

# The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous- What Does Hashem's Torah say about them?

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**Abstract:** This article provides a strong Torah-genuine background for the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and answers several questions raised by Jewish 12 step critics, whose aim is to portray the 12 steps as being against the Torah. In this paper I will answer famous questions asked on steps 1, 5, 6, 7, and 9. Among the questions that are resolved in this paper:

Do addicted Jews have free will to stop at anytime; are they really “powerless” in step one? Does it negate free will to ask Hashem to remove our shortcomings in step seven? Is it permissible to admit one's sins in step 5 to another person, which seems to resemble the Catholic ritual of “confession” to a priest? These issues and more will be addressed throughout the article.

*By Rabbi Avi Tenenbaum M.S.c (psych.) CASAP CASAC (grad.),*

*Director, Jewish Network of Addiction Recovery Support*

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Contact the author at [avitenenbaum9@gmail.com](mailto:avitenenbaum9@gmail.com) or [avi@jnars.org](mailto:avi@jnars.org)

USA: 011-972-54-845-1458    Israel: 054-845-1458

**Abraham J. Twerski, M.D**  
**1342 Princeton Road**  
**Teaneck, NJ 07666**

September 19, '14

Dear Rabbi Tenenbaum:

I thoroughly enjoyed your paper on “The Twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous—What Does Hashem’s Torah Say About Them?”

You have given a lucid clarification of the Twelve Steps, showing how they are fully compatible with Torah, and eliminating some of the misunderstandings that have caused some people to be hesitant to embrace recovery from serious addictive conditions.

I believe this is a great mitzvah, which is certainly timely as we approach Rosh Hashanah.

May Hashem bless you with a delightful year.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, MD

### **Author's note:**

*Special thanks to Rabbi Y. M., Rabbi C. R., Rabbi A. K., Rabbi Y. T., Rabbi S. T., Rabbi A. D., Rabbi A. T., Rabbi D. B. and Rabbi B. S.-I discussed with them several of the main issues addressed throughout this paper and was delighted to hear their support for the ideas herein. I do not discuss in this paper the ramifications concerning the context in which 12 step meetings take place. For example, I do not discuss whether it is permitted to enter a Church basement to attend an AA meeting. These issues have already been resolved by Gedolei Yisrael. **My concern in this paper is to directly address the Torah congruency with the 12 steps themselves in a very thorough fashion.***

*A book is being written now that will be more comprehensive and address a wide range of topics that were not discussed within the article; what you see here is only a rough draft of one section of the book. May God grant me the strength and merit to complete the work soon.*

*I hope this paper will help Jews out there, wherever they are and whoever they may be, so they may access addiction recovery and begin the rest of their lives in serenity, health, and genuine Torah spirituality.*

*All the best and keep in touch,*

*Avi*

*Rabbi Avi Tenenbaum M.S.c (psych.) CASAP CASAC (grad.),*

*Director, Jewish Network of Addiction Recovery Support [avi@jnars.org](mailto:avi@jnars.org)*

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## *Introduction*

Many of our Jewish brothers and sisters are in need of treatment for addictive disorders. Although we have no data at this time, it has been estimated that one out of one hundred Jews may have at least a mild addictive disorder. This is especially true when we incorporate the various behavioral addictions into this estimate, aside from substance abuse.

For people suffering from addiction there are a number of obstacles that stand in the way of receiving treatment, including lack of funds, stigma, and not knowing how to locate helpful treatment.

***The Jew has a unique block in the way of receiving treatment from addictive disorders.***

For the Jew, there is one more unique obstacle in the path of health from addiction-this obstacle is the great confusion amongst our community regarding whether the 12 step program is congruent with Torah values. Although there are many ways to understand the teachings of our Torah, the AA critics deceive their fellow Jews into thinking that the values laid down in the 12 steps are not congruent with our Torah according to *any* opinion; they are mistaken, and err due to ignorance of the Torah more so than out of ignorance about the 12 steps.

The purpose of this paper was not written to persuade the critics, but for the Jew in need of addiction treatment whose mind is confused about whether the 12 steps are Torah true principles or not. In this paper I will mention the famous questions asked on the 12 step ideas, and then I will provide Torah citations for those steps to show that they are indeed congruent with the Torah given at Har Sinai.

***Why bother defending the 12 steps? Aren't there many pathways to recovery from addiction?***

Although the 12 step program is not the only pathway to recovery from addiction, it is nonetheless considered a life-saving tool for many people. There is no guarantee that any particular type of treatment will help a person recover from addiction. This is why it is vital that we help the Jewish people to have access to a wide variety of treatment options, including the 12 step program.

