# ONEG SHABBAS

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# Wine's Torah Début...and Noah Gets Drunk

The very first ever drinking story in the Torah is certainly a fascinating one. The first recorded drink in the Torah is consumed by none other than the namesake of this week's Torah portion. How do we consider Noaḥ? How do we consider his drinking? How do we consider his getting drunk?

After all, he "is a man who was singled out by God for salvation," according to Rabbi David Kasher, who continues:

> His unfathomable efforts before and during the Flood managed to preserve and then restart humanity—and to save all animal species from extinction along the way. According to the Torah's narrative, we all owe our lives to Noah, for from the families of "המבול אחר בארץ הגוי" נפרדו נח בני - the Children of Noah, all the nations spread out onto the earth after the Flood" (Genesis 10:32).

Clearly, Noaḥ is special, although how do we consider this drinking session? This brief story is only ten verses long (Gen. 9:18-27) and the drinking aspect is quite brief, yet we read of not only the first appearance of wine and drinking, but also the first appearance of a vineyard, as well as the first appearance of drunkenness. While it's not necessarily inevitable, it is certainly fascinating that the first drinking story in the Torah involves getting drunk.

There are many angles from which to consider this initial drinking story in the Torah, including the question of how do we characterize Noaḥ's actions? Opinions on this can range anywhere from total innocence in his drinking and getting drunk to seeing how low he debased himself, as well as anywhere in between these two extremes.

### Negative Rabbinic Perspectives

The rabbis of the third century, at least as recorded in midrashim, perceived Noaḥ's actions negatively, as we read of one rabbi's opinion (*Bereshit Rabbah* 36 (cf. *Sanhedrin* 70a)):

> אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן לְעוֹלָם לֹא תְהֵי לָהוּט אַחַר הַיַּיִן, שֶׁכָּל פָּרָשַׁת הַיַּיִן כְּתִיב בָּהּ וָוִי"ן אַרְבַּע עֶשְׂרֵה פְּעָמִים, הֲדָא הוּא דִכְתִיב: וַיָּחֶל נֹחַ, וַיִּטַּע כָּרֶם, וַיִּשְׁתְּ מִן הַיַּיִן, וַיִּתְגַּל, וַיֵּרָא חָם, וַיַּגֵּד לְשְׁנֵי אֶחָיו, וַיִּקַּח שֵׁם וָיֶפֶת, וַיָּשִׂימוּ עַל שְׁכֶם שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיֵּלְכוּ אֲחֹרַנִּית וַיְכַסוּ אֵת עֶרְוַת אֲבִיהֶם וּפְנֵיהֶם אֲחֹרַנִּית וְעֶרְוַת אֲבִיהֶם וגו' וַיִּיקַץ נֹחַ, וַיֵּדַע אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לוֹ, וַיֹּאמֶר אָרוּר כְּנָעַן עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים וגו'



Rabbi Yoḥanan said: "Always beware of being excited for wine, because in the passage on wine [this one] is written with a *vav* fourteen times, as it is written: 'And Noaḥ the husbandman began', 'and planted a vineyard', 'And he drank of the wine', 'and was drunken'; 'and he was uncovered', 'And Ḥam saw...and told his two brethren', 'and Shem and Yapheth took a garment', 'and laid it upon both their shoulders', 'and went backward', 'and covered...and Noaḥ awoke...and knew what his youngest son had done unto him', 'And he said: "Cursed be Canaan"' (Gen. 9:20-25)."



While it is unclear what necessarily Rabbi Yoḥanan sees as the issue with all of these *vav*s, it would seem to be a statement of a multiplicity of "woes". Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (1555-1631) provides a fascinating explanation of it (מהרש"א חידושי אגדות על סנהדרין ע., ד"ה י"ג ווי"ן נאמרו ביין ויחל):

