitionists, were more politically explosive than Noah’s, but his Biblical facts were generally correct, and he was careful to make clear that he himself was “no friend to slavery in the abstract, and still less friendly to the practical working

(36) *Evening Star for the Country*, February 19, 1836, p. 2.

(37) White and Pleasants, *War of Four Thousand Years*, p. 293; “Temperance Wine,” [Augusta Maine] *Tri-Weekly Journal*, February 25, 1836, p. 3; Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, p. 105.

(38) *New York Mirror*, vol. 17, #36 (February 29, 1840), p. 285.

of slavery." This was no help, however, for his ill-timed lecture created a storm of controversy, and was used by the South's supporters in their pro-slavery defense. "The impression on the minds of some," a contemporary minister reported, speaking of Raphall's lecture, "is, that he must know the Hebrew of the Bible so profoundly that it is absolutely impossible for him to be mistaken on the subject of slavery; and that what he affirms respecting it, is as true almost as the word of God itself." Unimpressed, several Jews rose to refute Raphall, including the highly cultured Michael Heilprin on the pages of the *New York Tribune*. The whole controversy was soon overshadowed by the guns of war.³⁹ Yet the experience, in this case as in Noah's, held critical lessons for American Jewish leaders. They learned (and not for the last time) that pronouncements about the "Jewish view" on disputed issues of the day became public property and took on lives of their own. Those who received them did not necessarily use them in ways that those who delivered them originally intended or wanted. Instead, the pronouncements became grist for the political mill. Interested parties, seeking the legitimacy that the Bible as interpreted by Jews could offer, did not hesitate to refashion and selectively quote "Jewish views" so that they might better comport with their own established positions.

Temperance advocates enjoyed few subsequent opportunities to benefit from even this measure of American Jewish support.⁴⁰ As the Temperance Movement became more coercive in its demands, and as Jews became more aware of the evangelical and nativistic elements interwoven with the social reform and self-help aspects of the movement that had earlier appealed to them, they joined the ranks of the opposition. Leading rabbis, including Isaac Mayer Wise, Bernhard Felsenthal, Marcus Jastrow, and Gustav Gottheil, as well as American Jewry's Washington *shtadlan*, Simon Wolf, all spoke out against anti-liquor (prohibition) legislation, many of them noting that alcoholism was not a Jewish problem, and that both the Bible and rabbinic tradition permitted wine and spirits to be used in moderation.⁴¹ Questions from Christians eager

(39) Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654-1875* (New York, 1971), pp. 405-428; Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia, 1957), pp. 16-20; Ella Mielziner, *Moses Mielziner* (New York, 1931), pp. 20-23, 212-250.

(40) See, for example, support for moderate temperance in *Asmonean* 6(July 23, 1852)115; and *Occident* 17(1859)56-57, 63-64. Moses Samuel, writing in England, earlier advocated that Jews take up the cause of "total abstinence," see [Liverpool] *Cup of Salvation* I (December 1846), pp. 421-25. One of American Jewry's most ardent advocates of temperance was Lewis Charles Levin; see John A. Forman, "Lewis Charles Levin: Portrait of an American Demagogue," *American Jewish Archives* 12(1960)153-154.

(41) *American Israelite* 22(March 20, 1874), pp. 4-5; *Jewish Times* 6(April 24, 1874), p.

to know about the "Biblical meaning" of wine continued to confront Jews, but now rabbis met them with firm and unsympathetic answers, different in substance and tone from those that Noah had offered. Felsenthal repeatedly refuted the efforts of temperance reformers to employ the Bible in support of their ideas; and Gottheil, in a celebrated sermon, attempted to put the question to rest once and for all:

A new interest has been awakened by the temperance agitation. Was the wine Jesus drank fermented or not? If the former, then there can be no wrong in its use; if the latter, his authority cannot be invoked against total abstinence. In other words, the Pharisee of old must decide for the Christian of today, whether he may drink fermented wine or not. Their spiritual heir, the rabbi of today, is asked time and again to declare the law of God in this particular matter. His answer can only be one — fermented wines were never prohibited if kept from contact with leaven, which is restricted to fermented grain products only. We are sorry that we cannot offer the temperance reformer the much-coveted comfort of the example of Jesus.⁴²

Gottheil was actually more sympathetic to the temperance cause than most Jewish leaders were. He maintained close ties to the Protestant community, viewed alcoholism as "the yoke under which our nation is groaning," and saw a need for "strong legal control" of liquor, as well as strenuous police enforcement. Still, he was no advocate of prohibition. He called that a "Utopian" measure, and urged that it be relegated "to the time of the messiah."⁴³

