

A Message from Rabbi Tilsen

I'm one of the few people I know who doesn't use illegal drugs. Never have. Past and present presidents, teachers, cops and rabbis, just about everyone, apparently, has inhaled (or not), injected or ingested substances prohibited by law.

One reason I have avoided drugs is that many of them cause users to lose their inhibitions. I like my inhibitions. The ones I have are just barely sufficient to keep me from saying and doing utterly ridiculous, embarrassing and dangerous things, and only much, but not all, of the time.

Another reason is that drugs alter one's perception of reality. As it is, I feel my grip on reality is tenuous at best. While some have noted that loss of connection to reality is not really such a great loss, given the state of reality, I have a commitment to remain engaged and to improve it, even if only in a miniscule way, through performance of mitzvot.

Some recreational drugs contribute to undesired genetic mutation. The thought of damaging my future

offspring has led me to defer consideration of drug use. At this point, my actual children, already born, would be endangered, since as their resident father, I am on call 24-hours a day to provide them emergency care, if not daily guidance and maintenance. My kids already think I'm a dope; I can't be doped up and fulfill my responsibility toward them.

To a lesser extent, I also have a professional responsibility to the congregation, although there seldom are true "emergencies" that require immediate rabbinic sobriety. Although it may not always seem like it, we do have professional standards.

For those reasons, years ago I had thought that I would defer recreational drug use until retirement. But now as I begin to see the glimmer of Golden Years on my horizon, a new deterrent rears its head: Many recreational drugs destroy brain cells. I can barely get my children's names straight, let alone remember new information, as it is. It is abundantly clear that I do not have any brain cells to spare.

Illegal drug use also presents the potential for arrest and prosecution. Although the likelihood is small, the price would be huge. Were I incarcerated, I am sure someone would send me an email message with a file attached, and I could file my way out. Even so, spending time in the clink jail just doesn't fit into my plans.

So, at least so far, I have sought consciousness-expanding experiences and new realities through more conventional, or at least non-chemical,



means. Fortunately, our sages have made suggestions to guide us in such quests.

Am I "holier than thou"? Although I am a card-carrying member of the Holy Men & Women's Association of America, as a professional matter, I definitely have my serious vices, but we will not explore that topic today.

Like many in our community, I have suffered the loss of family, friends and other loved ones through the use of illegal drugs, or through the illegal use of permitted substances (such as driving while alcohol-intoxicated). Most often, they have been innocent victims of others' drug abuse. As we approach the end of December, we are reminded of this danger. The qiddush cup is fine; beware of the "New Year's Toast."

A person must stay away from things that harm the body.

Maimonides, Deot 4:1