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# Nick Muzin

on His Life in Washington

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# Educating Jews One Bottle at a Time

BY DOVID ZAKLIKOWSKI



Rabbi Elchonon Tenenbaum and vintner Jeff Morgan with the results of the rabbi's wine

What the rabbi  
and the vintner  
taught each other

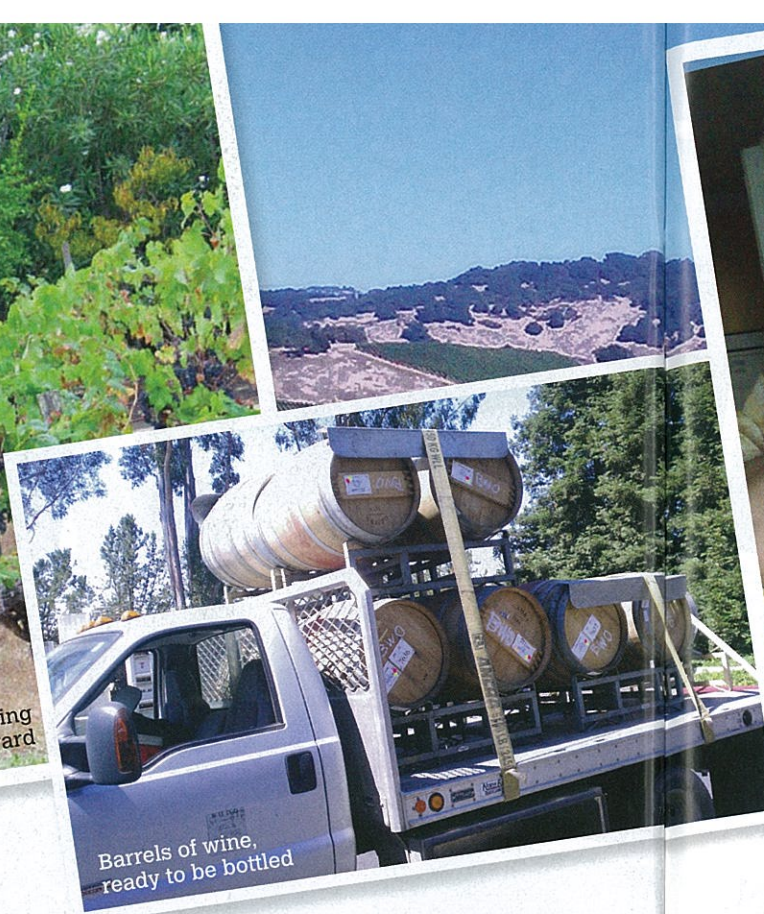


Panoramic view of the Napa Valley, California





Rabbi Tenenbaum working in the vineyard



Barrels of wine, ready to be bottled



Jeff Morgan affixes a mezuzah to his doorpost



The rabbi's first attempt at making wine

With 400 wineries in California's Napa Valley, it is said that wine runs through the veins of those who live there. Most locals are involved in the wine industry in some capacity, managing vineyards, working for wine companies or actually owning them. Surrounded by picturesque mountains, the region attracts over five million tourists every year.

For a native of Brooklyn, being in Napa is a dreamlike experience. One is completely surrounded by green, with a blazing sun during the day and a pleasant breeze at night. To Napa natives, I am also guilty of a faux pas: I actually like sweet Concord wine, a cardinal sin in this part of the country. Yet if I had come here some eight years ago I would have had good company, in the form of Rabbi Elchonon Tenenbaum, who came here to open a Jewish center in 2006.

Like me, Rabbi Tenenbaum, a Chabad *chasid* born and bred in Brooklyn, was also raised on sweet *farbrenge* wine made from Concord grapes grown on the East Coast. To Napa Valley locals, such beverages are barely worthy of the appellation.

When Rabbi Tenenbaum, the region's only Orthodox rabbi, and his wife Chanie landed in Napa Valley, he suddenly found himself surrounded by a foreign culture—one that didn't make much sense to him. "To me," he says, "wine was something that was purchased off the shelf and quickly downed after making *Kiddush*. It was a religious obligation."

In his new environs, however, he quickly learned that wine is something that should never be gulped down but enjoyed slowly.

