

CHAPTER 12

Addiction and Recovery through Jewish Eyes

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Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov once said: How to love people is something I learned from a peasant. He was sitting in an inn along with other peasants, drinking. For a long time he was silent like the rest, but soon he asked the one sitting next to him: "Tell me, do you love me or don't you love me?" The other replied: "I love you very much." But the first replied: "You say that you love me, but you do not know what I need. If you really loved me you would know." The other had not a word to say to this, and the peasant who had posed the question fell silent again. But I understood. To know the needs of people, and to bear the burden of their struggle—that is the true love of humanity. (adapted from Martin Buber *Tales of the Hasidim—Later Masters*)

It is a great irony that this profound Jewish lesson about loving and understanding others is learned from people who are (over)drinking at a tavern. For it is only within recent times that the Jewish community has even been willing to admit that there *are* Jewish alcoholics, and it has been an equally slow process for the community to reach out and try to love and understand the burdens of Jews affected by addiction to alcohol and other chemical substances. Over the years, this long legacy of denial among Jews has resulted in unnecessary pain, heartache, and a great deal of alienation from Judaism by those suffering from addiction. It has also served to prevent some suffering Jews from seeking or accepting appropriate help for themselves or their loved ones. Finally, it has presented a stumbling block

for Jewish alcoholics and addicts who have wanted to embrace their spiritual heritage as a step in their recovery process.¹

A Shikkur Is a Goy

The myth of Jewish immunity from addiction is typified by the well-known Yiddish adage "A Shikkur is a Goy"—one who is a drunk is a non-Jew. From this we learn that alcoholism is seen as a problem that lies outside the Jewish community. This kind of thinking, which was common "wisdom" among Jews until only a decade or two ago, is not only incorrect and *unwise*, it is actually quite damaging to individuals who have needed understanding and help, rather than anger and rejection. Imagine the intense shame that has been felt by Jews who have gotten the message from this "wisdom" and the thinking it represents, that they are considered less than full Jews because of their addiction. Imagine their identity confusion over this issue, when they have understood a Yiddish proverb to declare that one could not be both a Jew and an alcoholic; and imagine their guilt and anger over not being able to find acknowledgement and help from within their own culture. Many recovering Jews now report with great pain how, in the past, they hid their addiction from their families and friends because they feared being run out of the community if they openly admitted to their "other" identity. A number of these same Jews, in fact, have true stories to tell about being chastised and chased out of counseling sessions—and even all the way down the street—by an ignorant or threatened rabbi, who refused to accept what was being said when the subject of alcohol or other drug dependency came up. Others sadly report that when they turned to the organized Jewish community for help with their addiction, their pleas fell on deaf or immobilized ears.

The following true story, told in 1986 by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, poignantly demonstrates the unfortunate consequences of this disbelief and ignorance:

At a weekend retreat for Jewish alcoholics, chemically dependent people, and their family members, a mother declared: "For whatever I did or failed to do which contributed to my daughter's alcoholism problem, I will always bear the responsibility and perhaps the guilt. But the fact that my daughter is now a devout Catholic and has left the faith of her family, for that I hold the rabbinate responsible. It is not as though she was primarily attracted to another religion, but rather by default of the Jewish resources." The mother went on to explain, "My daughter was an excellent student, and, when her grades began to drop, we knew something had to be wrong. We eventually discovered she was drinking too

much. When she failed her courses, she sought help for her problem in an alcoholism clinic. She told her counselor that she felt spiritually empty, and he advised her to see a rabbi. The rabbi she consulted admonished her to control her drinking, and told her that it was a disgrace for a Jew to drink excessively. The rabbi offered no response to her feelings of spiritual bankruptcy.

"Her counselor then told her of a priest who was knowledgeable in alcohol problems. She began to see this priest, and progressed well in her recovery. She is now happily married, eight years sober, and a devout Catholic." This is a serious indictment, but one which I believe has great validity. Nowhere in the years of my training to become a rabbi was I taught anything about alcoholism, nor do I recall any attention given to the problem either in rabbinic journals or at conventions.