Jews usually identify well with the 12 step program since it is a spiritual program, resembling Torah Judaism in many ways. Therefore, for many Jews the 12 step is a good cultural match.

The 12 step program is also free of charge and can be found in all developed countries in the world. For these reasons in particular, the 12 steps may often be the only type of treatment available to many Jewish people.

It is also the most known method of treatment to Jewish people due to the life-long 12-step-advocacy of Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski. Therefore, whether you like AA or not, the people in need of help may only know about AA, unaware of alternative treatments, and by waging war on the 12 steps, this may turn down many Jews from getting help.

What if a poor Kollel student with an addiction has no money for expensive individual psychotherapy? He can go to the 12 step program, free of charge.

Do you know a Jewish businessman, whose work takes him traveling all over the country, thereby jeopardizing his sobriety from addiction? No problem-just get him involved in the 12 step program and he will find a 12 step meeting in every single place he travels to for business; is there any better safeguard for sin than this?

**I urge the Jewish people to consider the important place that the 12 step program has in healing the Jewish people from addictive disorders, which are known to destroy lives, families, and Torah observance.**

***If there are other ways to recover, doesn't this make the 12 step model unnecessary?***

This is such an important point that I am going to repeat it. Although several evidence-based psycho-therapeutic models that have been demonstrated to effectively treat addiction, this still does not make the 12 step program obsolete in any way. No method of treatment works for every person, and like I explained above, not everybody has access to other forms of treatment. Also, professionals often find it necessary to combine two or more treatments in order to produce successful treatment outcomes, and so even somebody using another model of treatment may also be proscribed the 12 step method of treatment as well. With moderate and severe addictive disorders this is usually the case.

***The 12 step program is especially important in aftercare***

The 12 step program is also uniquely recognized for its tremendous utility in providing aftercare in addiction treatment; in other words, inpatient or outpatient addiction treatment can only last for so long, and the day will come when these Jews will need to reintegrate to society without the aid of therapists and rehabilitation, expected to manage their way through the temptations of today's world on their own. When addicted Jewish people reach this point in recovery, the 12 step program may be an invaluable way to continue managing one's recovery while now living in the "real world". Do not forget that scientifically, we know addiction to be a chronic disorder, and addiction recovery needs to be maintained for a lifetime to some degree; this is where the 12 step program *often* becomes the addicted person's best friend and acts as a safety net which prevents him from relapse. Again, consider the important utility of the 12 step program for these Jews.

**I have now provided several reasons that explain the great importance of making the 12 step program available to the Jewish people. Please give the 12 step program the benefit of the doubt when considering whether it is appropriate for you, a friend, congregant, student, or spouse.**

*Let's now review each one of the 12 steps and clarify them so that Jewish people no longer get confused.*

## **1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol -- that our lives had become unmanageable.**

In this step, the Jew is asked to admit that he cannot stop his addiction on his own, and that his life has now become unmanageable as a result.

Certainly, admitting to one's self a fault or shortcoming does not need a source. The idea of admitting that his shortcoming has caused his life to become chaotic also **does not need a source**.

The question that people ask on this step lies in the word "powerless". This word seems to imply that the alcoholic or addicted Jew does not have free will to stop their maladaptive behavior-here, the Jewish AA critics scream *"but this cannot be because Hashem gives every Jew free will, and the Ramban teaches that God does not give any Jew a test that he cannot pass!?! Surely, then, Jewish addicted people can stop drinking or drugging at any time, and step one of AA is against the Torah?!"*

By adding an exclamation mark and question mark at the end of the previous sentence, I attempted to convey to you the excitement and bewilderment that the AA critics usually show on their facial expressions when asking this question.

The truth is that there's nothing to get excited about, and as we shall soon see, **R' Shlomo Volbe** says that this question is founded on what he calls "a complete mistake".

Here are the words of the Mashgiach, R' Shlomo Volbe, who qualifies for us what free will is, and what it is not:

[Source-See R' Volbe in Alei Shor, volume one, p. 156](#)

“It is clear from this that free will isn’t something that is on the daily schedule of a Jew. Rather, free will is a trait that needs to be learned and acquired....and it takes a lot of work to be able to have “free will” ....

We are able to acquire this trait with hard work, and that is why we are held responsible to learn it. According to this concept, we have arrived at a major idea in how to relate to ourselves and to other Jews-we should relate to ourselves and to other Jews as if they have no free will, and that their behavior is governed by his natural temperance, education, habits, and interests....

