

Parshas Noach

Drinking- Spiritual or Vulgar?

R' Aaron Lopiansky

Wine and drinking first appear in the Torah in *parshas* Noach. Throughout the Torah, wine is referred to very ambiguously. Sometimes it is treated as the most heavenly of all elixirs, and sometimes it seems as if it is the most poisonous of all potions. On the one hand, we know that wine is brought together with sacrifices, and that *shira* - song is recited only over wine. We also know that we both bring in Shabbos and escort her out, over a cup of wine. Additionally, wine is referred to as, "that which gladdens the hearts of men" (*Tehillim* 104:15).

Then there is a second side to wine. A *nazir* is considered someone who has become uniquely sanctified because he has abstained from drinking wine. The downfall of the children of Aaron happened because of the wine that they drank (Rashi, *Vayikra* 10:2). In our *parsha* Noach plants a vineyard, drinks wine, becomes drunk and loses his dignity, and thereby incurs shame on himself and a curse on one of his children. The *Gemara* states that "wine brings about all tragedies" (*Berachos* 40a).

So how do we understand wine? Is it something positive and a divine elixir, or is it a poison that drives a person away from all that is good and noble?

This dichotomy is actually alluded to in the responsa of the Radvaz (2, 615) where someone asks him about the nature of the drinking of the children of Aaron. He speaks about it a bit and then he states: "you need to be aware that there are two types of wine, the wine that is poisonous and intoxicates, and on the other hand the wine that brings about joy. It all depends on the intention of the drinker. The children of Aaron were seeking the wine that intoxicates. They rejected the wine, 'that has been kept in the grapes from the six days of creation' and therefore they deserve death".

The words of the Radvaz are cryptic. Let us try to understand them with an explanation that the Maharal gives (*Sanhedrin* 78 and other places). The *Gemara* there states: "Rav Chanan says that wine was created in the world only for two reasons: to comfort mourners, and to pay the wicked their reward in this world." It's a little bit hard to understand the seemingly random juxtaposition of these two purposes, but we do gather that one is very positive and one is very negative; i.e. the comforting of mourners seems to be something very positive, whereas the paying back the wicked with the reward in this world seems to be something very negative. So once again we see in the words of the *Gemara* that there are two types of drinking.

Let us, then, try and understand a little bit about what is it that drinking represents and expresses. The Maharal explains that of all the physical foodstuffs we ingest, wine is unique, because wine comes from "something hidden, within something that's hidden". This means to say, that the grape is the fruit itself, the juice is the hidden essence of that fruit, and the fermented wine is hidden within that hidden juice. This represents "*sod*" which means 'secret' in Hebrew. As the *gemara* states, "when wine enters, one's *sod* (secrets) exits." The word "*sod* - secret" and the word "*yayin* - wine" actually have the same *gematria* (numerical value).

This is parallel to the process of Hashem creating the world, wherein He created the world as is perceived on the surface, together with a multitude of deeper understandings and realities. The outer layer of the world is that which the physical senses and the rational mind grasp. The senses feel the object physically,

while the rational mind defines it. But there is something deeper within this world, an inner essence. The body and senses cannot perceive this reality, nor can the rational mind, for it, too, is limited to that which can be grasped by the senses and extrapolated by reason. The mind cannot process that which is beyond the senses and beyond even reason. However, when we succeed in bringing out some of the inner essence of a person, some of that inner awareness that transcends reason, then that person is able to "grasp" things that lie beyond reason.

This ability to reach beyond the constraints of the superficial and physical world is an incredible faculty, and can be a great blessing. For instance, going back to the words of the *Gemara*, when someone is in mourning, something has been lost to him forever. As far as human beings can perceive with their senses and "reason", death is final and there is nothing after that, and thus the loss is irreversible and eternal. Try as hard as we may, there is no way for our physical minds to "understand" that there is life after death. But when we loosen the shackles of our senses and rigid physical reasoning, we are able to perceive that there is a world after our world, a world that is eternal and whose essence cannot be grasped by the senses, or even by the mind. This is how wine enables the mourner to rise above his sorrow.

Similarly, when a person praises Hashem, he starts with prose. While such prose is limited to our experiences, our knowledge, and our understanding, Hashem's true praise rises beyond that. That true praise is *shira* - song, and that is the ultimate praise. *Shira* is enabled by the wine that liberates us from our world of sense and reason, and allows us to rise higher. This is why true *shira* demands wine.

This liberation is only possible for a person who has risen as high as he can with his actions and his mind, and is now looking to rise even higher. His "drink" is simply a push further. However, a person who has not reigned in his physical drives and passions, and is looking for wine to loosen the last remnants of reason from his body, is acting most destructively. A person who has few deeds and even less developed *daas* is fooling himself terribly when he claims that the wine "elevated" him. Besides the crudeness and vulgarity that the drinking evokes, its experiences are nonsense. What he thinks are "deeper revelations" are in fact nothing but idle fantasies. Yes, they "transcend" the mind, but not because they're revealing a greater truth, rather because they fall very far short of any truth.

Thus, the Torah is revealing to us the correct understanding of the "wine" experience. When a person has climbed the ladder of *kedusha* and *da'as* and is using wine to say *shira* to HKB"H, it is most uplifting. But when a person drinks to forget the reality around him and to free himself from the moral constraints of *da'as*, then not only is one not uplifted, rather one is falling into the deepest of abysses. Indeed, it is the fool's paradise of the wicked!