> נראה הכונה בזה כי הי"ג ווי"ן שזכר הם בי"ג תיבות שהם כולם פעולות ולא שמות ומלות כמ"ש התוספות דויפת לא קחשיב לפי שהוא שם ולהורות לנו על כל פעולות הבאות מהיין ראוי לצווח עליהן וי שהרי אם נעיין בי"ג פעולות האלה שזכר הששה הראשונים ויחל ויטע וישת וישכר ויתגל וירא הם מהפעולות הרע והששה האחרונים ויקח וישימו וילכו ויכסו ויקץ וידע הם מצד פעולות הטוב ויגד לאחיו וגו' הוא הממוצע ביניהם והזכיר בכולן לשון וי להורות שאף פעולות הטובות היו נמשכים מפעולת הרע לצווח עליהן וי כי לולא פעולות וישכר ויתגל וגו' היה בטל פעולות ויקח וישימו ויכסו וגו' וק"ל

It seems that the intent here is that the thirteen instances of the letter vav ("and") that are mentioned correspond to thirteen words, all of which are verbs rather than nouns or particles, as Tosafot writes that "and he was uncovered" is not counted, since it is a noun.

This comes to teach us that for every action that comes from wine, one ought to cry out "woe!" For if we examine these thirteen actions that are mentioned, the first six — "and he began," "and he planted," "and he drank," "and he became drunk," "and he uncovered himself," and "and he saw" — are actions of evil, while the last six — "and he took," "and they placed," "and they went," "and they covered," "and he awoke," and "and he knew" — are actions of good.

The phrase "and he told his brothers," etc., is the middle term between them. And he used the expression "woe" (וי) with all of them, to indicate that even the good actions were drawn forth from the initial evil action — and so one should cry "woe" over them as well. For if not for the earlier actions — "and he drank," "and he became drunk," "and he uncovered himself," etc. — the later actions — "and he took," "and they placed," "and they covered," etc. — would not have occurred.
And this is clear.

This articulation by Rabbi Eidels of Rabbi Yoḥanan's statement interprets the thirteen *vav*s ("and") in the story of Noaḥ's drunkenness as representing thirteen sequential actions, all connected to the effects of wine. By marking each action with "woe," Rabbi Yoḥanan, through Rabbi Eidels teaches that both the harmful and redemptive consequences of wine stem from the same source and thus warrant moral reflection and lament.

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We also read of other third century rabbis who seemed to have found Noaḥ's behavior problematic (*Sanhedrin* 70a):

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| Rav Ḥisda said, "Rav Ukva said", - and some say that Mar Ukva said: "Rabbi Zakkai said: 'The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Noaḥ: "Noaḥ, shouldn't you have learned from Adam the first man, whose banishment from the Garden of Eden was caused only by wine?""" | אמר רב חסדא אמר רב עוקבא ואמרי לה מר עוקבא אמר רבי זכאי אמר לו הקב"ה לנח נח לא היה לך ללמד מאדם הראשון שלא גרם לו אלא יין |

While it is not clear what they found to be problematic regarding Noaḥ's drinking here, although it seems that since Adam received punishment through drinking wine, according to the opinion that the forbidden fruit was wine/grapes (see last week's issue for more on this topic). Providing some further explanation on this is Rabbi Shlomo Yitzḥaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi), who wrote (רש"י על סנהדרין ע., ד"ה איש האדמה):

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| Because when the Holy One, blessed be He, reproved him, he should have learned from the "man of the earth," that is, from the first man (Adam), for whom wine incurred the penalty of death. | על ידי שהוכיחו הקב"ה היה לו ללמוד מאיש האדמה דהיינו אדם הראשון שהיין קנס עליו מיתה |

This perspective, however, does not condemn his getting drunk; it simply points out the midrashic perspective that Adam got punished with death through his consumption of wine/grapes and now Noaḥ experiences something intense, although there does not seem to be, at least according to these rabbis, anything for which he is being punished.

One final third century rabbinic perspective that takes a negative view of Noaḥ's drinking is the following (*Bereshit Rabbah* 36):

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| Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said: "On the same day he planted, he became drunk, and he was humiliated." | אָמַר רַבִּי חִיָּא בַּר אַבָּא בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם נָטַע, בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם שָׁתָה, בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם נִתְבַּזָּה. |

While it is not clear how these actions could all have been on the same day, what *is* clear from his words is that he perceived that Noaḥ humiliated himself.

