

I love the closing moments of the Shabbat morning service when there is a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The mood is one of joyous release. Gifts have been given, prayers said and, in closing, friends of the youngsters join the family up on the *bima*. The only thing that spoils the mood is when, immediately after the *Kiddush*, the blessing for wine, friends of the young man or woman holding the cup whisper loudly, “chug, chug, chug.” On the one hand, the egging on is just a bit of misplaced adolescent exuberance. On the other hand, I wonder where the misguided notion arises among these 12-year olds that guzzling alcoholic drinks (even something as sickly sweet as *Shabbes* wine) is some sign of coming of age.

I used to think it was just a way of challenging authority and tasting something forbidden. In recent years, however, I have come to see that problems of drinking and alcoholism are not just restricted to our youngsters. The first year we lived in Port Washington our oldest daughter used to go out regularly with her friends. We liked that she had people to go out with, but wondered why she and her friends never came over to our house as she told us she often spent the evenings at the homes of her friends. “Do you want to know the truth,” she asked. “Of course,” we answered. “Well,” she explained, “The other parents let kids drink, and I know you and mom would not.” Personally, I believe that the law restricting drinking to those 21 years of age or older is unjust. “We have tried to explain what we think is right,” we told our daughter, “But it is illegal, to say nothing of being irresponsible as a parent to allow you to drink. These people are not your friends ... and their parents ‘wink and a nod’ to your drinking is wrong.”

I don’t think I’m a prude. I like to drink. And the use of alcohol to induce feelings of joy is not only acceptable, but integrally a part, of Jewish observance. Do you know why we use wine as a symbol of joy on Shabbat and festivals, at births and at weddings? It is, quite simply, that drinking the wine makes us feel a bit happier. Thus, Judaism allows for the use of alcohol to heighten our joy.

In fact, abstaining from drink, while a possible religious position within Judaism, is questionable, at best. This week’s Torah portion speaks of the *nazir*, who shows his or her extra piety and devotion to God by, among other things, voluntarily refraining from

drinking. At the end of this period of abstinence the Torah says that the person had to bring a sin-offering. What is the sin that was committed? Some authorities claim that the sin was the decision to end his or her period of deeper commitment to God. The majority position in Jewish thought, however, is that the sin of the *nazir* is that he or she unnecessarily deprived himself of permitted pleasures. Instead of using wine for sacred purpose, the *nazir* choose to avoid it all together.¹

While Jewish traditions focus on the use of wine or drink to enhance a spiritual elevation, there is a recognition in Judaism that drinking has an inherent danger. A rabbinic story illustrates what most of us know from experience:

Satan came to visit Noah, the first to plant a vineyard. Once there he took a sheep and lamb and slew them under the vine. Then, in turn, a lion, a pig and monkey were slaughtered so that their blood drenched the soil. In that way Satan hinted that before a person drinks wine he or she is simple like a sheep and quiet like a lamb. Drinking in moderation makes one feel strong as a lion. When one has drunk more than enough, that person becomes like a pig. And, when one is completely drunk, he or she is like a monkey, dancing about, spewing out obscenities and unaware of what is happening.²

It should come as little surprise that Jewish traditions taught that the fruit that Adam and Eve ate was not an apple, but a grape. Many Jews are familiar with the rabbinic dictum that a person should drink so much on Purim that he or she can no longer distinguish “between ‘Cursed by Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordecai’.” Less well known is the story which follows right after this:

Rabbah and Rabbi Zera joined together in a Purim feast. They got drunk and Rabbah arose and cut Rabbi Zera’s throat. The next day he prayed and revived him. The next year Rabbah said, “Come join me again at the Purim feast.” Zera (obviously a man who learns his lesson the first time through) replied, “One can’t count on a miracle happening every year.”³

There is a dark and ominous side to drinking – and the equivalent in our time to Rabbah’s knife is the person who drinks and drives.

So often abuse of alcohol (and, related to this, drugs) becomes a problem without any awareness of the one who suffers. Denial is a basic response of the abuser. “I’m just

¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Nedarim* 10a, quoted by Rashi on Numbers 6:11

² *Tanhuma*, *Noah* 13

³ Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 7b

taking a few drinks; I can stop whenever I want.” “Oh, I’m not really an alcoholic; I just like to drink.” “These pills have been prescribed by my doctor. If there was a problem she would know.” “The more I drink, the more I can take.” “Things have been kind of rough lately. I’m just taking a snort to get me through.” “I’m not an alcoholic. I’m not addicted to drugs. I’m not an alcoholic.”

For Jews who are substance abusers there is a double denial, for all too often we perpetuate the myth that Jews don’t drink or take drugs. Sure, Jews may use wine to sanctify Shabbat or festivals, but we use it only in moderation. Jews, we believe, do not take drugs or drink to excess. Substance abuse is a problem other people have. Not we Jews.

