

## ***Fathers and Sons and Wine: The Oedipal Complex***

**By: RAFI VAAKNIN**

### **Introduction**

This article discusses a story from the Midrash [*Leviticus Rabbah* (Margalio) 12, a], which deals with the relationship between fathers and sons. The story can be read in numerous ways, and various insights and meanings with different layers of depth can be found within. By its very nature, language and structure, the story leaves the work of interpretation to the reader, which involves the dangers of exaggeration and imagination, and perhaps even subjective exegesis. However, without this exegetical process we may miss some of the messages of the story, perhaps some of the most important ones. The proposed reading is an explicit attempt to extract insights from the field of educational- psychology from the story.

Rabbi Aha says: An incident is related of one man who sold all of his household vessels to drink wine (using the proceeds), sold his house to drink wine (using the proceeds). His sons would complain and say: Our old father will leave this world and not leave us anything after his death. What should we do to him? Let's ply him with drink and get him drunk, and place him in his grave. They did just so, they took him, plied him with drink and took him out and placed him in a cemetery. Wine merchants passed the gates of the cemetery, having heard that there were tax collectors in the city. They said: let's unload these wineskins in this grave and escape. They did so. They unloaded their merchandise in the cemetery and went to see what was happening in the city. They saw this man, who was lying there, and figured him for dead. When he awoke, he saw a wineskin above his head, untied it, and placed it in his mouth and began to drink. When he was quenched he began to sing. Three days later, his sons said: 'Should we not go to see what our father is doing, if he is alive or dead? They went and found him with the wineskin in his mouth. They said to him: 'Even here, among the dead, the Creator has not forsaken you, will He forsake you among the living? Since the Heavens have granted you (wine), we do not know what to do with

---

Rafi Vaaknin is a professor of Psychology and Jewish Education. He heads the Jewish Education Department of Hertzog College in Jerusalem, and lectures in Psychology and Jewish Education at Chemdat HaDarom College in Netivot.

you. Let's bring him in, and make a permanent arrangement.' They made an arrangement that each son in turn would provide him with drink, one son each day. [*Leviticus Rabbah* (Margaliot) 12: 1. pp. 244–247]

This story is preceded by a homiletical interpretation of two verses: “Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations” (*Leviticus* 10:9) and “Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth its color in the cup, when it glideth down smoothly” (*Proverbs* 23:30). The first verse was stated as a unique commandment to Aharon, following the death of his two sons, who entered the Tabernacle intoxicated from drinking wine; and through the verse from Proverbs that is juxtaposed to it, the commentator gives it a universal commentary, transforming it into a commandment directed to all people. In his homiletic interpretation, the commentator describes the chain of damages that wine causes its drinkers. His conclusion is that whoever sets his eyes on the cup (of wine) will eventually become morally degraded—‘that *defiles the pure and purifies the unclean*’—and he will experience an economic downfall—he will sell all his household vessels to drink wine using the proceeds. This is the context of the story, and as said by Avigdor Shinan: “The context is the principal interpreter of things.” (In Reizl, 5771: 17.)<sup>1</sup>

Our story illustrates what is said in the homiletical interpretation and elaborates on it: Whoever sets his eyes on a cup of wine will end up losing not only his household vessels but also his house, his family members and his world. However, when reading the story we cannot remain at this level of meaning, because we will deduce that the story promotes drunkenness, and that the drunk will benefit! (Elbaum, 5727: pgs. 69–79; Heinemann, 1977: 69–79).

Moreover, the encrypted writing used to write this macabre story is conducive to and even requires a search for understanding that is beyond this initial understanding. Consequently, it seems to me that wine and its dangers are the obvious moral of this story, while its hidden moral is the relationship between fathers and sons. In other words, the story teaches us not only about the father's failings, but also about the failings of the sons. At the end of the day, even though they had not drunk wine, they had become morally bankrupt, doing what they did to their father—leaving him to die in a cemetery. In the end, they were caused financial damage, also as a result of what they did to their father, having undertaken

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that Elbaum claims that the story had previously existed before being used in a commentary of wine and its damages (Elbaum, 5727: 124–129).