

Who Is Truly Wise

[November 13, 2022](#) [Rabbi Ben Herman](#)

Pirkei Avot, or the Ethics of the Fathers, was a text I studied in day school from my teacher, Adon Morgan. At the beginning of each test, we had to write down “Who is truly wise?” followed by three answers: 1.) One who learns from all people^[1] 2.) One who foresees the consequences of his actions^[2] and 3.) One who lives out what he has learned. This, along with the statement “Learning never ends,” was the mantra for the course of study.

Of these three points, the third of which was Adon Morgan’s personal addition, I have found the second to be most significant. In making decisions, can we foresee the path down which those decisions will lead? Can we be like a chess player, looking five moves ahead, rather than just at what is directly in front of us?

A man who would have done well to heed this advice is Noah. After leaving the ark, Noah is described as “a man of the land, the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became intoxicated, and he uncovered himself in his tent.”^[3] Ham saw his father’s nakedness and told his brothers, who proceeded to cover him. When Noah found out what happened he cursed Ham’s son Canaan, making him a slave to his brothers.^[4] The Torah does not specify why Canaan rather than Ham is cursed or what exactly was Ham’s sin. The Talmud states that Ham castrated Noah, depriving him of a fourth son. Thus, Noah cursed Ham’s fourth son, Canaan.^[5]

How much blame should Noah be given for the occurrence of this incident? Perhaps he did not know any better and this was his first time getting drunk. He also was not harming anyone, being inside his tent, and he had just spent 40 days and 40 nights on a boat, not knowing when he would see dry land again. More interesting is that this incident occurred with one of our sacred weekly ritual items. Our tradition that “wine causes the heart of man to rejoice”^[6] and that “there is no joy without wine.”^[7]

Despite these texts, Noah is at fault for not foreseeing the consequences of his actions. He was supposed to set an example for his children and grandchildren. True, he worked hard tilling the ground, yet that did not give him the right to overindulge in alcohol and pass out in his tent. Noah demonstrated that he was concerned with himself and his own happiness, not the needs of his family. He did not understand how his sons and grandsons would react to their patriarch acting in this manner.

Did Noah commit a sin, a violation of the Torah? From the text I cannot say he did. However, he certainly did not act as a role model. It reminds me of the Talmudic interpretation quoted by Rashi that if Noah was in Abraham’s generation, he would not have been considered righteous, as he was only concerned about himself as opposed to anyone else.^[8] Noah’s mistake was taking something sacred, the fruit of the vine, which we consecrate every week through the Kiddush, and abusing it, thereby profaning it.

I recently learned that Sacramento has a chapter of JACS (Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons and Significant Others). I was privileged to attend one of their Shabbat retreats in 2010 as an observer. I saw and learned about people who had hurt themselves and their loved ones through abuse of alcohol. A number of them had started to drink gradually, in high school or college, and increased their level of drinking over the years. At one point they hit rock bottom-perhaps a friend advised them to join a 12-step program, or they recognized they needed to make changes in their lives. They understood that they had not only an addiction but a disease, a condition which required medical treatment. They also knew that they had each other for support, to cheer when they said, “I’m sixty days clean!” or “I’m two years clean!”

Unfortunately, Noah did not have the luxury of a *hevre* to support and encourage him. Even so, he had to establish a strong foundation for future generations. He could have begun by creating a *beit midrash*, a school for his children, or planting trees for fruit. Instead, he planted a vineyard, not for the purpose of Kiddush wine but for immediate, worldly pleasure through intoxication. Had he known how his family would react, he might have acted differently, and would not have ended up cursing his grandson, pushing him away and making him the progenitor of our enemy, the Canaanites. If only Noah had foreseen the consequences of his actions.

We cannot read the minds of others, nor do we have crystal balls. However, before we act, we need to think about whether this action would make our friends and family proud of us. Even if the act is legal, that is not always enough-rather, we need to do the best we can to model good behavior for our friends and families. May we strive to be truly wise, understanding the impact our decisions make not just now but down the road.

[1] Mishnah Avot 5:1

[2] Babylonian Talmud Tamid 32a

[3] Genesis 9:20-21

[4] Genesis 9:25

[5] Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 70a

[6] Psalm 104

[7] Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 109

[8] Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 58a