

The Lesson of Noah: When a Glass of Wine is a Cry for Help Parashat Noach

By Rabbi Jason Miller

Delivered at The Jewish Theological Seminary (New York City)

When I was sixteen-years-old, I spent the summer traveling the United States on a bus with forty-six other Conservative Jewish teens. For me, USY on Wheels was a six-week long maturing process in which I learned as much about myself and life as I did about the Grand Canyon and the Jewish community of Salt Lake City. I instantly clicked with a number of teenagers who became close friends for the summer, and for the following few years.

As a group of sixteen-year-olds away from home for the summer, sleeping in a different hotel room each night, you can imagine we did a lot of... well, whatever teens do in that situation. There was certainly a good deal of experimentation with alcohol. After the first few nights of helping ourselves to much of the contents of the hotel room's "mini bar" and getting a little sick, the novelty of drinking seemed to wear off. But we soon realized that this was not the case for all of us.

My friend Michael (*pseudonym*) wanted to get drunk every night. No matter what everyone else was doing, he would encourage his friends to have a drink with him. "Let's drink shots to celebrate," he would say - to celebrate what specific occasion, he never really mentioned. For Michael, it was always a good time to drink alcohol. And he was always the life of the party. Whether it was right after dinner or at three o'clock in the morning, Michael was in a great mood and making everybody laugh. When we would share a hotel room together, I was given an insider's perspective into Michael's life. I quickly discovered why he always seemed drunk. Michael was an alcoholic.

Like so many, I grew up being told, "Jews don't really drink." "Alcoholism is a gentile problem, not a Jewish problem." Unfortunately, these are misnomers. We'd like to believe they are true, but they simply are wishful thinking. There are in fact, Jews who are firefighters, Jews who like hunting, Jews who beat their wives, and yes, Jews who are alcoholics. So, Jews can continue making jokes about drunken gentiles embodied in the phrase "shikker as a goy," but it is time that we in the Jewish community realize that we too are plagued by the disease of alcoholism among our own rank and file.

At the end of this morning's parsha, we read that Noah, who was earlier described as a just man, perfect in his generation who walked with God, has now in the post-flood era become a farmer and planted a vineyard. And from this vineyard, we are told, Noah drank of the wine, and he became drunk. In Noah's drunken state, what the Torah leaves to the imagination, the rabbis spell out for us in the midrash. Regardless of what Noah's son did to him - rape, castrate, whatever - the rabbis seek to use this licentious incident to make a statement about the excesses of drinking.

Of course, as we know from rape law legislation passed by the Clinton Administration, and from our own common sense, just because the victim was under the influence of alcohol does not make them liable. And yet, we recognize that being inebriated seriously reduces our capacity to make decisions. Alcohol makes us lose our judgment, as well as our inhibitions. So, in a religion that incorporates alcohol as ritual, what do the rabbis have to say about drinking?

In the Talmud (Sanhedrin 70a), we learn that if one has merit, wine gladdens him; if not, it saddens him. That is to say, in moderation, drinking is good, but in excess, it wastes one's life. This reminds me of an aphorism my grandmother (z'l) was fond of saying, "too much of anything is a bad thing!" This seems sensible and yet, because we now understand alcoholism to be a disease rather than a habit able to be broken, we recognize that there are those in our community who are not capable of drinking in moderation. To the alcoholic, just as limiting drinking to social occasions is an impossibility, so too is limiting it to *simchas*.

Rabbi Hanan continues in the Talmud, saying that the only purpose for which wine was created was to comfort mourners and requite the wicked, for it is written, Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts (Prov. 31:6). We must disagree with Rabbi Hanan, however, because we appreciate that drinking alcohol is for more than merely sad occasions. For those who are able to moderate their drinking and reserve consumption to ritual acts and celebratory occasions, alcohol should not be viewed as an evil in society. We must set limits for ourselves in our consumption, and respect the fact that not everyone is able to set those limits. It is our obligation as a community to support organizations like JACS and L'chayim, organizations whose mission it is to reach out to our sisters and brothers in the Jewish community who need to turn their lives around, get sober, and remain sober.

Through midrash, the rabbis of the Talmud help us open our eyes, and see what we would not have seen by merely looking at the Torah text. Noah, a tzaddik, a righteous man who walked with God, had a problem. He drank too much leaving himself vulnerable to abuse. As if the character Noah didn't leave us with enough to learn, he exits the stage leaving a noble lesson for all those who came after him. Alcoholism is not a joke.

To this day, I regret that my friends and I did not do what we had planned to. On the last day of our cross-country tour on USY on Wheels, we had decided to make the phone call that we all dreaded. From a restaurant pay phone in Philadelphia, could a group of sixteen-year-olds call a friend's parents in Connecticut and inform them that their child was an alcoholic? Apparently, no. A decade later, I still wonder what would have happened to Michael had we made that call. Not having been in touch with him for the past several years, I can only hope and pray that he was able to kick the habit.

Alcohol can be used to help us celebrate the best of times in Judaism. It can also be abused. Let us be responsible not only with alcohol, but with those in our community who are unable to be responsible.

Shabbat Shalom.