The great Rishonim indeed teach us that the idea of “free will” is the cornerstone for the whole Torah, and no one argues on this. **However, a mistake leaked out amongst the simple Jews of our nation that “free will” means that any Jew has the power to choose good or bad, yes or no, in any situation that ever occurs-and this is a complete mistake.”**

According to R’ Volbe above, who bases himself on Rabbeinu Yonah and R’ Yisrael Salanter, Jews do not have “free choice” automatically.

“Free choice” is something that needs to be learned, and maintained throughout one’s life by learning mussar, prayer, and working on one’s self. Therefore, any Jew who has not yet learned “free will” simply doesn’t have “free will”. This doesn’t mean he can shoot and steal and do whatever he wants-because as R’ Volbe also mentioned, every Jew is responsible for learning how to choose freely.

It comes out that according to R’ Volbe, an alcoholic Jew may not have free will to stop drinking, and at the very same he is obligated to do whatever he can to find and learn “free will” so that he can eventually stop. Interestingly, this is exactly the intention that AA authors had in step one. Celebrated AA advocates say “You may be powerless over your addiction but you are responsible for your recovery” ([Source-see Carnes, “A Gentle Path through the 12 Steps”, p.7](#)). This is also taught by **R’ Avigdor Miller**, who explains that it is possible for a Jew to lose free will in one area while still having free will in another area. In our case R’ Miller would say it is possible to lose free will over drinking, but still have free will to join AA or seek other forms of help ([Source-see Lev Avigdor, Sha’ar Habechira, siman 4, paragraph 43](#)).

Once we are discussing ways to qualify “free will”, it is fitting to tell you what **R’ Eliyahu Dessler** famously says about it; this also sheds light on step one and closely resembles the idea laid down by R’ Volbe.

R’ Dessler coined a concept called “Nekudas HaBechira”, which means that **a person always has a choice in every situation of temptation, but what exactly is the nature of a person’s “free will” will depend on the individual at that time, and with those circumstances; the nature of his free will may even change every day of his life.**

According to R’ Dessler, free will is when a person’s level of truth meets face to face with his level of sheker, thereby creating doubt. In this place of doubt, where one can choose either way, we say that he has free will. Of course, it must be a situation where the person’s nature plays no role on choosing one way or another, because if so, then this again is not considered “free will”.

If I am correct, this teaching of R’ Dessler seems to mirror the words of R’ Volbe above.

R’ Dessler gives several clear examples to illustrate his point—a Rosh Yeshiva will never take a gun and murder people in a shopping mall when he is angry. Therefore, in regards to murder he has no free will to murder. Similarly, an angry, disgruntled neurotic man with a loaded assault rifle in his car trunk will have no free will *not* to murder people after being laid off from his job. In either case, their nature will motivate them to kill or not kill.

Free will exists only be in a case where either the neurotic man or Rosh Yeshiva has a doubt about what to do, and choose one way or another.

R’ Dessler continues to explain that **as a person does teshuva, his level of free will moves up. Conversely, when a person sins, his point of free will moves down.**

[See R’ Dessler in Michtav Me’Eliyahu, volume one, p. 10, p. 113, and volume 4 p. 95.](#)

In either of the two extreme cases where a person does total evil or total good, they will also lose their free will entirely, and be subject to the whim of their evil or holy nature, and their free will is taken away ([See Tanya chapter 17 who discusses this at length, and the Ba’al Shem Tov in Kesser Sheim Tov 152 who mentions this in passing](#)).

**R' Avigdor Miller** also says that by [\(Source-see Lev Avigdor, Sha'ar Habchira, siman 4, paragraph 53\)](#) using free will properly, Hashem gives him more free will; by misusing bechira to choose bad, Hashem reduces his ability to freely choose. This is exactly what R' Dessler says above about Nekudas Habechira.

In another place **R' Miller** writes that [\(Source-see Lev Avigdor, Sha'ar Habchira, siman 3, paragraph 27\)](#) because it is possible for a person to lose or decrease his free will, a Jew is therefore responsible to guard his ability to choose and not to lose it. Sometimes people place themselves in situations where they lose their ability to choose as a result, and they are responsible for putting themselves there, because it was their choice that they entered that situation. So although the Jew may not have free will once he is already in this situation, he is still responsible for walking into it. This is another place where R' Miller would say that it is possible that a Jew has no free will to stop drinking, although he may be responsible for creating the addictive cycle in the first place.

The point is, according to all these sources, it is possible for a Jew to have no free will over drinking or drugging and to be powerless to stop.