This persistent inattention and denial reflects a wish among Jews to be a people without flaws, without the "problems" of other nations. As Rabbi Susan Berman (1988) has written, this wish

arose for practical reasons. Our ancestors, as well as our own parents, often lived in fear of the more virulent [*sic*] forms of anti-semitism. They were people (and some of us have had the same experience ourselves) who knew what it meant to see Jews suffer for the simple reason that they were Jews. Any negative characteristic that might be used against the Jews was greatly feared. In this manner our "self-protective" myths [such as the Jewish immunity from addiction] arose. It was as if it were safer to deny problems than to risk retribution. We [also] believed that Jewish men did not beat their wives, that there was no such thing as a Jewish homosexual or lesbian, etc. Our community assumptions taught us that to be a Jew seemingly granted a person immunity.

Unfortunately, it is only in retrospect that we see how this need to see Jews as unblemished from the outside, and therefore less vulnerable, has worked against Jewish efforts to strengthen the community on the inside.

Important Changes

Things began to change in the 1970s. In 1975, concerned Jewish professionals in the New York City area were awakened to the reality that Jewish alcoholics *do* exist when Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, then the spiritual leader of Central Synagogue in Manhattan, broke the news that the Alcoholics Anonymous groups in his synagogue consisted of 60 percent Jews. Armed with this evidence, which affirmed their informal observations that addiction *was* a Jewish issue, Rabbi Isaac Trainin, then the Director of the Department on Religious Affairs of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, along with Rabbi Zimmerman and others, established the first Task Force on Alcoholism in the Jewish Community. Looking back

¹ It would not surprise this author if Jews reading this story over the years have assumed that the "peasants" must have been non-Jews. While that interpretation sends an important message that Jews learn from those outside the fold, it simultaneously reinforces a false stereotype that has resulted in Jewish suffering and even death over the years.

on the Task Force's early efforts to educate the organized Jewish community, Rabbi Trainin has reflected:

A questionnaire was sent to the entire New York rabbinate (close to 1,000) and to our Federation agencies. It was understandable that practically no rabbi knew of the problem, since an alcoholic would seldom go to a rabbi. [Yet] at that time, it was puzzling to us that our family agencies were [also] unaware of the problem. However, we should not have been surprised. In the late '50's it was made known to me by several Catholic priests that Jewish teenagers and young adults were seriously engaged in drug addiction. Then, too, a questionnaire to the rabbinate revealed nothing. Not one of our Federation agencies knew a thing about drug addiction among Jews... [In both cases] there was simply a total disbelief that this problem affected the Jewish community. The first conference held on the subject (of alcoholism in the Jewish community) aimed primarily at rabbis, attracted exactly nine rabbis. (quoted in Levy, 1986)

Rabbi Trainin continued his reflection adding that: "the denial syndrome among our Orthodox Jews is even stronger than among the rest of the Jewish community... I still recall the young Hassidic lady [*sic*] who attended a meeting of our Task Force in 1982, asking for help in obtaining space in a Brooklyn synagogue for an AA group. She and other alcoholics (all Hassidic) had visited close to fifty Orthodox synagogues in Brooklyn, not one of which would make space available. They were ashamed, the young lady pointed out, that it would be a reflection on the synagogue to admit that there were not only Jewish alcoholics, but alcoholics among Traditional Jews." (Levy, 1986)

In the two-plus decades since the Task Force on Alcoholism was established, there has been slow but steady progress across the denominational spectrum. For the most part, the organized Jewish community has acknowledged the incidence of alcoholism and addiction within our ranks. This has enabled affected Jews and their significant others to speak out, thereby breaking the denial syndrome. In 1982, in recognition of the complex nature of addiction and the frequency of dual dependency, the task forces on alcoholism and on drug addiction were fused into a single entity, called the Task Force on Addictions in the Jewish Community. Its mission was to deal with the reality of all chemical dependency in the Jewish community.

In terms of community awareness, Jewish professionals from clergy to youth workers are pursuing various levels of education and training related to addiction recognition, referral, and treatment. Some have become specialists in addiction counseling. Others have offered workshops and discussion groups in synagogues, Jewish schools, and at Jewish youth

gatherings. In addition, regional and national conferences relating to addiction and healing have become popular sources of continuing education for Jewish professionals.

Within the last several years, there has been a marked increase in the quantity of published resources about addiction and Jews. Books, school curricula, Jewish spiritual guides, Jewish versions of "*One Day At a Time*" (a popular daily meditation book of readings and prayers), and other materials are available from a variety of publishers. Most Judaica stores or general bookstores with a well-stocked spirituality section are good places to begin browsing. In a number of communities, there are informal study groups and support groups for Jewish addicts and those in recovery, as well as for Jewish professionals who may be interested. Twelve Step meetings are being held in synagogues and other institutions across the country. Meetings held in communities with significant Jewish populations now vary portions of the Twelve Step ritual so that it is more inclusive of Jewish experience. For example, the Serenity Prayer or the *Shema* (a Jewish prayer excerpted from parts of the Pentateuch) is sometimes recited in place of the Lord's Prayer.