He is apparently a good pupil, as today the "Wine Rebbe," as he is called, produces his own line of wines, with some varieties selling for several hundred dollars per case.

Like any good rabbi, he begins our interview with a *shiur*: "It states in *Sanhedrin*: 'Nichnas yayin yatza sod'—when wine enters, secrets exit. When you drink wine your essence is revealed, whether deep or shallow." Another *Gemara* he likes to quote is that there can be no happiness without wine.

He then branches out to Kabbalah. "Yayin," he tells me, "has the numerical value of 70, which according to the *Tikkunei Zohar* is the same number as the Names of G-d. By utilizing wine for good, one can come closer to Hashem."

Moving on to *chasidus* he says, "It states in the Torah that man is likened to a tree. One thing you learn from actually working in a field is that in order for a tree to produce good fruit you have to thin out the branches. Similarly, in order to improve himself a person needs to pare down his negative traits. That way, you end up with a beautiful fruit, a *mentsch*."

#### DIGGING IN

My efforts to understand Rabbi Tenenbaum's dual vocation as rabbi and winemaker find me interviewing him in his office on Mare Island, a historic naval shipyard off the coast of California. After 140 years of serving on the forefront of defense of America's West Coast it was closed down in 1993. Not long afterwards, Touro's College of Osteopathic Medicine was established on a 44-acre property on the southern portion of the base, and today its sprawling campus boasts 23 buildings.

In addition to his numerous other hats, Rabbi Tenenbaum is Touro's campus rabbi, having been appointed by Dr. Bernard

Lander and Rabbi Moshe D. Krupka and charged with maintaining the school's Jewish character. The campus, which is completely kosher, closes on Shabbos and Yom Tov and runs strictly according to *halachah*, "is a great *kiddush Hashem* demonstrating how Touro stands up for its beliefs."

Rabbi Tenenbaum tells me how it all began:

As a Lubavitcher living in Crown Heights, after a year of learning in *kollel* he set about looking for a place to open a Chabad House. The search, he explains, is a lot like looking for a *shidduch*. You don't just show up in town and set up shop; you have to be compatible with the community and see a sustainable future, creating a Jewish infrastructure and fundraising from local sources.

"We came out for a visit," he says, leaning back in his chair, "and found a community of about 500 Jews. Yet despite its small size there was definitely something that drew us here. It was very genuine and had a certain warmth. My wife and I decided that it had great potential."

Many of the locals, by contrast, were pessimistic about anything Orthodox-affiliated being able to survive in Napa Valley. Spread across five villages, there was very little *Yiddishkeit* in the area. The couple started reaching out to individual Jews one at a time. "We contacted every Jewish family here, connecting with people on a personal level."

They began with holiday events and services for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkos and Chanukah. They held weekly lectures and *shiurim*, drumming up business by going from door to door to find participants. Slowly but surely they built up relationships in the community and started having families over on Shabbos.

One question they were constantly being asked was whether

they were involved in the wine industry. Rabbi Tenenbaum would answer that he had come to California to reach out to Jews, not to make wine. "They always suggested that I should try it anyway," he says. "At the time, though, I didn't consider it seriously. I felt that my job was to be a spiritual guide, not to get involved with wine."

Living in Napa, however, did have a gradual effect on the Tenenbaums, as they subconsciously absorbed the culture that pulsates throughout the region. "You develop an appreciation for the whole thing."

The rabbi began by studying wine in Torah and Jewish history. "I learned that Rashi lived in a grape-growing region in France. While it's debated whether he was a vintner or just a merchant, everyone agrees that he was involved with wine in some way or another. I came to realize that wine is deeply ingrained in *Yiddishkeit*, an integral part of the Jewish story. For thousands of years there's been a cup of wine at everyone's *bris* and at weddings. There was wine at the beginning of our history. Even on the *mizbei'ach* there were different types and qualities of wine. This was interesting stuff."

