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Refuat Ha-Nefesh U'refuat Ha-Guf: Spiritual Dimensions of Addiction Recovery

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I write this article as an homage to my teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman, who has inspired so many of us to take God seriously in our work and in our lives. In addition to his many contributions to the field of Jewish thought, he addresses the spirituality of Twelve-Step programs in his foreword to Rabbi Kerry Olitsky's *One Hundred Blessings Every Day*.¹ In this essay, entitled "Are the Twelve Steps Jewish?," he endorses the compatibility between Twelve-Step programs and Jewish theology. Rabbi Gillman explains how Judaism and the Twelve-Step philosophy emphasize the spiritual power of community, the human need to structure our daily lives ("to bring cosmos out of chaos"), the value of humility and *emunah*, the process of *teshuvah*, and the idea of a personal God of infinite pathos for humankind.² Rabbi Gillman's endorsement of the Jewishness of the Twelve Steps helps open the door for so many Jews with addiction issues who could benefit from the Twelve-Step philosophy of recovery and the self-help groups it has generated.

Personal experiences have led me to an appreciation for the spirituality of the Twelve Steps and inspired me to shift careers after serving in the pulpit rabbinate for twenty-five years. Among my colleagues, this type of decision was not so unusual; what was unique was my decision to enter the field of drug and alcohol recovery counseling. To my knowledge, few of us have undertaken this particular challenge. I chose to do so because I believe

chemical dependency is an epidemic in our community like many others, an epidemic we ignore at our own peril.

There are many people in the Jewish community, professionals and laypeople alike, who are woefully ignorant about the nature and extent of chemical dependency among Jews. As I will discuss below, the moral model of addiction is still widely accepted. This stigmatizes the person with addiction and can hinder recovery. Moreover, according to a survey commissioned by JACS (Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons and Significant Others), eighty-three percent of the respondents who sought help from Jewish communal institutions claimed to have received little or no support.³ Thus, a significant subgroup within the Jewish population is underserved; most Jews with addiction are forced to look outside Jewish institutions if they are seeking recovery.

Chemical dependency is far from absent among Jews. Nevertheless, according to the authors of the JACS study, “. . . the idea that Jews do not become alcoholics remains the predominant opinion about alcoholism in the Jewish community.”⁴ There is little hard data to document the prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse among Jews, but we must assume that the problem exists and cannot be ignored. In fact, the primary drug of abuse among the respondents was alcohol.⁵

Moreover, the study showed that a sizable majority of Jews with chemical dependency were college graduates with incomes significantly higher than the national average. Over half of the respondents belonged to a synagogue, attended services regularly (twenty-seven percent attended at least weekly), and held Jewish culture to be very important in their lives. Note that the respondents were in recovery while completing the survey, yet many of them claimed to have been active in Jewish cultural and religious life while actively using drugs or alcohol.⁶ Thus, Jewish communal leaders, lay and professional, should be prepared to effectively address the needs of Jews who seek help with their addiction.

Yet something very significant is standing in our way. Another study, written in the 1980's, indicated that the overwhelming majority of American Jews accepted the moral model of addiction, claiming that it was a psychological weakness.⁷ The moral model of addiction can be understood as “the belief that people abuse alcohol [and other drugs] because they choose to do so.”⁸ This approach implies that chemical dependents, by abusing

drugs, are choosing an immoral path that causes harm to themselves and the people within their familial, social, and professional networks. The moral model causes negative and unproductive attitudes toward the addict. A well-meaning family member or friend might say, “You’d be sober if you only tried harder.” This type of statement reflects an attitude that places blame and moral judgments upon the addicted person. Loved ones who hold on to this model tend to blame not only the substance abuser but themselves as well: “We must have done something wrong,” they say, or “If only I hadn’t started that argument, she wouldn’t be out drinking right now.” As Jews, we are so achievement and success-oriented that we suffer deep shame and embarrassment when one of our family members becomes addicted to a substance. Admitting this reality of addiction is like admitting defeat and moral failure.

