

The Origin of the Custom of Chai Rotl

By: ZVI RON

There is a custom, which seems to get more and more publicity each year, to distribute “*chai (18) rotl*” of drinks on Lag B’Omer in Meron as a *segula* to have children. The custom was not widespread before the last few years,¹ affording a rare opportunity to trace the origin and development of a custom as it grows before our eyes.

These days the *chai rotl segula* is featured in a lot of publicity material put out by charitable organizations connected with Lag B’Omer and Meron. For example the “Kupat Tzidkat Rashbi” website advertises, “The distribution of *chai rotl mashke* to individuals who come to Rebbe Shimon’s burial place on Lag B’Omer ensures wonderful merit for the provider. People who distribute *chai rotl mashke*, 54 liters of drink, to the celebrants, earn Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai’s *bracha* and blessing.”² Similarly, the “Yeshuos Rashbi” organization states that “The *Ta’amei ha-Minhagim* says that numerous people who have had difficulty having children, finding a *shid-duch*, recovering from an illness or attaining a livelihood were successful only after they donated *chai rotl* for the Lag B’Omer celebration in Meron.”³ This practice is distinct from the meritorious act of giving charity, as the drinks are distributed not to the poor and needy, but rather to whoever happens to be celebrating at Meron.⁴

The *rotl* is a unit of weight that was widely used in the Mediterranean area, but it was measured differently in different countries and even in different regions in the same country,⁵ varying between one and six-plus

¹ When asked about the custom, R. Chaim Kanievsky said that “We never knew about it at all.” Zvi Yevrov, *Derekh Siha* (Bnei Brak: Or ha-Hayyim, 2004), p. 429; Yishai Mezlomian, *Segulot Rabboteinu* (Holon: 2014), p. 321.

² <http://www.rashbi.org/page_e.php?id=13>.

³ <<http://www.yeshuosrashbi.com/segula.html>>.

⁴ *Ohel Avraham* (Bnei Brak: 2011), p. 227.

⁵ Housni Alkhateeb Shehada, *Mamluks and Animals: Veterinary Medicine in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 291, note 15; Naval Intelligence Division, *Palestine and Transjordan* (London: Kegan Paul, 2006), p. 554; Kalman Kahana, *Heker v-Iyyun* (Tel Aviv: Melen, 1960), p. 227.

Zvi Ron received *semikhab* from the Israeli Rabbanut and his PhD in Jewish Theology from Spertus University. He is an educator living in Neve Daniel, Israel and the author of *Sefer Katan ve-Gadol* (Rossi Publications, 2006) about the big and small letters in Tanakh.

pounds.⁶ Regarding this custom, a *rotl* is understood to be equivalent to 3 liters, a value at the higher end of the *rotl* scale, so that 18 *rotl* of drinks is equivalent to 54 liters.⁷

The source commonly quoted for this custom is a letter written by R. Benzion Halberstam, the second Bobover Rebbe (1874–1941), on Sunday, April 21, 1912. He writes that someone heard that the “Jews in Israel have a tradition that a *segula* for barren couples is to vow to bring 18 *rotl* of drink (*mashkeh*) on the day of the *hilula* at the grave the divine Tanna Rashbi.” This person asked the Bobover Rebbe to perform the *segula*. The Rebbe asks the recipient of the letter, R. Yaakov Yisrael Shmerler,⁸ to be his “*shaliach mitzvah* to mention the couple Meir ben Chaya Leah with his wife Sara bat Sheindel, that God should give them a viable offspring speedily with no obstacle or harm, and vow on their behalf 18 *rotl* of drinks as is customary. And when God assists them and they are redeemed speedily, they are prepared to happily repay their vow.”⁹ Apparently, the vow had to be made at the grave of Rashbi, which is why the Bobover Rebbe appointed a messenger to do this on behalf of the couple. It is understood that the beverages purchased will refresh the visitors to Meron on R. Shimon bar Yochai’s *hilula*, and so is an appropriate way to give thanks for the prayer being answered.¹⁰

