

## EYK 5782 / 2021 - Addiction, Forgiveness and Understanding

Noah was an alcoholic. I'm not talking out of Sunday school or spreading rumors that I shouldn't be. One of the Torah's biggest heroes, saves all the animals, his family, and the human race as we know it and was an alcoholic. It is a lot of pressure to save the world and repopulate it with your family. We can honestly say it was probably a highly traumatic experience for everyone involved, especially for the man whose shoulders the survival of humanity rested upon. Sunday School may never have taught you this, but the Torah says it in black ink on parchment. The flood has subsided and Genesis Chapter 9, Verses 20-21 reads "Noah, the tiller of the soil, planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent."

Noah becomes naked drunk, something happens with his son Ham in the tent that isn't described, but is bad enough that the next morning Noah curses Ham and banishes him from the family for all time. Noah gets blackout drunk, but it is Ham who bears the brunt of the punishment.

We do our best to learn from this experience and yet on Purim we are all supposed to get so drunk, in celebration of Queen Esther and Mordechai, that we can no longer tell the difference between Mordechai and Haman. On Passover we are commanded to all drink four glasses of wine to celebrate our leaving Egypt and ending our time in slavery.

None of our literature takes into account those of us who know they can never taste a sip of that first cup again or celebrate how we've been told Purim is meant to be celebrated. So many of us understand how even a sip might undo all the days, weeks, months, or years of work towards one's own health and sobriety.

In our Talmud, in Avodah Zarah 17a it reads "They say concerning Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordia that he did not neglect a single prostitute in the world with whom he did not have sexual relations. One time he heard that there was a certain prostitute in one of the overseas towns, and her fee was a whole bag of dinars. He took a bag of dinars and went for her sake and crossed seven rivers. At the time that he was with her, she farted and said, "Just as this fart will never return to its original place, so too, Eleazar ben Dordia will never be able to repent."

Rabbi Dordia went and sat himself down between two mountains and hills, and he said, "Mountains and hills, seek mercy on my behalf." They said to him, "Before we seek mercy for you, we have to seek mercy for ourselves: 'For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed' (Isa. 54:10)." He said, "Heaven and earth, seek mercy for me." They said to him, "Before we seek mercy for you, we have to seek mercy for ourselves: 'the Heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment' (Isa. 51:6)." He said, "Sun and moon, seek mercy for me." They said to him, "Before we seek mercy for you, we have to seek mercy for ourselves: 'Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed' (Isa. 24:23)." He said, "Stars and

constellations, seek mercy for me.” They said to him, “Before we seek mercy for you, we have to seek mercy for ourselves: ‘All the hosts of Heaven shall molder away’ (Isa. 34:4).” He said, “The matter depends only on me.” He put his head between his knees and he wept a mighty weeping until his soul expired. A voice from heaven was heard proclaiming: “R. Eleazar ben Dordia is destined for life of the world to come.”

In the end only his own repentance and turning to God gained Rabbi Dordia forgiveness and entrance into heaven.

His addiction was so great that this renowned prostitute felt comfortable impugning him and predicting his fate. Either she had heard of his predilections as much as he had heard of her renown or in his coming to be with her she understood his addiction so well that with ease she predicted it would be the end of him. Sometimes life, the Torah and the Talmud must teach us hard lessons, lessons filled with pain, suffering and the damage from our actions that cannot always be fixed.

It is hard to imagine a rabbi so driven by his desires that his contemporaries wrote about his affliction over 1600 years ago and we continue to learn from R. Eleazar ben Dordia’s addiction and eventual desire for forgiveness.

Rabbis are as human as the next person. Through all times they have suffered debilitating addictions affecting their entire lives from ancient times until now. No, I am not trying to tell you something, although as a poker enthusiast, when I once long ago recommended poker tournaments as a viable fundraiser I was told by a president that if I mentioned poker tournaments again he would call gamblers’ anonymous.

What this does show us is that addictions have been affecting our lives and the lives of loved ones for thousands of years. Our ancient teachings try to teach us that as much as we think we’re alone in our suffering, we are never alone because our ancestors suffered before us, hoping to teach us, support us in our own struggles. Our Torah and our Talmud are books about life. We call our Torah Eitz Chayim - Tree of Life. It is a real tree, with real branches and roots, not always pretty and perfect, but gnarled in places and dying in places, showing us how life really is, not just some fairy tale ending. Our Torah and Talmud teach us about humans who lived the most real human lives, frail, tragic, struggling with individual addiction many of us cannot understand or perhaps know all too well. Our Torah may have few answers about how to conquer human addictions, but it doesn’t hide their existence from us or pretend that our biblical heroes were perfect, untouched by tragedy and true human experiences.

