

***Mi She-Berach* for Those Suffering with Addiction**
With Study Questions and Commentary
By Rabbi Paul Steinberg

Mi she-berach avoteinu Avraham, Yitzchak v'Yaakov, V'imoteinu Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, v'Leah...

May the one who blessed our ancestors
Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah,
bring blessings of compassion and healing
to those who suffer from the oppression of addiction.

Turn their eyes away from the seductions and cravings
that crush their spirits with cruel bondage.
Return them to their holy dignity
and restore them to wholeness
of spirit, of body, and of mind.
Do not let the inclination to evil control them
or lead to selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear.

Mekor Ha-Rachamim, Source of Mercy,
send our loved ones and friends the strength of spirit
to recover Your Great Reality within
and the serenity to accept Your will.
Open their hearts to the truth of our love
and may they awaken to Your presence
through *mitzvot* and spiritual practice.
May this be Your will and may it happen right now.
Amen.

Commentary & Study Questions

Commentary

oppression from addiction. Addiction is not a moral shortcoming as a result of bad choices by bad people. Addiction is defined by the American Society of Addiction Medicine as a disease with physiological, psychological, and spiritual symptoms. Furthermore, addiction is characterized by the inability to either control or enjoy their addictive behavior, including substance use, behavioral processes (e.g., gambling, eating), or relational dynamics (e.g., codependency). Therefore, addiction is not a personal choice and therefore, appropriately analogous to the Jewish motifs of oppression and slavery.

turn their eyes away. See Numbers 15:39, *lo taturu acharei levavchem v'acharei eineichem asher atem zonim achareihem*, “do not follow your heart and eyes that you are seduced by them” (also in the third paragraph of the *Shema*). Addiction, like idolatry in the Torah, leads individuals to follow impulses that relieve them from immediate discomfort and anxiety.

cravings. See Numbers 11:4, *hit'avu ta'avah*, “they craved a craving.” Cravings are the primary symptom of addiction. Cravings are not simply desires for pleasure, but rather they are responses to a genuine suffering. This suffering is physiological due to a depletion of neurochemicals in the brain. The suffering is also psychological and spiritual, as addicts are overcome with the need to relieve the obsessive preoccupation with discomfort and anxiety they experience without their addictive behavior.

crush their spirits with cruel bondage. See Exodus 6:9, *mi-kotzer ru'ach u'me-avodah kashah*, “their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.” Like the slaves in Egypt, addicts often feel a hopeless despair that no matter what they do they cannot change their circumstances, even in the midst of help.

return. The Jewish means of spiritual repair is *teshuvah*, literally meaning, “return.” According to rabbinic sages (B.T., *Pesachim* 54a), *teshuvah* was created before the world, as if the opportunity and means to mend errors and fix mistakes was built into the spiritual system. Essentially, *teshuvah* involves taking responsibility for what we have done, making amends to those we may have harmed, and refraining from committing the same grievances. In taking these steps, we gain back or return to our core holy dignity.

holy dignity. The Torah proclaims that every human being is created *b'Tzelem Elohim*, “in the Divine Image” (Gen. 1:27). As such, human beings are afforded the dignities of their infinite worth, equality among all other human beings despite external differences, and uniqueness (see Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 4:5). Fueled by shame, addiction often results in a denial of self-worth and dignity. From a spiritual perspective, early recovery involves reclaiming one's own divine spark and dignity.

wholeness of spirit, of body, and of mind. Addiction is an experience of individual brokenness and division. The body may be broken down; the mind is torn and conflicted; and the spirit is divided and confused. The healing of addiction is indeed a return to wholeness through integrating the disparate parts of the self. “Mind” here may be translated as *lev*, literally meaning “heart.” The heart in biblical language is not merely the seat of our emotions but is also intrinsically related to our thinking, such as its use in the *v'Ahavta* (i.e., *b'khol levav'kha*). Moreover, the integration of mind and heart is a critical component of spiritual well-being.

inclination to evil. I.e., *Yetzer Ha-Ra*. The daily morning list of blessings (*Birkot Ha-Shachar*) concludes with a paragraph, beginning with the words *Yehi Ratzon*, “May it be Your will.” The paragraph includes the phrase *v'al tashlet banu Yetzer Ha-Ra*, “Do not let the inclination to evil control us.” So too, in addition the impulsive *Yetzer Ha-Ra* contributes to self-destructive thinking and behaviors. As the Rabbinic sages suggest (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1), we pray for the strength to master our evil inclination rather than have it master us.

selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. See, *Alcoholics Anonymous* (a.k.a. “The Big Book”), pg. 84. Step Ten in 12-Step programs suggests that we continue to take a moral inventory of ourselves. “The Big Book” notes that the four primary areas with which to evaluate ourselves are selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. Accordingly, when we fall into the psycho-spiritual traps of these areas, we lose our spiritual fitness and become susceptible to the power of the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* and our addictive behaviors.