We cannot complete this discussion without bringing Rabbi Twerski's favorite Gemara on the topic. **Rabbi Twerski** is fond of quoting the Gemara [\(source-see Kiddushin 30b\)](#) which says "the evil inclination of man becomes stronger than him each day and tries to kill him...and if God did not intervene and help out, there would be no way for the man to overcome it [the evil inclination]". The Maharsha and Iyun Yakov explain that this Gemara is actually referring to a righteous person who truly wants to do the right thing, and nonetheless, the evil inclination is so powerful that it is actually impossible to overcome him without Hashem's aid [\(source-see Maharsha and Iyun Yakov in Kidushin 30b\)](#). So what is this Gemara teaching us? That even people who have free will and truly want to choose good are powerless! Understand the chidush of this Gemara because it is a great chidush! Is there any better source for "powerlessness" than this?! I suppose that is why Rabbi Twerski is so fond of it.

This powerlessness over the evil inclination is certainly true of the wicked people who have no strong desire to overcome their evil inclination. This is supported by several other chazals, vian kan makom liha'arich.

Just to support this idea even further, the **Ramchal** (source-see [Mesilas Yisharim, chapter two, end](#)) says “it is obvious that even if a person supervises his conduct, it is not within his power to overcome the evil inclination without the aid of Hashem”.

This idea is so transparent in the Torah that the Ramchal said it is “*obvious*”; it is therefore truly astounding how ignorant AA critics make an empty fuss over the world powerlessness in step one! It is astounding that they err about something so “*obvious*”!

### *Conclusion about step one*

Conclusion: We have seen from R' Avigdor Miller that it is possible to lose free will in one area, while still having free will in other areas of behavior. We also saw from R' Volbe, R' Dessler, R' Miller, and R' Nachman that although every Jew has some sort of choice, he may not have choice over his behavior. The *only* choice he may have is to learn how to choose better than the way he is choosing right now, by joining AA, talking to a Rebbi, or in other ways. We also saw from R' Volbe that some Jews never even learned how to choose in the first place, and they are held responsible for not learning how to have free will, but they still have no free will over their actual actions at the end of the day, making it correct to say that they are “powerless” to stop. Finally, we saw from the Gemara in Kidushin 30b that even Tzadikim who have free will and want to choose good are still powerless to the overwhelming power of their evil inclination. So to wrap it up:

- a) Some people don't have free will
- b) Even the people that do have free will are still powerless to the yetzer hara without Hashem's assistance, and this is true even about Tzadikim, and certainly about Rishaim

***Before I go on to step two, I want to tell you a story I had with R' Chaim Kanievsky and step one of AA.***

On this very topic, let me tell you a short story that you won't hear anywhere else.

I wrote a **letter to R' Chaim Kanievsky** several years ago asking him *“regarding a man who cannot seem to stop drinking alcohol on his own-is this man a wicked person who is using his free will to act wicked or a sick person who simply has no free will?”*

If you are familiar with letter-writing to R' Kanievsky, you will know that he never writes an answer that is more than about five words. These are the three words he used to reply to my question:

*“Sheyeleich libeit mishugaim”*

In English this is translated to mean “he [an alcoholic like the one I mentioned in my question] should go to a mental institution.”

It is obvious that according to R' Kanievsky, the alcoholic who cannot stop on his own is robbed of his free will to stop drinking. Instead, he must use his free will seek a mental institution where he can receive treatment.

I wrote this letter to R' Kanievsky simply because the man arguing with me would only listen to him. However, even without R' Kanievsky's reply our Torah has many sources for this idea.

My favorite source to quote for this topic is **R' Nachman** in [Sichos Ha"ran 67](#). There, it explains how some people have no free will at all over their behavior, and the only choice they actually do have is to seek help from somebody else who will tell them what to do.

## **2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.**

This step is about emunah (faith), proclaiming that Hashem can help us do things that we cannot do ourselves. **This does not need a source.**

## **3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him.***

**We do not need a source** to rely on Hashem.

## **4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.**

**We do not need a source** to make a cheshbon hanefesh.

## **5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.**

To admit to Hashem and to ourselves that we did something wrong **does not need a source.**

However, another part of this step is admitting one's sins to a human being. This specific component of the 5<sup>th</sup> step is questioned by people because it seems to contradict a Gemara in meseches brachos 34b which says that telling a human being one's sins is forbidden; if the Gemara says it is forbidden to talk about one's sins with other people, then how can it possibly be permissible to do the 5<sup>th</sup> step?

