

Noach 5772: Taking the First Step

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Congregation Rodeph Sholom, October 28, 2011¹

Last summer, I had the pleasure of officiating at a beautiful wedding. The bride and groom had met in Union Square while on a lunch break; both were reading books. They struck up a conversation, and so their relationship began. When I asked them what they loved about each other, he told me of her caring and her kindness, and how he loves the sound of her voice. She told me about his passion for life and his thoughtfulness, and how, when he eats a muffin, he always gives her the best bite first.

We were talking through the details of the ceremony, when I mentioned that they needed to bring two Kiddush cups, and a bottle of white kosher wine. "It has to be white," I told them, "for a very important reason: so you don't worry about getting a stain on your clothes." There was a pause. "Ok," I thought to myself, "it's not a great joke, but usually it gets a smile." The groom-to-be spoke up: "I quit drinking," he told me, "the night before we met."

We had grape juice under the *chuppah*. But the moment stays with me. As much as I felt aware and informed about alcoholism in the Jewish community, my assumptions betrayed me. It had not occurred to me that the cup of wine at the wedding could be a problem.

Sheldon B., an alcoholism counselor in New York, told of how a few years ago he approached his own rabbi with the idea of opening their temple to an A.A. group. He thought that Jewish members in any A.A. group might be more comfortable about accepting help in a synagogue setting than in a church. The rabbi informed him that there was no need: "There are no Jewish alcoholics." When Sheldon B. said, "But I am an alcoholic," the rabbi thought for a moment and then replied, "are you sure you know who your real father was?"²

As of last week, we have re-started the Book of Genesis, circling back yet again to the stories of our ancestors, our fathers, if you will. This week, we read about Noah.

¹ This sermon was part of a Shabbat focusing on alcoholism, addiction, and substance abuse, supported and inspired by the work of the Mental Health Initiative of the Caring Community at Congregation Rodeph Sholom. My thanks to the co-chairs of the Initiative, Shari Steinberg and Dr. Reina Marin, and the co-chairs of the Caring Community, Val Coleman and Arlene Kossoff, who have worked tirelessly to put this on our communal agenda.

² Nan Robertson, "Alcoholics Anonymous," in *The New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 21, 1988 (reposted on http://www.silkworth.net/magazine_newspaper/new_york_times_magazine_feb_21_1988.html).

Remember the song? *The Lord said to Noah, there's gonna be a floody floody...* Here's the short version: people started doing bad things, God came to Noah and told him to build an ark, and save his family and pairs of animals from the coming flood; Noah did what God told him. The flood came, the flood went, the dove brought back the olive branch, and Noah and his family left the ark. In the words of the song: *The sun came out and dried up the landy landy... Everything was fine and dandy, dandy, Children of the Lord.* Noah gave God a sacrifice, God put the rainbow in the sky as a symbol of God's promise not to destroy the earth again, and that was that. Fine and dandy, hunky dory... the song seems at pains to assure us that everything was ok.

But everything was not ok. Here is what happened next:

²⁰ Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. ²¹ He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. ²² Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. ²³ But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backward, they covered their father's nakedness; their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father's nakedness. (Genesis 9:20-23)

Usually, Ham, who told his brothers of their father's nakedness, is condemned; Shem and Japheth, who avert their eyes and cover him, are praised. But my colleague Rabbi Shira Milgrom has a different take. In her Yom Kippur sermon this year, she said:

They didn't see – and from then on, they didn't know.

We don't see; we don't know. Those in our community who suffer from alcohol and drug addictions not only suffer, they suffer alone. Worse than the shame of being alcoholic, apparently, is the shame of being Jewish and alcoholic.³

This shame, and the discomfort of the Jewish community, goes very far back. It is astonishing to me, looking at the commentaries on Noah, how few comment on the words, "he became drunk." Noah isn't even Jewish, but he is our ancestor, and we want to distance ourselves from his actions. We like to think we're different. But we're not.

³ Rabbi Shira Milgrom, Yom Kippur sermon 2011, Congregation Kol Ami, White Plains, NY.

Milgrom goes on to cite statistics: how up to 30% of patient populations in residential treatment for chemical dependency are Jews. At least as high a percentage of American Jews have addictions as any other cultural, religious, or ethnic group.

