**Laws of the Four Cups**

**By Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon**

**I. The rabbinic commandment of the four cups**

The *mishna* (*Pesachim* 99b) states: “They should not give him less than four cups.” The Talmud (108b) adds that the obligation of four cups applies to everyone: Men, women, and children: “The Sages taught: All are obligated [to drink] these four cups – men, women, and children.”

The commandment to drink four cups of wine during the *seder* is rabbinic, as is explained later in the Talmud (109b; 117b): “Our rabbis instituted four cups as symbolizing freedom.”

**Symbolizing freedom**

The Talmud also states the reason that the Sages instituted drinking the four cups: Drinking wine symbolizes freedom. Slaves, as opposed to free people, don’t drink much wine which is why the Sages required every Jew to drink four cups of wine as an expression of freedom.

From the *Rambam*’s wording as well (*Hilkhot Chametz U-Matza* 7:6-7), it appears that drinking the four cups is an exhibition of freedom:

In every generation one is obligated to show himself as if he himself had just left the servitude of Egypt ... Therefore, when a person during this night he must eat and drink and do so while leaning the way a free person does, and each person, whether male or female, must drink four cups of wine during this night ...

**The fulfillment of the night’s commandment with a cup**

The *Tosafot* (*Sukka* 35a, s.v. “*Mi shehaya*”) mention that there is another reason for the commandment regarding the four cups: “The four cups were instituted in order to recite *hallel* and the *Haggada* with them.” From this, one can understand that the purpose of the cups is to accompany the different passages which we are obligated to recite during the *seder* night. During the *seder* we fulfill four obligations of recital:

1. *Kiddush*
2. Relating the story of the Exodus from Egypt
3. *birkat ha-mazon*
4. *Hallel*.

Thus, the Sages instituted that each of these sections be accompanied by one of the four cups, so as to impart importance to them. With regard to other passages which we are obligated to recite, such as: *Havdala*, the marriage ceremony, etc., we find the obligation to accompany them by wine in order to grant them honor and importance.[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to the explanation that the four cups were instituted as an expression of freedom, the drinking is the primary component of the obligation during the *seder* whereas the recital of the *haggada* is secondary. On the other hand, according to the explanation that the four cups were instituted in order to grant importance to the passages that are recited, the recital of the *haggada* during the *seder* is the primary obligation.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is possible that there is room for both views such that the obligation of the four cups has two ends: both to exhibit freedom and to recite the obligations of the evening over wine.

The truth of the matter is that this appears to be the Talmud’s view (117b): “The four cups that the Sages ordained as symbolizing liberty – we should perform a *mitzva* with each and every one them.” In other words, at the outset the Sages ordained that one should drink four cups of wine as symbolizing liberty, but they also ordained that these cups should not just be drunk without any rhyme or reason rather we should perform another *mitzva* along with each cup, i.e., all of the evening’s recitals should be over cups of wine.

This is also implied by the *Rambam*, who on the one hand mentions the obligation of the four cups within the context of the obligation of “showing himself as if he himself had just now left the servitude of Egypt,” yet on the other hand notes that the cups accompany the obligations of the night (7:10).[[3]](#footnote-3)

On each and every cup of these four cups, one recites an independent blessing. On the first cup he recites the festival’s *kiddush*. On the second cup he recites the *Haggada*. On the third cup he recites *birkat ha-mazon*. On the fourth cup he recites *hallel* and recites the blessing of the song.

**Division of the *seder* night**

In light of the fact that the Sages instituted that each of the *seder*’s obligations be performed along with one of the four cups, we can view the cups as markers of four different parts of the *seder*: The first cup – *kiddush*, the second cup – the story of the exodus from Egypt, the third cup – consumption-related commandments, the fourth cup – *hallel*.

**Publicizing the miracle**

The Talmud (112a) states elsewhere that the obligation of the four cups also has an aspect of publicizing the miracle. The Talmud rules that even according to the view that a person should not accept charity even in order to celebrate Shabbat properly (“make your Shabbat a weekday, and do not resort to others”), the commandment of the four cups applies to every single person, and even to the poorest of the poor, because this obligation has an aspect of publicizing the miracle.[[4]](#footnote-4) Drinking the four cups is a clear and public demonstration that the person is free, and that is why it serves to publicize the miracle which God performed for us when we left Egypt.