The moral model has also impaired the effectiveness of chemical dependency treatment. A treatment professional might say, “One lapse and you’re out of here,” or “We’re going to humiliate you until you feel low enough to start recovery.” Treatment professionals who allow no leeway for relapses imply that their clients are simply making bad (immoral) choices. It is my view that our attitudes about addiction, as long as they remain morally based, weaken our ability to be truly helpful to chemical dependents. This holds true for family members, friends, and professionals alike. Jews who are affected by addiction will only be ready to “come out of the closet” and seek help when they perceive that they will encounter attitudes of understanding and empathy instead of moral condemnation and blame.

It is curious to me why the Jewish community is so uninformed in this regard. We are a culture that gave birth to the father of psychoanalysis and some of the leading pioneers in the fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy in the twentieth century. We are a people who have long venerated scientific knowledge and the value of medical research. Yet many of us are still reluctant to accept the now-prevalent notion that chemical dependency is a biopsychosocial disease. Although, as I mentioned above, this may have to do with the value we place upon achievement and success, I’m sure there are other equally cogent explanations. (However, this is not the place to offer further speculations.) In the present context, I find it important to remind the reader that the disease model of addiction was accepted by the American Medical Association in 1966 (having already come to describe

alcoholism as a “treatable illness” in 1956), and by the American Psychiatric Association in 1965. The disease model is “the belief that people abuse alcohol [and other drugs] because of some biologically caused condition.”⁹ Drug addiction is seen as a disease because it has a known etiology, progression, and outcome. Although the disease model is not universally accepted because of its exclusive focus on biology, it has opened the door to a more comprehensive and enlightened understanding of addiction. Adding the psychological and social components to the disease model (hence, referring to chemical dependency as a “biopsychosocial disease”) encourages treatment professionals and laypeople to view addiction in broader, more sympathetic terms. Not only will we withhold our moral judgments, but we will understand the person with addiction as one who is compelled to abuse drugs out of a natural and environmental predisposition. Friends and family may be able to empathize more easily because they know that their loved one doesn’t simply “choose” to abuse drugs. Treatment professionals will be able to adopt a more holistic approach by caring for the whole person, as a unique individual who suffers with addiction rather than as someone who is simply labeled an addict.

Understanding chemical dependency as a biopsychosocial phenomenon also helps frame the way we apply Jewish concepts and values to our discussion of addiction recovery. To be specific, we should be most careful how we relate the process of *teshuvah* to recovery. Some Jewish thinkers have indiscriminately drawn a general identification between the two processes. This can be misleading, even dangerous. The Jewish sources clearly describe *teshuvah* as a response to sin, as a moral and spiritual awakening resulting from an awareness of a sinful act.¹⁰ Some of these acts are ritual in nature; others are breaches of morality.¹⁰ If the *teshuvah* concept, as response to sin, is applied too generally to addiction recovery, we can fall into the dangerous trap of equating addiction with sin. We end up implying that the addict is undergoing *teshuvah* because he made the wrong choice by abusing drugs. Thus, we find ourselves regressing to the moral model of addiction, that same model that has been disproved by science and rejected by an overwhelming majority of the addiction treatment community.

Teshuvah can indeed be a useful concept in the language of recovery, but only when it is applied appropriately. The moral dimensions of *teshuvah* come into play when discussing the acts committed by the chemical depen-

