



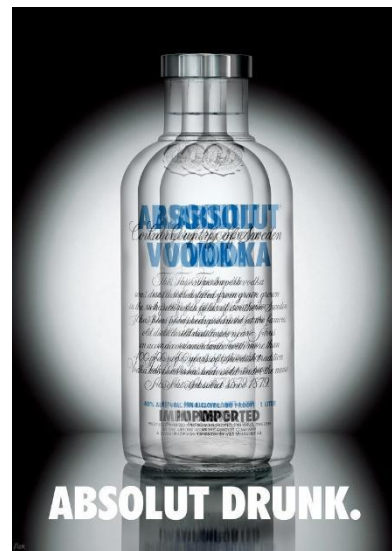
Pardes's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Parashat Noach. Getting Drunk!

After Noah emerges from the Ark, we read the following disturbing story:

Noah, the tiller of the soil, began by planting a vineyard. ²¹He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. ²²Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. ²³But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backward, they covered their father's nakedness; their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father's nakedness. ²⁴When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵he said, "Cursed be Canaan; The lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers." (9:20-25)



Wine, drunkenness, humiliation, and a curse. This is not a positive story. There are many questions raised by this troubling episode, but I will focus on one simple question. Why did Noah get drunk? Why was getting drunk the first thing he did after the flood?

Here is one rather improbable approach by the Abarbanel:

"Before the Flood there were vines for eating, but not vineyards with rows upon rows of vines for wine production. Noah took saplings that he had kept on the Ark, planting them in rows to make wine. Maybe this is due to the fact that he gave up on life after the Flood, desiring to drink wine rather than water (reminiscent of the flood waters) so that he would never see water again!"

What I take from this passage is that the wine-drinking is a sharp reaction to the Flood. It is an act of escapism.

Many have noted that God encouraged Noah to continue the world after the Flood: “Be fruitful and multiply; abound on the earth and increase on it.” (9:7) But Noah seems to resist. He has no further children. He seems unwilling to bring children into the world.

Rashi emphasises this when he notes that Noah’s family enter the ark separated by gender:

“Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons’ wives, went into the ark because of the waters of the Flood” (7:7).

Rashi: The men separately and the women separately, because they were prohibited from engaging in marital relations since the world was steeped in pain.

When the Flood is over, God says:

“Come out of the ark, together with your wife, your sons, and your sons’ wives” (8:16).

Rashi: Here He permitted them to engage in marital relations.

But Noah refuses. Note how Noah retains the gender separation between himself and his wife:

“Noah came out, together with his sons; his wife, and his sons’ wives” (8:18).

Noah despairs for the future. He doesn’t want to repopulate the world! Rav Yitzchak Blau writes:

"According to one midrash (Bereshit Rabba 34:6), Noah incredulously asks "Should I go out and propagate the world only to see it destroyed?" Hashem needs to reassure Noah and convince Noah to emerge and once again begin the building of a world. ... Noah's descent to the bottle reflects the response of escapism. When a person cannot face the overwhelming ugliness about, he can always take refuge in a variety of mind-numbing sedatives.

<http://www.hatanakh.com/tags/noahs-drunkenness>

Ramban sees this story as a warning:

"The episode with Noah and the wine is written as a warning... that even the "Perfect Tzaddik"(6:9) whose righteousness saved all humanity, even he was induced to sin by wine, leading him to a point of absolute humiliation and the curse of his offspring."

Judaism recognizes the enjoyment that wine brings. Tehillim (Psalms) speaks of: “wine to gladden the heart of man”(104:15), and the Talmud suggests that with festival meals, “there is no rejoicing other than with meat and wine” (Pesachim 109a). The pleasure of wine are commended in a positive framework. However, the Talmud makes the inverse assessment when it recalls Noah’s experience, presenting it as a cautionary tale of the curses of misplaced and excessive drinking and the dangers of drunkenness:

"There is nothing that brings woe to a person more than wine" (Berachot 40a)

Please discuss:

- Can you imagine what it must be like to emerge from the Ark and to know that every human being is dead? How might Noah have felt at this moment?

- Noah has two choices. He can rebuild, or he can despair. According to the narrative we have presented, which does he choose? Does this bring Noah any honor?

In today's world, alcohol is very present as teenagers grow up, and in adult life.

- Is drinking a healthy thing? What are its dangers?
- Do people drink to enjoy life or to escape life?
- Do you think that adults you know set a good and responsible example regarding alcohol use, or do you see a problematic alcohol culture around you?
- What does responsible alcohol consumption look like?
- What lessons might we take away from the Noah story?