

Illegal Drugs (Kosher)

What is the correct approach, either informed from the Torah or kosher traditions, regarding drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and heroin? I realize that these drugs are dangerous and illegal, but how should Messianic people think about them?

Neither the Torah nor Bible as a whole tend to say a great deal about what are often classified as either illegal narcotics or so-called recreational drugs, widely used today by addicts.¹ This does not mean, however, that appropriate ethics regarding narcotics cannot be derived or deduced from Scripture. Most rabbis, pastors, theologians, scholars, leaders and lay leaders, would strongly condemn the usage of drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and heroin. These substances have been known to cause extreme physical and psychological damage to those who use them, as well as emotional damage to the family and friends of the addicts. *Lives can be destroyed by people using narcotic drugs*, perhaps even more quickly, at times, than those who regularly abuse alcohol.

The following is a brief evangelical Christian summary on “**drugs**,” appearing in the *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*:

“Naturally occurring or synthetically manufactured chemicals that, when administered, produce some desired effect on the living being’s system. Not included in this nomenclature are substances considered foodstuffs, such as carbohydrates, proteins, lipids and starches. Drugs, when administered under the supervision of appropriate personnel, can be health enhancing...However, certain classes of drugs can become *habit forming and, when abused, can lead to *addiction or, in large doses, even *death. The abuse of drugs, and the personal and societal hazards inherent in that abuse, is an ethical concern for *society. From a Christian perspective, drug abuse, with its adverse effects on a person’s health, also conflicts with the biblical mandate to exercise *stewardship over one’s self and with the Pauline injunction against coming under the control of an alien influence rather than being empowered by the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18).”²

One of the main problems, involving drug addiction, is that many of those who can be classified as addicts are regular users of legal, over-the-counter drugs or prescription drugs, such as painkillers. To further complicate things, a narcotic like cocaine was once regularly administered by doctors to their patients. Various substances, that are now widely illegal, were once legal.

A huge amount of controversy is steadily emerging within the United States over the use of what has been classified as “medical marijuana,” to be used by patients to relieve their pain. There is a fear that states, which legalize medical marijuana, will then proceed to legalize marijuana in general (for tax revenues), similar to how countries like the Netherlands have legalized various recreational drugs. It is further thought that government regulation of various narcotics will eliminate much, if not most, drug trafficking and its associated high crime.

It cannot go unnoticed that a Conservative Jewish voice like Ron Isaacs, in his book *Kosher Living*, is not totally opposed to the usage of medical marijuana:

“In Jewish law anything that is dangerous to life and limb must be avoided. Because we are made in God’s image, we must protect our bodies. Classical Jewish sources make references to the use of drugs as medicine or as a painkiller. All of the drugs, of course, were legal in the communities where they were authorized for use. If

¹ The Greek term *pharmakeia* (φαρμακεία), often rendered as “sorcery” or “witchcraft,” gets about as close to speaking about narcotics as would be allowable for the Biblical period. According to *Thayer*, 649, *pharmakeia* involves “the use or the administering of drugs,” “poisoning,” and “sorcery, magical arts, often found in connection with idolatry and fostered by it.”

² Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, eds., *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 30.

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certain drugs that are now illegal were made legal, rabbinic authorities might allow their use under some circumstances.

"A good example would be marijuana: it is illegal in most states but in some cases can be used under a doctor's supervision to help alleviate the pain of a life-threatening illness or for another medical application. The bottom line is that if a particular drug were deemed to be noninjurious to one's health and had a physician's approval, using it would surely be permissible according to most rabbinic authorities."³

It is very unlikely that anyone in the broad Messianic community, in leadership, is going to be that open to medical marijuana—much less the legalization of any other narcotic. In this way, the leadership of most Messianic organizations and congregations does tend to properly mirror the views of evangelical Protestantism. At the same time, though, much more conscious attention—as formerly illegal substances are made legal—will need to be given to the issues of drug abuse and addiction. Many have known people, either in their families, or their friends or acquaintances, who have suffered from some kind of drug problem. The complex circumstances surrounding addition and recovery need to be surely be understood by all of us.

³ Ron Isaacs, *Kosher Living: It's More Than Just the Food* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), pp 48-49.