

## **From Shopping And Video Games to Sex and Heroin: An Exploration of Addiction and A High That Lasts.**

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**Rabbi K'vod Wieder**

Stephen Reid – author, incarcerated bank robber, and self described his first hit of narcotics at age eleven: “There is a memory so fixed and so perfect that on certain days, my brain listens to no other,” I am in profound awe of the ordinary – the pale sky, the blue spruce tree, the rusty barbed-wire fence, those dying yellow leaves. I am high. I am eleven years old and in communion with this world. Wholly innocent, I enter into the heart of unknowing.” (Crozier and Lane , *Addicted: Notes from the Belly of the Beast*)

In this hearing this addict’s experience, most of us can relate to the desire for wholeness, for moments when all is right with the world. We all crave for a release from pain and boredom, and in our ways, we seek out experiences and moments where we are free from the humdrum and the bondage of our own minds.

Unfortunately, most of us are unwilling to acknowledge the extent in which our search for these experiences have compromised our lives and who we want to be in the world. To acknowledge alcohol and drug addiction in our own lives or the lives of those close to us is taboo because of all the shame and judgment that we hear in our own heads and fear from those around us.

Rabbi Paul Steinberg, a counselor at Beit Teshuvah, a Jewish recovery center in Los Angeles and author of *Recovery, the 12 Steps and Jewish Spirituality* writes that admitting he was an alcoholic especially difficult because of his Jewish identity. He writes:

“Whether it was good old fashioned Jewish guilt, or the unspoken rule that Jews shouldn’t hang our dirty laundry out to dry lest we give anyone an excuse to dislike us, or that being an

alcoholic just isn't something that happens to a "nice Jewish boy" (especially a rabbi), I spent a long time denying the truth about my disease. After all, what am I saying about myself when I admit that I am an alcoholic? Am I a bad Jew, or worse, a bad person with tainted moral fiber? Am I a failure in life? Am I intellectually and emotionally inferior to others? Being an alcoholic carries with it a stigma – a scarlet letter, if you will – in our society. Adding the weight of the Jewish community's expectations and judgments, my fear was that, with my admission to being an alcoholic, I would forever be doomed to dwell on the margins of society and be rejected by my own Jewish community."

I have had more than one congregant who upon dealing with the reality of having a drug addicted child, has felt marginalized by their own synagogue community. People they thought were friends slowly pulled away when they sought out emotional support. They found they just weren't included in the same way as they were before.

Whether one is struggling with the unmanageability and danger of their own addiction, or with that of a family member, the experience is especially devastating because of the isolation and the lack of community support. Who can we turn to? Who can we hold on to?

The famous psychologist Carl Jung noticed that all of us have aspects of our psyche that we are not willing to acknowledge. He called this the "shadow" and observed that when we don't acknowledge certain elements in ourselves, we are uncomfortable and aversive to those elements in others. I believe that this is the case with addiction.

Dr. Gabor Mate a physician and expert on addiction treatment writes: "There is one addiction process, whether it is manifested in the lethal substance dependencies of those who daily endanger their lives, the frantic self-soothing of overeaters or shopaholics; the obsessions of gamblers, sexaholics, and compulsive Internet users; or the socially acceptable and even admired behaviors of the workaholic."

Pain and hurt is at the center of all addictive behaviors. It is present in the gambler, the Internet addict, the compulsive shopper, and the workaholic. The wound may not be as deep and the ache not as excruciating as some, and it may even be entirely hidden – but its there.

I have come to see addiction, not as a discrete, solid entity – a case of “Either you got it or you don’t’ got it” – but as a subtle and extensive continuum. Its central, defining qualities are active in all addicts, from the honored workaholic at the apex of society to the impoverished and criminalized crack fiend who haunts the worst parts of our cities. Personally, I find myself somewhere along that continuum.