dent, which are *results* of the addiction. For instance, addicts may regret the lies they told their loved ones and friends while abusing drugs. The biopsychosocial model of addiction would remind us that the chemical dependent is *accountable* for immoral acts committed while actively addicted, though the addict is not morally *responsible* for the addiction itself. Thus, the concept of *teshuvah* addresses ways in which one can recognize the hurtful deeds that resulted from the disease. In the Twelve Steps, Step 4 represents the recognition of one's moral weaknesses (and strengths as well) through a complete *heshbon ha-nefesh*, a moral and spiritual inventory: "Made a fearless and searching moral inventory of ourselves."¹¹ The ability to admit this to oneself, God, and another human being (Step 5), the readiness to have God remove one's defects (Steps 6 and 7), and the willingness to make amends to those who have been wronged (Steps 8 and 9) are all consistent with the concept of *teshuvah*.¹² But we must avoid going overboard in our attempts to Judaize the traditional models of addiction recovery. A chemical dependent might undergo *teshuvah* for the acts he committed while addicted, but the primary cause, the addiction itself, is a disease that does not engender moral guilt. Thus, *teshuvah* should only be used as a way of framing the Twelve Steps in Jewish terms rather than as a general model of recovery.

Since addiction is a primary disease process, the most appropriate Jewish concept to be applied is *refuat ha-nefesh u-refuat ha-guf*, healing of the mind, spirit and body or, more simply, *refuah*. Judaism understands *refuah* as a spiritual phenomenon; God is the Divine Healer who operates through human channels, the physicians.¹³ For people with addiction, recovery is the process wherein they participate with God, treatment professionals and/or a supportive community to affect *refuah*. If they are involved in Twelve-Step recovery, they are also undergoing *teshuvah* to repair the secondary immoral acts resulting from the primary disease of addiction (as well as other deeds that may have been unrelated to drug abuse). If they are finding recovery through other models (like natural recovery or through their religious communities) they are focused on the varied dimensions of healing from their disease. Either way, most people approach *refuah* as an experience that is dependent upon a Higher Power. The Twelve Steps emphasize the restorative power of God (Step 2), the human need to surrender one's will and life to God's care (Step 3), God's ability to remove

our defects of character (Step 7), and God's immanence as One who hears our prayers, guides us, and gives us strength (Step 11). God takes on a key role in our *refuah*. Through humility, a recognition of our powerlessness and a need to surrender to God's will, we become receptive to what is called "the precious gift of recovery," the blessing of *refuah*.

For the remainder of this essay I shall share some personal reflections on spirituality and *refuah*. Because of a family member's addiction, I was subject to the many negative effects that addiction can have on loved ones. Addiction is a family disease, and a person's chemical dependency deeply impacts loved ones. Yet what appears at first to be a curse can in the end become a blessing. That is why an onlooker or newcomer to Twelve-Step meetings may be surprised to hear a veteran describe herself as a "grateful member" of such and such a fellowship. It can be difficult to grasp how anyone can feel gratitude for a progressive, potentially fatal disease like chemical dependency. It is the process of *refuah*, with the help of a Higher Power and a caring community, that inspires gratitude, turning suffering into redemption, curse into blessing, darkness into light.

When my loved one's addiction became unmanageable to me, my body responded in kind. My damaged psyche and emotional pain helped cause a relapse of a long dormant gastrointestinal disease and I landed in the hospital. Lying in that hospital bed, lamenting my fate, I began to wonder: how amazing it is that this illness is my body's way of sending important messages to my mind and soul! Now, what will it take for me to find healing? During a rather long period of recuperation, I had lots of time to read books, take walks, and concentrate on regaining my physical strength. Yet I was uncertain about ways in which I could reclaim my spiritual strength. I continued to fulfill the halakhic obligations of daily prayer and study, and this helped sustain me in my recovery; but I felt that it wasn't enough.

After a few months I began to attend a self-help group based upon the Twelve Steps.¹⁴ At first, I was a bit uneasy with the fact that the meetings were held in churches and often ended with the Lord's Prayer. In time, this no longer fazed me. The more meetings I attended the better I felt. Steadily, I began to feel comforted and heartened by the presence of others who have been affected by the disease of addiction. I listened to members share their experiences, strengths, and hopes. I heard them speak of how changed attitudes can aid recovery. In time, I noticed that I was starting to love these

people, and I sensed that they loved me as well. As I was regaining my physical and emotional strength, I began to realize that my relationship with God was undergoing a metamorphosis. I found myself speaking to God more often, not only through the formal, traditional language of *tefilah* but through the spontaneous stirrings of my heart (“*rahmana liba baei*”). God was becoming ever more immanent to me, a constant companion, a personal Presence to whom I would turn for guidance, direction, wisdom, hope, and strength. During the depths of my own disease, (not only my physical illness but the “disease” of co-dependency) I would silently cry out to God for help. As I found recovery, I would silently sing to God in gratitude. The negativity of living with active addiction, and the painful memories that lingered, began to give way to the positive experiences of belonging to a fellowship and developing a more personal relationship with God. This was indeed something to be grateful for.

