

Rosh Hashanah Sermon – Making Wine  
Rabbi Koas 5780

*A rabbi and a priest get into a car accident and it's a bad one. Both cars are totally demolished but amazingly neither of the clerics is hurt. After they crawl out of their cars, the rabbi sees the priest's collar and says, "So you're a priest. I'm a rabbi. Just look at our cars. There's nothing left, but we are unhurt. This must be a sign from G-d. G-d must have meant that we should meet and be friends and live together in peace the rest of our days." The priest replies, "I agree with you completely." "This must be a sign from G-d." The rabbi continues, "And look at this. Here's another miracle. My car is completely demolished but this bottle of wine didn't break. Surely G-d wants us to drink this wine and celebrate our good fortune." Then he hands the bottle to the priest. The priest agrees, takes a few big swigs, and hands the bottle back to the rabbi. The rabbi takes the bottle, immediately puts the cap on, and hands it back to the priest. The priest asks, "Aren't you having any?" The rabbi replies, "No...I think I'll wait for the police."*

I love wine. Wine is something that helps bring people closer together -- it's all about creating and sharing memories with the people we love. Of course, wine is also a vital part of our Jewish tradition. We drink wine during Shabbat, holidays, and life cycle events. It imbues ordinary experiences with a sense of holiness and sanctity -- and helps bring us together as a community.

So why am I bringing this up? You might be thinking, it's only 11am, why is Rabbi Koas talking about wine?! Well I realized that since wine features so prominently in Jewish life, maybe there is more to it than meets the eye. And since over the past years I've learned more about wine and the winemaking process, I want to share with you today how the process of winemaking - that is the dedication, care, and love for the product - can leave us with valuable lessons for the new year. Though there are many steps and variables in the winemaking process, I've boiled it down to three main steps and life lessons:

1. The first step in winemaking, of course, is growing grapes. This is far easier said than done! When grape seeds are planted, they take time growing into vines and *years* before maturing and producing grapes.

How many times have you heard that "patience is a virtue?" How many of you wish that we could slow down? I think you all know -- especially those of you with teenagers -- that we live in a world that craves instant gratification. We are better at texting with our phones than speaking with each other face to face. In our desire for immediate responses, we're losing the art of conversation! By the way, how many of you have thought about looking at your phones since I've started speaking? It's nothing to be embarrassed about, but something to recognize. I believe that it's this lack of patience that creates a society riddled with anxiety.

Of course, we also expect this instant gratification when it comes to our aspirations and dreams. How many of us give up on our dreams before we even actually pursue them? People can't change overnight; personal development takes time as well. From this first step in the winemaking process, we learn that it is essential to be patient with

EVERYTHING and EVERYONE. Just like the grape takes time to mature and become its best self, we too need patience, and lots of time to evolve as well.

2. Once the grapes are grown, the second step in the process is crushing the grapes for their juice. The grape goes through trauma and pain in order to release its juice. This step serves to remind us that life is not always easy. Every single one of us here has experienced and will experience difficult challenges. That's just part of life. I'll speak more about this in a little bit, but we must recognize that we can't control these moments, but we can control our reactions to them. Don't look at situations or circumstances that don't work out as failures. Look at failures for what they truly are - opportunities to develop and grow, and to always ask the question - "What can I learn from this"? My challenge for all of us for the coming year is to choose to see these painful moments as opportunities for us to emerge stronger and wiser.

I've often heard winemaking referred to as an "art." The greatest artists in music, film, writing, and architecture often created their greatest masterpieces from places of uncertainty, sadness, and pain. The grape also goes through tremendous pain...it gets crushed and barreled to become wine. Without those painful moments of uncertainty in our lives, we would remain grapes forever, instead of unleashing our full potential.

3. The next step really isn't a step at all, but rather a series of calculations that winemakers need to make. Winemakers do their best to control all aspects of the process. They check in on soil, water, and weather constantly. Once grape juice is barreled, they keep the barrels rotated and cool. They read articles, subscribe to magazines, and do their very best to follow scientific guidelines to produce the best wine. And yet, despite ALL this, at the end of the barreling process the winemaker can only make a *prediction* on when this wine will be optimal to bottle and drink. Usually they're right, but these are only *predictions* and that means that there are often mistakes made.