This may be the only legitimate question on the 12 steps, although you will soon see that it also has a legitimate answer. In fact, you already rely on the answer that I will give in other ways in your life, even if you are not a member of AA.

In the original edition of this paper I wrote a lengthy teshuva on this step. In this edition I have shortened it to the bare bones of why it is permitted in halacha to do step five and admit one's sins to a sponsor.

The answer simply is, the Torah forbids sharing one's sins when it has no constructive purpose. However, if the sins are being told over for the purpose of seeking guidance or in the context of working a spiritual program to sober up from addiction, this is permitted. Not only that, it seems to be the minhag Yisrael as well. If this idea was not true, it would not be permitted to discuss one's spiritual problems with a Rabbi, Mashgiach, or Chasidic Rebbe in order to seek guidance.

**Rabbi Twerski** is known to bring the source for this from **Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk** in his Tzetel Katan. Although I was originally bothered that Reb Elimelech seemed to be the only one who writes that this is permitted, I later understood that no one else wrote this is permitted simply because it is so obvious that it is unnecessary to speak out. Indeed, all the Rabbanim that reviewed this paper said this idea is obvious, and that it is clearly the custom of Klal Yisrael to understand the halacha in this way.

[The letter of Rabbi Twerski on this topic can be found in sefer Yishmaru Da'as, vol. 2, p. 116; The Tzetel Katan itself is in the Tzetel Katan paragraph 13.](#)

**(Author's note:** The **Shlah Hakadosh** ([Sha'ar HaOseeyos](#), [Chess](#), [Chaver Tov 2](#) quoting [Rabbeinu Yona in Igeress Hatshuva 97](#)) brings from **Rabbeinu Yona** a general statement about the importance of having a friend in regards to doing teshuva, so that if one friend veered off the path of teshuva, he can share this and then the person he shared the information with can rebuke him and influence him to return to the path of teshuva.

The language that the Shlah quotes from Rabbeinu Yona may only support that idea of sharing general information with one's friend, but not sharing specific sins. However, in the Yad Rama edition of the Shlah Hakadosh, they note (see footnote 89) that the text quoted by the Shlah of Rabbeinu Yona is different from the actual text that we have today. **Take a look at the version that we have in our edition of Rabbeinu Yona, which says:**

*"The way a man should conduct himself in order to achieve fear of heaven is to find one or two good friends to be able to speak to them constantly in topics concerning yiras shamayim. If one of the friends sins or fails to perform one of the positive mitzvos, his friend can rebuke him, and **they can rebuke one another on each sin that the other one did**".*

According to this text of Rabbeinu Yona, it seems that it is permitted for friend "a" to share his specific sins with friend "b" so that friend "b" can rebuke the sinner, friend "a", specifically for *that* sin. Rabbeinu Yona seems to imply that it is permitted to share one's *specific* sins with a trusted friend for the constructive purpose of doing teshuva; if friend "a" didn't share his specific sin with friend "b" then how would "b" ever know about it in order to rebuke "a"?

It is still possible to say that one cannot draw any proof from here either because of an alternative way of reading this text, which suggests that speaking with the friend in yiras shamayim is one idea while being rebuked is another. According to this reading, friend "b" is not rebuking "a" because "a" told anything to "b". Rather, it may simply have happened that "b" saw with his own eyes something that "a" did, and he rebuked him for this.

Nonetheless I think the original, more simple way to read the text of Rabbeinu Yona is also a possibility-according to this reading of the text, Rabbeinu Yona is telling us that the two friends should talk in yiras shamayim constantly, which means to always check in with one another about sins and mitzvos, so that if one is slacking off, the other friend can rebuke him, vidok, vian kan makom liha'arich, eyin sham.) Similarly, it is possible to understand the Tzetel Katan in an alternative fashion-that Reb Elimelech is referring specifically to urges and bad thoughts that come to him naturally, but he is not referring to actual sins and thoughts that the man conjured or devised on his own-therefore, there is no absolute proof to say from here that according to Reb Elimelech, one can share his sins with a trusted friend for a constructive purpose, because in the actual text of the Tzetel Katan, the man there may have not done any sin at all-since the halacha is that it is not a sin to have sexual or evil thoughts-it is only a sin to prolong or create such thoughts. Vidok gam bazeh, yaish liayin vian kan makom liha'arich.)