Influenced by these midrashic comments, Rashi wrote (רש"י על בראשית ט:כ, ד"ה ויחל):

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| He profaned himself, for he should have occupied himself first with planting something different | עָשָׂה עַצְמוֹ חֻלִּין, שֶׁהָיָה לוֹ לַעֲסֹק תְּחִלָּה בִּנְטִיעָה אַחֶרֶת |

In this comment, Rashi understands the Hebrew word ויחל as "debasing" - that instead of seeking a moral or spiritual elevation following the flood, he debased himself, clearly taking a negative view of his actions.

## Beginning

Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) not only pushed back on Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba's perspective of the temporal aspect of this story, but also seems to position him in a positive agricultural light (אבן עזרא על בראשית ט:כ, ד"ה איש האדמה):

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| A skilled agriculturalist, agriculture being a great science. The Rabbinic statement that Noaḥ drank from his vineyard on the day he planted it is not to be taken literally. | יודע עבודת האדמה והיא חכמה גדולה והדרש שביום שנטעו שתה מיינו, יש לו סוד ואיננו כמשמעו |

For another understanding of the word ויחל, Rabbi David Kimḥi (1160–1235) (popularly known as Radak) explains it not as "debased", but as "began" (רד"ק על בראשית ט:כ, ד"ה ויחל נח איש האדמה):

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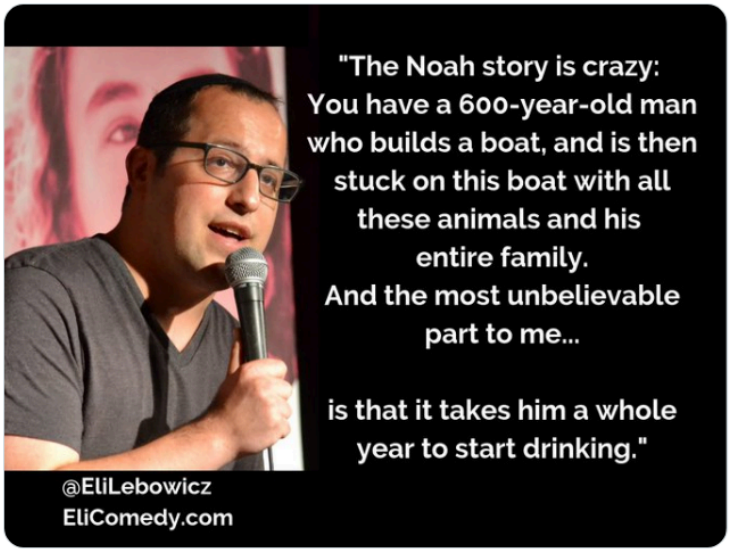
| We had already written in the first Torah portion that Noaḥ was a farmer and excelled in this vocation. Now, after the deluge, he acquired additional expertise in combining different strains of grapes and making wine out of the | כמו שכתבנו בפרשה ראשונה, כי נח התעסק בעבודת האדמה והתחכם בה, ועתה אחר המבול התחכם עוד לנטוע הגפנים רבים יחד |

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| grapes. Up until this time, people had not been drinking wine, but eating the grapes, as with other fruits, but now Noaḥ became the first to plant a vineyard. Regarding it saying "And he began to plant and he planted", which primarily relates to the language of beginning, or, perhaps its explanation is that he began with the activity of planting and he planted a vineyard.... | ולעשות מן הענבים יין, כי עד הנה לא היו שותים יין אלא אוכלים הענבים כשאר הפירות: ונח היה תחלה לנוטעי כרם, ומה שאמר ויחל ויטע, פי' ויחל לטעת ויטע, כי על התכונה המקור דבק עם לשון תחלה...או פרושו, החל בעבודה הזאת ונטע כרם כמו ויחל ליטע |

In this consideration, Radak is pointing to Noaḥ either having been the first person to ever plant a vineyard or, alternatively, having begun with the activity of planting, following the flood, amongst the plants, though, was a vineyard. While this points to his agricultural ingenuity, considering him in a more positive light than had Rashi, Radak then considers Noaḥ's drinking in a negative light (ibid.):