JACS

The most important development, however, in breaking the denial syndrome among Jews, and in creating support for Jews in recovery, was the 1980 establishment of the JACS Foundation. JACS stands for Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically dependent persons, and Significant others. Born of a concern among Jewish leaders and committed recovering Jews, JACS is an organization dedicated to the needs of chemically dependent Jews and their loved ones. While there is a national JACS office with a small salaried staff, the heart of the work is done by JACS volunteers on the local and regional level.

In 1985 a network of JACS groups from around the country developed a mission statement to express commonality of purpose, even as individual groups varied in how they carried out the mission. The statement declared:

A JACS group is an autonomous, nonprofit, volunteer membership organization with the threefold purpose of:

1. providing spiritual and communal support for addicted Jews and their families;
2. serving as a resource center and information exchange;
3. conducting community outreach and education.

A local JACS group supports existing Twelve-Step programs, but is not a substitute for them. Rather, JACS supplements and complements existing self-help programs and attempts to assist Jews and their families in integrating Jewish traditions and heritage with the recovery process.

Perhaps the most engaging work of JACS, at least in the initial years, was its sponsorship, along with the Task Force on Alcoholism in the Jewish Community, of weekend retreats for recovering Jewish alcoholics, drug-dependent persons, and family members. These semiannual gatherings, which continue today, have grown in size and impact over the years. They bring together the entire spectrum of suffering and recovering Jews to share common concerns including isolation from the spiritual nature of their Jewish heritage, and ignorance and denial of their disease by religious and other leaders. The retreats offer the possibility of Jewish study, Jewish worship, and contact with supportive Jewish leaders who often are recovering persons themselves. For many, these retreats are the first step back into a Jewish setting after years of avoidance and anger. They can be important turning points for Jewish addicts and their family members.

Spiritual Issues

Despite the significant progress in community attitudes and awareness, organizational change, and institutional support described above, a troubling degree of shame, and its accompanying anger and identity confusion, persisted among Jewish addicts well into the 1980s. This shame led those of us working to help Jews affected by addiction to speculate about the existence of an additional factor in the Jewish experience of addiction and recovery.

Ironically, as it became more acceptable to talk about Twelve Step meetings, AA, and recovery, and as better-informed Jewish leaders encouraged Jews to make use of Twelve Step programs, the Jews who attended those very programs began to reveal strong feelings of discomfort connected to their involvement. Their discomfort stemmed from concern that the beliefs and principles of the Twelve Steps were Christian in orientation and therefore in conflict with the tenets of Judaism and Jewish spiritual practice. These Jews worried that the Steps might be "forbidden" to Jews. Some asked if they were "bad" Jews for participating in AA and related programs. Others claimed that they felt compelled to choose between their religion and their desire to survive. Understandably, many of those concerned chose survival and went to Twelve Step meetings while hiding their Jewishness. And in some cases, they abandoned their Judaism altogether.

Several factors contributed to the Jewish impression that Twelve Step programs are "Christian." First of all, most meetings took place in churches; few were held on Jewish premises. Secondly, meetings frequently ended with The Lord's Prayer, and often participants were encouraged to kneel in prayer and to offer personal, spontaneous prayers at home. Finally, the actual wording of the Steps, and the ideology it implied, troubled many Jews. It read to them as Christian theology. It was necessary then, as it still is today, to clarify for all recovering Jews and those who would offer them counsel that Jews can feel comfortable participating in Twelve Step programs.

Rabbi Susan Berman (1988) has written an excellent article on this topic entitled, "*Judaism, Jewishness and recovery: Bridging the gap.*" I will summarize the main points here.

