

## **Demons, Depression and Alcohol**

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How do we fathom how much pain a person experiences when they take their own life? Can we achieve a state of radical empathy so that we can understand how this can seem like a logical act to the depressed person? It requires a great bending of our minds, but our sages tried it...therefore, so should we.

The sages understood that drinking opens the door to danger. In their minds, that danger takes the shape of powerful demons that attack when we drink pairs of cups of wine (2, 4, 6, etc., cups) rather than odd cups of wine (1, 3, 5, etc.).

*Rav Papa said: Joseph the demon told me, "For two cups of wine we kill; for four cups of wine we do not kill, [but] for four cups we harm the drinker. For two cups we hurt the drinker whether [they are drunk] unwittingly or deliberately. For four cups, we attack only if the drinker drinks 4 cups deliberately. But we do not attack if he drank four cups unwittingly."* (B. Pesachim 110a)

This is only a small sample of a very long passage about demons at the end of this tractate in the Bavli. It's obviously important because the four cups of the Seder would make us vulnerable to such demons, therefore, we must have a fifth cup (Elijah's cup).

The sages understand that some demonic force is associated with alcohol. I am no mental health professional and just want to point out how long people have been trying to understand what happens to the brain when alcohol and depression mix. Something breaks through from some other realm into day-to-day life and makes the unthinkable, thinkable, and even logical.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. The sages saw the brain on alcohol as possessed by a demon. Today we might call it addiction and/or depression? Is it comforting to think about how long we've known about this connection or is it merely depressing? Why?
2. How can we help those who are struggling with the demons of depression and substance abuse? Can the demons be banished? If so, how?
3. Obviously, we are thinking about this issue this week because of Robin Williams. I know he struggled and I also am grateful for the gifts he shared with us in so many movies and shows. His pain, his struggle, is over now and his gifts remain for us to enjoy. May his family find understanding and forgiveness as they cope with their loss. His memory is already a blessing.

As always, looking forward to your insights and answers!