

Dear Community,

As we conclude the holiday season and resume the routine of our daily lives, it becomes difficult to hold onto the spiritual growth and inspiration of the past few weeks. We spent the past month praying, celebrating and dancing together while focusing our energies on our spiritual selves. Now we face a long cold winter, the stresses and distractions of daily life and our struggle with our alienation from our spiritual cores.

This week's Torah portion describes Noah's departure from the Ark into a new, cleansed but vacant, world. Noah proceeds to plant grape vines to produce wine. The Torah criticizes Noah for this agricultural choice by calling him a "Man of the Earth," someone who was too focused on his pleasure rather than dedicated to rebuilding the earth. He should have sowed wheat or some other crop fundamental to the human diet.

However, why did Noah plant grapes? Was his motive so base and transparent? Did he just want a stiff drink after a traumatic experience? The commentaries explain that Noah made the mistake we often make whenever we experience a powerful event. The inspiration moves us to seek intense spiritual experiences and causes us to grasp beyond our reach. Noah saw the devastation he was spared from and he wanted to praise G-d for his salvation. Just as we make Kiddush over a cup of wine, Noah sought to sanctify G-d's name with the use of wine.

However, this was not what was needed. The world was new, the soil still wet from the ruins of a failed society and ripe for the rebuilding process to start. Noah's job was to take his experience and use it to ensure that the foundational steps taken were done in the right way. He needed to build the world block by block, educated by what he saw and motivated by what he understood.

Our job is to draw on our inspiration and focus on our "bread and butter" Judaism. Commit to attend a class, dedicate a few minutes to study Torah, commit to coming to minyan. Focus on laying the foundations of a new year with practical, sustainable steps to improve your Judaism. Avoid the sensational and the transient and focus on the staid and the lasting.

I would like to wish you all a good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein