

## Torah Table Talk

# Why Noah Planted a Vineyard

Parshat Noah

Genesis, Chapters 6:9 – 11:32



The story of Noah's ark is well known to almost every child. The Jewish people were not the only people to tell the story of God's disappointment with humankind and to decision to rid the world of life. The significant difference between the Biblical version of this story and the pagan version from the Ancient Near East is that in the Bible, God's disappointment grows out of human failings. In the pagan versions of the flood story, the gods choose to destroy human beings because they were disturbed by all the noise that human beings make! It is not self interest but a deep concern with the moral state of the world that moves God. Strangely, the first thing that Noah does after the flood is to plant a vineyard and get drunk. This brief passage led the sages to contemplate the pros and minuses of alcohol.

### Genesis 9:20-21

Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk...

### Etz Hayim Commentary on Genesis, Page 52-53

Overwhelmed by the task of building a destroyed world, finding himself virtually alone and friendless in a nearly empty world, or perhaps burdened by a sense of guilt at having survived when so many others perished, Noah turned to drink.

1. Why do you think the Bible tells us that Noah planted a vineyard immediately after the story of the flood?
2. The comment in Etz Hayim explains why Noah may have resorted to alcohol but not why he planted a vineyard in the first place. There would have been a considerable amount of time between the planting of the vineyard and the production of wine. What do you think the vineyard symbolized? Could it have had a positive connotation or is it necessarily negative?
3. Are there reasons for drunkenness and alcoholism that are understandable?

### Tanhuma, Noah 13

When Noah began planting, Satan came, stationed himself before him, and asked, "What are you planting?" Noah: "A vineyard." Satan: "What is its nature?" Noah: "Its fruit, whether fresh or dried, is sweet, and from it one makes wine, which gladdens a man's heart." Satan: "Will you agree to let both of us plant it together?" Noah: "Very well." What did Satan do? He brought a ewe lamb and slaughtered it over a vine. After that, he brought a lion, which he likewise slaughtered. Then a monkey, which he also slaughtered over it. Finally a pig, which he again slaughtered over that vine. And with the blood that dripped from them, he watered the vineyard. The charade was Satan's way of saying that when a man drinks one cup of wine, he acts like a ewe lamb, humble and meek. When he drinks two, he immediately believes himself to be as strong as a lion and proceeds to brag mightily, saying, "Who is like me?" When he drinks three or four cups, he immediately becomes like a monkey, hopping about giggling, and uttering obscenities in public, without realizing what he is doing. Finally, when he becomes blind drunk, he is like a pig, wallowing in mire and coming to rest among refuse. All the above befell Noah.

**Numbers Rabba 10:8**

As wine enters each and every part of a man's body, it lax, and his mind is confused. Once wine enters, reason leaves. Wherever there is wine, reason is no more. When wine comes in, a secret (*sod*) goes out, as intimated by the fact that the numerical value of the letters in *yayin*, "wine," equals seventy, and The numerical value of the letters in *sod* likewise equals seventy.

1. The character Satan who appears in this Midrash is very different from the demonic character familiar in Western Christian literature. What role does Satan play in the production of wine and its influence over those who imbibe the wine? Is it necessarily negative?
2. What are the dangers of too much wine according to these two statements? If alcohol and wine pose such a danger to humanity why are they prohibited by the Torah or at least by the sages?

**Psalm 104:15** "Wine to gladden the heart of man and oil to brighten his face."

**Proverbs 31:6-7** "Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that are of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more."

**Baba Batra 58b** "Wine is the greatest of all medicines: where wine is lacking, drugs are necessary"

1. What attitude toward alcohol and wine is expressed in these statements? How is it different from the statements above? How would you reconcile these two attitudes toward drinking alcoholic beverages?
2. Adults regularly drink wine and other alcoholic beverages, often in the presence of children. How do we teach children the importance of temperance? Does alcohol serve any positive or life affirming purpose, or is it simply a source of misery and evil in society? Is it really any different from illegal drugs such as marijuana?

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***How to use Torah Table Talk***

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

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