

The Inner World of Addiction

Before starting the series of classes on “addiction” through the lens of *pnimiyus ha-Torah* there are a number of introductions necessary.

1. When speaking of “addiction”, we are not referring to the diagnostic category of substance abuse related diseases or addiction as a mental illness. To attempt to speak of the spiritual world of the lived experience of addiction as a disease would be grossly inappropriate. This is not to say that there is no spiritual dimension to the experience of addiction, but rather that focusing on the spiritual and abstract expression of this condition while the individual is in the midst of real suffering is unethical in the truest sense. Addiction is a destructive disease that makes life nearly unlivable for the addict and anyone who loves the addict. The symptoms of addiction often result in abject suffering and death and as such any attempt to relegate this disease to the realm of spirituality is to ignore the significant role that both the brain and the body play in this disease and its treatment.
2. For the purpose of these classes, the word and concept of “addiction” will be used in the most expansive form so as to include any mode of inner experience that drives the individual towards escaping life. Addiction is never simply addiction to a drug or chemical, but rather it is always already the sum total of suffering, despair and an attempted response to pain. While this pain may often be physical and neurobiological in nature, for the purpose of these classes we will be examining the psycho-spiritual pain that the individual experiences within the self/soul as opposed to the brain/body. In this sense any inner experience that results in the individuals attempt to escape life will be considered to be part and parcel of the addiction experience.
3. While the ideas that will be discussed and shared in these classes have been tested in the real world of substance abuse recovery, nothing said in these classes should be considered clinical advice or suggestion with regards to addiction itself. If anyone finds themselves struggling with symptoms of addiction the first step should be reaching out for help.
4. When speaking of the inner experience of addiction, one must speak of the various modes of psychological experience that inform addiction. Anxiety, depression, attention, excitation, hopelessness, bipolarity etc. will all be discussed as natural parts of the

human condition. When speaking of these moods-of-being we are not referring to the pathological and diagnosable forms of these conditions as described in psychiatric literature, but rather to the natural expression of these moods within each individual in everyday life. Our view is that when discussing anxiety and depression it is not a question of whether one has it or not, but rather a question of to what *degree* someone has it. Part of the natural consequence of being human is anticipating the future through anxiety and mourning the past through depression. When these symptoms begin to interfere with the individual's ability to function "normally", then psychiatric diagnosis becomes part of the discussion.

5. When speaking of addiction, we are not simply referring to the maladaptive attachment to mind altering chemicals such as alcohol or drugs. When addiction is limited to the space of mind altering chemicals a sharp distinction is made between us and them. "Us" as the normal, functioning individuals who have not undergone the process of physical tolerance and dependency, and "them" as the individuals who have gone through the process of use, misuse and abuse developing a tolerance and dependency on mind altering chemicals. In order to insure that we move away from the misleading platitudes that have littered the field of addiction wherein one is either addicted or not addicted; we would like to posit that everybody qua human being lives within the possibility-of-addiction. Whether process addictions in the form of repetitive behaviors that ease the everyday pains of life, or the insistence of negative habits and traits, addiction is something that affects each and every person whether or not they have moved from the realm of potential possibility into the realm of actual experience.
6. The guiding principle behind most of these classes is that addiction is rooted within the recesses of the soul and as such the soul is the place where comfort and recovery must come from. The soul of the addict or the addicted soul is one that contains within itself vast storehouses of intensity and desire. It is for this reason that the process out of addiction towards recovery offers gifts that could never have been realized without addiction. In this sense, addiction will be seen as a profoundly difficult condition that can give birth to an equally if not more profound sense of spiritual sensitivity and experience. One need not have experienced the descent into addiction in order to benefit from the ascent out of it; one must simply be willing to pay mind to the possibility-of-addiction that abides within each individual qua human being.

7. While most of the ideas contained within these classes are rooted in psychological and philosophical texts, it is our belief and experience that the vast storehouses of Jewish thought contain within themselves the rarified and intense expression of these ideas in accordance with the particular ethos, pathos and idioms through which the spiritually attuned individual lives. It is particularly within the space of the interiority of Torah (*pnimiyut ha-Torah*) as expressed in the teachings of the Arizal and his students; the Baal Shem Tov and his students; the Vilna Gaon and his students; the Rashash and his students; and the Ramchal and his students that we find these ideas expressed most clearly and fully. In particular, it is the school of Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Iszhhbitz (*Mei Shiloach*) and his students with a specific emphasis on his student Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin; Rebbe Nachman of Breslov; and the second and fifth leaders of the Chabad Chassidic movement Rav DovBer Schneuri (*the Mittlerer Rebbe*) and Rav Shalom Dovber Schneersohn (*the Rashab*) where we find most of our ideas.