



## **What Harm Reduction & Passover Have in Common: A Path to Freedom**

By Marla Kaufman

“Freedom is within our grasp, and Pesach reminds us that we need to reach.”

— Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

During Passover, Jews around the world gather to share the story of our ancestors’ miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt. In the retelling of this history that is so central to Judaism, we have an opportunity to consider what it means to be free today.

As we contemplate the concept of freedom this Passover, let us also consider what freedom might mean to those in our Jewish communities and beyond who are fighting to free themselves from addiction, as well as the stigma and shame that so often accompany it. How can we, as Jews and allies, help support those individuals and families in their search for freedom, connection, and belonging?

It’s vital to understand why this increasingly devastating epidemic needs our attention, both as individuals and as Jewish communities.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s Center for Health Statistics reported 106,699 overdose deaths in 2021 — an unfathomable number. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) estimates that over 40 million individuals ages 12 and older are struggling with a substance use disorder (SUD), and drug-related overdoses are now the leading cause of death among adults ages 18 to 45. There can be no doubt that we are in the midst of an addiction and overdose epidemic. We are trapped in a vicious cycle that is devastating lives, families and entire communities, including Jews.

In a pilot study of Canadian Jewish communities conducted for the Journal of Addiction, 41% of survey respondents said they knew someone with an alcohol or substance use disorder, and 23% had a personal family history of SUD. In a recent survey conducted by the UJA-Federation of New York, 10% of Jewish households reported an SUD problem, and 9 out of 10 said they were not seeking help for the problem. We must ask ourselves, why?

Given these statistics, the chances are very likely that you know and care about someone who has been or is currently impacted by addiction. You may be among them. Why is it that so many Jewish individuals and families, and many others, face this struggle alone, in the shadows, isolated by stigma, shame, and denial instead of with a supportive community? Especially when research shows that isolation only makes it more difficult for people to access treatment and find their path to recovery.

We can begin to change this by tapping into our Jewish values of kindness (*chesed*), compassion (*rachamim*), and justice (*tzedek*), which are all ways that we can fulfill our sacred mission of *tikkun olam* — being God’s partners in working towards repairing our broken world. We can recall the words of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, who wrote, “Because humans are the image of G-d, they are endowed by their creator with three intrinsic dignities: infinite value, equality, and uniqueness.”

Recognizing the value, equality, and dignity of those actively struggling with SUD and addiction is an essential component to freeing them from stigma, shame, and isolation. That in turn can help them receive the support they need to begin their recovery journeys. This recognition of the dignity and humanity in people who use substances is at the heart of an innovative strategy known as harm reduction.

Harm reduction is an approach to help and support individuals who use drugs, with the primary purpose of keeping them alive and as healthy as possible. According to SAMHSA, harm reduction emphasizes direct engagement with people who use drugs to prevent overdose and disease transmission, improve their physical, mental, and social wellbeing, and provide unconditional access to treatment and other healthcare services.

A harm-reduction approach does not punish, degrade, belittle, or shame individuals who use substances. The approach also seeks to provide comforting resources for supportive family members. With a focus on safe use and overdose prevention, harm reduction advocates work to support the rights of people who use drugs, giving them access to healthcare services in order to meet individuals where they are.

Harm reduction rejects stigmatizing language, does not coerce people into treatment (although many people find their way to treatment and recovery by participating in harm reduction programs), and recognizes the realities that often contribute to, exacerbate, and perpetuate substance use and addiction. These include disparities in access to treatment and overdose rates, punitive approaches and incarceration, job loss, poverty, family disintegration, recidivism, and social isolation.

When we learn the principles of harm reduction, it’s easy to see how they align with Jewish values. By acting with compassion, respect, and dignity toward those who use drugs, we recognize their humanity – that they too are *b’tzelem Elohim*, created in the image of God. We also honor the most important *mitzvah* of all - *pekuach nefesh*, saving a life.

Harm reduction is at its essence about freedom: the freedom to be treated like a human being. The freedom to access vital healthcare and mental health services, without fear of punishment. The freedom from stigma and shame. The freedom to share experiences with a Jewish community that accepts and supports you, without judgment. The freedom to find your own path to recovery, on your terms.

So as Jews engage in discussions around the concept of freedom during the *Seder*, all of us should include those affected by SUD and addiction in the conversation. Let us consider our own role in helping individuals and families find freedom from the pain of addiction. Let us give kindness and acceptance freely.

Click [here](#) to download JAAN’s “How to Be a Jewish Recovery Ally” guide for practical ideas on allyship.