Experts on addiction define it as any repeated behavior, substance-related or not, in which a person feels compelled to persist, regardless of its negative impact on his life and the lives of others. Addiction involves:

1. Compulsive engagement with the behavior, a preoccupation with it
2. Impaired control over the behavior.
3. Persistence or relapse despite evidence of harm
4. Dissatisfaction, irritability, or intense craving when the object – be it a drug, activity, or other goal – is not immediately available.

“Dependence” can be understood as a powerful attachment to harmful substances or behaviors, and this definition gives us a clearer picture of addiction. The addict comes to depend on the substance or behavior in order to make himself feel momentarily calmer or more excited or less dissatisfied with his life.

And let us remember that any passion can become an addiction; but then how to distinguish between the two? The central question is: who is in charge, the individual or their behavior? It’s possible to rule a passion, but an obsessive passion that a person is unable to rule is an addiction. And the addiction is the repeated behavior in which a person keeps engaging, even

though he knows it harms himself or others. How it looks externally is irrelevant. The key issue is a person's internal relationship to the passion and its related behaviors.

If in doubt, ask yourself one simple question: given the harm you're doing to yourself and others, are you willing to stop? If not, you're addicted. And if you're unable to renounce the behavior or to keep your pledge when you do, you're addicted.

There is a deeper more ossified layer beneath any kind of addiction: the denial state in which, contrary to all reason and evidence, you refuse to acknowledge that you're hurting yourself or anyone else. In the denial state you're completely resistant to asking yourself any questions at all. But if you want to know, look around you. Are you closer to the people you love after your passion has been fulfilled or more isolated? Have you come more truly into who you really are, or are you left feeling hollow?

An alcoholic shares his first experience of a 12 step meeting: "I thought I was just a guy who drank too much and who just needed some other way to cope. When I started coming to meetings, it was clear to me that you all were insane, but not me. And then, slowly I started seeing myself in you. Staying up late and drinking secretly while my wife slept. Starting to drink earlier and earlier in the day. Then on Saturday night when we were having some of my wife's business associates over for dinner, I hid a bottle of gin in the bathroom and pretended to have diarrhea so I could slip away and drink without anyone knowing. Of course they knew and my wife was mortified, but I didn't care. Her guests left early and awkwardly, she started crying and I went into the bathroom to drink. Then it hit me. I was you. I was insane."

The difference between passion and addiction can also be described as the difference between a divine spark and a flame that incinerates. The sacred fire through which Moshe experienced the presence of God on Mount Horeb did not annihilate the bush from which it arose: Passion is a divine fire: it enlivens and makes holy; it gives light and yields inspiration. Passion is generous because it's not ego-driven. Addiction is self-centered. Passion gives and enriches;

addiction is a thief. Passion is a source of truth and enlightenment; addictive behaviors lead you into darkness. You're more alive when you are passionate, and you triumph whether or not you attain your goal. But an addiction requires a specific outcome that feeds the ego; without that outcome, the ego feels empty and deprived. A consuming passion that you are helpless to resist, no matter what the consequences, is an addiction.

Understanding the the neurobiology of the brain in substance-addicted individuals makes clear how these brain chemical dynamics touch all of us in the experience of addiction. Drugs and alcohol could not affect us the way that they do unless they worked on natural processes in the human brain and made use of the brain's innate chemical apparatus. Drugs influence and alter how we act and feel because they resemble the brain's own natural chemicals. The brain systems involved in addiction are among the key organizers and motivators of human emotional life and behavior – which is why addiction has such a powerful hold on all of us. I'd like to take a few moments to share the briefest introduction to our neurobiology through discussing three major brain networks – the opioid apparatus, the dopamine system, and the self regulation system in the cortex.

The defining molecules of the opioid apparatus are the brain's "natural narcotics" – the endorphins, which are powerful soothers of pain, both physical and emotional. They are also important regulators of the autonomic nervous system, and they are chemical catalysts for enabling emotional bonding between mother and infant.

So, addiction to opiates like morphine and heroin, is an addiction to a sense of security, well being, and love. Opiates do not "take away" pain. Instead, they reduce our consciousness of it as an unpleasant stimulus. Opiates help make some pain bearable.

