

CHAPTER 5, LAW 3 - WINE AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

"When the wise man drinks wine, he drinks only enough to accompany (lit., 'soak') the food in his innards. Anyone who becomes drunk is a sinner, is disgraced, and loses his wisdom. And if he becomes inebriated before the unlearned, he has desecrated the Divine Name. It is forbidden to drink in the afternoon, even a small amount, except as part of a meal, as drink which accompanies a meal does not intoxicate. [Thus, scholars] are only careful [to refrain] from wine after the meal."

The Rambam here is continuing to discuss the more proper behavior appropriate for the Torah scholar. In this law, he recommends that the scholar be careful to avoid inebriation, especially in the presence of the unlearned. This law thus parallels many of the other laws of this chapter -- advising the scholar to refrain from types of behavior not strictly speaking forbidden by the Torah, yet which the sensitive soul will surely take care to avoid.

Wine has a curious place in Rabbinic literature. On the one hand, the Prophets go all out in condemning drunkenness and wild revelry. (See Isaiah 5:11-14, and 24:9 for a few examples.) Yet wine has a significant place in Jewish worship. Most of the offerings in the Temple were accompanied with wine libations. We usher the Sabbath both in and out on a cup of wine. Wine is a central component of the Passover Seder. And of course, on the upcoming holiday of Purim, folks who are generally almost pure teetotalers celebrate the salvation with multiple "l'chai'im's ("to life!"). (The somewhat dubious justification for such behavior is beyond the scope of this article.) In fact, the same Scripture which denounces drunkenness too states, "And wine gladdens the hearts of man" (Psalms 104:15), and "Wine gladdens life" (Koheles (Ecclesiastes) 10:19). And finally, the Talmud, in discussing how to celebrate the festivals, states: "There is no true happiness without wine" (Pesachim 109a).

I suppose we could simply answer that the distinction is a matter of degree -- a single cup Friday evening is a far cry from the merriment decried by the Prophets (although by my standards at least, the four cups of Passover are hardly moderation (I won't tell you how I found that out), not to mention the more serious excesses of Purim). But I believe the message here is far more profound.

Before moving on I should add that needless to say, the Sages are not going to totally forbid anything which has a place in Jewish life -- even if the dangers of excessiveness and addiction are so patently obvious. (During Prohibition in the U.S., my maternal grandfather made wine in the bathtub (my mother never told me what it tasted like). (It was actually slightly before her time). My paternal grandfather, who at the time owned a pharmacy, had no difficulty obtaining wine "for

medicinal purposes." Clearly, prohibiting entirely something which may be harmful in large quantities (as is almost everything) is generally not the practice of the Torah.)

Finally, I should reference our recent class -- Chapter 2, Law 2 on the Nazir (Numbers 6), in which the Torah permits a person who sees he cannot handle his liquor to go to the opposite extreme -- abstaining from all grape products, even where required by Jewish law.

We tend to think of wine as only destructive -- allowing man to cast off his inhibitions and behave in ways totally inappropriate for the sober -- let alone the damage it does to his liver, brain, pancreas, etc. The Talmud, however, makes the following enigmatic statement regarding wine: "Enters wine, exit secrets" (Sanhedrin 38a). What wine actually does is allow a person's inner (and often guarded) thoughts to come to the fore. It enables him to act out his true self and his secret fantasies -- whom he really wants to be, without the typical restraints of societal pressure and personal inhibition.

Now, for the vast majority of us, this would be an enormously dangerous thing. How much of our proper behavior is our own, and how much is imposed by society? Will we maintain our dignity while under the influence or will our many repressed drives roar free? Probably, far better that we not take the chance and find out. And likewise, the Sages generally frown on drunkenness. And the Rambam here too urges the wise to avoid it to an extreme.

Yet even so, it's significant to recognize that the Talmud does not consider the drunken state evil per se. It's a very strong form of personal self-expression -- and perhaps even more significantly, it allows a person to know just who he actually is on the inside. What am I truly made up of? Who is the true me? When I'm a little high, am I full of gregarious warmth and friendliness, or self-centered pleasure-seeking? Do I become more sensitive to the feelings of others, or more wrapped up in my own whims and desires?

I'm quite fond of pointing out, having spent many Purims in yeshiva (rabbinical college) in the presence of many great rabbis, that there is nothing more beautiful than a truly great person under the influence. If a person's insides are full of love of G-d, Torah and mankind, there is nothing more heartening than seeing it burst forth in generous and uninhibited portions. Far from disgusting and vulgar sot we tend to imagine, when a truly great human being loses his compunctions, we might just gain a glimpse of how great he truly is.

(Needless to say, we are discussing people who are tipsy and high but not those who utterly lose their faculties via spirits. Nothing positive results from drinking oneself totally senseless (see the story of Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19) if you actually need proof of this), and great but responsible people likewise remain in control sufficiently to know when to stop.)

Based on all of the above, many other statements of the Sages regarding wine come into fascinatingly clear focus. I quote just a few below.

There is an opinion in the Talmud (Brachos 40a) that the Tree of Knowledge that Adam and Eve

partook of was none other than the grape vine. In eating the Forbidden Fruit, Adam wanted to become in touch with himself. He wanted to know evil from the inside. He did not want the trifling challenge of confronting evil as a foreign entity -- as a Serpent attempting to seduce him from without. He wanted the desire for evil to dwell within his very bosom -- and to then conquer it. And so, he ingested the grapes of the vine. And it led him to self-knowledge -- to gaining an intimate and personal yearning for the evil drive which now resided within. (The fact that that challenge was too great basically outlines the rest of human history.)

In Proverbs, Solomon finds a positive use for alcohol: "Give strong drink to one who is perishing (wasting away) and wine to the bitter of soul" (Mishlei 31:6). If someone is depressed, give him wine to cheer him up. The simple explanation is that wine will make him high and cause him to forget his sorrows. But based on the above, a much more profound thought arises. When someone is depressed, he becomes overwhelmed with his troubles, unable to cope with his situation. Wine will cause him to understand himself better. He will then see that his problems are not truly him. They do not make his life unbearable. They are merely external issues he must deal with. He will then become able to put his problems in perspective and deal with them rather than allowing them to crush him.

Thus, to conclude, in the eyes of the Sages wine is as much a positive force as a negative one. And for this reason Scripture does not level unequivocal criticism against it. For wine is not a means of misbehaving per se but a means of behaving -- as my true self. Wine enables self-expression, of seeing and acting out who I really am. Of course, practically, very few of us are so secure in our goodness that we can afford to risk becoming our true unrestrained selves. And equally self-evident, as with all powerful forces, too much can easily destroy a person.

And so, certainly the Rambam is well-justified in advising that we avoid toying with such forces. (Of course, the Rambam lived long before Chassidus. As a pure rationalist, he had little room for an occasional "high". (I once heard in the name of my teacher R. Yaakov Weinberg OBM that whereas spirits intoxicate, wine "brings out the glow.")) Yet it's significant to recognize that our image of drunkenness stems less from the true nature of wine than from man's typical inability to live up to its uninhibiting effects. The Talmud states that the true reward of the World to Come is "wine guarded in its grapes since the six days of Creation" (Brachos 34b). Perhaps one day man will again aspire to become his natural and unguarded self, yet still in perfect communion with G-d in the Garden of Eden.

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