**The four verbs of redemption**

The Jerusalem Talmud (10:1) states a number of reasons for the obligation of drinking the four cups. The most famous of them (also cited by *Rashi* 99b, s.v. *arba kosot*) is that the number four corresponds to the four verbs of redemption: “I will bring you out ... I will deliver you ...I will redeem you ... I will take you” (*Exodus* 6:6-7). According to the simple interpretation of the Jerusalem Talmud, this is not the reason for the actual drinking of wine. Drinking a significant amount of wine is an expression of freedom and the Sages determined that one should drink precisely four cups of wine so that they should correspond to the four verbs of redemption. Therefore, drinking the four cups is yet another expression of freedom.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is nevertheless still possible to understand that the Jerusalem Talmud means to explain the essence of the obligation, i.e., the Sages ordained that one must drink four cups of wine as they correspond to the four verbs of redemption. If that is the case, why then did they require specifically four cups of wine? Why not four nuts? Why not four *matzot*?

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach offered a beautiful explanation (in a lecture he gave at the Kol Torah Yeshiva in 1970). The four verbs of redemption are not a chance combination of four times that rescue is mentioned. The reference here is to four types of rescue and to four stages of the redemption. Each subsequent stage is greater than the previous one: At first, it is “I will take you out,” followed by “I will deliver you,” which is an addition of joy, and thereafter, “I will redeem you,” which is yet another addition of joy because God removed us from the Egyptians, and finally, “I will take you,” indicating that we have merited God taking us under His wing (and thereafter there is a fifth verb: “I will bring you,” which is the entry into the Land of Israel).

That is why the Sages instituted four cups of wine. With regard to everything a person eats, the first portion is the most enjoyable one. For example, if a person eats a tasty cake, he enjoys the first slice best. Afterwards, the other pieces are also enjoyable, but less than the first slice. The fourth slice is definitely not as pleasurable as the first slice. There is only one type of food which the more one has of it, the better it tastes: wine (i.e., for one who enjoys wine). With each cup, a person becomes more joyful and happy. Therefore, to express the progress of the redemption, which is the essence of the four verbs of redemption, it is most appropriate to drink specifically wine.

To summarize: The four cups were instituted in order to demonstrate our freedom and to publicize the miracle. The cups also have an element of granting respect and importance to the recital of the *Haggada* and the different obligations of the night. The number four is also a symbol of freedom, as it corresponds to the four verbs of redemption, and the increased joy that one experiences as one advances from one cup to the next symbolizes the progress in the redemption process.

**II. How much must one drink?**

**The size of the cup**

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 76b) explains that every cup used for a ritual purpose must hold at least a *revi’it* of wine. The *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 472:9) rules that for the four cups as well one must use a *revi’it*. There is a dispute among rabbinic authorities as to what that size of a *revi’it* is: According to Rav Avraham Chaim Na’eh (in his *Shi’urei Torah*), a *revi’it* is 86 milliliters (2.9 fl oz). A common mnemonic for this is that 86 in *gematriya* is the equivalent of the word “*kos”* – a cup. According to the *Tzelach* (*Pesachim* 116b) and the *Chazon Ish* (*Orach Chaim* 39), the size is 150 milliliters (5 fl oz). A common mnemonic for this is that 150 in *gematriya* is the equivalent of the phrase “*kos hagun*” – a befitting cup. The *Mishna Berura* (486:1) ruled that as the four cups are required by rabbinic law, one may use the smaller measure.

There are those who are more stringent about the first cup, and use the larger measure, as that cup is also used for *kiddush*, which is based on a Torah requirement. This is the *Bi’ur Halakha*’sruling (271:13, s.v. *shel revi’it*):

Regarding the *kiddush* of the night, which is based on Torah law, it is also preferable to be concerned about the view of *Tzelach* (the larger measure) ... however regarding the *kiddush* of the morning and the other cups which are drunk for various ritual purposes, one may rely on the custom of the world (i.e., the smaller measure).