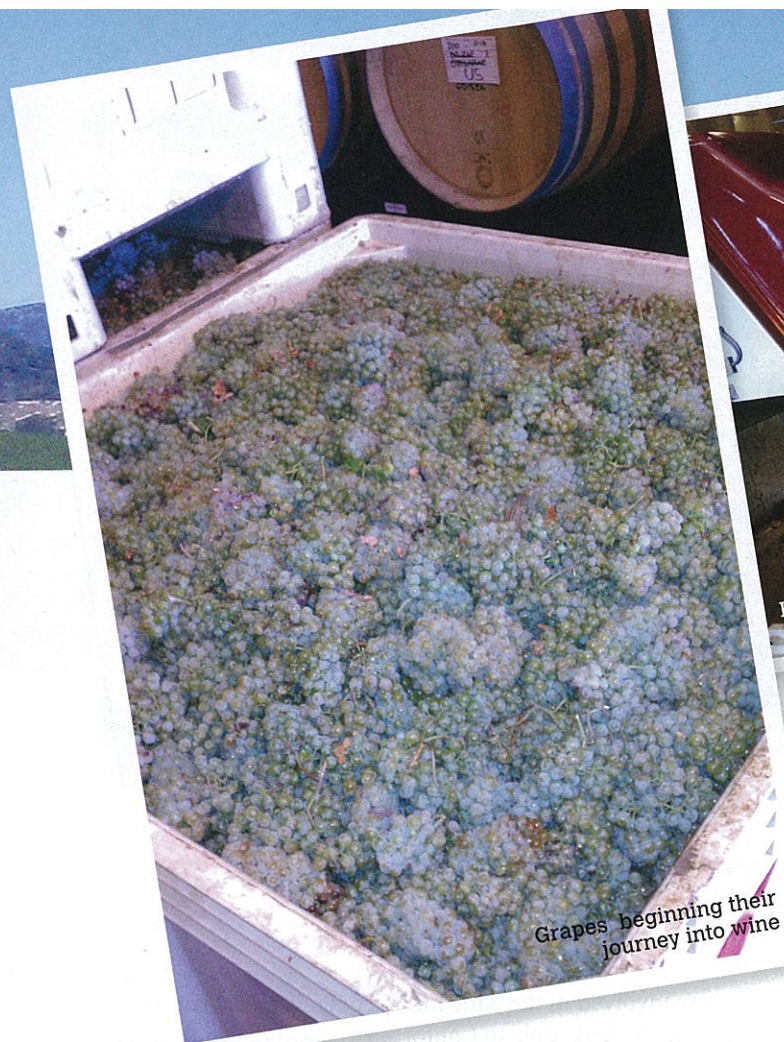
The rabbi's reluctance to get involved with wine was gradually weakening.

**ONE DAY**, while Rabbi Tenenbaum was visiting another local Jew, someone suggested that he meet a man named Jeff Morgan. Morgan is the owner of Covenant Wines.

At the time, the only thing remotely Jewish Morgan knew was that he had to have only "Sabbath-observant Jews coming in contact with the kosher wine I was producing."

As he tells it, this actually served to make the process more





Grapes beginning their journey into wine



Rabbi Tenenbaum pressing the grapes

**RABBI TENENBAUM WAS RAISED ON SWEET WINE MADE FROM CONCORD GRAPES. TO NAPA VALLEY LOCALS, SUCH BEVERAGES ARE BARELY WORTHY OF THE APPELLATION.**

meaningful for him. "Making kosher wine requires you to stay focused. You're aware that you're making a Jewish beverage that's in sync with our traditions and heritage."

Like everyone else, Morgan thought it would be cool if the rabbi made some wine. "He was a typical East Coaster, completely disconnected from wine production. I thought this might make him more connected." What he failed to take into account was Rabbi Tenenbaum's passion and calculated approach to everything that he does.

The rabbi collected some grapes and rented some wine-making equipment. He put the grapes into a fermentation bucket in the garage and let them ferment. "Twice a day you have to stick your hands in and check the temperature. You get your hands full of grapes, getting the process going. The understanding is that the smaller the batch, the more care goes into it and the better the wine is."

Rabbi Tenenbaum was shocked by how labor-intensive the process was. Making wine required constant involvement, and the fermentation needed to be conducted in the perfect temperature. "If it's too hot the grapes will go bad. If it's too cold the fermentation will stop. At first I set everything up in my garage, where the temperature was just right. But then it started getting too cold at night so I brought the bucket into my bedroom."