The point is that all said and done, all the poskim and talmidei chachamim that I consulted with, as well as the basic understanding of the reason behind the Gemara in Brachos 33b, as well as the support from Sota 7b, as well as the custom of klal yisrael-**all of this together permits step five beyond the shadow of any doubt.** <-See Igros Moshe Orach Chaim 4, 118 who also permits this, eyin sham. Below I will quote him.

**Now I will briefly expand on additional sources for this Halacha.** In the very source in the Gemara where it teaches the law restricting people to share their sins with others, it provides a reason for this law-that by sharing our sins with other people, it appears as if the person telling the story is not embarrassed about what he did ([source for this interpretation-Rashi, Sota 7b & Yoma 86b, also Tosfos Brachos 34b](#)) and this is a desecration of Hashem's honor. Consider the fact that the Gemara in Sota 7b teaches that relating one's sins to another is permitted when there is a constructive purpose-the case of the Gemara there is relating one's sins to somebody in order to remove suspicion from other people, *eyin sham*.

It comes out from these two places that although it is forbidden on the one hand to share one's sins since it appears that he is careless about his sins, it is still nonetheless permitted to do so when there is a constructive purpose.

This helps us understand better the source in the Shulchan Aruch that forbids saying over one's sins in public. The Shulchan Aruch there has a case where a man is praying on Yom Kippur in shul, alongside everybody else. The Shulchan Aruch says that it is forbidden for this man to specify within the general confession of Yom Kippur all of his personal sins of that year, in a way that the other shul members can hear what his sins were. This is because of the original Gemara we quoted that says it is a desecration to God's name to tell other people one's sins.

This is forbidden because the man specifying his sins has no reason to do so out loud; because of this simple fact, it is forbidden. However, if there was a compelling reason why this had to be done, it would be permitted. A case where saying over one's sins to another is necessary is the case of an addicted Jew who joined a 12 step group and needs to do step 5 in order to recover from addiction. In this case, the intention is noble and it is certainly no less of a constructive purpose than the reason why sharing one's sins is permitted in the Gemara of Sota 7b. I reviewed this with 4 Rabbis and Poskei Halacha in Yerushalayim, where I live. They unanimously agreed that this halacha formulation is correct and obvious ([see also the Mayim Chaim brought by Mekoros ViTziyunim in the Frankel edition of the Rambam, hilchos Teshuva 2, 5](#)) who writes that *revealing one's sins for a constructive purpose is permitted*; see also Sheilos U'T'shuvos Noda BiYehuda Even Haeizer, 72 who writes *"One time before Rosh Hashana...several people came before the Beis Din and*

*specified the aveiros that they did that year in order to confess their sins and to ask the Beis Din for guidance on how to do teshuva...". Eyin sham, upashut, vian kan makom liha'arich.*

Even when permitting step 5 in halacha, some Jewish AA critics make a fuss and claim "well, it has a Catholic taste to it so it is no good anyways, even though permitted by halacha!"

I know one Rabbi who replies to this with what he calls "the Judaism of the Shulchan Aruch", which means that we Orthodox Jews know whether something is Jewish or not by whether it is permitted or not by the halacha. If the Jewish people were to decide what is Jewish or not based on emotion, we'd end up no longer observant. It is halacha that guides the Jewish people towards the correct conduct; it is halacha that reveals to us God's will in this world, despite the fact that we have no prophets anymore.

I personally like to reply to this with the **Rambam** ([source-see Rambam in hilchos Teshuva 2, 5](#)). Here, the Rambam writes *"It is worthy of great praise regarding a Ba'al Teshuva when he confesses his sins in public that were done to his fellow man and to specify 'I did this and this to Mr. so-and-so'...and anyone haughty that doesn't confess these types of sins in public, his teshuva is not considered complete, because the pasuk says "the one who covers up his sins will not be successful"*.

Even though the final practical halacha set out in Shulchan Aruch ([Yom Kippur 607,2](#)) holds that one should not share his sins to others, you see from the Rambam that confessing certain types of sins in certain settings is a Jewish idea. According to the above Rambam not only was this considered an acceptable Jewish practice, but he writes that without doing this step of teshuva, one's teshuva is not complete!

Despite that the Rama in Shulchan Aruch decided for us to act otherwise in halacha, we cannot say about the view of the Rambam that it is a Christian practice because at the end of the day, one of the greatest rishonim in history held that this was the halacha, making it within the realm of "eilu vi'eilu diverei Elokim chaim" (*these as well as these are the words of the living God*); this is no different than Beis Shamai, who we do not follow as final halacha in most cases, but we do not regard his opinion as being Christian just because we follow Bais Hillel instead.

