

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

person to drink wine in history *begins* by making positive use of it, and *only then* goes overboard. Wine is intimately connected here both to blessing and curse.

Those who know me know that I too love beer. I was an avid home-brewer and make sampling and reviewing new beers a part of my travels to any new place. But, as I tell my children whenever the subject comes up, what I especially love about beer is how it brings people together to celebrate, how it breaks down the borders that isolate us from each other, and mildly loosens our inhibitions so that we can form new bonds. When I go to a brewery (and I go to a lot of breweries) I meet people that I would not otherwise meet in my regular bubble. We raise a glass, we talk a bit about the beer we're drinking today, the beers we drank last week, and those we hope to drink in the future. We talk about our dogs (dogs are typically welcome at breweries), our kids, sports—whatever we can find that we have in common. I'm sure we often come from different sides of the political aisle, but as temporary as these friendships are, they make me, and I'm sure the people I talk to, happy. Beer, wine, and other forms of alcohol are an integral part of every human society that has ever come into contact with them, and we should celebrate the good that they bring into our lives.

The Talmud was well aware, of course, how wine (and beer) break down social barriers, and did not regard this as an unadulterated positive. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of the legacy of wine in Jewish legal literature is the prohibition of Jews drinking wine produced by non-Jews. According to a passage found twice in the Bavli (Shabbat 17b; Avodah Zarah 36b) the rabbis prohibited gentile wine because it would lead to Jews marrying “their daughters.” Large portions of Tractate Avodah Zarah are dedicated to the discussion of this issue and it remains a halakhah observed in most traditional circles. And while the rules with regard to beer were less stringent, rabbis did refrain from drinking beer in inns owned by gentiles (Avodah Zarah 31b). There are times when breaking down social barriers is a positive, but knowing when and how to maintain borders between cultures is one of the more difficult questions facing Jews to this day.

And finally, there are certain borders that alcohol should never let us cross. As I tell my children every time we talk, alcohol is never an excuse for acts that we know, or should know, are wrong. Alcohol is one of the most dangerous substances known to human beings, and may just cause more suffering in the world than all illegal drugs combined. As adults, we have a responsibility to model for our children both the joys of drinking, and the relaxing of the inhibitions and boundaries that go with it, and the heavy responsibility we assume when we do. This week's parashah is the chance to make up for an important lesson that many did not learn last week.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Noah

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Annual | Genesis 6:9 (Etz Hayim p. 41-63; Hertz p. 26-40)
 Triennial Genesis 11:1-11:32 (Etz Hayim p. 58-63; Hertz p. 38-40)
 Haftarah | Isaiah 54:1-55:5 (Etz Hayim p. 64-68; Hertz p. 41-44)

D'var Torah: Liking Beer

Dr. Joshua Kulp. Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva

Buried in the fiasco of last week's battle over the Supreme Court nomination was an opportunity to discuss an issue that can be one of life and death, and I am not referring to sexual assault or to denial of access to abortion. The issue I am referring to here is also brought up in a foundational myth told in our parsha—alcohol consumption and the consequences of use and abuse.

We all heard the allegations that Judge Kavanaugh's love of beer led him to drink to excess. While I certainly do not know whether he ever blacked out from drinking, if he did, he can trace his pedigree all the way back to humanity's progenitor—Noah. The first act that Noah performs upon leaving the ark is planting a vineyard. Noah immediately gets drunk from the wine, and “his nakedness is uncovered” (Genesis 9:20-21). This leads to disastrous results for his son Ham, and in particular for his grandson Canaan. This is the foundational myth of alcohol in Judaism—drinking leads to loss of control and loss of consciousness which leads to sexual transgression.