Fermentation, he says, is the neatest and cleanest part of the process. "All you're doing is making sure it's fermenting properly and gently pressing the grapes so the juice comes out."

(When Rabbi Tenenbaum had to leave California to attend the

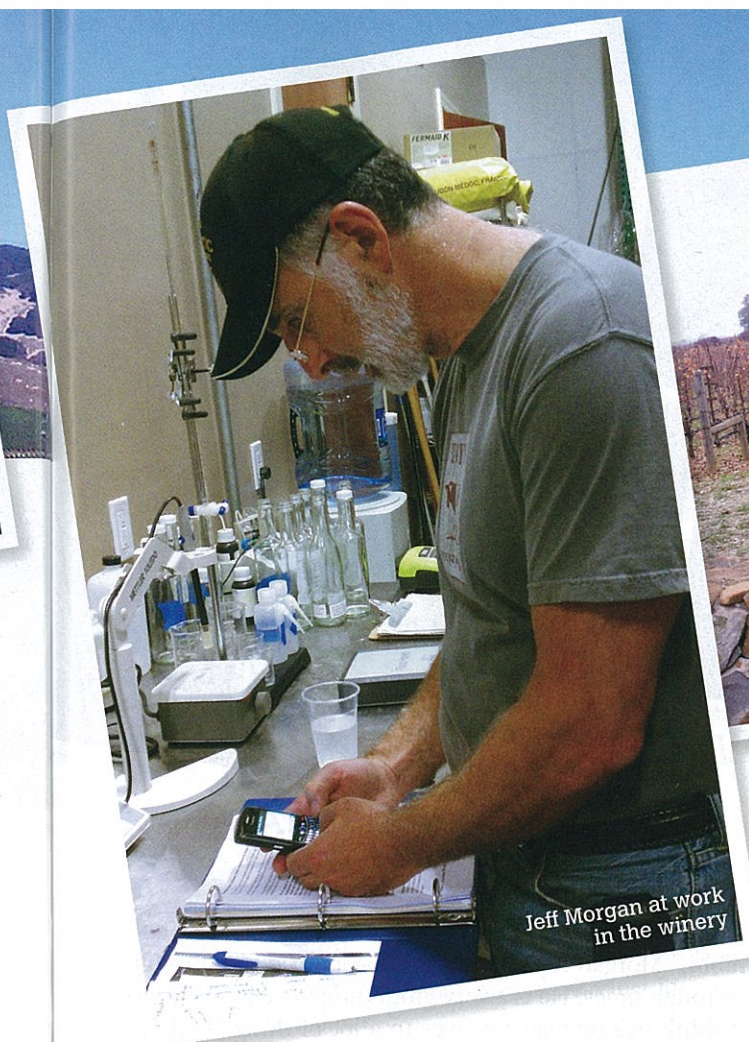
International Convention of Chabad Emissaries in Brooklyn, he made sure to guide his wife over the phone to keep things going in his absence.)

One unexpected result was a greater appreciation for many seemingly unrelated topics. "You learn about all these *mitzvos* that are connected to the ground yet you never apply to something tangible, like *maaser* and *terumos*, *shikchah*, *lekach* and *pei'ah*." "Getting his hands dirty" made all these things much more real.

The end result of the experiment was a single case of wine, one bottle of which he presented to Jeff Morgan. "It actually tasted pretty good," he recalls. He jokingly dubbed the wine "*Cuvée Chabad*," French for "a very fine wine collection," and the name stuck.

Morgan has a simple explanation for Rabbi Tenenbaum's success. "Anyone can make wine. But if you make wine without passion it's going to be reflected in how it tastes: flat. Elchonon is very passionate about whatever he does. They say that wine is part science and part art. I think it's mostly art and only partially science. To be a good artist you need passion. The rabbi takes that passion and shares it with everyone with whom he comes in contact."

By Divine providence, the same day Morgan tasted the rabbi's wine he was visited by a woman named Naomi Glass, who asked him if he knew someone who could take care of her vineyard. "It was a small plot of land," he says, "and the caretaker had decided he wasn't interested in tending it anymore. In payment for allowing someone to use the one acre, Naomi said she would accept a



Jeff Morgan at work in the winery

case of wine."