While finishing the writing of this paper, I came across a response from **R' Moshe Feinstein** on our very topic (see [Igros Moshe Orach Chaim 4, 118](#); quoted by [sefer Mishpatei Hashalom p. 221 in footnote 34](#)). There, R' Moshe writes to a girl who was promiscuous and now wants to repent:

“You also need to know that when you repent, it should be silently so that other people do not hear what you did.....only when there is a constructive purpose is it okay to reveal your sin to somebody else so that they can tell you how to repent in Halacha or so that they can give you good advice about how to stay out of repeating the sin, and that’s why it was good that you wrote this letter to me since you wanted to know what to do to avoid sinning again in the future...but if there is no constructive purpose to revealing one’s sin, then it is forbidden, because only lowly people in other cultures do this since they believe that by telling their sins over to a religious figure, this alone will consider the sin “undone” and forgiven, and then it is as if the person is allowed to go back to sin again and again [as long as he keeps coming at intervals to get “forgiven” by the religious figure]. The way of our Torah is the opposite, to hide one’s sin unless there is a purpose to know how to repent or how to overcome the evil inclination in that area”.

We see clearly from this responsa of R' Moshe that:

- a) Telling over a sin for a constructive purpose to know how to repent or how to overcome the evil inclination in this area is permitted
- b) It is forbidden to share a sin with a person that, so-to-speak “undoes” and forgives the sin, encouraging and enabling the sinner to sin again and again and just come back for his regular “cleansing”.

Of course, Jews in 12 step programs do not share their sins with their sponsor in step five in order to be “cleansed” by them! They do this so that they can overcome their evil inclination and interrupt the harm they are doing to themselves and others as a result of their addiction.

Just remember one thing from all of this-that step five is fine in Halacha.

## 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

A closer look at 12 step literature here reveals that the intent of step six mirrors the component of teshuva called “*azivas hacheit*”. Here, people in the 12 step program are asked to at least try to abandon their defective traits as best as they can by creating in themselves a will to stop behaving this way:

The founders of the 12 step program explain:

“The key words ‘*entirely ready*’ underlie the fact that we want to aim at the very best we know or can learn. How many of us have this degree of readiness? In an absolute sense practically nobody has it. The best we can do, with all the honesty we can summon, is to *try* to have it (Source-see “12 Steps and 12 Traditions”, p. 65-66).

Simply said, step six asks the addicted Jew to create a feeling of never behaving in unspiritual ways again. In our Torah, this is called “*azivas hacheit*”. The **Rambam** teaches that teshuva must be done on defective character traits just like actual sins themselves (see [Hilchos Teshuva 7, 3](#)). The **Vilna Goan** writes that if a person is not working on his character traits, he has no reason to live (see [Even Shleimah 1, 2](#)) and **R’ Chaim Vital** writes that it is even more important to work on character traits than on the actual behavior of sin itself, since it is the character traits that influence behavior (see [Sharei Kedusha 1, 2](#)). Certainly, our Torah agrees with working on one’s character traits, and **this needs no source**.

The component of step six that asks us to generate a will to abandon these bad traits also **needs no source**. I will bring sources about this anyhow, because I suspect this is a less known idea to many Jews, despite its great importance. This step mirrors the Torah concept of “*ratzon*” which is one of the highest Jewish ideas that our Torah has (see [Sefer HaYashar of Rabbeinu Tam chapter 11 as explained by R’ Volbe in Alei Shor p. 120](#)). Certainly, Hashem asks of us to take action and move beyond *ratzon*, because doing physical actions in the physical world we live in is what draws Hashem downwards the most to dwell in this lowly world. Nonetheless, the single most powerful thing that draws the Jew from this impure world upwards to Hashem is *ratzon*, which is the desire to do Hashem’s will and be near to him, and the desire to

abandon all things that separates between himself and God. **R' Volbe** (see [AleI Shor volume one p. 120](#)) brings sources to demonstrate the power of *ratzon* from Makos 10b, Yoma 38b; both Gemaras discuss how it is *ratzon* that moves people either up or down in terms of spirituality.

On the words of step six “entirely ready”, you may enjoy seeing how closely they parallel the words of the Chazon Ish, also brought by R' Volbe above. The **Chazon Ish** (sefer [Emunah U'Bitachon 4, 1](#)) writes “*the greatest trait is to develop an absolute determination to put moral feelings above that of desire, and that it is from this starting point and ratzon that a Jew can fight against all the bad traits together*”.

To quote **R' Volbe** (see [AleI Shor p. 121](#)) “*this is our entire job-to constantly strengthen our ratzon to become pure*”.