However, this stringency only applies to the person reciting *kiddush*, whereas for those who merely listen to *kiddush* and only drink because it is the first of the four cups but not because it is *kiddush* (because in terms of *kiddush* only the person reciting it must drink of the wine), there is no reason to be more stringent than with the other cups.[[6]](#footnote-6) In practice, according to the strict law, even the one reciting the *kiddush* may be lenient and use the smaller measure for the first cup, especially if the *seder* night is not on Friday night, because according to most *Rishonim* the festive *kiddush* is only by rabbinic ordinance (see also Responsa *Orach Mishpat* by Rav Kook, 128:23, as well as other rabbinic authorities, who did not distinguish between the cups).

**How much must one drink?**

In general, whenever wine is used for a ritual purpose, one only has to drink is a mouthful (107a), namely an amount of wine enough to fill one side of the mouth (each person depending on his own mouth size), and the size of the cup is immaterial. However, in regard to the four cups, the Talmud (108b) states that one must drink the majority of the cup.

The *Rishonim* argue about the interpretation of this statement. According to *Tosafot* (ibid., s.v. *ruba dekosa*), even on the *seder* night one must drink only a mouthful, as is the case with regard to *kiddush,* but as the cup has to hold a *revi’it*, and with the average person a “mouthful” is more or less a little over half a *revi’it* (44 cc, 1.44 fl oz), the Talmud stated that one must drink the majority of the cup of wine (in other words, a majority of a *revi’it* = a mouthful). According to this, even if the cup is larger, one only needs to drink a mouthful, as is the case with regard to *kiddush*. The *Ran* (p. 23 of the pages of the *Rif*, s.v. *hashaka*) too seems to imply this idea.

However, according to the *Orchot Chaim* (*Seder Leil Pesach*, 6), the *Ramban* and *Rav Aharon HaLevi* understood that the Talmud in the literal sense, namely, that with regard to each of the four cups one must drink a majority of the cup, even if it happens to be a very large cup. This interpretation of the Talmud is also mentioned by *Rabbenu David* (108b, s.v. *sheta’an be'vat achat*). Why, according to these scholars, is there is a difference between *kiddush* and the four cups in terms of the amount that must be drunk? The *Bach* (472, s.v. *uma shekatav ve’ein tzarich*) takes a simple approach and explains that with regard to *kiddush* the blessing is the main part of the obligation, but “the one who recites the blessing must taste [of the wine]” (105b), i.e., consumption of the wine is only secondary to the obligation. Therefore, one does not need to drink more than a mouthful, which is enough to constitute “tasting,” whereas during the *seder* the obligation is to drink four cups as a display of freedom. Therefore “tasting” is not enough, rather one must drink each cup in full, or at least the majority of each cup in accordance with the halakhic principle that “the majority is like the entire amount.”

The *Rosh* (10:21) seems to imply that ideally one should drink the entire cup, and the majority of the cup is not sufficient. The *Bach* (ibid.) explicitly ruled that there is a *mitzva* to actually drink the entire cup. He explains that the commandment is to drink four cups, in other words, to drink the entire cup, and the rule of “the majority is like the entire amount” is applicable only ex post facto.

**The halakhic ruling**: The *Shulchan Aruch* (472:9) mentions *Tosafot*’sopinion as the default ruling, namely that it is enough to drink the majority of a *revi’it*. He then adds the *Ramban*’sopinion, stating that “there are those who say,” namely that one must drink the majority of the cup, even if it is a large cup. The *Mishna Berura* (ibid. subparagraph 33) ruled that one may be lenient and drink only the majority of a *revi’it*. He continues to mention the *Magen Avraham*’sopinion (ibid. subparagraph 10) who suggests that the cups should not be overly large so that one can drink the entire cup, or at least the majority of it, and this way fulfill all the different views. The *Mishna Berura* recommends following the *Magen Avraham*’s advice.