The pandemic tested so many of us in ways we never could have imagined. For those in our lives struggling with addiction or maintaining sobriety, the pandemic was just one more ultimate test that many overcame while just as many succumbed to their struggle, starting their count towards healing and sobriety once again.

For a few of my friends, I was blessed with being one of their lifelines. I knew that if my phone rang and I saw their name, picking up the call could be the difference of them gaining a few more minutes of sobriety on a day that saw them reaching out to everyone and anyone who would listen. In listening I knew there was nothing I could

really say to create true healing, but just by picking up the phone and listening, I was giving my friends a chance to speak their truth and let them know that I loved them no matter what.

I've never felt so helpless. I prayed that I could just hug them with all my strength and take all their pain away. I prayed that somehow I could have the magic touch and just pluck their addiction from their bodies, show them how loved and important they are to so many lives and relieve them of their suffering.

Each individual carries so much weight upon their shoulders of what they've done, what they haven't done, all the good they've accomplished and all the harm. Their addiction is a physical manifestation of all the struggles within them often hidden from all those who love them until at some point they can no longer hide it from those who love them most.

For some who don't understand addiction, they simply believe an addict isn't tough enough or strong enough to do what needs to be done to be sober. They think "Just drink less or don't drink at all, just don't buy drugs, just don't turn on the internet, just don't eat as much or go shopping all the time."

I wish it was that simple. I've been on the phone for years with some friends. Their struggle is real, their inability to find what works for them is real. Their desire for sobriety is real in as much as it will allow them to spend more quality time with family and friends and go back to doing the work they love.

We don't always know who struggles in our lives because we may be no one's lifeline. Some dealing with addiction are too embarrassed to reach out because we don't want everyone to know our darkest secrets, our greatest struggles, or the fact that the perfect image we present to the rest of the world is a sham.

The cartoon images of Noah are a sham. The perfection of our biblical ancestors that we pretend is there is a sham. The celebratory songs we sing about King David are a sham about a king who couldn't control his own desires or evil inclinations. These are our heroic ancestors. If they suffered and struggled, why do we think our suffering and struggles are any less human? Why do we believe we don't deserve understanding, respect, love and help when we need it the most?

Yom Kippur is about self reflection. We all look inward and seek forgiveness for all we know we've done wrong and for all the pain we may not even know we caused. Yom Kippur is about owning that we can do better, be better and vowing to change for the better even as Kol Nidre releases us from the vows we make now that we may somehow fail to keep.

Too often we forget the God of love and only ponder our punishment for not being good enough, for failing to be our best selves. We struggle loving ourselves enough so we wonder how could God love us unconditionally if even we cannot love ourselves conditionally?

On this Kol Nidre I ask you to send love and prayers to all those struggling with things we may or may not know about. As we take account of our own failings may we send some of our strength and prayers to those who fight every day to be their best selves, to return to their former strength. We are blessed if we don't struggle like Noah. We are blessed if we don't suffer like Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordia. Our blessings allow us to be there for those in our lives who battle addiction in any way they can. Yom Kippur asks us to give forgiveness to those who may have harmed us so we can put down the weight of our anger and hurt. It asks us to forgive those who seek forgiveness. It asks us to seek forgiveness from those we may have hurt in some way. This isn't easy. Forgiveness isn't easy. It isn't meant to be. It is easier to stay angry and bitter. Forgiveness means letting go of how we feel. It means letting go of our personal feelings. Forgiving someone has so many pieces to it. Forgiving ourselves can take decades for certain moments we regret.

God trusted Noah to save the world, but was silent in a moment when clearly Noah needed God the most. When Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordia felt the utmost remorse for his behavior and struggles he cried out to the Creator of all things for solace and forgiveness, achieving it as his life ended. Hopefully this Yom Kippur presents us with the opportunity to be there for those who need us the most and to grow in our ability to forgive others, forgive ourselves and seek forgiveness where needed. May we be the light for those who need our light. May we find the light when our life seems to be at its darkest. May we feel weightless when it feels as if we are carrying the world upon our shoulders.

I wish you all a light fast and a meaningful Day of Atonement. May you all be written in the book of life for a sweet and fulfilling year. Cayn yehi ratzon - May this be God's will. L'shanah tovah umetukah.