

Spirituality, Prayer, the Twelve Steps and Judaism

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The fellowships of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Al-Anon are of inestimable value in the recovery from alcoholism and chemical dependency. Not infrequently, there is a resistance on the part of Jews to participate on the grounds that these programs have a religious orientation that is non-Jewish.

Let us first dispense with some extraneous objections.

"A.A. is Christian because meetings are held in church basements," say some. While it is true that the majority of A.A. meetings are in churches, it should also be mentioned that few Jewish facilities have welcomed A.A. The myth that Jews do not become alcoholic has resulted in an alienation of alcoholism treatment programs from the Jewish community.

Just as there is a lack of alcoholism expertise in Jewish health agencies, so is there a dearth of synagogues and Jewish community centers that have opened their doors to A.A. Several years ago there were virtually no synagogue - based A.A. meetings. Today there are communities that have one or more. If more rabbis and community leaders would overcome their resistance and denial, there is no question that more meetings will be held in Jewish institutions.

"A.A. meetings involve Christian liturgy," say others. While A.A. meetings generally close with the Lord's Prayer, there is no rule in A.A. that precludes substituting a Jewish prayer. While others are reciting the Lord's Prayer, one may say the 23rd Psalm or any other Jewish prayer.

"All the available literature on spirituality in recovery has Christian origins," is another common complaint. Like the first objection, this is not inherent in A.A., but a default by Jewish theologians. Again, the prevailing lack of awareness about alcoholism among Jews is responsible for the absence of literature on spirituality.

Hopefully, this will be corrected with the increasing interest in the problem. In some communities, knowledgeable rabbis have begun to provide sessions on spirituality for recovering Jews.

These objections are similar to the various forms of denial and resistance inherent to the disease of alcoholism and the awareness that help must be sought. Even after a person accepts the presence of a problem and the need for treatment, there is often resistance to Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon. Permit me to list the most typical forms of resistance:

1) A.A.'s insistence on total abstinence.

The alcoholic much prefers a treatment which would allow him (or her) to cut back on his alcohol consumption, or teach him 'to control his drinking. He is therefore more likely to accept some treatment approach that would not demand total abstinence indefinitely.

2) Reluctance to be stigmatized as "alcoholic."

The pejorative nature of this term, and its association in many people's minds with skid-row derelicts often results in preference for the euphemism of problem drinker.

3) Concern that one will meet social or business acquaintances at meetings, and that one's alcoholism will be "exposed."

While there are various reasons for resistance to A.A., the rationalization that it is alien to Jewishness is a comfortable one and frequently exploited. Strangely, one can hear this objection from people who have broken all identity with Judaism. It is a rationalization that is also enjoyed by those who have no reservations about intermarriage. Clearly, objections of this sort are a resistance maneuver and should be recognized as such.

The essence of Alcoholics Anonymous is contained in the Twelve Steps, the adoption of which is a sine qua non for participation in the fellowship. Much confusion can be eliminated if we look at the compatibility of the steps with Jewish theology.

Step One: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.

This step is the foundation of recovery since it identifies the problem. Unless one accepts that a problem exists, efforts to do something about the problem will be futile. Clearly, this Step has no religious connotations. The First Step is without a doubt the most difficult. Typically the alcoholic will deny the problem even when the evidence is blatant and irrefutable. The loss of control over alcohol, whether it is dependency or the inability to stop, is usually recognized by everyone except the drinker. The physical, emotional, social or occupational deterioration of life may be quite evident to family, friends, employer or physician, but the drinker often has the delusion that things are just fine, or that his difficulties are due to the actions of others.

To the active alcoholic Step One is terrifying because it implies that the use of alcohol must be totally abandoned. It is also formidable because the person may perceive admission of powerlessness as a shortcoming or weakness. Considering that alcoholics are invariably lacking in self-esteem, this admission is extremely threatening to the ego. Anything which can help bolster the fragile ego of the alcoholic will make acceptance of powerlessness and the recognition that one has lost control much easier. For the same reason, punitive behavior toward the alcoholic will only depress his self-esteem and make acceptance more difficult. Spiritual guidance directed at improving one's sense of worth is thus helpful in facilitating the first step and initiating recovery.

Step Two: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

The Talmud states, "A person's temptation becomes more intense each day, and were it not that God helps him, it would be impossible for him to resist" (Sukkah, 52b). This statement is universal, applying to all people, great or small, wealthy or poor, learned or unlearned. The Talmud tells us that even though giving in to destructive impulses may be recognized to be foolish and detrimental, no one would be able to resist these urges without the help of God. One's own resources, regardless of how great they may seem, are simply inadequate. Step Two is thus a statement of fundamental Jewish belief.

Step Three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

The phrase "God as we understand Him" is a recurring one in A.A. literature. The wording was intended to avoid identification with any particular denomination.

Step Three is a logical consequence of One and Two. If I've lost control of my life, and there's a greater power that can restore my sanity, then it follows that I must be ready to turn my life over to that higher power. But, for many, this step is almost as difficult to accept as the first. In part, this is due to the contradiction between the verbal acknowledgement of the loss of control and the obstinate efforts in early recovery to maintain control.

Yet turning one's life and will over to the care of God does not mean that one can relinquish responsibility. Although the quoted principle of the Talmud indicates that unaided man is helpless. It clearly does not imply that an individual should make no effort and place total responsibility on God. The Talmud states that God's "Assistance" implies that one is taking some action, but needs help. A person must do everything within his power to make his life constructive and productive. Divine help, if sought, will be forthcoming only when one does his share of the work.