For Morgan, it was as if all the puzzle pieces had fallen into place. "What are the odds that on the same day I taste the rabbi's wine I find this woman who wants someone to take care of her vineyard? I called Elchonon and said, 'I've got a project for you. Why don't you try it? I'll show you what to do.'"

Unfortunately, the 150-year-old vineyard was in poor condition. It was the month of January and the vines looked totally lifeless. The first step was to start pruning. "I had to learn everything from scratch," Rabbi Tenenbaum recalls. "Where to prune the shoots; how much to bring them down; where you want the clusters to grow. You don't want to stress the vines because then you'll have lower-quality grapes. It took an enormous amount of physical and mental labor."

The rabbi spent hours tending to what would ultimately be about a ton of Zinfandel, Syrah and Carignan grapes. But even



A Napa vineyard

when he wasn't working there, he loved to hang around the vineyard, listening to Torah classes and lectures by the Lubavitcher Rebbe on his iPod. As a Brooklyn boy, he couldn't believe how much he enjoyed the pristine landscape and chirping of the birds. He would reflect upon the wonder of taking the physical grapes and turning them into a vehicle for spirituality by using them to make *Kiddush*.

The first time he worked in the vineyard it took him three days to recover. The next time his muscles cooperated, a little less.

The original plan was to leave the grapes on the vine for as long as possible to increase their sugar content. However, if you leave them on for too long they turn into raisins, "Which is only good if you want to make jam."

The fledgling vintner hung up a sign on one of the barns with a verse from *Vayikra*, "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not strip your vineyard bare nor gather the overlooked grapes; you must leave them for the poor and the stranger"—a visual reminder that everything we do should connect us to Hashem.

It took some time, but with the guidance of Morgan and other experts, the rabbi eventually perfected his technique—and his wine. "It took me two and a half years but I felt an amazing sense of accomplishment. Learning how to make wine has been a truly remarkable experience."

The first batch resulted in some 25 cases of wine that immediately sold out. All of the proceeds went to support local Jewish



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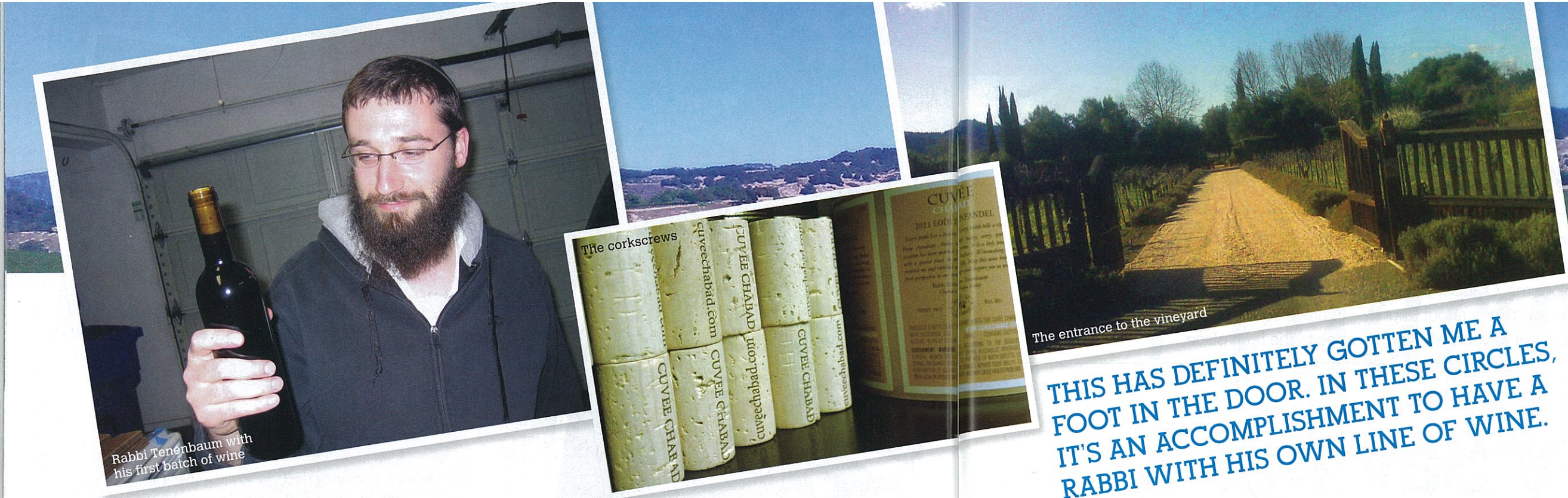
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Rabbi Tenenbaum with his first batch of wine