First of all, the text of The Lord's Prayer has so many parallels in Jewish sacred literature that many claim this prayer was Jewish in its original inception. Certainly, there is nothing in the wording of the prayer that is forbidden for a Jew to say. What is problematic for Jews is that The Lord's Prayer has come to be associated with Christianity and it is known today as part of the Christian liturgy. While there are other prayers that might be more palatable to Jews to recite at meetings, there really is nothing in Judaism prohibiting its recitation. As Rabbi Berman has stated: "The need for meetings and fellowship should override any squeamishness. The purpose of AA is to save lives..."²

Second, with regard to the issue of personal or spontaneous prayer, it is true that Jews as a community have most often prayed from a fixed liturgical text. It is also true, however, that Jewish law considers prayers of the heart, offered honestly and with sincere *Kavanah* or intention, to be valid and worthy. The language of the prayers, their form, and their length are of far less importance than the *Kavanah*.

The other concern regarding the form of prayer is the question of the permissibility for Jews to kneel in prayer. First of all, this is not a requirement of the Twelve Step fellowships. Today, Jews do not kneel when praying (the exception being specific moments when the cantor kneels during Jewish High Holy Day Services). In contrast, there have been historic periods when Jews did kneel during prayer. Jews ceased praying on their knees, however, as a way to differentiate themselves from Christians, the result being that this Twelve Step tradition may have more than the usual awkwardness for Jews to whom it is recommended.

Finally, we come to the issue of the seeming Christian content of the Steps themselves. This is an important issue to explore in some detail. As we shall see, Twelve Step ideology clearly echoes established beliefs found in mainstream Jewish liturgy and thought. Its step-by-step process for altering addictive behavior, thereby bringing about a return to sobriety and right living, bears a striking resemblance to the Jewish step-by-step method for changing so-called "sinful" behavior and initiating a return to Jewish ethical living.

Theology of sin and repentance

We begin by looking at the Jewish concept of sin. The Hebrew word for sin is *chet*, a word derived from a term in archery meaning "to miss the mark." *Chet* refers to behavior which is off-center or off-target. Judaism teaches that each of us is born with a pure soul and that when we transgress, we deviate from this basic core; that is, we behave in a way that is missing the mark. In broader terms, Judaism regards each person as essentially

² For more on this subject see Cohen, 1956.

good, while acknowledging that sometimes individuals behave in ways that distance them from that goodness. At those times it is the misguided behavior (or sin) that is judged as in need of change, not the essential worth of the human being involved. The Jewish method for letting go of this unwanted behavior and returning to ethical living is a step-by-step process known as *Teshuvah*, or "repentance." Literally, *Teshuvah* means "the process of return," and Jewish tradition teaches that it involves a return to a complete relationship with God as well as a return to the whole self. It is accomplished by a return to centered, ethical living. In traditional Jewish terms, this means a return to faith and the observance of the *Mitzvot*, or "commandments," as they are spelled out in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish interpretive literature.

The American Medical Association, of course, has long defined alcoholism as a disease. Interestingly, Judaism recognizes sin as a disease, a disease of the spirit. Employing the technique of Biblical textual parallelism, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a leading Jewish scholar of the twentieth century, has cited the verse "God forgives all your iniquity, heals all your diseases" (Psalm 103:3) as a proof text for the idea that Judaism regards sin as an illness and repentance as the healing cure. "The idea is clear: sin is an abnormal phenomenon," writes Rabbi Soloveitchik. "The healthy person living a normal life, does not fall into the ways of sin. Sin constitutes a sort of spiritual pathology, just as many diseases of the flesh constitute a physical pathology." Along the same lines, Maimonides, a twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, referred to those who stray from the "good path" as *cholei n'fashot*, that is, "people of sick spirit."

Clearly then, there are strong similarities between the phenomenon of addiction and the Jewish view of improper conduct. They are both considered diseases, and their respective "cures" are achieved by a step-by-step process which incorporates personal responsibility and faith in a Higher Power. Since the stated goal of both systems is to discard unhealthy behavior, it appears that the discomfort some Jews have had with the Twelve Steps is based on something else.

In 1984, I conducted some research which led me to the conclusion that the problem lay in the differences of language and style between the two systems, Judaism and the Twelve Steps. To eliminate these variables, I constructed a "translation grammar," a method used by scholars to restate cultural disparities in neutral language. To see how this relates to our discussion, first consider the lists that follow:

Maimonides

The Laws of Repentance

- A. Confession before God which includes:
- (1) Naming the specific sin.
 - (2) Statement of regret at having sinned.
 - (3) Expression of shame felt at having sinned.
 - (4) Pledge not to repeat the same sin.

