

There are some who claim that alcoholism is less prevalent, at least among observant Jews, but the evidence is unclear. More importantly, there is no denying that alcoholism is present in the Jewish community. Substance abuse is at least as prevalent in the Jewish community, if not more prevalent because Jewish people often have more access to doctors who prescribe medications. Jewish people abuse drugs - the legal kind and the illegal kind - just as much, if not more than the general population.

I would like to share with you a couple stories that were shared with me by someone, himself a recovering addict, who counsels many Jewish people who have substance abuse problems. The first is a story of a responsible adult woman, who came to the brink of addiction. He writes:

I took a call from a woman I know and respect. She was a leader at the synagogue, and to my surprise she explained how she had become hooked on prescription drugs. Her doctor had prescribed a common pain killer for her back problem. It helped, but after a few weeks she decided to stop. Now she had a craving. The pain in her voice betrayed the pain in her soul. I almost cried. She wanted to know what was happening to her!

A good woman, intelligent, well-off, with a bright future and a leisurely retirement in sight, yet she found herself trapped. She had followed the doctor's instructions. Her normal reticence guaranteed that she would not over use, but her body wanted more. I explained that everyone's body is different. There is no test to find whether a person is especially susceptible. Clearly she was. She had to stop. She sighed deeply and resolved push her way through it.

I think she'll make it. She wasn't really hooked. She had her fingers nipped by the ringer. It was a warning.

Sometimes, problems start with a young person, who maybe makes the wrong choice of friends, and follows it up with a wrong choice of action. Another account:

I took a call from a desperate Jewish mother.

"What kind of community service jobs are available for my son?"

She had told a judge that the crack pipe found in her son's car did not belong to him, but apparently the judge felt her son needed to perform community service. Though the judge was not fully persuaded, she seemed determined to convince me that her little boy would NEVER use crack!

"He's a musician," she said. As if that explained it all.

OK. If he's not using crack, then your little boy is driving crack-heads all over the county! Tell him that next time the judge won't listen to excuses. 'Your little boy is going to do hard time!' I shouted.

The message finally got through to her. When your little boy lays down with dogs, he is going to wake up with fleas.

Substance abuse in the Jewish community runs the gamut, through each age group and each substance of "choice." These are stories of lives turned upside down, families turned upside down. We are not immune, and so we must be vigilant and aware, caring and compassionate.

Myth #2: There is no domestic abuse in the Jewish community.

Here is another baseless claim. Unfortunately, there are many cases of domestic abuse in the Jewish community, in all the ugly forms that they exist in the outside world: spousal abuse, child abuse, parental abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse, etc.. We are, unfortunately, not immune. Abuse victims are our mothers and fathers, our sisters and brothers, our sons and our daughters. Mistreatment can be physical, verbal, and emotional. The ages of the victims and perpetrators can range from children to senior citizens. While I prepared this sermon, a colleague shared with me this account:

As I studied Judaism I came under the influence of many well studied Jews. I made friends with one man who invited me to his home. His wife was a kind and gracious woman who loved life and could draw out the essence of beauty in every portrait she painted, every image she fashioned, every form she shaped. She was an artist, joyful and tragic at once.

I told her I was learning how to lay tefillin and that I drew a great deal of spiritual energy from doing so. I became serene but she became scornful.

"My ex-husband laid tefillin every day. He also beat me every evening."

She went on to relate a terrible experience. He was cruel to her and in the end, she left him, scorned him, scorned traditional ritual and turned inward. She built a life for herself in that little apartment, drawing life, but rarely venturing out into life. She stayed at home and let her new husband bring people to her.

I told a friend that a man who laid tefillin also beat his wife.

"Impossible!" he shouted.

It is possible. Her eyes told the truth.

Unfortunately, neither Jewish DNA, nor observance of mitzvot can protect us from misdeeds. Even technical observance of every mitzvah is no guarantee that the meaning of those mitzvot will enter into our hearts.

The Dangers of the Myth of Jewish Immunity

Unfortunately, I can't tell you that religion is the answer in these situations. All of the great ills of society are present in the Jewish community and across the spectrum of the Jewish community, from the most unaffiliated to the most Orthodox. And what's worse, sometimes our risk from these problems can be greater than the general population, for a number of reasons.

First, our ignorance of the problem and our false sense of security can stop us from recognizing problems when they exist.

