

# Addiction: It All Began with Noah

Parshat Noah 5770

By Rabbi Mark Greenspan

If you really need to blame someone, then blame Noah. It all began with him. He planted the first vineyard and he was the first drunk. All the misery, unhappiness and tragedy that have been recorded since the beginning of time as a result of alcoholism and addiction can be traced back to Noah's actions shortly after the great flood.

Not that Jews view alcohol as a bad thing. We Jews are known to raise a glass from time to time. The Psalmist said that wine "gladdens the heart of human beings," and there is hardly a sacred event in Jewish life that doesn't involve at least a bit of wine. We give an infant boy a bit of wine to temper the discomfort at his *Brit Milah* and every Friday night there's wine on the dinner table in a traditional Jewish home. Of course, everyone knows about the Passover Seder when we drink four cups of wine. And then there's Purim, when we're supposed to drink enough alcohol so that we can't differentiate between "*Baruch Mordechai*" and "*Arur Haman*," "Blessed be Mordechai and cursed be Haman."

So Jews aren't prudish when it comes to alcohol. We like to claim that as a result of our liberal attitude toward drinking, we are less prone to be drunks; at one time you would hear older Jews saying, '*shikkur is a goy*,' "Only gentiles are drunks." Today, we know full well that's just not true; there are probably just as many Jewish drunks as there are non-Jewish drunks in the world, percentage wise. And when it comes to other forms of addiction, such as gambling and drugs, Jews have a decided advantage.

So maybe we should blame Noah. After all, he started it. Immediately after the great flood Noah went out and planted a vineyard. The next thing we learn is that Noah "Became drunk and uncovered himself in his tent." The Torah doesn't tell us what this means. What it implies is something we know all too well: drunkenness impairs one's ability to make sound judgment. When Ham finds his father naked and drunk, he thinks it's pretty funny and tells his brothers. They have the presence of mind to cover their father's nakedness. Again we see a parallel between the ancient and the modern: how often do families 'cover up' their loved one's addictions? When Noah awakens from his stupor and discovers what has happened, he curses Ham and blesses his other two sons. In a sense, Noah sets a pattern that would exist for all time in which the addict blames others for his faults.

But the truth is Noah is not a bad man. The Torah describes him as 'wholly righteous in his generation.' Imagine what it must have been like to carry the burden of knowing God was going to destroy the world, then having to build an ark to save a hand full of animals and humans, and then having to shepherd them through this cataclysm for almost a year. I can imagine that Noah must have been haunted by the screams and pleading of his neighbors and friends when God began flooding the earth and they had no place to go. We call this survivors guilt.

It's understandable, then, that the first thing Noah did when he left the ark was get a drink. How many of us here immediately turned to liquor cabinet, after a tough day or when we have heard bad news, to dull the pain. Noah was no different than we are. He had every reason to want a drink.

But the fact that because something is understandable doesn't make it right and it certainly doesn't make it good. It's like the old story of the drunk who tells his friend that he drinks to forget. "What do you want to forget," asks the sympathetic friend. "I want to forget that I drink too much," says the drunk.

Today, we know that addiction had a genetic component to it. Some people are more prone to addiction than others. But knowing that one is prone to addiction doesn't justify it or excuse the continued abuse any more than being a diabetic excuses one from not being careful about one's diet. Life can be unbearable at times and the problems we face can be over whelming but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to act in responsible manner or seek help when we need it. Instead of turning to his family or turning to God, Noah chose to drink.

So let me suggest a simple rule: if you feel you need a drink, you probably shouldn't. Drinking socially, having a drink to heighten the joy of a moment, I would suggest is ok. But when you are drinking because you feel bad, or for ulterior motives, you should ask yourself – how else can I address my pain or discomfort? Judaism condoned alcohol by sanctifying it - in moments of celebration and rejoicing, drinking was an appropriate outlet. But alcohol is not medicine and it certainly shouldn't be a crutch.

The problem here is that the line between acceptable and improper alcohol consumption is complicated; I'm not sure we can completely differentiate the two. That's the rub. The problem in our society is that we make drinking so glamorous and sexy that every kid can't wait to take that first drink. And all the advertisements about 'drinking responsibility' make about as much sense as putting a statement on a package of cigarettes that says that smoking causes cancer – it doesn't stop abuse. The people who are drinking look like they are having so much fun, and they are so, so beautiful – who wouldn't want to indulge.

And yet all you need to do is watch the daily news. A week doesn't pass without a life shattered by drunkenness and addiction. We hear about a woman driving her car on to the wrong side of the highway because she combined alcohol and drugs before getting in the car with her children or a family destroyed because they were racing their boat much too fast in an improper area after partying too much.

Those are the dramatic stories that make the front page; we do not read about families shattered by addiction, lives lost to alcoholism, and children and spouses who are the victims of abuse. We don't hear about the kids who land up in the emergency room after drinking at frat parties, or the silent addiction that takes place just next door in our own neighborhood.

I'm not suggesting we shouldn't have an occasional drink. What I am suggesting is that we are living in a society that celebrates over-indulgence and dependency. The answer to every problem is a pill or in a glass. Instead of addressing our pain, we dull it. Instead of experiencing life we induce it. From the time of Noah on, the world has known that alcohol and mind altering substances can be a way of escaping from the world rather than living in it.

Here in our own community we have a responsibility to honestly confront this issue. It's in our schools and in our homes. But we need to do that by first looking honestly at ourselves. I would guess that there is not a single person here who doesn't know someone who suffers from some form of addiction. Rather than covering it up, I believe we have a responsibility to confront that person and reach out to them.

And if we're the ones with the addiction, we have a responsibility to begin with ourselves. There are a thousand reasons to take a drink or pop a pill, and only one for not doing so. We may be saving our own lives and the lives of our families.

The truth is life can be intoxicating. You don't need alcohol or drugs to experience the miracles of the world. There is so much good, so much wonder, so much joy to be found in the every day and the common place. The best drink is to drink fully and completely of life – that is the greatest pleasure of all!

Shabbat Shalom