Some of us are fortunate enough to experience liminal moments when we feel a deep connection to God. At such times, we sense that we are standing at a threshold of something life-changing. I have been blessed with some liminal moments in my life; they were the catalysts for my decisions to accept the regimen of *mitzvot* and to enter the rabbinate. These were events of an intense personal nature, when I perceived that God was turning to me, beckoning for my response. I was able to reach the threshold only because I was open to hearing God’s overture. Over the years, through many wonderful, uplifting, and joyous times in Jewish communal worship, I have rarely, if ever, felt so deeply connected to the Eternal. Perhaps this was because the people with whom I was worshiping, singing, and dancing were not in recovery.

This may sound strange. I do not minimize the spiritual beauty or grandeur of public worship, and I genuinely love it. I enjoy participating in daily *minyanim* and leading Shabbat services at my part-time pulpit. Yet it is at the self-help meetings and in the Twelve-Step work I do on my own that I truly experience God’s personal care and love. The Rabbinic sources are replete with examples of God’s empathy for the People Israel; it is common for these sources to reflect upon God’s inclination to suffer and weep whenever Israel is in travail. Abraham Joshua Heschel described God’s empathy for Israel as Divine Pathos, suggesting that the prophetic and rabbinic references to God’s feelings are more than metaphorical. God indeed

does have feelings, among them God's profound concern for humankind: "The prophets speak not so much of man's concern for God as of God's concern for man. At the beginning is God's concern."¹⁵ I have experienced this concern as I continued attending meetings regularly and took note of my personal recovery and that of my fellow group members. From the pulpit, I would often speak about God, usually in abstractions. But in the meetings, I began to share unashamedly about my growing personal relationship with my Higher Power. These musings would often take the form of questions and speculations. I'd wonder aloud about how God works in my life and reveals God's will to me. Sometimes, I'm sure, I would even ramble a bit and eventually conclude my comments by thanking the members for giving me the chance to share. At these meetings, no cross talk is permitted; the person speaking is not to be interrupted so that he may have the opportunity to freely express and work out his thoughts and feelings. The ultimate purpose of sharing is to find recovery and serenity. Thus, I sought (and continue to seek) *refuah* partly through the process of honest and open self-disclosure in my Twelve-Step fellowship.

Of equal significance is the way we find *refuah* and comfort by listening to others. As I become increasingly aware of God's concern for me, I find inspiration in the stories and insights of my fellow members. I realize that, as difficult as my situation has seemed to me, their experiences are often-times worse. Yet after all they have been through, they are able to express feelings of gratitude, hope, and faith. They are able to smile and laugh even in the face of active addiction. They attribute their recovery to a Higher Power who has brought light into their darkened lives. Like me, they too are still struggling. Like me, they may have more questions than answers. Yet we all find ways to grow more comfortable with uncertainties, knowing that the power of recovery helps us get through each day, one day at a time.

