

SHOULD I STOP MY WINING?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d told Aharon, "Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, whenever you go into the Appointed Tent. Otherwise you will die. This is a law forever for all generations..." (Vayikra 10:9-10)

If you look on the side of a wine bottle today, you may find the following: WARNING: This product contains sulfates and may be dangerous for pregnant and nursing women. Too bad it did not say back in the days of the Mishkan: Contents should not be consumed by priests while serving in the Mishkan. Had such a warning been posted, then Nadav and Avihu would have avoided death, and the pure and sublime joy the Jewish people enjoyed that awesome day of inauguration would have ended on a high note, and not on the disastrous one it did.

Indeed, ALL of Jewish history would have been different, because we probably would have gone from "strength to strength" and ushered in the Days of Moshiach. But alas, again, it was not meant to be, and instead we struggle and stumble from the effects of wine to this very day.

In fact, even from the Talmud it is not 100 percent clear if wine is a good drink or a bad one:

Rav Chanan said: Wine was only created to comfort the mourners and to give evil people reward, as it says, "Give strong drink to the lost and wine to those of embittered soul" (Mishlei 31:6). Rebi Yitzchak said: Why is it written, "Do not look at wine becoming red . . ." (Ibid. 23:31)? It makes the faces of the evil red in this world and white in the World-to-Come! (Sanhedrin 70a)

And, lest you forget with this is found in the Talmud, it is on the 70th page, the gematria of wine itself. And, furthermore, lest you under- appreciate the potency of wine, the Talmud concludes by saying:

Rav Chisda said in the name of Rav Ukva, and some say in the name of Mar Ukva, who said it in the name of Rav Zakkai: The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to Noach, "Noach, should you not have learned from Adam HaRishon? It was wine that caused him [to sin]!" (Sanhedrin 70a)

At least according to the one who held that the tree that Adam ate from was actually a vine. Indeed, according to the Shlah HaKodesh, that had been Noach's intention in planting a vine the moment he had descended from the Ark, and why he had been unclothed at the time he became drunk: he was trying rectify the sin of Adam HaRishon and, in fact, and not even drunk enough wine to become

drunk in the first place.

The Leshem concurs:

Noach also stumbled in this manner, putting himself into a test without [G- d's] permission. His intentions had been purely for the sake of Heaven, wanting to rectify the sin of Adam HaRishon. But he stumbled and this is what it says, "He drank wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in the tent" (Bereishis 9:20). (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 343)

In fact, the Leshem says that even Nadav and Avihu were trying to rectify the sin of Adam HaRishon, and perhaps that is why wine was also involved, and perhaps, why disaster ensued. So far, it doesn't sound too positive for wine, but as the prosecution sits down, it is time for the defense to present its case.

SHABBOS DAY:

For your love is better than wine. (Shir HaShirim 1:2)

The love you manifested to Israel when You redeemed them from Egypt and when they stood before You at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah was greater than all earthly pleasures, and we desire it again. (Metzudas David)

Even better than wine, the posuk says, which speaks quite highly about wine, at least as far as earthly pleasures goes. But that doesn't make wine good necessarily, just pleasurable. However, we do drink four cups of wine at the Seder, and we use wine each week for Kiddush. And, we are told that:

A person is obligated to drink on Purim until he doesn't know the difference between cursed Haman and blessed Mordechai. (Megillah 7b; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 695:2)

-- which takes a lot of wine. Furthermore, the Talmud states:

Anyone who becomes settled through wine has the knowledge (da'as) of his Creator . . . has the knowledge (da'as) of the Seventy Elders; wine was given with seventy letters (Rashi: the gematria of yai'in -- wine -- is 70), and the mystery (of Torah) was given with seventy letters (sod -- mystery -- also equals 70) -- when wine goes in, secrets go out. (Eiruvim 65a)

In the above quote, the Talmud is using gematria to make a conceptual link between Da'as and wine. The gematria of the Hebrew word for wine -- yai'in -- is seventy (Yud, Yud, Nun), and Da'as, it seems, is often associated with the number seventy. Even the word "Sod," the last letter in the word "Pardes," which refers to the Kabbalistic level of Torah- learning, has the numerical value of seventy (Samech, Vav, Dalet).