Step Four: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step Five: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

All the works of Jewish moralists and ethicists are replete with need for cheshbon hanefesh. This is a detailed personal accounting taken daily, as well as a more general overview of the direction, accomplishment and shortcomings of one's life taken periodically, with special emphasis in the period beginning with Rosh Hashonah and concluding with Yom Kippur.

The great Chassidic master, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk, states in his "Brief List for Proper Living" that "one must repeatedly confide in another person, whether spiritual counselor or trusted friend, all improper thoughts and impulses which come to one's heart and mind, whether these occur during meditation, while lying idle awaiting onset of sleep, or at any time during the day, and one should not withhold anything because of the shame of embarrassment."

Anyone familiar with the siddur knows that confession before God is not restricted to Yom Kippur. A detailed confession is required twice daily.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty here is admitting to oneself, and one must stand in admiration of the wisdom of this requirement. Many individuals make verbal confessions from which they are completely detached. Confessions that are not accompanied by a sincere regret for the wrong deed and commitment to change are worse than worthless.

A sincere admission of a mistake to God or to another person elicits forgiveness, and so should this admission elicit forgiveness to oneself. Yet many people seem unable to forgive themselves even when the misdeed is acknowledged and sincerely regretted. These individuals carry a heavy load of guilt, and this remains a hindrance to all. For the alcoholic, this unalleviated guilt is a frequent cause of relapse.

Step Six: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step Seven: Humbly asked Him to remove all these defects of character.

These Steps reflect an understanding of human behavior which is well-recognized in Jewish ethics. In Judaism, man is defined not as homo sapiens, a hominoid with intelligence, but as homo spiritus, a hominoid with a divine spirit. According to genesis "God blew into his nostrils a spirit of life, and man became a living being"(II.7). Man's distinction from lower forms of life lies in his spirit, not his intellect.

Man is thus essentially a biological animal with all of the lusts, cravings, impulses and drives that are natural to all animals. In contrast, however, man has a spirit which enables him to master these innate urges. But all that unaided man can do is master these forces. He cannot eradicate them any more than he can change the color of his eyes.

While man alone can't relinquish undesirable internal drives, God can, if his help is sought. A prerequisite for divine intervention, however, is that man first must do all that is within his power to subdue undesirable traits. A person who prays for divine intervention to rid himself of undesirable lust impulses while, at the same time, indulging in sexually provocative literature, can hardly expect divine assistance. Whether it be lust, anger, hate, envy or greed, maximum efforts on one's own part must fully be exhausted before a divine response can be expected. This is the "readiness" required in Step Six and the justification for Step Seven.

Step Eight: Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step Nine: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

The Shulchan Aruch, or Code of Jewish Law, states that all the atonement possible is ineffective if an individual has harmed another, unless forgiveness from the victim has been sought. If the wrong action resulted in financial loss, then adequate restitution is required. If the offended party refuses to grant forgiveness, he is to be approached three times. If he remains obstinate in refusing forgiveness, and the offender sincerely regrets his behavior. Divine forgiveness is assured. If the victim has died, the Shulchan Aruch requires that one take a minyan (a quorum of ten people) and visit the burial place to publicly ask forgiveness.

Step Ten: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

Taking a personal inventory on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is not sufficient. This must be an ongoing process. The need for recognizing a wrong and promptly admitting it is stressed by the Talmud. The longer one delays in admitting a sin, the more apt he is to explain away and justify his behavior, until the sin may even appear as the right course of action.

Step Eleven: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for the knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

One of the first prayers upon rising asks for Divine guidance and the strength to do God's will. In Ethics of the Fathers, the Talmud states, "Make His will your will, and negate your will before His" (11,4).

Step Twelve: 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.

Everywhere in Jewish ethics there is a great emphasis on mutual responsibility for one another's actions. "No man is an island." Just as some diseases are contagious, so is moral and spiritual deterioration. Those who are fortunate enough to achieve a measure of spirituality to not have the right to keep this enlightenment to themselves. The Yiddish phrase, He is a zaddik in pelz, refers to the pious one who keeps warm by wrapping himself in furs. In other words, he maintains a selfish piety. Warmth should be obtained by building a fire so that others can benefit from the heat as well.

A.A. has set an example for reaching out a helping hand. It is not unusual for a person to be awakened in the early hours of the morning in subzero weather and be asked to respond to a call for help from a total stranger. The call is heeded even though the helper realizes that the stranger may change his mind or has fallen into a drunken stupor. Yet recovering alcoholics respond because their disease has taught them in very practical terms that "we either make it together, or we don't make it at all."

Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religion and cannot take the place of religion. Religion deals with ultimates, especially with the ultimate purpose of Man's presence on earth. All Jews need to learn more about their faith and learn from the unlimited resources of Jewish knowledge. The recovering alcoholic has a particular need for positive direction and sense of purpose in his life. A.A. does not provide this.

It has been said that new ideas often have a three-stage course. At first, the idea is thought to be anti-Jewish. Then it is decided it may be compatible with Jewishness after all. Finally, it is declared that Jews thought of it first. This theory notwithstanding, it is difficult to see how anyone can point to any conflict between A.A. philosophy and Judaism.

It is important for Jews as a whole, but especially for Jewish spiritual and communal leaders, to learn more about alcoholism and chemical dependency. In addition to the methods that have been found effective in promoting recovery, the treasury of Jewish tradition and learning has much to offer. A.A. can be an invaluable ally in the comprehensive spiritual growth for recovering Jews everywhere.