

Kol Ha-Rav

My guess is that when most people read the story of Noah these days, they focus on the environmental concerns it addresses - humanity polluting the earth with immoral excess, catastrophic floods, protection of species.

But you have to read past the two-by-twos and the dove with the olive branch to get to the second set of lessons from Noah. Though he begins his story as unblemished in his generation, his fall is recorded in a quick succession of words that compress planting, tending, harvesting, fermenting and drinking grape wine - a long process - into two verses. He becomes a falling-down drunk, and is discovered in his tent by his son Ham. The language seems purposely imprecise, but it's pretty clear that Noah is in an embarrassing state. Ham tells his brothers Shem and Japeth, who walk into the tent backwards, eyes averted, to cover their father with a cloth draped between them.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that this story, known across thousands of years to anyone familiar with the Bible, has had a significant influence on how we all deal with substance abuse. Ham, who calls attention to Noah, is universally condemned, in the text of Genesis itself and in later Jewish literature. Though there is no record of what Ham said to his brothers, it is presumed that he mocked his father and purposely left him exposed in order to increase the shame and ridicule.

And the other two brothers? They are praised in the Bible and later teachings alike. Such respect did they have for Noah that they turned their backs, averted their eyes and covered up their drunken father.

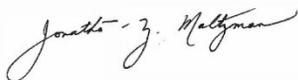
Maybe we ought to reconsider this story. Maybe the economy of the lead up - Noah planted a vineyard and got drunk - is meant to convey that Noah was singularly focused on the wine. I won't presume to argue for or against his drinking as a choice or a disease, though I do have sympathy for the notion that losing your entire world and peer group in forty days would drive anyone to drink. But maybe this incident was not a one-time thing.

And maybe Ham's conversation with Shem and Japeth was not quite the snark-fest we presume, but a plea to deal with dad who was again humiliated by his habit.

In that context, it is not so praiseworthy for a man to turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see. In that context, the sheet draped over him in a drunken stupor is less about modesty and more about denial.

Only Ham's love opened the possibility of addressing the pain Noah self-medicated by leaving it exposed for acknowledgment. Only Ham's love honored Noah as he was rather than Noah as his other sons wanted him to be.

The fear of stigma or embarrassment is debilitating. The deep-seated need to preserve a particular version of someone you love and admire is powerful. The honesty to acknowledge that someone you love (including yourself) is powerless over alcohol or drugs or another compulsion is terrifying. But real love is Ham's love. And real love is hard.



Rabbi Jonathan Z. Maltzman