In practice, it seems that if it is not especially difficult, one should act in accordance with the stringent rulings and drink the entire cup; if that is too difficult, one should drink the majority of the cup, and if even that in itself is too difficult, one can drink just a mouthful, which is approximately the majority of a *revi’it* (1.44 fl oz).

**Must one drink the entire amount at one time?**

There are those who hold that one must drink the entire amount at one time (*Magen Avraham*, 472:11; *Mishna Berura* subparagraph 34).[[7]](#footnote-7) However, the rule that “one who drinks his whole cup at one time is considered to be a guzzler” (86b) does not apply here, as the person is drinking in this fashion out of regard for the commandment (see *Rashi*, *Sukka* 49b, s.v. *megame’a*). In any event, it makes sense to claim that those who say that one should drink the whole amount at one time do not mean that one must drink the whole amount in one gulp; rather one should drink without a break, i.e., without moving the cup away from his lips. Drinking this way is considered to be drinking at one time, even if one drinks the cup in a number of gulps (see *VeZot HaBeracha*, *Birur Halakha* 11)*.* One who finds it difficult to drink the entire amount at one time should at the least try and drink the requisite amount within the time it takes to drink a *revi’it* (*Mishna Berura*, ibid.). In other words, one should drink the cup in two consecutive gulps (*Sha’ar HaTziyun*, 210:11).

[This is adapted from Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon’s book, *The Seder Night – Kinor David* (Jerusalem, 2014), available [here](http://halachaed.org/%D7%97%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%9E%D7%A8%D7%9B%D7%96-%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%94-%D7%95%D7%94%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%94/) or [here](http://www.amazon.com/Seder-Night-Kinor-David/dp/965751312X).]

1. As explained by the *Mishna Berura* (182:1) in the name of the *Levush*: “That most of the blessings which the Sages ordained were ordained to be said over a cup, because that is a way of honor and respect to God to arrange His praise and blessing on a cup, as the Torah states, ‘I shall lift up a cup of salvations, and I shall call out in the name of the Lord’ (*Psalms* 116:13).” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **Can a person fulfill the obligation of the four cups on behalf of his fellow?** The debate concerning this question is whether only the head of the household is required to drink the four cups and can thereby have all the participants fulfill their obligation of four cups. *Tosafot* (99b, s.v*.* *lo yifchetu*, second instance) discusses this question, but the *Achronim* (see *Chiddushei HaGriz on* the *Rambam* 7:9) noted that this debate is only based on *Tosafot*’s understanding, that the commandment is not drinking rather the commandment is to fulfill the night’s obligations of the night over wine. According to this understanding, one can say that the head of the household says the passages over a cup, while the other participants do not need to drink the wine. However, if the obligation is not the recital of the passages rather it is to drink wine, a person cannot perform the obligation of drinking for somebody else, just as a person cannot put *tefillin* on his own arm on behalf of another person (in practice, one must be stringent and require every person to drink for himself, and that, indeed, is what *Tosafot* concluded).

