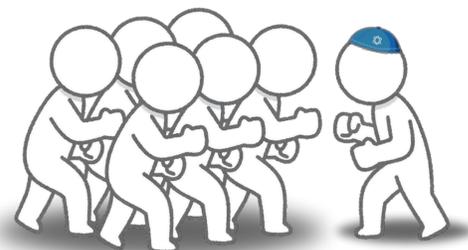




WHO IS STRONG? RESISTING PEER PRESSURE & UNDERAGE DRINKING

Peer pressure, the influence we feel from others to act, think or behave in particular ways, regardless of our values, is a timeless challenge. (Psychology Today) Some of the Torah's earliest stories consider the consequences of peer pressure, like the tower of Babel, where humanity chose to assemble around a single tower and way of thinking as a rebellion against God rather than expand, explore and create the diverse world God intended. (Genesis 11) Later, Jacob's son Reuven planned to covertly save Joseph from his brothers who wanted to kill him, but he failed, because he gave in to peer pressure. He appeased his brothers' desire to harm Joseph by throwing him into a pit and putting him in danger rather than saving him in the moment. (Genesis 37:21-22) But while Reuven serves as an example of what it looks like to have personal convictions but bend to peer pressure, the Purim story's main character Mordechai, is a model for resisting peer pressure and living by your convictions. When the wicked Haman was promoted to a position of authority in Shushan and forced everyone to bow down to him, Mordechai refused. This infuriated Haman, who enforced conformity and submission to power.



All the king's courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman, for such was the king's order concerning him; but Mordecai would not kneel or bow down. Then the king's courtiers who were in the palace gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's order?" (Esther 3:2-3)

Despite social expectations and pressure, Mordechai's refusal to bow to someone diametrically opposed to his values demonstrated an unwavering commitment to his own. What makes this an especially powerful example is the explanation in the following verse of why he refused to bow to a wicked man like Haman: He was a Jew. To be a Jew is to live by your beliefs — [Live by Them \(Vayikra 18:5\)](#)



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Peer pressure plays an outsized role in social behaviors, especially for adolescents (usually defined as being between 12 and 20 years old. (Alcohol's Effects on Health, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2023)), whose brains are still developing while they are trying to find their place in the world. This makes them extremely susceptible to peer pressure when it comes to alcohol consumption. According to recent studies, 5.6 million American adolescents consumed alcohol regularly in 2023. Studies have seen underage drinking levels decrease in certain demographics, but the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has reported that alcohol is still the most common substance used among high schoolers in the United States. (CDC, About Underage Drinking, 2025).

We cannot overstate the dangers of overdrinking, both to adolescent physical and mental health. The CDC reported the deaths of 4,000 Americans under the age of 21 in alcohol-related incidents and poor decision making while intoxicated. Alcohol use and abuse has been shown to correlate with increased risks of mental health disorders like anxiety, depression and poor self-esteem and strained relationships. Underage drinking also greatly increases the risk of developing an alcohol addiction later in life. (Silveri, M. M. (2012). Adolescent brain development and underage drinking in the United States: identifying risks of alcohol use in college populations. Harvard review of psychiatry, 20(4), 189-200.)

But it isn't just the peer pressure from other adolescents that promotes underage drinking. How parents and adults behave around and engage with alcohol at events like Simchat Torah and Purim parties contributes as well. Studies show that children with parents who drink five or more times a week have an extremely increased risk of consuming alcohol themselves. The way parents behave around alcohol sets an example for their children of what is or is not accepted, and seeing parents drink excessively can send the message that that behavior is okay and even praiseworthy.





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What Can You Do?

If you're a parent, there are clear steps you can take to help nurture healthy relationships with alcohol for your teens.