- B. Abandonment of sin.
- C. Change of thought.
- D. Change of name.
- E. Supplication to God.
- F. Public confession (is praiseworthy).
- G. Acknowledgement of your sins on this and the following *Yom Kippur*.
- H. Reparations (compensation) for sins against other people.
- I. Apology to victims of the sin.
- J. Self-restraint from repeating the sin when the opportunity to do so presents itself.

Rabbenu Yonah of Gerona

The Gates of Repentance

- I. Regret for having committed the sin.
- II. Forsaking the sin.
- III. Experience sorrow over the transgression.
- IV. Bodily suffering in relation to the sin.
- V. Worry over the punishment for the transgression.
- VI. Feel shame at having transgressed before God.
- VII. Behave with humility (speak in a low voice...).
- VIII. Have a humble attitude.
- IX. Break the physical desire to commit the sin.
- X. Compensation (in actions) to prevent recurrence of sin.
- XI. Moral inventory.
- XII. Consider the punishment from God and the consequences of sin.
- XIII. Minor transgressions as equivalent to major ones.
- XIV. Confession.
- XV. Pray for forgiveness.
- XVI. Reparations (monetary, apology, request forgiveness, confession).
- XVII. Pursue acts of loving-kindness and truth.
- XVIII. Keep your sin before you always.
- XIX. Fight off your evil inclination. Don't give in to sin when the desire is strong.
- XX. Turn others away from transgression.

These are two versions of the prescribed way for a Jew to do *Teshuvah* (repentance), that is, the method for Jews to change and redress unethical behavior, thereby achieving a return to acceptable conduct and spiritual wholeness.

Though the sages who composed the above lists wrote them centuries ago, their work suggests a guided spiritual journey that is nearly identical to the spiritual journey suggested by the Twelve Steps. Employing the translation grammar method, the similarities between *Teshuvah* and AA's Steps become apparent, as seen when the next two lists are put side by side (refer to the previous lists for a full understanding):

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove all our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Generic steps for change

The three categories following each generic step represent the number or letter of the corresponding steps of AA (Arabic numerals), the steps of *Teshuvah* according to Maimonides (capital letters), or the steps of *Teshuvah* by Rabbenu Yonah (Roman numerals). See preceding lists for specifics.

It is evident that the Twelve Steps and the concept of *Teshuvah* are spiritually as well as tactically compatible. Both offer directives for behavioral improvement. Both include reliance on God (or a Higher Power), the taking of a moral inventory, confession to others and to God, appropriate reparations, and evidence of changed behavior. Both systems also imply that unacceptable behavior is the result of spiritual emptiness.

Steps 3, 6, 7 are those most likely to give Jews some difficulty. Taken literally, they seem to advocate the relinquishing of free will and the abdication of personal responsibility for directing one's life. These are concepts which Jews associate with Christianity, while passionately denying a place for them within the tenets of Judaism. (Similar misgivings arise among women and minorities, that is, other groups with an awareness of oppression. See Smith and Seymour, chapter 5, and Kasl's chapter 6.) From this point of view, it is easy to see how one might conclude that the Steps are

GENERIC STEPS	AA STEPS	MAIMONIDES	RABBENU YONAH
THE GREAT AWAKENING	1	A	III, V, VI, XII
BECOME A BELIEVER	2	Rabbinic Judaism assumes this step to be a given.	Rabbinic Judaism assumes this step to be a given.
TURNING TO A HIGHER POWER	3	F	VII
MORAL INVENTORY	4	A, H	XI
ADMITTING OUR WRONGS TO GOD AND OTHERS	5	A, G	XIV
PRAYING FOR GOD'S FORGIVENESS	7	A, F	VIII, XV
ACKNOWLEDGING THOSE WE HAVE HARMED AND PREPARING TO FACE THEM	8	I	XVI
REPARATIONS	9	J	X, XVI
CONTINUING THE MORAL INVENTORY	10	H, K	IV, XV, XVIII, XIX
MAINTAINING THE SPIRITUAL PATH	11	E, H, K	IV, XV, XVIII, XIX
SPREADING THE WORD	12		XX

not consistent with Jewish values. This reasoning could lead to the assumption that the Twelve Steps are not appropriate for Jews. Such language, however, is not to be taken at face value. It is simply one way of stating the more generalized idea that faith in a Power beyond the self can lead to behavioral transformation.

