Eat and Be Satisfied
Temple Judea – High Holy Days 5769
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I found God in a Church basement.

How I got there is something I am still trying to figure out, but that God was there to greet me I have no doubt and that knowledge literally saved my life.

It was just about one year ago this past August, it was a Saturday morning;

I got up early to go to Church, before I went to Synagogue. I walked into a room filled with people I didn't know, and I sat in the far back corner, quite literally hiding behind a pillar. It was a 12-step support group for people dealing with food addiction and I was there to prove to myself that this wasn't my problem; that I was in the wrong place - and not just because I was a rabbi in a church.

One by one these strangers got up to share their stories. They shared openly and graphically about a lifetime battling not only the bulge but the inner pain and shame that comes with addiction, about the frightening reality that they were powerless over food and how their lives had become unmanageable.

As they shared their stories they ceased being strangers but became extensions of myself, their story was my story, they gave voice to the frustration and hopelessness that I felt in my own life regarding food. Sitting there in the back row, a rabbi in a church on a *Shabbas* morning, I heard the Torah of my own life, I heard my story –it was like they had read my diary and were now reading it back to me - only they had a different ending. They talked about a way out, a way to wholeness and freedom – to my surprise it had little to do with what I should be feeding my stomach and had much to do with what I wasn't feeding my soul. The missing ingredient was God.

Our tradition teaches that food contains within it manifestations of holiness, that it is a gift from God because without it we would perish. From this the Torah commands that human beings should not only eat but should eat and be happy. *Vahalta v'svachta* we sing at the end of a meal, we ate and we are satisfied.

But some of us eat and we are never satisfied, some are full but still feel empty. There are three types of hunger in the world, physical hunger, emotional hunger and spiritual hunger. We eat over each of them, but only one can be solved with food. People who eat compulsively, do so because they are trying to fill with food an emptiness they feel inside.

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; members of this temple; suffering from addictions such as overeating, drugs, 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.

Addiction is not something we often talk about in the Jewish community. Of all the problems facing the Jewish people we tend to think this one is not one of them. In the 18th century no less of a scholar than Immanuel Kant taught that "women, ministers and Jews don't get drunk". Like the once popular Yiddish tune, "A Shikkur Is a Goy" suggests – some erroneously believe that addiction is for the *goyim*. In point of fact the Jewish problem is that we deny we have a problem – we have been silent too long in the shadow it casts on our community – we are not immune.

You become an addict when you can no longer stop yourself from going down that path. You become an 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.

Every year we read the same prayers in our prayer book, they never change, but we do - and that change is reflected back to us in how we relate to the words we read. Every year we read, *Unataneh Tokef kedushat HayYom*. "This is the day when even the hosts of heaven are judged, 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 water…" we know the litany well. Last year I came to the verse "who by hunger and who by thirst" and I realized the prayer was talking about me. I looked at this one aspect of my life and 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 literally might not be around for the relationships in my life that mattered most.

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 insulated myself against starving to death. But those 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 they 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; the workaholic lives to work rather than works in order to live. For others – those of us who are checking our blackberries and have our cell phones 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. The rise of the Internet – which offers instant access, anonymity and isolation just a mouse-click away has created whole new categories of addictive behavior. Online gambling, pornography, endless hours of web surfing and video games are for some irresistible allures and destructive behaviors. We know people for whom shopping is therapy and who accumulate stuff and debt beyond their 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.

We all have secrets – things about ourselves that are just too embarrassing to reveal or admit even to ourselves. For me the open secret – one that you have all known and seen for the past 10 years that I have been your Rabbi is that I have 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 their failings to themselves – the addict closes their ears to the pleadings of others and self medicates with their 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, in just the right way, you may be compelled to listen and respond – not just to those around you but to the voice you have been ignoring inside yourself. That is why the clinical response to addiction has so often been an intervention: to gather together the people who love the person the most and to lovingly confront them with the reality of their life as it is experienced by others. To fulfill the mitzvah of *tochecha* or giving a rebuke, we are told to confront the one we love with a clear picture of how their 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 – to offer salvation.

In my own journey toward recovery people I cared about and who clearly cared about me tried to help me. One by one, they began to wear down my defenses, I pushed back for sure, but to their 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 save me". The waters rise again, and as 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 – "I sent you two boats and a helicopter what more do you want from me!"

Shema Koleynu, hear our prayer - 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 to. 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. Their love and concern can be the guiding hand we need to lead us on a path to recovery and wholeness – but only if we open our eyes to what they see and our ears to what they are saying.

One evening an old Rabbi told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son the battle is between two 'wolves' inside us all.

One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. The Grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?" The old rabbi simply replied, "The one you feed."

Strength comes from our weaknesses, when we are aware of our weaknesses we can grow strong in the face of them. I realize now that I didn't find God in a church basement – God found me. I could have been anywhere – but until I admitted to myself that I had a problem and needed help, that I was feeding the wrong wolf, I was lost and God's voice was nowhere inside of me – the wolf ate that too.

Our Rabbis teach that if you are going in one direction your whole life and you want to change course all you have to do is turn around, to take a step in the other direction. That is the essence of *T'shuvah* and of 12-step recovery to examine our path in life and make the necessary adjustments so that the course we take leads us closer to the person we were created to be. For some it may take 12 steps, for others just a few. But for each of us the first step is to look in the mirror and be honest with the person we see there.

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