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| This story serves two purposes:<br>First, to explain why Canaan and his descendants were cursed, as we see that the patriarchs despised and kept far away from marrying them....<br>And second, this story comes to warn about the drinking of wine and not to become intoxicated by it, for it destroys understanding. For if one drinks it raw and becomes drunk from it, the brain will be dried out from the confusion of thought, and he will come to madness....<br>Therefore, this story appears in the Torah to speak of its disgrace, for the first person who drank from it became drunk from it, and his mind became confused until his nakedness was exposed—and he did not know it. | והיה הספור הזה לשני הענינים, האחד למה כנען וזרעו היו מקוללים כמו שראינו שהיו האבות מואסים ומרחקים מאד מלהתחתן עמהם.... ועוד היה הספור הזה להזהיר על משתה היין ושלא לשגות בו, כי הוא מפסיד הדעת, כי אם ישתהו חי וישתכר ממנו ינגב המוח מבלבול המחשבה ויבוא לידי שגעון.... לפיכך בא ספור ממנו בתורה לספר בגנותו, כי הראשון ששתה ממנו נשתכר בו ונשתבשה דעתו עד שנתגלה ערותו והוא לא ידע |

Radak perceives this story as a warning for alcohol-consumption, particularly warning us not to overindulge in drinking, especially as he continues (רד"ק על בראשית ט:כ"א, ד"ה וישת מן היין):

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| He drank limitlessly until he got drunk and disgraced himself. | שתה בלא מדה עד שנשתכר ונתבזה |

Clearly, Radak did not perceive Noaḥ's drinking in a favorable light, reminding us of the opinions of those third-century rabbis.

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## A Sympathetic Perspective?

A sympathetic perspective of Noaḥ, however, perceives his having taken part in a totally acceptable activity as not only having been described at the outset of this week's Torah portion as being a righteous person, but also that this story depicts his agricultural prowess, and that he does not do anything negative while asleep. Indeed, it seems that he was an agricultural innovator, planting the first-ever vineyard, as we read of Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (1194-1270) (popularly known as Ramban) describing him, similarly to one of the explanations of Radak, as an agricultural innovator (רמב"ן על בראשית ט׳:כ, ד"ה אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה):

וטעם ויחל כי הוא החל לנטוע כרמים כי הראשונים נטעו גפן והוא החל לנטוע גפנים רבים שורות שורות הנקרא "כרם" כי ברצותו ביין לא נטע הגפן כשאר האילנות ועשה כרם

And the meaning of ויחל is that he was the one to begin the planting of vineyards — for the earlier generations had planted a single grapevine, but he was the first to plant many vines, arranged in rows upon rows, which is called a "vineyard". Because he desired wine, he did not plant merely a single grapevine like other trees, but rather made a whole vineyard.

A similar perspective, with a slightly different angle, was articulated by Rabbi Yitzḥak ben Yehudah Abarbanel (1437–1508), who wrote (אברבנאל בראשית ט׳:כ׳, ד"ה ויחל נח איש האדמה):

וספר הכתוב שעם היות שקודם המבול היו שם גפנים לאכול הענבים הנה לא היה כרם מסודר שורות שורות לעשות יין עד שבא נח שמזמורות הגפנים שהכניס עמו בתיבה נטע כרם מסודר שורות שורות כדי להוציא יין מהענבים אולי כי כאשר קץ בחייו מפני מי המבול בקש לעשות יין לשתות ממנו כדי שלא ישתה עוד מים ולא יראה אותם לעול".

And Scripture tells that although before the Flood there were grapevines for eating grapes, there had not yet been an organized vineyard — planted in rows for producing wine — until Noah came. From the vine cuttings he had brought with him into the Ark, he planted a vineyard arranged in rows to produce wine from the grapes. Perhaps, since he had grown weary of life because of the waters of the Flood, he sought to make wine to drink so that he would no longer drink water nor see it ever again.

ומ"ש חז"ל בו ביום נטעו בו ביו' שתה מן היין רצו בזה שלא נמשכה שתיית היין בהשתלשלות הדברים אבל מתחלת המחשבה כשנטע כרם היה סוף המעשה לשתות יין כי לזה נתכוון שעה ראשונה

And what our Sages said, "On that very day he planted it, and on that very day he drank from its wine," means that the drinking of the wine did not follow naturally as a later development, but rather that from the very beginning — from the moment he planted the vineyard — his ultimate intention was to drink wine, for that was his purpose from the outset.