Elsewhere, the Talmud finds another reason to compare Da'as to wine:

Why are the words of Torah compared to three liquids: water, wine and milk? . . . This is to teach you

that, just as these three liquids are best kept in ordinary utensils, such as wood or earthenware, so too is the Torah best contained by those who possess a humble spirit. The daughter of Caesar once said to Rebi Yehoshua ben Chananyah, "Such an ugly vessel and such glorious wisdom!"

He told her, "My daughter, in what does the king, your father keep his best wine?" "In earthenware containers," she answered him.

"The commoners keep their wine in earthenware containers," He told her,

"Shall your father do so also?"

"In what should they be kept?" she asked him innocently. "You who are wealthy," Rebi Yehoshua remarked, "should keep it in silver or gold containers!" She told her father, who then commanded that all his wine be kept in containers of silver and gold. Consequently it became sour, and when the Caesar was informed of this, he asked his daughter, "Who told you to do this?" "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah," she told him. The king sent for Rebi Yehoshua ben Chananyah, and asked him, "Why did you give her such advice?" "This was the answer to her question." (Ta'anis 7a)

In fact, one who possesses all of Torah is referred to as an eshkolos -- a grape cluster, the source of wine -- a play on the word which can be understood as ish kol bo-one within whom is everything, that is, all of Torah (Sotah 47b). Or better yet, Da'as itself, for:

There is no Da'as other than Torah. (Sotah 49a)

This is why wine is used as a parable for Gan Aiden, the glorious Future World reserved for the completely righteous, which is called the "wine guarded in the grapes since the six days of creation" (Brochos 34b). Even the shirah, the holy song of the soul recited by the Levi'im in the Temple was sung over Wine-Offering.

The GR"A (Vilna Gaon) states outright that Da'as is called wine (Safrat D'Tzniusa, Chapter 2). He also points out the inherent connection between Da'as and Ya'akov Avinu, the father of the "seventy souls" that came down to Egypt (Bereishis 46:27), which, perhaps, is why Yosef, when setting the stage for his reunification with his father after twenty-two years of living apart from him, sent his father yai'in sh'da'as zekeinim nocheh himeinu -- wine that is pleasing to the elders (i.e., the Seventy Elders).

Furthermore, wine played a direct role in the miracle of Purim as well. It was a drunken Achashveros who demanded that his wife, Queen Vashti (whose name means, "and drink") appear before him. He wanted to show off her beauty to his visiting guests, but she declined. This so angered Achashveros that he had Vashti executed, which, of course, opened the door for Esther to become the new queen of Persia -- setting the stage for the eventual redemption from Haman's tyranny.

So, it seems as if wine is not so bad after all. In fact, it seems as wine has heroic qualities, and the question is, do we stop wining, or keep it up?

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

The answer to the question lies in an obvious place, but is not an obvious answer. As the Talmud has stated, "When wine goes in, Sod -- Secrets -- come out" (Eiruvim 65a). Secrets, as in the Kabbalistic type, as in Da'as Elokim -- G-dly knowledge -- as in the type of ideas that provide piercing and sublime insight into this world and life within it.

In other words, wine is a key. But like any key, wine does not determine what lies on the other side of the door that it unlocks. Wine can bring one to wanton merriment, to what the Torah refers to a "parua" behavior, licentious conduct, the like of which was witnessed at the time of the golden calf. In this case, wine is used as key to lock out Da'as Elokim in order to allow one to enter the artificial world of selfish abandon.

Or, wine can be used as a device to neutralize the body in order to allow the soul to roam freely, to take the lead, albeit temporarily, in a world that caters to the body. This, of course, is the drinking meant for Purim, where the wine is used to remove the body from its everyday mundane and temporal concerns so that the soul can emerge and relate. Here, wine is used as a vehicle to get in touch with the knowledge of the soul, to see the world from G-d's perspective, which allows one to come to the intellectual realization and emotional appreciation that there really is no difference between blessed Mordechai and cursed Haman when one lives in the realm of Sod.