While the brain's opiate receptors are the natural template for feelings of reward, soothing, and connectedness, they are also triggered by narcotic drugs, and they play a role in other

addictions too. In a study of alcoholics, opioid receptor activity was diminished in several brain regions, and this was associated with increased alcohol craving.

If opioids help consummate our reward-seeking activities by giving us pleasure, dopamine initiates these activities in the first place. It also plays a major role in the learning of new behaviors and their incorporation into our lives. The experience of craving or desire corresponds with a release of dopamine into our system. That is why the anticipation – whether in the shopaholic, the sexaholic, or the drug addict is as much of a pleasurable experience if not more so than the fulfillment of the desire.

That is why addiction inevitably involves both opioid and dopamine circuitry. Desire, wanting, and craving are all incentive feelings, so it is easy to see why dopamine is central to non-drug-related addictions, too, like shopping. On the other hand, opioids – innate or external are more responsible for the pleasure-reward aspects of addiction.

Finally, scientific studies have also shown that addiction disrupts the self-regulation circuits in the brain – which the addict needs in order to choose not to be an addict.

The Orbitofrontal Cortex or the OFC is powerfully affected by drugs and powerfully reinforces the drug habit. It also plays an essential supporting role in non-drug addictions. It serves as the brain's mission control room. Imaging studies consistently indicate that the OFC works abnormally in drug abusers, showing malfunctioning patterns in blood flow, energy use, and activations. With an impaired OFC, we can see how an addict overvalues the drug or the behavior making it her chief concern – and often the only concern, undervaluing other objectives, such as food or health or relationships. In short, it fails at its task of impulse inhibition, aiding and abetting the enemy.

Scientific research on nonsubstance addictions like gambling, overeating, shopping, video games, and sexual pursuits suggest the involvement of similar brain regions as in the drug user.

Gamblers and compulsive shoppers show an increase in dopamine and a decrease the the rational activity of the OFC. Junk foods and sugar provides a quick fix of endorphins and addictive eaters have been shown to have fewer dopamine receptors. For someone with a relative shortage of dopamine receptors, its whichever activity best releases extra quantities of this euphoric and invigorating neurotransmitter that will become the object of addictive pursuit. In effect, people become addicted to their own brain chemicals.

While we all have the natural brain chemicals necessary for survival like endorphins and dopamine, why are some of us more prone to seek certain experiences in an addictive way? According to Rabbi Rami Shapiro, a spiritual teacher and recovering overeater, addictive behavior is about playing God. He writes that playing God is “living under the delusion that life is controllable. It means constantly struggling to maintain the delusion that you are controlling it. It means lying to yourself all day, everyday, insisting that, with enough effort, you can get life to do whatever it is you want it to do. It means having to mask your failure at controlling life by blaming others – your parents, your spouse or partner, your children, your colleagues, your friends – for your failure. It means having to dull the pain of failure of control with booze, pills, television, overwork, or whatever your method of numbing yourself to the reality of life’s uncontrollability may be.”

Rosh Hashanah helps us move into the new year by acknowledging that no matter how it appears, so much is not under our control. In the twelve step recovery program, The first step of recovery from addiction is admitting powerlessness. As an alcoholic states: “You want to know what powerless is? Powerless is losing your wife, your kid, and your job to booze, and then, when you sober up just enough to maybe pick up the phone and try to call them, you pick up the bottle instead.”

When we realize more clearly our lack of control, the more powerless we discover ourselves to be. And the more powerless we experience ourselves to control life, the less we struggle against it. Then, instead of spending all our effort trying to control life, we can actually live it, be

present with it. But that means being willing to be present with pain. It means being present with irritability, discomfort, boredom, with a low level of dopamine flowing through us. It means trusting that life will be okay even if it doesn't fit the models in our minds. But to be present to these uncomfortable experiences requires that we have alternatives to raise our dopamine levels and our endorphin levels. We have to find ways to do this that don't keep us locked in the prison of self-centeredness.