Since the Bobover Rebbe’s letter mentions *mashkeh*, a term commonly used for alcoholic beverages, the drink was generally understood to be wine.¹¹ Old Bobover Chassidim reported referring to beer as *mashkeh*,

⁶ Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, eds., *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2013), p. 43, note 18; Mordechai Diskin, *Divrei Mordekhai* (Jerusalem: 1889), p. 11a; A.M. Luncz, “History of the Jews in Palestine, Part I,” *Jerusalem Year Book*, vol. 2, 1887, p. 18, note 52.

⁷ Yaakov Kochavi, *Darakh Kokhav m-Yaakov* (Bnei Brak: 2006), p. 104.

⁸ Regarding this righteous figure, see Natan Anshin, *Sippurim Yerushalmim* vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Meimei Ha-Daat, 1997), p. 132.

⁹ ב"ה, א' אח"ק י"ט במב"י תרע"ב באבוב יע"א, שלום רב לידידי האברך המופלג הירא היוחסין כ"ש מו"ה יעקב ישראל נ"י שמערלר, נדרשתי מאחד מאנ"ש יחיה בענין נשגב, היות ששמע מפי אנשי אה"ק ת"ו שקבלה בידם סגולה לחשוכי בנים רח"ל, לנדב ח"י ראטל משקה ביומא דהילולא על ציון התנא האלקי רשב"י זי"ע ועכ"י. לכן בחרתי בו לעשותו שליח מצוה להזכיר לטובה את הזוג מאיר בן חיה לאה עם זוגתו שרה בת שינדל שיפקוד השי"ת אותם בזש"ק במהרה בלי שום מכשול ונזק. וינדב עבורם ח"י ראטל משקה כנהוג. וכאשר יעזור השי"ת ויפקדם בישועה במהרה, מוכנים המה לשלם נדבת לבבם בשמחה. ובזה הנני מברכו בישועה בכ"ע ויזכה לישב על אדמת הקודש במנוחה והשקט ובטח וברוב נחת והרחבה. ידידו"ש באהבה, בן ציון הלבשרשטאם.

¹⁰ Moshe Bublil, *Simbat Banim* (2006), p. 25.

¹¹ Yehuda Sheinfeld, *Osri l-Gefen* (2002) vol. 8, p. 377, *siman* 403.

which at the time was sold in cases of a *rotl*.¹² More recent sources mention bringing grape juice,¹³ and even soda or chocolate milk,¹⁴ anything that may be considered a significant and refreshing beverage.

This letter is reproduced in the well-known book of customs, *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minhagim*.¹⁵ The original book was compiled by R. Abraham Sperling (1851–1921), and the chapter about Lag B'Omer customs was added in the 1957 edition of this book, as the commemoration of Lag B'Omer became more and more popular and elaborate over the years since the book was first written. The new chapter was compiled by R. Shlomo Eliezer Margalio based mostly on the works of his father, R. Yishaya Asher Zelig Margalio (Riaz, 1894–1969), a major promoter of commemorating Lag B'Omer in Meron.¹⁶

The Bobover Rebbe is referring to a custom that was already in place, although the letter indicates that he himself knew of this *segula* only because of someone who just told him about it. When did it originate, and who started it?

R. Yosef Messas (1892–1974) recounted a legendary story about the birth of R. Shimon bar Yochai based on what he recalled seeing in various books. According to the story, R. Shimon Bar Yochai's mother Sarah was barren, and Yochai was considering divorcing her and marrying someone else. Sarah cried and prayed for a child. "On the night of Rosh Hashanah Yochai had a dream, and in the dream he was standing in a large forest. The forest had many thousands of trees, some of them were fresh with fruits and some were dry. Yochai was leaning on a dry tree and he lifted his eyes and saw a man of stature of awesome appearance carrying a jug on his shoulder, filled with water. He watered some of the dry trees and some he skipped over and left as they were. When the man came to water the tree Yochai was leaning on, he took out a little plate filled with pure water and watered the tree Yochai was leaning on and blessed it. Yochai

¹² *Davar B-Itto*, 5768 (Bnei Brak: 2008), p. 847.

