



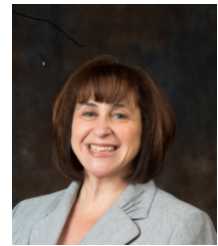
Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Shemini
March 30, 2019 – 23 Adar II 5779



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Wine, Wisdom, and Wonder

Torah Reading: Leviticus 9:1 - 11:47

Haftarah Reading: *Ezekiel 36:16 - 38*

Judaism is a religion of faith. It is also a religion of behavior – and not just in contemporary times, but in ancient days and everlasting. In this week's Torah portion, Shemini, the Torah says: *“And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicants, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages, for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the Lord has imparted to them through Moses.”* (Leviticus 10:8-11)

In a world where so many use wine and intoxicants to self-medicate and/or to obliterate reality, this warning is certainly worth consideration. Yet, we Jews regularly sanctify Shabbat and holidays with wine. Thus, commentators are quick to point out that this passage is not meant as an absolute wine prohibition. Notice the exact wording.... Wine and intoxicant are forbidden to the priests in carrying out their priestly duties because of the possible effect it

might have on their mental acuity, a necessary part of their responsibilities. More, specifically, it comes as a warning against drinking such that it perverts the ability to make the distinctions to achieve holiness.

We tend to think of the differences between sacred and profane, (ritually) purity and (ritually) impurity (better translations of the words 'clean' and 'unclean') as dichotomous realms, raising the goal to rid ourselves of every day as the anti-sacred. In reality, however, they are not polar opposites nor are they of different substance. There is no magic that makes something of and for God.

In Hebrew the word for between is *bein*, from the same Hebrew root which forms the forms the word *binah*, the wisdom of discernment. Human development depends on making *havdalah*, a separation, using clear awareness and distinction to recognize that which is sacred and that which is not.

So, we look at two similar things and acknowledge that, despite their similarity, they are intended to be differentiated and held apart. As was taught by our rabbis, "If there is no *daat* (discriminating intelligence), how can there be *havdalah*?" (Talmud Yerushalmi)

That which is holy, set apart for God, is distinguished in mind, word, and deed. So too is it intrinsically bound in the ordinary, every day. It is we who transform every day into the service of God through words, through deeds/ritual, and through intentional setting aside and separating.

So, we both use wine to sanctify and avoid overusing it. In the balance lies life as lived; in the middle between the poles lies God and Godliness. And, to that, we should indeed raise our glasses to say *l'chaim*.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Cheryl Peretz, is the Associate Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, where she also received her ordination. She also holds her MBA in Marketing Management from Baruch College, and helps bring those skills and expertise into the operational practices of rabbis and congregations throughout North America.



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