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In Rabbi Abarbanel's telling, he describes Noaḥ's planting of the vineyard as not just an agricultural experiment, it was a deeply human act. Having just survived the Flood, he sought stability, maybe even comfort, through something he could cultivate and control. Yet, as so often happens with human attempts at restoration, what begins as an effort to heal can take on a life of its own. The very medium he chose to distance himself from water — wine — would soon demonstrate its own power over him. In this way, Rabbi Abrabanel describes the Torah moving us from Noaḥ's intention to his experience: from purposeful planting to the unanticipated consequences of that first cup. Speaking of unintended consequences, while some opinions consider Noaḥ's intentions to be drinking in order to get drunk, Rabbi Naftali Herz Wessely (1725-1805) described his drinking without such intentions, as he wrote (ר' נ"ה וויזל בראשית ט׳:כ"א, ד"ה וישת מן היין וישכר):

אחר שגדלו מטעיו וְדָרַךְ היין מענביו, שתה ממנו לא כדרך הסובאים להשתכר מרוב השתיה, אבל שתה ולא ידע כי יחזק היין ממנו ויבלבל דעתו עד ששכרו היין. על כן אמר "וישת מן היין וישכר", להודיע ששתה ביישוב הדעת וגבר היין עליו שלא מדעתו וישכר. ואילו שתה להשתכר היה לו לומר "וישכר מן היין". וכן [נאמר] "וישתו וישכרו עמו", לא אמר "וישכרו" לבד אלא "וישתו וישכרו". ששתו כדרך בעלי דעת, וישכרו במקרה

After his plantings had grown and he had pressed the wine from his grapes, he drank from it — not in the manner of drunkards who drink excessively in order to become intoxicated, but he drank without realizing that the wine would overpower him and confuse his mind until the wine made him drunk. Therefore, it says, "He drank of the wine and became drunk," to inform us that he drank with a settled mind, and the wine overpowered him unintentionally, causing his drunkenness. For had he drunk with the intent to become drunk, it should have said, "He became drunk from the wine." Similarly, it says, "They drank and became drunk with him" — it does not say "They became drunk" alone, but "They drank and became drunk," to indicate that they drank in a rational manner, and the drunkenness occurred by happenstance.

Taken together, these interpretations form a portrait of Noaḥ not as a reckless or morally fallen figure, but as a complex and deeply human one — a man emerging from catastrophe, seeking renewal through cultivation and comfort. His vineyard represents both ingenuity and vulnerability: the creative impulse to rebuild a world through the fruits of the earth, and the human susceptibility to be overtaken by one's own creations.

Ramban and Abarbanel see in Noaḥ an agricultural pioneer, while Rabbi Wessely reframes his intoxication as an accident of circumstance rather than intent. In this way, the story becomes less an indictment and more a meditation on the delicate balance between mastery and surrender — between the impulse to shape the world and the humility to recognize how easily it can shape us in return.

While it is unclear how Ramban perceived Noaḥ's drinking, it is at least possible that, owing to his silence on the matter, maybe we can consider something about his being the first to plant a vineyard. If Noaḥ was the first person ever to create a vineyard, either he very intentionally knew that he was going to drink wine and get drunk or - who knows? - maybe he enjoyed drinking the juice of this fruit and then, at one point in time, it just had been sitting around for long enough and it tasted really, really good and made him feel really, really great and he didn't really know what he was getting himself into. In some respects, how else would we imagine the first human to consume alcohol?

While these rabbis do not point to Noaḥ's drinking as necessarily bad, they do seem to not particularly view his drunkenness in the most positive light.

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## Considering Noaḥ's Planting Innovation

Now that we have read this survey of both Talmudic/Midrashic rabbinic opinions, as well as rabbinic opinions from the past millennium, it is fascinating to consider the innovative aspect of his planting, as John Anthony Dunne wrote in his recent book:

> The consensus of archaeological evidence has suggested that the grapevine was first intentionally cultivated by humans during the Neolithic period (ca. 6000 BCE) in the broader Transcaucasian area, which includes portions of modern Türkiye, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran, etc. Intriguingly, in this regard, Mount Ararat from the Noah story (Gen 8:4) is found in eastern Türkiye today (i.e., Mt. Ağrı). Recent studies challenge this consensus, however, contending that genetic evidence for grapevine cultivation indicates an earlier origin (by about 3,000 years), and that in addition to the Transcaucasian region, there was a simultaneous cultivation of the grapevine occurring in the Levant.
>
> John Anthony Dunne, *The Mountains Shall Drip Sweet Wine: A Biblical Theology of Alcohol* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2025), 126.