The corkscrews

The entrance to the vineyard

**THIS HAS DEFINITELY GOTTEN ME A FOOT IN THE DOOR. IN THESE CIRCLES, IT'S AN ACCOMPLISHMENT TO HAVE A RABBI WITH HIS OWN LINE OF WINE.**

activities. But there was another result as well, in that it made him a part of the wine community and opened many doors for him. "Without the wine it would have been a lot more difficult to connect to the locals," says Morgan. "This has given him a sense of belonging in the community."

Rabbi Tenenbaum agrees. "This has definitely gotten me a foot in the door. In these circles, it's an accomplishment to have a rabbi with his own line of wine. When locals hear about it, they're really impressed."

Nowadays, Rabbi Tenenbaum gets his grapes from Morgan and produces wine in conjunction with his company, to the tune of about 100 cases a year. However, they aren't easy to find, as they quickly sell out.

#### A SHARED PASSION

Jeff likes to say, "Without kosher wine you wouldn't be talking to me today—and I wouldn't have any connection to the Jewish world."

Several years ago, because Morgan had the distinction of not only being a vintner but also a wine reviewer, he was asked to write an article on kosher wines for Pesach. The article reconnected him with his roots, and when it was suggested that he produce his own kosher wine he jumped at the opportunity. "It was kind of a dare," he says. "Somebody dared me to make a good kosher wine, and in the process I got interested in *Yiddishkeit*."

Morgan was born on the Upper West Side of Manhattan into a family that was so assimilated they had an Xmas tree; having a bar mitzvah wasn't even on the table. "For the next 40 years, while I was playing my saxophone and making wine I had nothing to do with *Yiddishkeit*. Of course, one of the first questions Rabbi Elchonon asked me after we met was if I wanted to put on *tefillin*." Morgan told the rabbi he had never done so before, "so he

made me an impromptu bar mitzvah."

"The rabbi," Morgan says gratefully, "has helped me through some very rough times. He is a very grounding force in our community. I think he's opened my eyes to a lot of things I would never have noticed if he hadn't shown up in Napa Valley when he did."

What really cemented their connection was something that happened while he was away at a wine show in Texas. "I got a hysterical call from my wife: The daughter of a good friend of hers had just died in a car crash. No one could calm her down or offer her any comfort. I suggested that she call Rabbi Tenenbaum."

His wife wasn't too interested in speaking to an Orthodox rabbi; she'd only met him briefly a few times and didn't feel comfortable. Meantime, in the middle of their phone conversation someone knocked on the door. She opened it to see a man dressed in a white shirt and dark pants. "She expected it to be someone from the 'J' Witnesses," he chuckles. Instead, it turned out to be Rabbi Tenenbaum. "It's the rabbi!" she excitedly told her husband.

Rabbi Tenenbaum was in the neighborhood delivering *shmurah matzah*, "and just happened to ring my doorbell when my wife was in crisis." The two spoke at length, and it was the start of a deep relationship with the whole family.

Rabbi Tenenbaum says that Morgan, whom many in the wine industry call "the wine Messiah" for having redeemed kosher wine from its former servitude to sugar, is a very connected Jew. "*Yiddishkeit* resonates with him. After he put on *tefillin* with me he wanted his own pair, and it's something that has become very meaningful to him. Then he started to make *Kiddush* and slowly became more connected."

Today the two men are united in another mission: to try and wean Jews from their addiction to sweet Concord. "Concord

grapes are not the species that grew in ancient Israel," says Morgan. "It's a species of grapes that grew wild in America before there were Jews here. G-d created it for the animals of the forest and other people who just like to eat grapes. They were never meant to be fermented."

He says that when Jews arrived on the East Coast, where Concord grapes naturally grow, it was the only option available for making wine. "That's all they had so they made the best of it. Today many people believe that that's the traditional kind of Jewish wine, but that's only because they got used to it." Our forefathers, he insists, drank dry wine in ancient times.