¹³ Yaakov Kochavi, *Darakh Kokhav m-Yaakov* (Bnei Brak: 2006), p. 104.

¹⁴ Moshe Bublil, *Simhat Banim* (2006), p. 25.

¹⁵ Abraham Sperling, *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minhagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1957), p. 263, in the footnote.

¹⁶ *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minhagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1957), p. 255. Regarding R. Yishaya Asher Zelig Margalio, an ideological leader of the Eda Haredit, see chapter three in Raphael Patai and Emanuel Goldsmith, *Thinkers and Teachers of Modern Judaism* (New York: Paragon House, 1994); Aviezer Ravitzky, "Covenant of Faith or Covenant of Fate? Competing Orthodox Conceptions of Secular Jews" in Rachel Elijor and Peter Schafer, eds., *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 283-284; Motti Inbari, *Messianic Religious Zionism Confronts Israeli Territorial Compromises* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 146-147.

felt the blessing in the little bit of water. The water kept the tree and its surroundings covered and the tree immediately produced large apples...When Yochai woke up he told his wife about the dream. He told her that he understood that the forest represented the world and the trees represented women, some fertile and some barren like the dry trees...and his wife was the tree he leaned on and she was now watered with the spring of blessing... but what was the reason that the man watered all the other trees with a jug and the tree he leaned on was watered with a little plate?" His wife suggested going to Rabbi Akiva and asking for an explanation of the dream. Rabbi Akiva explained that the little bit of water the man used were the tears Sarah cried when she prayed, that's why it was used only for this tree. He told them she will get pregnant this year. And so it happened, Yochai and Sarah had a baby boy born on Shavuot. They called him Shimon, since God heard her prayers."¹⁷ Although this story is sometimes brought as a source for the *segula*,¹⁸ it actually contains nothing about donating drinks or making a vow of any kind connected to having children. Furthermore, the story itself is of questionable provenance, as it does not appear in any classical sources or in any source prior to R. Messas.

Another source given for the custom is a letter written by R. Ovadia of Bartenura in 1489 where he responds to his brother's query regarding miracles associated with the Temple Mount and graves of saintly people. The general tenor is to deny the miracles his brother asked about. In his discussion of alleged miracles, he notes that on the 28th of Iyar people gather at the grave of Samuel the prophet and he never heard of any miracles associated with that site "other than people saying that many barren women have conceived and sick people were healed after a vow or promise was made there, or their prayers there were answered." He concludes that the veracity of these reports cannot be determined.¹⁹ Earlier corrupted versions of this letter switched the date to the 18th of Iyar and substituted R. Shimon bar Yochai for Samuel the prophet,²⁰ leading to an association with Lag B'Omer and Meron.²¹ In actuality R. Ovadia specifically writes that he did not visit the northern part of Israel, and the only

¹⁷ R. Yosef Messas, *Nahalat Avot*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Otzrot Yosef, 1977), pp. 31-32.

¹⁸ Ilan Shmila, *Ilana d-Haye* (Lod: 2012), pp. 247-248.

¹⁹ Avraham Yaari, ed., *Iggerot Eretz Yisrael* (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1971), p. 139, letter 22.

²⁰ Ovadia mi-Bartenura, *Darkei Zion* (Kolomya: 1886), p. 17b; errors repeated in the Petrikov: 1928 edition, p. 26.