Another key element in the twelve steps that is all about the inner work that our tradition asks us to do this season is the fourth step - taking a moral inventory of ourselves. Judaism calls this a *cheshbon haNefesh* – an accounting of the soul. This searching moral inventory is one that honestly and thoroughly examines the vices and addictions that haunt our lives. The main obstacle to doing this for all of us is our pride – the ego's strategy for not fully taking responsibility for our spiritual and social lives by blaming others. The author C.S Lewis writes:

“Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind...If you want to find out how proud you are, the easiest way is to ask yourself, “How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or patronize me, or show off...” Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others.”

It is our pride that, in looking at others who struggle with addiction, can only feel ok about ourselves if we say – “that is not me.” I'm better than that. When we sit down to be honest with ourselves through taking our own inventory, we notice the ways that addiction plays a role in our lives and that letting go of our pride allows us to admit we are working through our own slavery.



The key to making this kind of list is to do it without judgment – to do it with the same accuracy and objectivity that we bring to any other inventory. A recovering sexaholic was struggling with this process because of the shame he felt when he was truly honest. But then, he writes:

“I was taking inventory at work, something we do quarterly, and I just made the link from one kind of inventory to another. I didn’t get mad or ashamed because we have so many boxes of a product on the shelves; it was just a fact. I began to approach my moral inventory the same way I approach my stockroom inventory. I imagined my life to be a series of stockroom shelves and I just recorded what I found lying on them.”

There is a great story about a woman who went to the Buddha in tears, carrying a dead child. “Lord Buddha, I have heard that you can bring the dead back to life. This is my son who died only this morning. I beg you, Lord Buddha, restore him to me.”

The Buddha agreed, provided that the woman bring him a single mustard seed from a home in the village that had not experienced death. The woman ran to the village and went door to door to find even one household that had not been touched by death. She failed. When she returned to the Buddha, her grief was no less but her attitude toward it had changed. She knew the inevitability of suffering and futility of seeking to make things other than they are. She could now mourn her child and move on.

This woman still had to experience her grief, her pain. Accepting her son’s death did not diminish her suffering, it only meant that she did not waste more energy denying reality. When she shared her story with the villagers and heard their stories of death and loss, she also developed compassion. Her world expanded to include not only the pain of her son, but the pain of other people who lost loved ones. And, finally, she realized that accepting the present is not the same as accepting the future. As Dr. Valerie Goode states, “You change what is next. What is is what is given to you in the present moment. What you do with what is creates the

next moment. Freedom, if there is such a thing, lies not in changing what is, but in creating what is next.”

And, this is what Rosh Hashanah is all about. Rosh Hashanah celebrates the miracle of creation – and specifically our ability to create what is next. And the only way that we can do this is if we, to use a metaphor, crown God as the Creator of the World. Accepting God as Melech HaOlam means that we have let go of controlling the outcome. It means that we accept what is. And we don’t do this in isolation, we do this in community. We do this with our hearts open to each other – that we are all on a journey of recovery, of return/*teshuvah* together.

There is a saying in twelve step programs, that “if you are not in recovery, you are in denial.” This means that all of us fall on the spectrum of addiction – all of us turn to outside sources to ease our pain, to make life ok, instead of realizing that in this moment everything is filled with God – that we are part of a beauty and a wholeness that is miraculous. For some of us, our lives have become unmanageable due to addiction. For others of us, if we are honest with ourselves, we notice that we compromise our integrity in certain areas of our lives due to addiction. And for some of us, we realize that we are not living fully, in our creative potential, or in our relationships because of addiction.

It is my hope that as we begin to identify where addictive elements operate in each one of us, not only will we begin the new year with an engaged sense of recovery and growth, but we will open our hearts to each other. We will create a space in our synagogue and our communities where each one of us can be honest about our own addictions or those of our family members. Where we won’t be afraid to reach out for help. And where we won’t marginalize each other’s experience as shameful because we have accepted it’s reality in ourselves.