Morgan categorically insists that sweet wine was never a part of Jewish tradition. "Do you think that Rashi drank wine made from Concord grapes? Do you think Maimonides drank Concord? Do you think that any Jews in the Old World drank that stuff? It's an American phenomenon that was later imported to Israel by Baron Edmond James de Rothschild, who started Carmel wines."

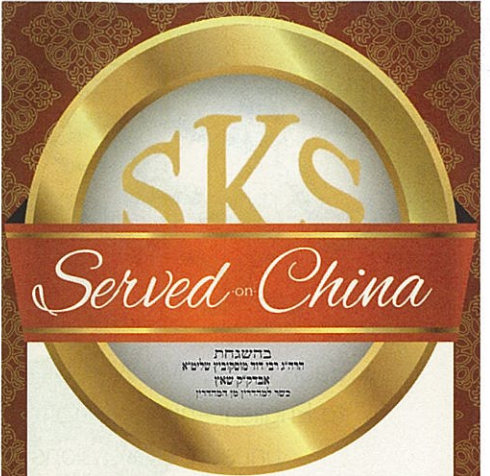
Rabbi Tenenbaum explains that all good wines are dry because there isn't any sugar camouflaging the real taste. "With dry wine you taste everything that's there. Sweet wine is like a pharmacist sugarcoating a pill to disguise its bitterness." The underlying taste of sweet wine, he says, is of poor quality.

Morgan emphasizes that wine isn't intended to be gulped down. "It's not a good idea to gulp down anything that contains alcohol."

Rabbi Tenenbaum is humbled by the fact that if not for his high-quality product, many people wouldn't ordinarily buy his kosher wine. Indeed, this is a big part of his motivation. "Why should a Jewish connoisseur even entertain the thought of not drinking kosher wine? I feel that this is a big part of my mission, to bring good kosher wine to these Jews."

Morgan agrees that Rabbi Tenenbaum is filling an exclusive niche. "He's educating lost Jews through good bottles of wine. Kosher doesn't have to mean boring. And wine has a unique capacity to bring people together. The rabbi's wine has connected more Jews to Judaism than I ever thought it could."

"The rabbi came here to offer us a portal to *Yiddishkeit* and taught us a lot. But we taught him something too! We hope he'll continue to make Cuvée Chabad for many years to come." *Lechaim!* ●



#### Kashering the Way to Coffee 2

Our competent mashgiach thankfully exited from the oven in time to continue ensuring that you could have your cake and eat it – with a good cup of pesachdik coffee...

He kashered the multi-story, spray drier – a tower of continually flowing hot air that sprays liquid coffee concentrate into the hot air, making it evaporate and turn into desired powder. Due to the dry heat, this system requires "libun" after a complicated clean-up of the coffee plastered inner walls and all the "impossible to kasher" plastic parts had to be replaced.

After successfully culminating the kashering, he turned to classify the raw materials, and to verify their origin. Then the mashgiach intently studied the details of the production process, and observed the behavior of the workers. He then supervised production, from roasting to storing, and attempted to avoid problems or deviations.

After the relatively uncomplicated beans are roasted and cooled, they are ground in an ordinary stone mill. The powder is then blown into tall narrow vats filled with 190°C water, for the extraction procedure. (Local hard water, necessitates mineral softeners, all certified by the mashgiach.) The extract is compressed and 60% of water is evaporated, leaving highly concentrated coffee. After the waste is discarded, it is completely dehydrated, at which point, the characteristic aroma dissipates, usually replaced later by added aroma – but not in a Pesach production, when the aromatic vapors must be saved for later incorporation.

More straining, more drying, and for granulation – some controlled humidifying, drying and chopping in a multi-tiered process. Finally, the coffee is packed.

But attentiveness doesn't end there.

While affixing a seal of kashrus on outer-packaging, a mashgiach once climbed up on some full cases, only to fall through them! Smugly adorned with their "mehadrin" certification, they lay waiting – to be filled later, after a cheaper production, once the mashgiach was comfortably out of the way...

Hope you enjoyed that coffee!

Rabbi David Moskowitz



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