So, this story may well reflect the seeming innovation in vineyard-cultivation in world history.

## Considering Noaḥ's Drunkenness

Even if Noaḥ was not actually the first person to ever consume alcohol (as mentioned in this space in rabbinic midrashim last week depicting Adam drinking wine), maybe this drinking and getting drunk is totally fine. After all, there is no value judgment of his having gotten drunk mentioned in the Torah.

Indeed, as Dr. Rebekah Welton said on the 162nd episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show*, "The text in no sense condemns the drunkenness, itself. It doesn't say 'it's a sin', it doesn't say 'he shouldn't have done it'. There's no negative language used in relation to his drunkenness."

It is certainly unclear from the text that Noaḥ did anything particularly pernicious through getting drunk, nor that he necessarily debased himself by doing so. In this more sympathetic reading towards Noaḥ's drinking and then getting drunk, he appears as an agricultural innovator who is happy to enjoy the fruits of his labors. He is certainly not the only farmer ever to get drunk. Moreover, he did not do anything to anyone while having been in a drunken sleep.

In addition to this story being the first depiction of human consumption of alcoholic beverages in the Torah, there are two notable things that happen: drunkenness and something disturbing of a sexual nature. This may be where all those "woes" come in that Rabbi Yoḥanan mentioned early in the third century. What seems to have triggered the problem, though, is, as Prof. Dunne describes (*op cit*., 128):

> Instead, the judgment concerns what Ham does to his drunken father. … Noah's excess was precarious because it made him vulnerable to sexual exploitation, however we understand the exposure of his nakedness. Thus, there is an implicit warning against drunkenness - but specifically because there are those like Ham who are quick to take advantage of people in a compromised state.

While this is not the space to discuss what exactly it was that Ḥam did to Noaḥ (although you can check out the 5th episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show* on exactly this topic), it is certainly noteworthy that drunkenness occurs, providing a certain amount of vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Indeed, taking Prof. Dunne's words of "however we understand the exposure of his nakedness", it is very important for us to consider that aspect of this story. Moreover, drunkenness causing this vulnerability has never gone away from humanity. In fact, it remains quite vividly with us down to our present day. This aspect of his drunkenness may very well be the most important lesson for us to consider: the awareness and concern for physical vulnerability, in general, and sexual vulnerability, in particular.

## Conclusion

Rather than condemning Noaḥ, the Torah presents him as deeply human — a man rebuilding life after destruction, seeking solace in the fruits of his own hands. As the first drinker in the Torah, Noaḥ introduces humanity to an innovative agricultural advance - intentional vineyard-cultivation. Along with these grapes comes fermentation.

The early rabbis, particularly in the third century perceived Noaḥ's drinking and subsequent drunkenness as problematic, where his first action was to get down to making wine, which certainly captured the perspective of some rabbis, both in the medieval era and beyond. However, there were also medieval rabbis who saw Noaḥ's actions in less of a negatively critical light, less about getting right into making wine, but rather about his agricultural innovation and brilliance in unlocking this new ability.

Noaḥ's intoxication, while not immoral, especially considering that he did not do anything harmful to anyone else, renders him vulnerable, particularly in a sexual fashion, providing readers with the cautionary tale of what challenges could potentially occur with drunkenness.

Keeping this concern in mind, however, this week's Torah portion still leaves readers of this publication with the opportunity to celebrate the first appearance of vineyards in the Torah, the first appearance of wine i the Torah, and the first appearance of drunkenness in the Torah. This trifecta of firsts is certainly something to which we should raise a glass of wine this Shabbat.

L'chaim 🍷

# Relevant Episodes

Related episodes of *The Jewish Drinking Show* on this topic:

- **Drunkenness in the Bible**, featuring Dr. Rebekah Welton (episode #162)
- **Exploring Noah's Getting Drunk: What Did Ham Do To Noah?** featuring Professor John Bergsma (episode #5)

These episodes are available on YouTube, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever else you enjoy listening to podcasts.