Mekor Ha-Rachamim, Source of Mercy. Mercy stands at the opposing end of judgment in Jewish spiritual philosophy (e.g., *din*/judgment versus *rachamim*/mercy). Addicts face a tremendous amount of judgment due to the social stigma that surrounds it. The harshest judgment that addicts face, however, is self-imposed judgment, which is related to their own shame and guilt. We pray to counterbalance the attribute of judgment with God’s grace and mercy, for it is through the mercy of second chances and renewed opportunities that the healing process is aided.

recover. The term “recovery” has many possible meanings in terms of the healing from addiction. What, one may ask, is it exactly that we recover? There are a range of answers to this question, including health, well-being, moral integrity, and potential self. Ultimately, however, what we recover is a spiritual connection (e.g., to a power greater than oneself or God), which is the cornerstone for all future emotional and spiritual growth.

Your Great Reality within. See “The Big Book,” pg. 55. The concept of God is surely a significant feature of 12-Step programs. That being said, how one may conceive of God or a “Higher Power” is open to individual interpretation, punctuated by the 12-Step refrain: “God as we understand Him.” The phrase here is drawn from the reference to God as “the Great Reality deep down within,” which is perhaps the closest “The Big Book” comes to defining God. It is noteworthy that this conception of God points to the inner-life and self as the source of divine reality from which we can discover healing.

serenity to accept Your will. Serenity is a common phrase in 12-Step communities, especially in the framework of the “Serenity Prayer,” inspired by Reinhold Niebuhr. Both Jewish spirituality and the 12-Steps teach that we can find serenity when we learn to align our own will with God’s will, as opposed to running our lives on self-will alone (see *Avot* 2:4 where it says, “Do God’s will as though it were yours...” and Step 3: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*”).

spiritual practice. In Judaism, there are *mitzvot*, which constitute a system of holy living through practices and ritual. 12-Step programs (as well as other spiritual traditions) also suggest certain spiritual practices and rituals that do not contradict Jewish practices, but rather enhance them. This phrase is in the prayer to make space for those in recovery from addiction who also gain meaning and strength from useful and effective contemporary spiritual practices that may not be in the canon of traditional *mitzvot* (e.g., varying forms of meditation, prayer, exercise, nutrition, study of 12-Step literature).

may it happen right now. The traditional *Mi She-Berach* concludes with the phrase *u'vizman kariv*, suggesting that healing be “close at hand.” Because of the gravity and immediate life-threatening conditions of addiction, we explicitly pray that it happen immediately.

Study Questions

- How is addiction like oppression? Is it possible to oppress oneself?
 - The Torah teaches in Exodus (ch. 6) that the spirits of the Israelite slaves were crushed. Addiction also crushes the spirit. How is the experience of slavery similar to that of addiction that they both crush our spirits?
 - At what point do seductions and cravings begin to crush our spirits?
 - Define the terms: selfishness; dishonesty; resentment; and fear?
 - In 12-Step programs, resentment is deemed to be the “number one offender” that is at the root of addiction. Why might this be?
 - How are the inclination to evil (the *Yetzer Ha-Ra*) and fear related? Does fear cause the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* or vice versa?
 - Many addicts experience a great sense of shame. How is shame related to the *Yetzer Ha-Ra*?
 - When in recovery for addiction, what is it that addicts recover?
 - Is recovery the same thing as the Jewish concept of *teshuvah* or “return”?
 - A common theme in recovery from addiction is aligning one’s life with God’s will (it is the 3rd Step of the 12-Steps). What does that mean and why is that such an important spiritual principle?
 - Why is it so important for recovering addicts to have a program of recovery that includes spiritual practices such as prayer/meditation, writing out fears and resentments, making formal apologies, attending meetings, and being of service? How might having a program of recovery be similar to Jewish observance and practice? Do we all need a “spiritual program” of some sort?
 - In the prayer book (*siddur*) God’s love is demonstrated through the giving of the Torah and *mitzvot* (see *Ahavah Rabbah* prayer). Which *mitzvot* and/or spiritual practices help you to know God’s love?
 - *What can we do to help raise awareness around addiction and to minimize its consequences in our communities?*
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