Second, people who suffer from these problems often blame themselves baselessly. The myth that Jews are less prone to these problems can reinforce this debilitating sense of guilt. "I don't understand. I'm Jewish, how could I be so weak that I am a substance abuser." "Jewish husbands don't beat their wives. I must be a bad wife." "I should be able to control my anger on my own . . . After all, I'm Jewish." And so, it is so very important that the message be heard by all in our Jewish community who are victims of abuse, that they are not alone in their predicament.

Third, the idea that these problems don't exist in Judaism can lead us to be less willing to help our friends who are in need. "Jews don't have these problems. It's his fault. Let him deal with it."

Misplaced Jewish values can also be a danger in these situations. There are some who may believe that turning to God should be enough to solve their problems. All they need is faith in God, and magically they will stop being abusive, or they will stop being the victim of abuse. But these are complex problems which demand far more than just a religious solution. In fact, Judaism values not only a belief in God's ability to heal, but in using the God given talents of humanity to heal. In the Talmud, Rav Acha prescribes a prayer to be recited by one who undergoes a medical procedure:⁴ "May it be your will before you A-donay my God that this procedure should be for me for healing, and you should heal me because you are a faithful healing God, and your healing is true, for it is not the way of man to heal, but this is our practice." The great Talmudic sage Abaye objects to the last words of this prayer vociferously, because it implies that human intervention is pointless: "A person should not say that! For it is taught in the academy of Rabbi Yishmael that the fact that the Bible states (Ex. 21:19) (that a person who causes an injury to another) 'shall cause him to be healed' demonstrates that permission to heal is given to doctors." In cases of alcoholism, domestic abuse, and a host of other problems, a faith in God to the exclusion of a faith in human means of healing can be tragically counterproductive.

In the case of domestic violence, other religious issues can create a barrier to finding help. Judaism places a great value on *שלום בית* (*shelom bayit*), the peace of the household. This value may lead an abused spouse to believe that the abuse is a demonstration of their own failure. They may also mistakenly believe that it is their obligation under *shelom bayit* to work through what may be intolerable and dangerous situations, forgetting that their primary responsibility in Judaism is to *פקוח נפש* (*pikuach nefesh*) - the protection of one's own life and wellbeing.

The dangers can go even further. A community which lacks proper attention to these problems, or has misplaced priorities may well facilitate and enable an abusive relationship or a substance problem, rather than interceding to help solve the problem. Negative chatter among a community can also be greatly hurtful to the victims of these problems.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Berachot 60a. The prayer is prescribed for one who is having a blood letting. The text reads as follows: יהי רצון מלפניך ה' א-להי שיהא עסק זה לי לרפואה ותרפאני, כי אל רופא נאמן אתה ורפואתך אמת, לפי שאין דרכן של בני אדם לרפאות אלא שנהגו. אמר אביי: לא לימא אינש הכי, דתני דבי רבי ישמעאל: +שמות כ"א+ ורפא ירפא - מכאן שניתנה רשות לרופא לרפאות. The translation in the main text is my own.

The Power of Religion

No, Judaism is no panacea. But that doesn't mean it can't help. Religion is often our greatest support in times of need. It is no accident that just about every 12 step program out there includes a religious component. Often the feeling of being alone with our problems can be all consuming. Faith in God gives us a constant partner in our struggles. Faith gives us hope that things can get better and the sense that there are people who can support us. Faith also gives us a belief that we can do penance for what we may have done wrong, and that we can move on toward a better future.

One of the most important teachings of Judaism is that each of us is created *בצלך א-להים*, *in the image of God*. Everything we do, every mitzvah we perform is an opportunity to reflect that divine image in our lives, and to reinforce our own cosmic importance. That sense of self worth is an important tool for the recovering substance abuser or the domestic violence survivor.

No, Judaism is not "THE" answer. An alcoholic that finds God does not cease to be an alcoholic. He or she simply becomes an alcoholic with a powerful ally at his or her side in order to battle that disease. In the case of a victim of abuse, God alone will not take the abuse victim out of the home of the abuser, but may hold his or her hand on the way out the door, and throughout the rest of his or her life.

The Power of the Jewish Community

Just as important as the help that someone in need can find within his or her own religious self, there is so much that they can gain from a strong and caring Jewish community. There are many important steps that we must take as a community.

Awareness

The first, and I think most important step is achieving an honest awareness of these problems. They are real, and they exist. We must spread this word not only so that we can keep an eye out, but also so that the victims can know that they are not alone.