But the Book of Jubilees, an ancient expansion on Genesis, adds in a very interesting passage before Noah becomes drunk. In Jubilees, Noah plants the vineyard, but then must wait five years before he can use the wine because it is prohibited to use the fruit of a tree for the first four years of its growth (see Leviticus 19:23-24; rabbinic law is slightly different). At the beginning of the fifth year, Noah offers a series of sacrifices followed by a libation of wine on the altar. Thus, according to Jubilees, Noah is not only the first person to get drunk, but *also* the first person to make ritual use of wine. In other words, the first

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D'var Haftarah: A Flood Warning

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The story of the flood must have seemed a bit odd to the Israelites and Jews of ancient times. Living in a water-starved country where the possibility of rain only exists for a few months a year, the very thought of a flood covering the entire world was probably incomprehensible. A brief scan of the Tanakh finds lots of talk of famine (i.e. no rain), but little about floods. Similarly, the Mishnah and Talmud have an entire masechet (tractate) called Taanit (Fasts) dedicated to the subject of praying and fasting in times of national calamity. And the national calamity of choice was – you got it – drought.

The flood episode is only mentioned one time outside of the original story, in a passage from our haftarah, which dates from the period of Shivat Zion, the return from Babylonian exile, in a promise that God's mercy is indeed eternal: "For a little while I forsook you but with vast love I will bring you back. In slight anger, for a moment, I hid My face from you but with kindness everlasting, I will take you back in love, said the Lord your Redeemer. **For this to me is like the waters of Noah: As I swore that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the earth, so I swear that I will not be angry with you or rebuke you.**" (54:8-9) In other words, for the prophet, the intent of the promise to Noah was that there would never again be a flood and this was taken to mean that God's love would abide perpetually.

The rabbinic tradition saw this promise along similar lines. We had to worry about adequate water but would never have to wonder about its dangerous overabundance. Tosefta Taanit 2:12 tells the story of a miracle worked to whom the people turned to help bring the rain: "They said: 'Pray so that rain will fall.' He prayed and rain fell. They said to him: 'Just as you prayed that it would rain, now pray that it will go (stop).'" The people seem to be afraid that the rain, once turned on by the miracle worker, will continue to fall long after it has ceased to be a blessing. But the miracle worker replies: "Go out and see if a man stands on the Ofel Rock (a high place) and can shake his feet in the Kidron Stream. Then we will pray that the rain will stop. Still, we are certain that God will not bring the flood again to the world, as it is written: 'There will never be another flood' (Genesis 9:11) and it says: 'As I swore that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the earth.' (Isaiah 54:8)." It made sense to the sages that rain was a matter of divine providence that depended on human behavior. And it made sense that rain though normally a blessing, could sometimes cause damage. But they were confident that severe weather and flooding would never again destroy the earth.

Modern experience may have turned all of this on its head. Though "rational people" for a long time moved away from seeing the weather as divine reward or punishment (leading Reform Jewry to remove from the siddur the second

paragraph of the Shema), we are slowly coming to grips with the impact of human behavior on weather. Severe weather events occur with greater frequency - with storms and floods causing tremendous damage and loss of life. Glaciers are melting and the sea is rising.

Perhaps all of this is wakeup call - a necessary reminder of the importance and impact of what we do as individuals and in aggregate. Hopefully we will not be like Noah's generation, and we will find a way to change course before the ultimate calamity occurs.

Parashat Noah Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Last week we learnt about the creation of the world, and now we read about the destruction of this amazing enterprise because of the corruption of all living things. As life returns after the flood we read about the nations of the world that come from Noah's children, and begin to focus on Avram.

- 1) Noah is describing as a 'righteous man in his time.' What do you think that a life of a righteous person in the middle of the severe corruption was like?
- 2) The dimensions of the ark that Noah is instructed to build (6:14-16) suggest that it is a rectangle rather than a hydrodynamic ship. Why might God have instructed him to do it this way?
- 3) The story of the flood is filled with dates and accounts of how much time has passed (7:11, 24, 8:3-14). Why do you think these details were included?
- 4) When Noah finally opens the cover and discovers that the land is dry, he does not seem to run out of the ark (8:13-18). It is only after God instructs him and his family to leave that he does so. Why do you think that he does not leave quicker?
- 5) The parashah ends with an introduction to Avram's family (11:26-32). After giving us the family tree and their settlement in Haran (Syria of today), we are informed of the death of Terah, Avram's father. By the ages recorded, this event took place after Abraham had left for Canaan. So why do you think that it is told here, before we are told that Abraham went to Canaan?

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We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org