But it isn’t true. Jews do drink. Jews are alcoholics. Jews, like other people in society, take drugs. In fact, Jews (representing some 2% of the population) make up some 18% of cocaine addicts. An estimated 10 to 20% of young Jews abuse alcohol or drugs. Ask the teenagers of our community. They will tell you. After all, we live in a community where young people can afford drinks and drugs. And the problem is not confined to our teens. I know Jews who are addicted or have worked through addictions to alcohol and drugs. And, I suspect, so do many of you. In fact, a few people in our own congregation have told me about the drinking at adult parties that is literally out of control. Jews are *shikkers*. And Jews are drug users. Some are elderly, some are young parents, some work. Others are homemakers. Some are distant from organized Jewish life, most are not.

The tragedy of being a Jewish substance abuser is that the myth makes the problem even worse. How can a Jew turn to help to a community which refuses to face the problem? There is a true story told of an alcoholic who went to her rabbi for help and referral. The rabbi’s response was, “come on, you’re not an alcoholic. You just drink too much. Try to control yourself.” Others have been told, “Jews don’t drink. If you do, then you are not a good Jew, but are a shame and disgrace to God and our people.” Such insensitivity drives away those who seek help and frighten off others who might make the effort.

We must open our eyes, then, and our hearts, to the reality. A 35 year old woman

once admitted, “There were many times in my addiction that I wanted to go to someone for help ... a rabbi... but all through the years I was told that there were no Jewish alcoholics.” Unsure of her self already, the message she continually received was that she was a non-entity, leading to a greater sense of alienation and (probably) increased dependence on alcohol and drugs.

Jewish substance abusers need more than our understanding. Addiction is not a sin. It is not measure of a person’s moral character. It is a disease. Jewish addicts, then, do not need our pity, they need help. Many Jews have sought ways of getting help, but often in non-Jewish settings. If you don’t believe me, attend some Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or NA (Narcotics Anonymous) groups. You will find Jews. And you will find Jews in AL-ANON and ALATEEN. For many years the only place Jews could go was to groups meeting in church halls or basements. Today there are synagogues and community centers to such programs, but the hardest step of all is admitting your problem, or confronting a family member or friend, and getting them to walk in the door to get help.

Sometimes people are a bit hesitant about the religious overtones of the 12-Step program of AA and NA. Such reluctance is unfounded. The secret of this program’s success rests in the understanding that fighting addiction demands not only medical help and physical fortitude, but spiritual awareness. The parallel between the 12-Step program and Judaism is striking. First, belief in God plays a crucial role in leading one to humility and self-control. Second, the individual is not left to struggle alone, but is part of a community that fosters stability: “I can’t, but together we can.” Third, there is recognition of human limitation. A friend and congregant in a former congregation who had not had a drink in 14 years, always told me, “I am an alcoholic. It is part of me and I know that.” His admission came without embarrassment or guilt, and demonstrated an acceptance of the reality of who he is and the limits of his control. In short, AA and NA are grounded in a belief that our failings in life do not define us as failures, and that there is a Power that we can tap to turn ourselves (make *t’shuvah*) toward the men and women we want to be.

Happily, Jewish communities these days do realize that Jews are suffering and that

Jews need help. Almost 30 years ago a group began that melds the insights of AA with Judaism. Called JACS (Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons & Significant Others), they have sponsored retreats, helped sensitize the Jewish community to this issue and set up connections between Jewish addicts and alcoholics.

Awareness and self-run support groups for substance abusers are important. But they are not enough. One critical thing more is needed. Our love. This does not mean acceptance of friends and loved one's addictions. Rather, we must confront the drinkers or drug abusers we know honestly and strongly with our understanding of the problem we see. If you suspect someone is using drugs or drinking heavily, it is likely that they are. And the best thing to do is to speak to them. We must not judge our friends and family who abuse, but we must reach out to them. And we must tell them that here in the Jewish community they will be supported and helped. Jews, however distant from Jewish life, must be told that this rabbi (and, I pray, all clergy) will not chastise them, but do everything possible to help them overcome the drinks or drugs overwhelming their lives.

In ancient times, the *nazir* sought to serve God by refraining from drink. Perhaps then, as now, there are men and women who understand their desires – and the difficulty that drink and drug pose. Abstinence was not the answer for the community as a whole. But it was a sacred choice for those who needed to take it. If there is a “sin” in our time, it is not in the turning from drink. No ... ours is a much graver sin. The sin in this community – and in our selves – is refusing to acknowledge the reality, to turn a blind eye – to our children, our family members, our friends.

The *nazir* of old felt that he or she had to withdraw from the community, living a life apart, in order to control themselves. Perhaps, then, the sin offering they gave was not for themselves, but the community, that allowed them to be so separate – who saw their problems but chose not to help. Let us not do the same. Alcohol abuse is a problem – in this country, in this congregation, in our homes. Let us admit the truth. Let us reach out in love. And let us not be afraid to confront the adolescents who thinking chugging is cool, no less than our adult friends whose drinking waits to be wielded like a knife on an innocent's throat.