Winemakers attempt to control the outcome of life -- don't we attempt to do that every day? What I've learned over the years is that while we can control certain variables in our lives, we cannot control the overall outcome. What we need to learn, just like most winemakers I've spoken with have told me, is that we need to LOVE the PROCESS. I know it's cliché, but the journey is far more important than the destination.

We get so bogged down by trying to control the outcome of life's events, that we don't take the time to enjoy the process and our own unique journeys. So how do we do this? Like I said earlier, it starts by learning to control what we can control: The only thing we can control in life are OUR attitudes, choices, decisions, and reactions to what we encounter along our paths. There will be difficult moments, but attitude changes can make all the difference.

In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Two psychologists, Dr. Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, Davis, and Dr. Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami, have done much of the research on gratitude. In one study, they asked all participants to write a few sentences each week, focusing on particular topics. One group wrote about things they

were grateful for that had occurred during the week. A second group wrote about daily irritations or things that had displeased them, and the third wrote about events that had affected them (with no emphasis on them being positive or negative). After 10 weeks, those who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic and felt better about their lives. Surprisingly, they also exercised more and had fewer visits to physicians than those who focused on sources of aggravation.

Those of us here today are also far luckier than most. We have something unique to be grateful for -- our community. Look around. All of us here, whether we know each other or not, are here for a reason. We're all hearing the same words, learning the same messages. We all chose to be here for a reason. We are not alone - we have each other to lean on. In the coming year, let's support each other. I've worked in a number of communities all over the world, and I know that what we have here at MJC is special. So let's be grateful for what we have, focus on the beautiful journey of life, and remember that we are so blessed to have a loving and supporting community that has our backs.

In the Torah, immediately after the Great Flood and G-d's promise not to flood the world again, Noah and his family exit the Ark and begin regrouping, rebuilding, and repopulating, a desolate earth. The Torah describes the first event to occur after G-d promises never to flood the world again: "And Noah began to be a master of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine and became drunk".

Why was Noah drinking so heavily? A man chosen by G-d to be the father of all mankind, someone who was, in the Torah's words, "a righteous man" and "perfect," was taking to the bottle like some degenerate in a corner pub? We're talking about a man G-d communicated with directly. We're talking about a man G-d selected as the most eligible of all his peers to save humanity.

My interpretation is simple: having witnessed extreme immorality, and the destruction it left in its wake, Noah was depressed! Wouldn't you be? Noah didn't understand that wine is like life, it's all about the process and the experience.

When we were propelled and planted onto earth, we didn't have too many choices. We had no choice in the type of family we were born into, whether we would be short or tall, intelligent or stupid, healthy or sick....so what do we get to choose? Our choice is our reaction to our "Lot in Life." We get to choose whether we are angry or bitter, kind or compassionate, generous or selfish.

Whether we are physicians or plumbers, musicians or scientists, rabbis or cantors doesn't really matter. It is the kind of physician, the kind of plumber, or the kind of rabbi, that we become which makes all the difference.

I love my kids and I choose to see life from a glass half full point of view -- so every morning when I wake up I thank G-d for giving me another day of life. And I say the traditional morning

prayer: *Modeh anee lefanecha melech chai vekayam, she-he-chezarta bee nishmatee b'chemla, raba emunatecha.*

“I offer thanks to You, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great”.

Today, on the second day of Rosh HaShanah, we evaluate the spiritual quality of our lives. We do a *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, a calculation of our strengths and weaknesses, an assessment of ourselves, our accomplishments and our faults, the overarching question must be: am I entirely devoting myself to physical, materialistic goals, or does my life have a higher meaning? What I hope you learned today is that we need to be more patient, we need to learn that great things often come out of adversity, and that we can all become better versions of ourselves if we remember to be grateful for what we have and aren't afraid to rely on those around us for help and support.

I hope you remember these lessons every time you have a glass of wine! Don't save that 'Great Bottle of Life' for tomorrow. Don't wait until tomorrow to enjoy the PROCESS of life. Start now to make your life beautiful.

Shana Tova. Have a happy and healthy new year!  
Rabbi Koas