- Set clear expectations and boundaries regarding alcohol consumption. Complete abstinence is not always the solution, and it doesn't offer long-term lessons nearly as helpful as showing your kids what a healthy relationship with alcohol looks like.
- Create a space where you can talk with your teens about alcohol use and what to do when they or their friends need help. That will empower them to prioritize safety, especially when drinking.
 - Discuss and demonstrate examples of what you consider to be helpful support or unhelpful pressure in conversations, media, etc. Identify the strengths you appreciate in your own friends as well. You might say, for instance, "We plan ahead and choose a designated driver" or "My friends and I have a deal to let each other know if we have had too much to drink and to never leave alone."
- Lead by example, and model responsible drinking by limiting the amount of alcohol you consume and the amount of times per week when you do.
 - Over time, you can demonstrate moderation in front of your teen both in words and action. Explain why you are choosing to limit your intake, e.g., "I have to drive us home, so I am going to have only one drink and wait a little while before we leave."
- Educate your children about the risks of underage drinking, including impaired judgment, health risks and legal consequences. Do research together from reputable sources, and encourage your child to seek information on their own with guidance.
- Educate your community on the dangers of alcohol consumption. On Purim, promote the voices within Jewish tradition that don't subscribe to the commonly held belief that excessive drinking on Purim is a religious requirement/imperative. Identify other ways of fulfilling the mitzvah of celebrating the holiday that do not require alcohol
- Emphasize the importance of restraint and self-control in general. Both values weigh heavily in Jewish tradition, not as ways of lessening pleasurable experiences but as ways of living fuller — and longer — lives.



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If you're a teenager, consider the following when you find yourself in situations of peer pressure.

- Know yourself and how much alcohol you can have while remaining safe. Come into any situation in which there will be alcohol with a plan on how much you are willing to drink and how you can get home if things get out of hand.
- Peer pressure is exactly that — pressure. Like any other force making you uncomfortable, you need to find a way to deflect or direct it. If you're feeling peer pressure, think of quick and easy things to say to confidently sidestep uncomfortable situations. A simple "I'm good, thanks." or "I'm really not interested." can be very persuasive when said with confidence.
- Take pride in being who you are and proudly living by your values.
- Make sure any friends who are drinking are safe. "Kol Yisrael areivim zeh la zeh" — All of Israel is responsible for each other (Talmud Shevuot 39a). We each have a responsibility to each other.
- Identify a trusted adult you can reach out to if you need help. Try identifying one on our "Trusted Adult Contact Cards" on the next page.
- Assign a designated driver.

By emulating Mordechai, we can resist social expectations that conflict with our values and upbringing and choose what is right over what is easy. Mordechai's resolve led to the salvation of the Jewish people, and our principled decisions can literally save lives too.

Resisting the pressure a lot of adolescents feel when it comes to drinking in social settings by either healthily limiting or completely abstaining from alcohol consumption not only protects our physical and mental well-being but also sets an example for others to follow. Jewish celebrations are not about the thrill of indulgence. Rather, it is about having the courage to be yourself despite social pressures. Anyone can have principles, but Mordechai is our reminder to live by them.

"Who is strong? Those who conquer their impulses." (Pirkei Avot 4:1)





PARENT-CHILD CONVERSATION GUIDE

By Jaime Glazerman, LPC

We encourage you to talk with your teens early and often about harm reduction and responsible alcohol use. Involve your teen in the planning and execution of these conversations—how, when and what to discuss. These conversations can be easier while doing something else, such as driving, taking a walk, playing a board game, shooting baskets, etc.

Developmentally, it is normal and expected for teens to pull away from their parents as their most important relationships and start relating more to their peers. As this is happening, think together about what these relationships look like for them, and in an age-appropriate way, you can share what you like and appreciate about your own friendships.

- What are the different kinds of friends you have in childhood and in adulthood? (Ex: Work, synagogue, childhood, interests in common, etc.)
- What qualities do you need in those different friends? (Ex: Your study buddy needs to be serious about the subject you are learning.)
- How would you know if a friendship is helpful or harmful?
- What motivates you to want to be friends with someone?
- What's it like for a friend to ask you to do something you don't want to? How comfortable do you feel saying no or doing something else? What would the consequences be?