²¹ See the discussion by Chanoch Tobias in *Alim l-Trufah*, number 381, 3 Av, 5763 (2003), p.3; *Davar B-Itto*, 5768 (Bnei Brak: 2008), p. 846.

thing he says about Tzfat and the northern part of Israel in this letter is that he heard that the Jews there live peacefully and are not troubled by Moslems.²²

The actual earliest recorded mention of this practice is in the book *Tal Yerushalayim*, published in 1873. It was written by R. Yehuda Ornstein (1814–1889), formerly the Av Beit Din of Faltishen (Falticeni), Romania, who moved to Jerusalem and headed the court of the Ḥassidic community there.²³ The book describes the customs of the people living in Jerusalem and Israel in general at that time. In the book, the author records a visit to Meron on Lag B’Omer, noting the celebrations and practices he saw there. The author reports that he saw “with his own eyes, two men who had a lot of *mashkeb* and they would ask every person to drink their *mashkeb*. I asked what this is about and I was told that one of the men brought his young son for a festive haircut, and he did not have children for 14 years. One time the men were [in Meron for] Lag B’Omer and in a festive mood one said in a loud voice that he vows to bring 18 *rotl* of *mashkeb* to the celebration of R. Shimon bar Yochai so he should help him have a son this year and the crowd answered ‘Amen!’ That year his wife got pregnant and gave birth to a boy. Now that it was time for his son’s haircut he repaid his vow. The other man did not have children for ten years and he said the same after the first man and God helped him too. I heard this from them themselves.”²⁴

Since there is no earlier mention of this custom, and since the author seemed surprised and intrigued by what he saw, and based on the explanation he received, it is clear that this was not a previously existing custom that was known before and in fact seems to have been a spontaneous vow

²² Avraham Yaari, ed., *Iggerot Eretz Yisrael* (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1971), pp. 139-140, letter 22.

²³ Yehuda Ornstein, *Tal Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem: 1988), pp. 2-3. See the biographical information in Baruch Traktin and Zev Hershkovitz, *Encyclopedia l-Yahadut Romania* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2012), p. 424; Meir Wunder, *Encyclopedia l-Hakbmei Galicia* vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Makhon L-hantzaḥat Yahadut Galicia, 2005), pp. 43-44; *Od Yosef Chai – Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem: 1989), pp. 71-72.

²⁴ Yehuda Ornstein, *Tal Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem: 1873), pp. 10a-b. More recently reprinted in Jerusalem, 1988, pp. 39, 40. והנה בשמחה זו ראיתי בעיני שהיו שני אנשים שהיו להם משקה הרבה, והיו מבקשים לכל איש שישתה משקה שלהם, ושאלתי מה זה וסיפרו לי שאחד הביא קטן שלו על שמחת התגלחת, והוא לא היו לו ילדים ארבעה עשר שנים, ופעם אחת היו בל"ג בעומר ובתוך השמחה ענה בקול אני מגדר שמונה עשר ראטיל משקה על שמחת רשב"י שיעזור לי ה' בזו השנה בן זכר, וענו כל העם בקול אמן. בשנה זו נתעברה זוגתו וילדה לו בן, וכעת הגיע זמן ההתגלחת ושילם נדרו כאשר נדר, ואיש השני לא היו לו ילדים עשר שנים, ענה אחריו כנ"ל ועזר לו ד' גם כן. שמעתי מפיהם בעצמם

made by one man, perhaps when he was a bit tipsy, which was seconded by another man. In the well-known series on Jewish customs, *Nitei Gavriel*, this vow was understood to be a pledge to make a *seudah* with 18 *rotl* of drinks at the child's first haircut.²⁵ Thus, the vow of 18 *rotl* of *mashkeh* is comparable to someone today vowing to make a *kiddush* with 18 bottles of scotch, or pledging \$180 dollars at an appeal.