   **Drinking the cups out of the order of the *haggada.*** Another difference applies to a person who drank the four cups but not in accordance with the order in the *haggada*, such as a person who drank the third cup before the *birkat ha-mazon* and did not recite the *birkat ha-mazon* over a cup of wine, etc. If the obligation is to drink four cups as an exhibition of liberty, it might mean that as long as a person drank the four cups, regardless of the order, he has fulfilled his obligation of drinking four cups of wine. However, if the obligation is to accompany each of the requirements of the night with a cup of wine, if one drank the cups but not at the proper places, he has not fulfilled the obligation of four cups. In practice, the Talmud (105b) rules that if a person drinks four cups of wine at one time, he has fulfilled his obligation. The *Rishonim*, though, differ as to why this is so. According to the *Rashbam* and *Ran* (ibid.) it appears that this refers to a person who drank the four cups but not according to the order of the *haggada*, and he does not fulfill his obligation (*Peri Chadash* 484 mentions the same concept; see also the *Griz*’s opinion which is mentioned in following footnote); whereas *Rabbenu David* explained that Talmud means that a person drank four cups consecutively, one after another and this is considered to be a single act of drinking. However, if a person took a break between cups, he has fulfilled his obligation, even if he does not drink them to accompany the *haggada* at the appropriate times of the *seder* (the *Beit Yosef* 484, s.v*.* *vechatav*, accepts this opinion). I terms of the *halakhic* conclusion, the *Bi’ur Halakha* (472, s.v*.* *shelo keseder*) leans towards the view that the order is irrelevant, provided that one took a break between the cups and did not drink them consecutively. In any event, ideally one should certainly drink the cups according to the order instituted by the Sages so that each cup accompanies the obligations of the evening. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is what the *Griz* (7:9) wrote about the view of the *Rambam,* and according to this was able to explain the Rambam’s opinion. According to the *Rambam*, as explained by the *Griz,* one who drinks four cups at one time “has fulfilled his obligation of liberty but has not fulfilled his obligation of four cups.” (That is the textual version of the *Rif* and the *Rambam* in the Talmud, 108b). The *Griz* explained that a person has fulfilled his obligation of drinking as an exhibition of liberty, as he drank four cups of wine, but he has not fulfilled the obligation of reciting the obligations of the night over a cup, as he drank the cups at one time, and not at the appropriate times. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The *Avnei Nezer* (501) explains that in every other commandment, if a person tried to perform it but was forced by circumstances beyond his control not to do so, it is considered as if he had performed it. That is why a person is not required to sell his clothing or accept charity to enable him to perform a commandment, but it is enough if he just planned to perform it. However, where the purpose of a commandment is to publicize the commandment, just thinking about performing it is not enough, because in the final analysis he did not publicize the miracle to others. That is why a poor person is obligated to sell his clothing or to take charity in order to fulfill that commandment. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to the view that the cups are meant to fulfill the obligation to recite the *haggada* over wine, it is clear that one must drink four cups, for on this night there are obligations of things to say. According to this view, it is obvious that the reasons brought in the Jerusalem Talmud are but associative hints and not the main point at hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. However, there is another reason for being more stringent with the first cup and to use the larger measure, one which applies to all the participants. According to *halakha*, the rule is that “*kiddush* is only valid when a meal takes place thereafter” (101a). The rabbinic authorities discuss why on the *seder* night there is no problem with the fact that the meal is much later than *kiddush* (see, for example, *Mikra’ei Kodesh – Pesach*, II, 37, and the note there; see also Responsa *Ginat Veradim, Orach Chaim*, Rule 3, Section 20, who learned from here that there is no prohibition in interrupting between *kiddush* and the meal, but only to go from one place to another). Reciting the *Haggada* is evidently considered to be a necessity of the meal, and is thus not considered an interruption between *kiddush* and the meal (*Ketzot HaShulchan*, 81, *Badei HaShulchan*, 10, mentions the same concept). In any event, if one drank two *revi’iyot*, it is possible that the second one is considered like a meal, and thus the *kiddush* is in the place of the meal (based the ruling in *Shulchan Aruch* 273:5 in the name of the *Ge’onim*, that drinking wine is also considered to be a meal). If that is so, when the cup is large enough according to the requirements of *Chazon Ish*, that is equivalent to two *revi’iyot* by Rav Avraham Chaim Na’eh’s calculation, and when one drinks both of them, he has fulfilled the requirement of *kiddush* being in the place of the meal. In any event, there is no obligation to drink two *revi’iyot*, as we do not find rabbinic authorities who require that one drink two *revi’iyot* for the first cup, and especially given that according to many rabbinic authorities one only needs to drink a single *revi’it* to fulfill the requirement of *kiddush* being in the place of the meal (see *Mishna Berura* 273:27, and *Sha’ar HaTziyun* there, 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Magen Avraham* and *Mishna Berura* write that it is enough to drink the majority of a *revi’it* at one time. However, *Machatzit HaShekel* (in reference to *Magen Avraham*, ibid.) noted that this ruling is in accordance with the view that drinking the majority of a *revi’it* is sufficient*.* However, according to *Bach* who rules that one must ideally drink the entire cup, one is to drink a full *revi’it* at one time. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)