``Hi my name is Dan and I am a Food Addict

A year ago that is how the story I am about to tell you began. I walked into a room in the basement of a church, a room filled with people I didn't know, a church not a synagogue, and from the far corner of the room, hiding quite literally behind a pillar I stood and said those ten words, "Hi my name is Dan and I am a Food Addict."

The story I am about to tell you is my story, and I struggled with this sermon and whether or not to share it with you because it is so personal and because it comes with a great deal of private shame. But I am compelled to share it because my story may be your story, and almost certainly it is the story of someone you know and love.

Research shows that one in ten people are substance abusers. One in three people know someone, a family member or close friend, who is addicted. These statistics suggest, and my experience confirms, that sitting among us today are people; Temple members suffering from addictions such as overeating, drug addiction, and gambling, alcoholism, co-dependency and more. They are our Moms or Dads, brothers or sisters, sons or daughters, aunts or uncles, friends or co-workers. They are ourselves. When a person suffers with addiction and addictive behavior everyone around them suffers as well.

My story began actually a few weeks before I stepped into that 12-step meeting in a church basement. Most 12-step meetings by the way take place in churches – not because the 12-step programs are decidedly Christian – they are ecumenical perhaps to a fault – but because the Jewish community has lived in denial about addiction and substance abuse for generations. In the 18th century no less of a scholar than Immanuel Kant taught that "women, ministers and Jews do not get drunk". Like the once popular Yiddish tune A *Shikkur* Is a Goy" suggests – we erroneously believed that substance abuse was not a Jewish problem. In point of fact the Jewish problem is that many continue to believe this *shtel legend* – we have been silent too long in the shadow it casts on our community – we are not immune.

A few weeks before Rosh Hashanah last year I did what I have been extolling my congregation to do every year for the High Holy Days, I actually listened to one of my own sermons and reflected on the words of the prayers we say in this sanctuary. As I examined my soul in preparation for the High Holy Days I not only heard but for the first time I listened to the haunting and prophetic words of the *Unataneh Tokef* Prayer. "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and Yom Kippur it is sealed who shall live and who shall die, who shall reach ripe old age and who shall not, who by fire and who by beast…" we know the litany well. I came to the verse "who by hunger and who by thirst" and I realized the prayer was talking about me. In a clarity of purpose I realized that I was wasting the miracle of my own creation and that if I didn't get control over my relationship with food – I quite literary might not be around for the relationships in my life that mattered most.

I realized over this past year that during my adult life eating had become my default response to just about everything. Something good happens lets go out to eat and

celebrate. Had a bad day – I need a treat. Family gets together – lets have a feast. My relationship with food was like the old synopsis of Judaism that travels around the internet from year to year all "Jewish holidays can be reduced to one . . . explanation: 'They tried to get us, God rescued us, let's eat!"

They say that the difference between an emotional adult and an emotional child is that the child thinks they will live forever and the adult realizes that they won't. It is the reason that 17 year olds drive 90 miles an hour on a freeway at 2am in the morning and why parents of a new born drive home from the hospital at 10 miles an hour. The former thinks they will live forever and the later with a baby in the back seat realizes that they won't and wants to make every moment last. It is the most important lesson we learn in life - life is finite so don't waste a minute and don't hurry the process along.

I had always read the verse, "who by hunger and who by thirst" as describing those who die of starvation or dehydration – exotic ends that I was pretty sure would never apply to me. Indeed you could say that pound by pound I quite literarily insolated myself against starving to death. But those of us who suffer from addiction have a hunger and a thirst that is insatiable – not just for food or drink; but for any substance or activity that we can't resist or can't get enough of. For some it is food and drink, or drugs – but for many others it may be an insatiable need to always be working we live to work rather than work in order to live. For others – those who are checking there blackberries and have there cell phone on vibrate right now in this sanctuary we are unable to disconnect from the outside world – which often leaves us disconnected from those around us, from what is happening right now. We know people for whom shopping is therapy and who accumulate stuff and debt beyond there needs or capacity. And we know others whose thirst for love, affection and attention blinds them to the perils of their choices and traps them in relationships and behaviors that compromise who they are and who they dream of becoming.

You become and addict when you can no longer stop yourself from going down that path. You become and addict when you do one of these things more than or longer than you planned, when there is a compulsion to continue it, when you try to cut down and you can't, and when you continue to abuse the substance or experience despite your knowledge that it is going to cause you significant difficulty with school, work, your emotions or your family.

A few weeks before Rosh Hashanah last year – I realized that was me - the first step. I realized that I was powerless over food and that my life had become unmanageable. Self knowledge is the critical first step of a 12-step program of recovery – but it is often not one that the addict can take on their own.

We all have secrets – things about ourselves that are just to embarrassing to reveal or admit – for me the open secret – one that you have all known and seen for the past 10 years that I have been your Rabbi was that I had a problem with food. But while it was no secret it was also not something that I would ever let anyone talk with me about.

Throughout my adult life family and friends had tried, some tactfully and some bluntly – I heard but I didn't listen. That is the thing about addiction it is a disease of isolation. Not able to admit our failings to ourselves – we close our ears to the pleadings of others and self medicate with our substance or behavior of choice.

But when the chorus grows loud enough even the person who doesn't listen can't help but hear. And if you hear something often enough, loud enough, in just the right way you may be compelled to listen. That is why the response to addiction has so often been an intervention; to gather together the people that love the person the most and to lovingly confront them with the reality of there life as it is experienced by others. To fulfill the mitzvah of *tochecha* or giving a rebuke, confronting the one we love with a clear picture of how there behavior is affecting them and those around them and then offer them a path toward wholeness and recovery- a *derech l'shalom* – a way toward peace of mind, body and spirit.

In my own story that encounter came over a series of months as one by one people I cared about and who clearly cared about me brought up the subject and offered me a hand out of the hole I was digging for myself with a knife and fork. One by one they began to wear down my defenses, I pushed back for sure, but to there credit they didn't love me less because I was stubborn – they loved me more and the chorus for change grew louder. I prayed for God to help me confront that which I could not handle on my own and I realized that God was already helping me, he had sent me these people who loved and cared for me into my life.

It was like the old joke about the man who is trapped on the porch of his house as flood waters begin to rise, a boat comes by to rescue him and he says no, I will wait for God to save me. The waters rise to the second story, another boat comes by his window this time and again he says no I will wait for God to rescue me. The waters rise again and he is on his roof clinging to his chimney for his very life a Helicopter hovers over head, they throw him a line and he shouts back no I will wait for God to save me. He drowns and goes to heaven where he confronts God, he is angry why didn't you save me when I asked for your help, God responds – *shmuck* I sent you two boats and a helicopter what more do you want from me!

At our lowest moments in our lives we pray to hear God's voice but what we so often fail to realize is that God is already talking to us through the people that love and care about us. Those friends and family who have our best interests at heart and tell us the harsh truths that we need to hear but so rarely listen too. God works through them. *'lo bashamayim he'* the Torah tells us, the voice doesn't come from the heavens, it comes from the people in our lives who care about us so much that they are willing to risk our anger or resentment in order to help us.

I tried everything to get control of my weight and food. I have the greatest library diet books, -