As Mordechai did. That is why, try as Haman did to eradicate Mordechai and annihilate his people, in 70 days -- the gematria of wine and Sod -- Haman rose and fell. And the harder he tried to carry out his Amalekian plan, the worst matters became for him, to the point that he became a servant to Mordechai even while he was second-in-command over Persia!

That is why the Talmud also states:

Through three things a person is known: koso (his cup, i.e., drink), kisso (his wallet), ka'aso (his anger). (Eiruvim 65b)

Each of these three things are keys of sort. Situations that can lead one to anger, how one deals in business, and whether or not one is settled through wine, reveal what lies behind the often-locked door of one's personality. They can act as window openers to the core of a person, and ultimately reveal the depth to which one believes G-d plays a role in his or her life. That is why the letters that the three Hebrew words don't have in common -- Vav, Yud, Ayin -- total the same gematria as Elokim, the Name of G-d who works in a hidden way.

Therefore, if wine merely intoxicates a person, allowing him to blank out reality and live as if he has no concerns or responsibilities, then it is a reward for the evil in this world or comfort for the mourner who has permission to step outside of everyday life for seven days. However, if the wine serves to unlock the soul of a person to allow it to show the mind far higher and more sublime visions of everyday life, then it is the wine of Da'as Elokim. If wine goes in and Sod comes out, then it is a taste

of the wine reserved for the World-to-Come.

MELAVE MALKAH:

We can assume that Nadav and Avihu were great people. And not just great people, but talmidei chachamim -- Torah scholars -- par excellence. As Rashi points out, this was part of Moshe's consolation to their father, Aharon HaKohen, who on the most joyous day of his life had to witness the ultimate person tragedy. He even said that Nadav and Avihu were greater than themselves.

Thus, we can also assume that when the wine of Nadav and Avihu went in, Sod came out, and that is what they were doing. In fact, that is, perhaps, why the fire that came out of the Kodesh Kodashim to punish them only burned out their souls and left their bodies perfectly intact, an unusual form of Divine punishment.

If so, then the question becomes, what went wrong?

The Maharal explains this. He says that what Nadav and Avihu did that fateful day was something that would have been praiseworthy -- had been before the Torah was given. However, once the Torah was given, service of G-d was channeled between the guidelines of Torah law, based upon Sod that is much higher than anything man can comprehend while in this world.

It is something we take for granted. We have all these laws and details to fulfill, as commanded in the Written Law and explained in the Oral Law. But each mitzvah and every single details represents a concept from the overall larger picture that we called Avodas Hashem -- Service of G-d.

But how do you know that what you are doing is right? I mean, EXACTLY right? Yes, man is not perfect and G-d is full of mercy. But, there is a concept of judgment, and there is a concept of punishment, and sometimes G-d even judges to a hairsbreadth. In other words, the service of G-d is an exact science, something that only G-d could work out, not man. We can barely balance our budgets; how can we figure out the exact right way to serve the Master of the Universe without His guidance?

We can't. That is why our Sod must always work WITHIN the framework of halachah as received by Moshe Rabbeinu directly from G-d Himself; it is heresy to try and change a single detail unless sanctioned by G-d Himself, as in the case of Eliyahu the prophet at Mt. Carmel.

This was, in effect, the Evil Son was trying to do at the Seder. Make no mistake about it, he is a chacham too; one has to be to become an epikores -- a heretic. But in his question lies his fundamental modus operandi: Service of G-d is what makes sense to MY mind, regardless of tradition, regardless of rabbinical opinion as explained from generation to generation.

Not all heresy is malicious, and not all heretics have an axe to grind. But heresy is, nonetheless, heresy, inasmuch as it goes beyond the boundaries that G-d Himself has determined to constitute true and eternal Service of G-d. Thus, when wine goes in and Sod comes out, it must be Sod that

can flow through the channels established by G-d at Mt. Sinai, transmitted to us by Moshe Rabbeinu, and upheld by the generations of Torah-observant Jews since then.

Have a great Shabbos,

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Text

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