

Moderation Is Tricky

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Prohibition didn't work, nor does abstinence-only sex education.

Prohibition ended in 1933 after 13 years (I had thought it was shorter), but alcohol-related deaths and violence continue unabated. In 2019 alcohol use was the third highest cause of preventable death. It is also a cause of injury.

With regard to domestic violence, there is consensus that alcohol use, particularly heavy and binge drinking, contributes to the increased frequency and severity of violence.

Even with this heavy toll of the consequences of alcohol abuse, banning it altogether was not a successful strategy.

Abstinence-only sex education has been shown in peer-reviewed studies to be positively correlated with teenage pregnancy and higher birth rates. This is the case even after accounting for socioeconomic status, teen educational attainment, ethnic composition of the teen population, and availability of Medicaid waivers for family planning services in each state. Strong evidence suggests that approaches to sex education that include information about both contraception and abstinence help young people to delay sex, and also to have healthier relationships and to avoid STDs, sexual risk taking, and unintended

pregnancies when they do become sexually active. While the “just say no” approach sounds easier, the results are just not there.

I have been thinking about this complexity as we come to the point of reopening our communities. In many ways, shelter in place, as burdensome as it has been, is easier and more straightforward. It is like the Nazarite who knows that for the term of his vow, he is not to touch any wine or other intoxicant, nor anything in which grapes have been steeped, nor anything from the grape vine.

We don’t think this practice emerged in response to substance abuse, but by the Middle Ages, rabbinic commentators were making the association. Rabbi Solomon Astruc, a rabbi who lived in the 14th century (in the French wine country), wrote about an individual addicted to wine, using his vow to help overcome his addiction. Rambam (Maimonides), a rabbi and physician, writes about the vow as a sort of training wheels for an individual seeking to gain self-control. He explains why this is permitted, given the *halachah’s* generally negative attitude toward making vows and oaths: “When one embarks on a course of abstaining even from permitted pleasures and fears a weakening of his determination, he is permitted to bolster his will by putting his action in the form of a vow.” This must be for a limited period, “until he will no longer have to depend on vows.”

But in general Judaism does not require abstention from alcohol. The power of alcohol to lighten the heart is recognized in Jewish tradition, and so it is often used to symbolize all of the goodness we experience from the natural world. With a blessing over wine we welcome Shabbat and holidays, and are even encouraged to overdo it on Purim, a day of breaking out of normal boundaries. But this can be

overdone—as our community learned some years ago when young faculty and students from the Jewish Study Network were invited to celebrate Purim with the high school students at Kehillah High School. The next year there was much study of the limitations of appropriate drinking and a reminder of the warning that the story of Noah provides, right in the book of Genesis, of the dangers of alcohol. Jews are allowed to drink, but we are expected to use sense in doing so. As in eating and in sex, Judaism promotes enjoyment within boundaries of alcohol consumption as well.

New government regulations opening up businesses and places of worship pose some serious challenges. They are often unconsciously read as a sign that the danger of transmission of the virus is minimal, but unfortunately that is not the case. They seem to have some adults experiencing this as a free for all, acting like American teens do sometimes when they come to Israel on summer trips and discover that the drinking age is 18 and is not routinely enforced.

The importance of wearing masks, physically distancing ourselves, and regular rigorous handwashing continues to be very great. Can we hear both the messages that it is safe enough to go out *and* that it is still dangerous? Without prohibition can we learn to act safely? Let us hope that Maimonides was correct, that having used the training wheels, we can get on the bicycle safely.