Caring and Compassion

Next, we must be caring and compassionate. Remember, the people who are victims here are victims not because of weakness or a character flaw, but because of a disease. Our job, **ALWAYS**, is to help and **NEVER** to judge. Sometimes, we tend to blame the victim. We figure that they got themselves into the mess, they can get themselves out. We forget about the very strong emotional barriers that remain. We forget about the emotional attachment and dependence that the victim of abuse is programmed to have for his or her abuser. We forget that alcoholism is a disease, or maybe we don't really understand what that means. Here's an explanation I received from the counselor I mentioned earlier:

I have been told that alcoholism and drug abuse is a disease. That is probably true. But it is not a disease like a cold or cancer. It is a disease like heart disease. What is heart disease? It is many things. Sometimes it is genetic. We are born with it. Sometimes it is a product of our bad habits, something we can avoid if we give the utmost care.

The fact that there is a human component to this problem does not mean it is any less a disease worthy of our care. Blame is perhaps the greatest barrier to caring. We **MUST** place all of our energies at seeking to solve problems, not at laying blame for them.

Vigilance

To our awareness and caring, we must add vigilance. We are the first responders. The Jewish community and the secular community offer a great deal of resources to help with these problems. For the victims of violence, there is Jewish Women International, and "Dayenu," the domestic violence initiative of the New York Board of Rabbis. For alcoholism and substance abuse, there are organizations like JACS, Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons, and Significant Others. Your local Rabbi or Jewish Family Service may well know what to do and where to turn. But each of us is the eyes and ears. We must watch carefully, and train ourselves to notice warning signs. We must demonstrate caring and understanding, so our friends and family in need can feel comfortable turning to us for help. Many people out there will be comfortable coming to the professionals in their lives for help. There are a number of people who have come into my office seeking help in situations of domestic abuse or substance abuse, among the many issues that they come to discuss. Yet unfortunately, there will be some who are not ready to speak to their Rabbi. There are some who won't bring up these problems to their Doctors. So it may well be you who they come to talk to. Or it may be you who realizes that you must start moving your friend or loved toward finding help.

Obviously, I can't make a long sermon even longer by giving a seminar on how to detect these problems, but it would be foolish to tell people to be on alert without giving some ideas of what to be on alert for. So, here is a short list of warning signs of domestic violence which I found on the Jewish Women International website:

- A husband or boyfriend acts very controlling and puts a woman down in front of other people.
- He acts extremely jealous of others who pay attention to her, especially men.
- The woman becomes quiet when he's around and seems afraid of making him angry.
- She stops seeing her friends and family members, becoming more and more isolated.
- She often cancels plans at the last minute.
- He controls her finances, her behavior and even with whom she socializes.
- He violently loses his temper, striking or breaking objects.
- She has unexplained injuries, or the explanations she offers do not quite add up.
- She often is late, misses work, or has lower work productivity and quality.
- Her children are frequently upset or withdrawn and won't say why.
- The husband or boyfriend threatens to or actually harms the pets.

And here are some warning signs of substance abuse⁵:

- A repeating failure to meet social, occupational or familial duties.
- Bizarre or lame excuses for social, occupational or family failures.
- Borrowing (or stealing) money without good reasons.
- Uncharacteristic mood or personality changes.
- Puncture marks, or long thin lines along the arms or legs (alternatively, wearing clothing that is not appropriate to the season in order to cover these marks).
- Skin Infections.
- Nose and throat problems.
- Drowsiness, or loss of coordination.
- Red or bloodshot eyes.

⁵ Source: Based on a selections from a list at
http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=8082&cn=14

- Drug-related smells on clothing.
- Drug-related paraphernalia.

Conclusion

I'd like to end where we began. With משה רבנו (*Moshe Rabenu*) reminding us: וּבַחֲרַתְּ בְּחַיִּים *choose life*. Life has a great many challenges. We recognize that Judaism is no panacea to cure every ill and woe, but we pray that our Jewish faith and our Jewish observance be a blessing to us at all times. We know that our primary goal is to make the right choices that will best respond to the challenges with which we are presented. We pray that we will all be privileged to see God's Torah as a beacon of light helping to illuminate for us the best and wisest path. May the choices that we make be choices that give us the greatest strength of character, and help us to be the most effective support that we can be for ourselves and others.

To those of you here who are victims, we pray that your Jewish faith be a source of strength through your troubles. We pray that our Jewish community be one of caring and sensitivity, a warm, friendly, and supportive place for you to turn in your time of need. May you be blessed with strength from heaven, and love from your fellow man. And let us say, Amen.