Biblical reflections

Concepts in the Twelve Steps *are* found throughout Jewish tradition, though the phrasing may be quite different. Take, for example, the following excerpt from traditional Jewish High Holy Day liturgy: "May it be Your will, my God and God of my ancestors, that I sin no more. In Your abundant mercy cleanse the sins I have committed against You." Another example, from Psalm 51, can be found in both liberal and traditional prayer books: "Hide Your face from my sins; blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and put a new and right spirit in me... Do not cast me out away from Your presence, or take Your holy spirit away from me." Or, more dramatically, this selection from Psalm 116: "I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the Name of the LORD: 'O LORD, I pray, save my life!'"

In these passages the speaker first implores God to help change undesirable behavior. The speaker then asks that God take control and assert his divine will to alter the situation. What I have understood is that the authors of the Twelve Steps no more intended such phrases as "turning our will over to the care of God" and "ask God to remove our shortcomings" to be taken literally, than Jews take their requests for God to "blot out sins" or "refrain from taking the holy spirit away." What we have in the Twelve Steps and in Teshuvah are two different systems of symbolic language used to express the common idea that *improvement of behavior comes about by the inclusion of a God in one's life*. A moving section in the book of Leviticus (see below) teaches the same lesson in another way. In so doing, it expresses the fundamentals of Jewish spirituality, and at the same time provides a message that echoes the lesson of the Twelve Steps.

The essence of Jewish Biblical spirituality proclaims that a loving God exists, who awaits the Israelites' willingness to acknowledge that human beings are ultimately not in control. This God is anxious to be a partner with people in creating a society where individuals forgo the drive to be overly independent, choosing instead to live interdependently with each other, and consciously dependent on God. This dependency is made manifest through the commitment to live by the Mitzvot (Commandments). The Mitzvot, in turn, symbolize acceptance of living with moral and ritual limitations.

As Leviticus 26 focuses on the process of human change, it gives us insight into how some people can move from a state of personal chaos and utter despair to a state of life that is meaningful and grounded in a covenantal relationship with God. According to the text, that change begins with an awareness of a living God in one's life.

With the implicit acknowledgment that people are stubborn and reluctant to surrender control or independence, God first predicts (Leviticus 26:14ff) that an obstinate Israelite nation will stray further and further from the covenant, that is, they will fail to take the Mitzvot seriously and will neglect their observance. As they fail to keep the Mitzvot, they will, according to the text, fall deeper and deeper into a morass and into spiritual despair. Ultimately, they will hit rock bottom, becoming "fainthearted," powerless, and homeless. But, the purpose of this prediction was not to frighten or intimidate people, but rather, to give them hope for the future; and so there is more.

"If then their uncircumised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant with Jacob." (Lev. 26:41). This humbling or opening of the heart shall lead to a restored life, one in covenant with God once again. The text is teaching us that when a people reaches the lowest point possible, ascent can only begin with a change of heart. *K'niat HaLev*, the humbling of the heart, is a process of opening oneself to God. For biblical Israel, this meant coming to the realization that life without Mitzvot was difficult and lonely, that it had no

purpose and led to self-destruction as it drew the nation further and further from a peaceful life in the promised land. What Israel did in humbling her heart was to confront the meaninglessness of life without God, a life symbolized by the absence of the observance of Mitzvot. Israel came to *K'niat HaLev* by looking hard at her own limitations, her human failings, and by admitting that she couldn't "go it alone" forever. Israel acknowledged that she needed God's guidance. Israel also realized that she needed healing. She found it in making a commitment to the Mitzvot, as a way of welcoming God back into her life.

Note how the text continues by indicating the rewards of being open to God's presence: "Yet, even when they are still in the land of their enemies, I will not reject or spurn them so as to destroy them...I am Adonai their God, who freed them from the land of Egypt" (v. 44). When Israel will open her heart to hear God's voice, she will not be alone anymore. When she reclaims the Mitzvot as her own, even if only "one step at a time," her life will start to have new meaning.

Conclusion

When a person struggling with addiction and the attendant issues of control and dependency can reach the point of beginning to 'work the Steps'—when s/he can let in the notion that a Higher Power can offer the strength needed to overcome—this is *K'niat HaLev*, the humbling of the hardened heart. This is the essence of Jewish spirituality, and the beginning of recovery for the addict. In this is confirmation that The Holy One who took the Israelites out of Egypt, the Higher Power who can bring alcoholics and addicts from despair to sobriety, is available to anyone, Jew or non-Jew, searching for the means to a life of serenity and direction.

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