The payment of the vow was a big event that year at Lag B'Omer and thanks to the author, the story became known to a wider audience. In the years between the time *Tal Yerushalayim* was published and the time the Bobover Rebbe wrote his letter, word of this particular vow spread to the extent that others followed suit, and it was transformed from a vow into a *segula*. It cannot be considered an ancient custom.²⁶

Adding to the popularity of the practice, the original story from *Tal Yerushalayim* was quoted in the book *Masa Meron*, published in 1966. This book is based on the 1889 book *Masa Meron* by R. Menachem Mendel Rubin, in which he describes his trip to Meron.²⁷ The 1966 version was put out by the local council in Israel in which Meron is located, "Merom ha-Galil," and contains much additional material beyond the original travelogue, such as songs and prayers associated with Rashbi, as well as tales of salvation, of which the story of the two childless men was included.²⁸ The book is geared to encourage and support people visiting Meron on Lag B'Omer.²⁹ Multiple editions of this book appeared since then.³⁰

In the original story we see all the elements that made it into the 1912 letter: the vow is made in Meron on Lag B'Omer, there is a plea to have a child, and the vow is repaid only after the prayer was answered, in the original episode only when the child got his first haircut. We can now trace the development of this custom. It began as a spontaneous individual vow by two childless men in the mid to late 1800s. The episode was recorded in the book *Tal Yerushalayim*. Others heard or read about this and word of the vow spread, so that the Bobover Rebbe had heard of it by the early 1900s. The custom was then included in the 1957 edition, and all subsequent editions, of the very popular *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minhagim*. The

²⁵ Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel – children's haircuts, bringing them to cheder and Chumash parties* (Jerusalem: 2001), p. 73, note 13.

²⁶ David Russof, *V-Amartem Ko L-Chai* (Jerusalem: Otzar Ha-Torah, 2006), p. 329.

²⁷ Menachem Mendel Rubin, *Masa Meron* (Jerusalem: 1889).

²⁸ Bezalel Landoy, *Masa Meron* (Jerusalem: Usha, 1966), p. 112.

²⁹ Bezalel Landoy, *Masa Meron* (Jerusalem: Usha, 1966), dedication on inside cover.

³⁰ For example, *Masa Meron* (Jerusalem: Torah Mi-Tzion, 1983), *Masa Meron* (Jerusalem: Wagshal, 1989).

original story was recounted in the various editions of *Masa Meron* from the 1960s and on.

Note that the original sources of this *segula* only refer to having children, not anything else, and more significantly, the drinks were purchased and distributed only after the prayers were answered.³¹ Today, the *segula* is used as a pretext for organizations to ask for donations on Lag B'Omer by subtly shifting the donation of 18 *rotl* from after the prayer is answered to before the prayer is answered, which brings us to the contemporary version of this *segula*.³² Modern books that repeat the contents of the Bobover Rebbe's letter even misstate the request to match the current practice. While in the original letter the Bobover Rebbe asked R. Shmerler only to make the vow at Meron so that the couple will have a child, this has been changed to a request "to distribute 18 *rotel* of drinks...in Meron."³³ Although the original sources talk about this only as a *segula* to have children, now it is advertised as helping with *shidduchim* and livelihood as well,³⁴ things never mentioned in the original sources or the literature that faithfully recounted those original sources. These alterations to the original version of the vow may have been made in good faith, or can be viewed in a more cynical manner.

What began as a spontaneous vow by a childless man in the 1800s has now become a cure-all *segula* and fund-raising tool directed at a population that is fundamentally unaware that this *segula* never really existed. ❧

³¹ That is, when the woman gets pregnant. See Asher Chananiah, *Sheilot u-Teshuvot Sharei Yosher*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: 2005), p. 349, *Yoreh De'ab*, *siman* 16.

³² See, for example, Aharon Tzoref, *Mevasser Tov* (2010), pp. 52-53; *Davar B-Itto*, 5768 (Bnei Brak: 2008), p. 847.

³³ Baruch Lev, *There is No Such Thing as Coincidence* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2003), p. 45. There the date of the letter is mistakenly given as 1932.

³⁴ Baruch Lev, *There is No Such Thing as Coincidence* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2003), p. 45. The author states that he was told by a representative of Agudas Ohel ha-Rashbi that this *segula* works also to find a spouse or cure illnesses, after they "had given eighteen *rotel* of drinks."