With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, the "Utopian measure" that Gottheil and most other Jews considered quite unnecessary came into effect. This raised anew the subject of raisin wine, but for a different, even opposite, reason. The question now, put forward by Jews who knew nothing about the past history of the subject in America, was whether Jewish law permitted (not required!) unfermented wine to be used for sacramental purposes, and if it did, whether the unfermented wine was considered to be inferior. In a celebrated responsum,

136; (May 1, 1874), pp. 148–9; *Old Testament Student* 4(1883)131, 184; Simon Wolf, *Presidents I Have Known* (Washington, D.C., 1918), pp. 102, 106; Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal: Teacher in Israel* (New York, 1924), pp. 304, 322, 326; Shlomith Yahalom, "Jewish Existence in the Shadow of American Legislation: A Study of Prohibition," *Tarbiz* 53(1983)119–121 [in Hebrew].

(42) Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, pp. 304, 322, 326; Gustav Gottheil, "Judaism and Temperance," *Sermons by American Rabbis* (Chicago, 1896), p. 177.

(43) Gottheil, "Judaism and Temperance," p. 178–79.

later translated into English for the *American Jewish Year Book*, Louis Ginzberg attempted to put all doubts to rest. He demonstrated, bringing to bear the full force of his incomparable erudition, that raisin wine and grape juice were no less acceptable for ritual purposes than fermented wine itself.⁴⁴

IV.

Our effort to understand the puzzling nineteenth-century American Jewish practice of using raisin wine on Passover has resulted in three separate yet obviously interrelated inquiries. We began by seeking the practice's Jewish origins, moved on to consider the role played by Passover raisin wine in the American temperance debate, and concluded by relating the raisin wine issue to American Jewish views on the temperance question as a whole. This sequence is methodologically significant, for it nicely illustrates the three different strands of American Jewish history: Jewish history, American history, and American Jewry's own distinctive historical tradition, now more than three centuries old.

The conclusions set forth here, however, are also significant in their own right. Among other things, we have suggested that the use of raisin wine demonstrates a usually overlooked desire on the part of American Jews to maintain selected traditions and customs even under difficult "frontier" conditions. The practice enriched Jewish life, served to distinguish Jews from their Christian neighbors, and helped to transform Passover into a time of religious revitalization. Seen in the context of the temperance debate, the raisin wine practice also illustrates how Christians in nineteenth-century America sometimes used Jews as informants, viewed them as repositories of ancient wisdom, and looked to them as potential legitimators of Christian practices — roles that Jewish leaders not infrequently exploited. At the same time, it shows how a "Jewish view," when it became attached to a contemporary issue in America and hence politicized, took on a life of its own, with occasionally unfortunate implications that could not be predicted in advance. Finally, we have seen that the raisin wine issue sheds light on American Jewish attitudes to the temperance question as a whole. To Mordecai Noah, who first brought the Jewish use of raisin wine to the attention of Amer-

(44) Ginzberg, *Teshuvah* (n. 5); *American Jewish Year Book* 25(1923-24)401-425; Eli Ginzberg, *Keeper of the Law* (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 221. For a full discussion of various responsa on this issue, including Ginzberg's, as well as their background, see Yahalom, "Jewish Existence in the Shadow of American Legislation," pp. 127-131. This and other aspects of Jews and Prohibition are also covered in Jenna Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940* (Bloomington, IN, 1983), pp. 85-105.

icans, temperance was an important social cause, a largely voluntary movement that promoted self-restraint, self-help, and popular middle-class values. He was happy to endorse the cause, even as he warned its adherents against extremism. Later Jews, who saw the Temperance Movement at a more advanced stage, noticed the extremism first. They found the movement's virtues outweighed by its coercive evangelical fervor and anti-immigrant nativism, and most of them kept their distance. Far from trumpeting the use of raisin wine by Jews, they questioned, from a ritual point of view, whether such non-fermented wine was even permitted.

The use of raisin wine by Jews in nineteenth-century America is admittedly not one of the grand themes of American Jewish history. Nor did the issue become a matter of any substantial importance even in the temperance debate. But like many a seemingly trivial ritual and custom, when viewed in context it takes on a somewhat larger meaning. For, as we have seen, even a minor custom can shed light on issues of enduring significance.