In *The Star of Redemption*, Franz Rosenzweig writes about how the religious community (which he refers to as the "cult," in its positive sense) can force eternity into time: "The cult too appears merely to build the house in which God may take up residence, but can it really force the exalted guest to move in? Yes it can. For the time which the cult prepares for the visit of eternity is not the time of an individual; it is not mine, nor thine, nor his secret time. It is the time of All. . . . The enlightenment which befalls the

individual can here be none other than that which can befall all others too.”¹⁶ For Rosenzweig, the institution of Jewish communal worship not only invites the Divine Presence to enter the realm of the temporal; it actually compels God to come into the community of worshipers. The enlightenment of the individual becomes the enlightenment of the group. We build the tabernacle so that the Presence of God may dwell therein (cf. Exodus 25:8). The power of the group to move the Divine into its midst is also a hallmark of Twelve-Step recovery groups. There are moments when I sense the Presence of God during communal worship, but in my experience they do not compare in lasting intensity to the realness of God’s healing power in the rooms of Twelve-Step meetings. The recovery of one becomes the recovery of all, as each member draws spiritual strength from the others. God dwells not only within the broken-hearted but within the hearts and minds of those who are actively seeking and finding *refuat ha-nefesh u’refuat ha-guf*, recovery from the disease of addiction. They may be chemical dependents themselves, or they may be the loved ones of a dependent; either way, the devastating effects of the disease eventually make room for the blessings of healing and spiritual growth.

Finally, the deep humility that comes from one’s feelings of powerlessness—over the drug, over other people, over changing the past—is the emotional predisposition that leads to enlightenment. Walking humbly with God is the way the person recovering from addiction or co-dependency retains a hold on Eternity. It is no accident that Rosenzweig concludes the *Star* with a profoundly stirring passage based upon the oft-quoted verse from Micah: “He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God” (Micah 6:8). The attitude of humility is predicated upon what he calls a “wholly present trust.” This trust in turn engenders faith, hope, and love. The person of faith enters the gates of Eternity, the light of spiritual truth, through his disposition of humility.¹⁷ It is no different for those of us who are in recovery. As we are continually reminded of our powerlessness in Step 1, we develop the need to fully trust in our Higher Power in Steps 2 and 3, a trust that keeps us fastened in the Now and deters us from dwelling on a troublesome past and an uncertain, possibly worrisome future. One day at a time, we find that our faith, hope, and love of God and one another keeps growing. As we journey along the road of

recovery, we know that the disease of addiction no longer has power over us; rather it is the power of the Eternal that sustains us, strengthens us, bears us through our days of darkness and lovingly carries us into light, faith, and serenity.

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light; on those who dwelt in a land of gloom light has dawned.” (Isaiah 9:1)

NOTES

1. Rabbi Kerry Olitsky, *One Hundred Blessings Every Day* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), pp. xv–xiv.

2. Ibid., p. xvii.

3. Susan Lind Vex and Sheila B. Blume, “The JACS Study I: Characteristics of a Population of Chemically Dependent Jewish Men and Women,” *Journal of Addictive Diseases* 20:4, 2001, pp. 82–3.

4. Ibid., p. 74.

5. Ibid., pp. 79–80.

6. Ibid., p. 84.

7. Barry Glassner and Bruce Berg, “Social Locations and Interpretations: How Jews Define Alcoholism,” *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 45:1, 1984, pp. 16–25.

8. Glen R. Hanson, Peter J. Venturelli and Annette E. Fleckenstein, *Drugs and Society*, 9th Edition, (Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett, 2006), p. 58.

9. Ibid.

10. E.g. Exodus Rabbah, Beshallah, 23:10, “As soiled garments can be cleansed, so the Israelites, albeit they sin, can return by repentance unto the Lord.” Cited in C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 316.

11. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd Edition, (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., 1976), p. 59. The 12 Steps are reprinted in identical form in many volumes published by both the Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon World Service organizations.

12. Ibid. Step 5: “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” Step 6: “Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.” Step 7: “Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.” Step 8: “Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.” Step 9: “Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

13. Cf. Exodus 15:26, “. . . for I the Lord am your healer.”

14. The principle of anonymity, described in the Twelve Traditions of Twelve-

Step programs, prohibits me from specifying the name of the self-help program I attend. No member is entitled to appoint himself as a representative to the public, lest any backsliding or relapse on his part reflect negatively on the program itself.

15. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956), p. 412.

16. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), p. 292.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 424.

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