

Does anyone still read Highlights magazine? It was a regular part of my childhood. Maybe you've seen it in a doctor's office.

One of the pieces I remember best was Goofus and Gallant. This is a cartoon about two boys making everyday choices, but the choices are usually presented in the most extreme way.

Goofus knocks over little old ladies on crutches rushing to be first in line, while Gallant allows a family from the shelter, to get in line in front of him, as they need the free lunch more than he does.

If the choices that confronted us in life were always so clear, then perhaps there would be no need in our Torah portion for the restriction on the consumption of alcohol while the priests were serving in the tabernacle.

Clear choices like those made by Goofus and Gallant, I assume I could make even with a drink or two in me- though I admit I might be fooling myself. People do stupid and terrible things to others while under the influence. It's estimated that alcohol plays a role in 40% of all violent crimes, and some of you may have seen the interesting story in the New York Times last week about rural women in India struggling against alcohol not only to prevent domestic violence and crime but also to preserve financial resources for food and small businesses.

Maybe the ban on the priests drinking alcohol while serving God and the community, is less a hint about what Nadab and Abihu did or didn't do, and more of a general concern. What is it that the priests need to do that they need to be so clear minded and what does that tell us today?

The Torah portion outlines two roles for the priests- the first is drawing distinctions between the pure and the impure, the holy and the profane. The second is instructing the community.

This role of drawing distinctions is what ties this whole Torah portion together, the story of the Aaron's sons on the day of the dedication of the tabernacle, and the long section about kashrut, about which animals one can and cannot eat.

Drawing distinctions, separating into categories is a quintessential Jewish act.

In our Jewish story of creation, it is how God acts at the very beginning, Genesis 1 verse 4 Vayavdel Elohim beyn ha-or uveyn hachoshech- and God made a distinction, a separation, between the light and the darkness- and the world was on its way.

Drawing distinctions and making categories became a Jewish way of approaching the world, hence both the development of the Torah She-Baal Peh, the Oral Torah, and the Jewish tendency toward argument. It rests on the understanding

that the world is not as simple as Goofus and Gallant would have us believe. Our choices are often between two goods, or in trying to avoid the greater of two evils. Distinguishing the holy, identifying the right path is a constant challenge- and the effects of wine which according to Jewish tradition make a person “overconfident in making judgements” prevent right action.

What about the priest as teacher? Perhaps cheerier teachers would be better, more positive.

In Jewish tradition a teacher teaches not only in their explicit instruction but through their lives. Remember the stories about Hillel, the greatest of teachers, whose students followed him to the bath house and even into his own home. One day he heard some noise and discovered them hiding under the bed. What are you doing there, he asked? We have come to learn Torah, they explained. Hillel’s students learned from him, the Talmud tells us, not only in the classroom, but through his behavior in everyday life.

The priests were to be in a state of joy to serve in the sanctuary, but that joy could not be artificially induced, it had to come from within them, from their spiritual core. So too for teachers in every generation. Think of those who have been a great influence on your life. I remember my American History teacher

from high school- her passion for the subject was not something she put on when the first bell rang. I think of the first rabbi under whom I interned- his preparations genuinely reflected the respect he felt for the congregation. Who are the teachers you remember? Was it their authenticity which was part of what made them who they were?

In this week's Torah portion, we are reminded that there are times in life when we must be **fully present**-times when we are drawing distinctions so as to make right decisions, and times when we are models for others in providing instruction, whether formally in the classroom or informally through our lives. As we go forth into our lives, as Sylvie goes forth into this new chapter of her emerging independence, we pray for the strength and wisdom to be fully present.