More important than the statistics are the stories. We have congregants who are alcoholics. We are congregants who are addicts. The impact on them – and on their families – is immense, and it is made worse by stigma and taboo. We may know it in the abstract, but there are alcoholics and addicts among our b'nei mitzvah parents and our adult education students, among our most avid learners, and our most dedicated volunteers. We have congregants who have almost died from drinking, and we have congregants who have been arrested for buying drugs. Each of them has a story, but there is a common thread: of trauma, or loss, or struggle. Childhood trauma, or the compounded stress of troubles at work and at home. But there is more to it than that. As one recovering alcoholic told me, "Other people had losses. But I was the only one who started stealing alcohol when babysitting and hiding it in a shampoo bottle at home. I was the only one who thought my life was over at the age of 21."

Each of them has a story. One, which I share with permission, is of a woman I'll call Janet. Janet came from an affluent family. Both of her parents were alcoholics, and she grew up in the hard position of caring for them in different ways; she remembers having to get her mother to bed when she, as a child, came home from school. Growing up, she vowed never to become her mother. She married Mr. Right, developed a successful career and became an expert in her field, all while raising a family of her own. She drank socially, but was in control. Until her sons got married, to women who disappointed her in different ways. More and more, she enjoyed her glass of wine when she came home and made dinner. As another recovering addict told me, sharing the perspective she once had, "Alcohol wasn't my problem, it was my solution." A glass turned into bottles. She hid it from her husband, moving from wine to vodka and disguising it as ginger ale. One day, she walked home, went straight to the vodka without taking her coat off and without using a glass. As she put the bottle to her lips, she realized, in a moment of clarity and of horror: *I have become my mother.*

She went to A.A.

Let's pause here. We know there are Jewish alcoholics. We know there are Jewish addicts. But what is the Jewish response? Consciously or subconsciously, there is a perception that A.A., Alcoholics Anonymous, isn't for Jews. The term A.A. conjures up

church basements and the Lord's Prayer, and the Twelve Steps which include submitting to a Higher Power – and when's the last time your rabbi told you to do that? And if one of us did, would you listen? J.A.C.S., Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons, and Significant Others, was founded in large part to make it easier for Jews to come in the door. But the principles of these programs are essentially the same.

Rabbi Neil Gillman, in his essay, "Are the Twelve Steps Jewish?" reminds us that Judaism is fluid.⁴ There are teachings within Judaism that can be found to support each and every one of the Twelve Steps. There are also, if you look hard enough, teachings that would call those steps into question. This is true, Gillman reminds us, of almost any belief, whether it is resurrection or meditation. There is nothing intrinsically un-Jewish in the Twelve Steps, and much that is. Most important, Gillman suggests, simply to reject the Twelve Steps is to play into denial: to allow someone who is addicted to avoid getting the help that they need, and to allow the rest of us to keep ignoring that need. *We don't see; we don't know.*

But there's more. Alcoholism has been called "America's most treatable untreated illness."⁵ And experts on alcoholism – and other addictions, though clearly there are distinctions between alcoholism and substance abuse, and other variations on the theme – experts agree that these are illnesses. The treatment for these illnesses include two core concepts, both essential to Jewish life and thought.⁶ First, the notion that we need to structure our lives. It's remarkable to me that last week's parsha, Bereishit, describes the creation of the world in an incredibly ordered way; we are told what was created on the first day, the second, the third. Light is divided from darkness, land from sea from sky. And this week, in the story of the flood, all that order turns to chaos. The treatment for addiction requires a recognition that we are not always in control, hard though we may try; that we need help, some external source of order, to re-create our world and our lives.

This leads to the second concept: community. Just like you need a minyan to pray, you need a community to stay sober. AA is first to say that there are exceptions and there are those that find their own way, but it is a dangerous and difficult path. Recovering

⁴ Rabbi Neil Gillman, "Are the Twelve Steps Jewish?" in Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, *100 Blessings Every Day: Daily Twelve Step Recovery Affirmations, Exercises for Personal Growth & Renewal Reflecting Seasons of the Jewish Year* (Woodstock, VT), 1993. Also see Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, "Is the 12-Step Program Kosher?" reprinted multiple places.

⁵ Dr. Morris E. Chafetz, cited in his obituary, *The New York Times*, Oct. 21, 2011.

⁶ Gillman, pp.xvi-xvii.

alcoholics have taught me just how much I don't understand, how for me, a glass of wine is something I can take up and then put down, but for them, once they start, they simply cannot stop. It's chemical, it's physical, it's often genetic, it's always real. Many describe it as an allergy. "God forbid you should step into the synagogue with peanuts," they tell me, "but you stand at Kiddush worrying that someone will look at you if you take grape juice instead of wine." Of course it makes sense that you need a community of people who fundamentally understand. Of course nothing is as powerful as seeing someone else who has the same reaction, the same illness, but has found a way to stop.

So Janet went to A.A. Last night, I too went to A.A. – to an open meeting, accompanied by two congregants, to a church on the Upper East Side. Let me tell you, every story I heard there was a sermon. It was a special night when people were sharing their anniversaries of sobriety, from the first speaker, who was marking a single year, to someone who had been sober for forty. One man told us how he decided he had to keep drinking until after Christmas, because, even though he was Jewish, he thought Jews and Christians should come together for the holidays. Another man spoke about coming home after his first A.A. meeting to his sleeping wife and children, and how, for the first time, he didn't have a drink before bed. "It was," he told us, "the single most elegant gesture of my life." A woman told us how, after twenty-four years, she thanked the man whose conversation and kindness helped her realize she had a problem, so many years before. Two people responded when asked if anyone was counting days. One hadn't taken a drink for 44 days, the other for 56.

There are so many stories. *We don't look; we don't know.* But we have to look. We have to know.

When God tells Noah to build the ark, God instructs him to include something called *tzohar* near the top. The meaning of the word is uncertain; some say it is a window, others say it is some kind of precious stone which illuminated the ark. The commentator Chizkuni insists that it is not a window, because for the duration of the flood, no one looked outside; even the stars were dimmed, so they couldn't use the constellations to navigate. They had no point of reference beyond their existence on the ark. It must have been terrifying.

In contrast, the Talmud teaches us that when we pray, we should pray only in a room with windows.⁷ Why? In his book on Jewish approaches to recovery, Rabbi Kerry Olitzky writes: “Healing takes place in community, not isolated from it... You may have felt alone in your active addiction but in the community of fellowship, you learn that you are never alone.”⁸ On a more humorous note, one of the speakers last night spoke about a conversation he had with his sponsor, in the early days of his recovery. “What do you think of the people at the meetings?” his sponsor asked. “The people are great, I love all of them,” the man replied. “You’re not going to enough meetings,” said his sponsor.

We, as a mixed community of alcoholics and non-alcoholics, addicts and non-addicts, cannot give the kind of fellowship that groups like A.A. provide. But we can be a room with a window. Here is what we can do.

First, we can take steps to make the synagogue a safe place, not just by making sure that where there is wine, there is grape juice, not just by avoiding a focus on alcohol – here I am speaking of programs like “Torah and Tonics” or “Latkes and Vodka,” which synagogues often offer to try to draw people in – but also by being a resource to help. We have many resources under the Caring Community section of our website, thanks to the efforts of our Mental Health Initiative – an initiative that has been central in inspiring this sermon tonight. Each of the clergy has a list of therapists and resources who deal specifically with alcoholism and addiction. We can help you connect with J.A.C.S., which has a retreat coming up this fall. We can help you connect with A.A. We can help you find others who will go with you, and whose stories may resonate with your own.

Second and crucially, we can acknowledge that alcoholism and addiction are illnesses, and that they are very real.

Finally, and most important of all, we can step away from judgment. Remember: the first thing the Torah tells us about Noah is that he was a righteous man. Not as righteous as Abraham, true, but righteous. A human being, struggling, trying to find the right path.

Whenever I meet with wedding couples now, I think of the bride and groom who met in Union Square. I am grateful to them, and to all the others whose stories I shared; I am grateful to them for breaking their silence. Thanks to them, I ask other couples whether

⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 34b.

⁸ Olitzky, p.300.

they want wine or grape juice under their *chuppah*. It's a small step. But it's a step. And whether it's Twelve Steps or some other number, what matters is that they are in the right direction. May it be God's will, and may it be our own. Please join me in saying: *Amen.*