The **Shlah Hakadosh** writes (source-see [Shaar HaOseeyos Reish, Ratzon 19](#)) “he who has this great trait, the lofty quality of *ratzon*, he will be connected to Hashem who sits in the loftiest place of places”.

**Rebbe Nachman** has several teachings about the importance of expressing one’s desire or *ratzon* to change. He writes “the main way to strengthen one’s nefesh is to express his desires to get closer to Hashem and reach a level higher than the level he is currently holding by... by expressing this *ratzon*, he builds a nefesh of Kedusha” (source-see [Likutei Eitzos, Ratzon 1](#) and [Likutei Moharan 31](#); see his beautiful [language inside](#)). In another place R' Nachman writes “as a general rule you need to know that the longing and desire to improve in holiness is extremely precious, and that it is through that that one’s nefesh is strengthened” (source-[Likutei Eitzos, Ratzon 4](#)).

Finally, **R' Nachman** (source-see [Likutei Moharan 66, paragraph 4](#)) says that the more a person has a desire and will to perform a certain task in Avodas Hashem, the more he will be able to accomplish what he desires, and if he has absolute determination to do the mitzvah then it is possible to reach a situation that nothing will stand in his way.

Before moving on to a different topic, let me finish here with my most favorite source for the importance of having a will to change and how it isn't just "wishful thinking".

**Rebbe Nachman** writes:

"The main thing in Judaism is having *ratzon*; and even though every Jew wants to serve Hashem on some level, the fact of the matter is that not everyone's level of *ratzon* is the same...even within the same person there can be numerous levels of *ratzon* that vary from day to day...the rule is that the main thing a Jew needs is *ratzon* and desire to get ever closer to Hashem..." (source-Likutei Eitzos Ratzon 8; also see paragraph 6 which writes how having a bad *ratzon* about sinning also shapes and forms one's nefesh, underscoring the great utility and liability of *ratzon*).

After all this, I hope you have a greater appreciation for step six, which is not just wishful thinking or a Catholic ritual, but actually one of the most significant concepts in Judaism. If a Jew does his sixth step and develops a will to leave behind his bad traits, and if he expresses this, there is no doubt that he has accomplished something that is spiritually significant and important to Hashem, the living God.

## **7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.**

Many people misunderstand this step and make a big deal out of nothing. They yell (I actually heard a Rabbi yell about this once!) *"But what about free will!? Doesn't the addicted person need to take action in order to repent to Hashem? How can you just ask Hashem to take away your bad traits without doing anything?"*

The real answer is that there was never any question to begin with. This is only a question when you isolate this step and forget all the other ones that go with it. It is as if the person asking this question has a sudden memory lapse and does not remember the fact that this 7<sup>th</sup> step is sandwiched between steps 1-6 and steps 8-12, all of which require enormous physical and spiritual work! Certainly, the Jew in a 12 step program takes an enormous amount of action in order to improve.

The second question that the Jewish AA critics ask on this step is “even if you tell me that these Jews are taking a lot of action, who says that it is a Jewish idea that one can ask Hashem to take away from him his bad character traits?”

When I mentioned this question to one Rabbi he replied *“the people asking this particular question don’t know anything!”*

I think that the people asking this question may know *something* as opposed to *nothing*, but that the “something” that they know on this subject is not sufficient, because what they don’t know is that there are actually two different opinions on this, not only one. That is something important to know! I will explain below.

The ultimate question raised by the Jewish AA critics is this:

*“If every Jew has free will to choose to do either good or evil, then how can a Jew possibly pray to Hashem about anything related to choosing good or bad? Surely, this prayer has no purpose and will not be heard because the Jew has free will to choose, and prayer cannot come and influence one’s free will? Conversely, if prayer could theoretically influence my ability to choose good or bad, then what then is the purpose of free will? ”*

The answer to this question is given by dozens of timeless Torah sages. Let’s preface the answer by saying that this topic is the subject of debate ([source-see R’ Moshe Feinstein, Igros Moshe Orach Chaim 4, response 40, paragraph 13 versus the Chazon Ish in the end of volume Orach Chaim & Moed, p. 516; see also Chovos Halvavos in Sha’ar Habitachon chapter 4 \[see also Rashi in Megila 25a who may agree\] versus the Avudraham on the prayer found in the end of Uva Litzion “viyaseim bilibeinu ahavaso viyir’aso” quoted by sefer Ohel Rama on Brachos 33b; see also Maharsha in Kidushin 81b and Moed Katan 28a; this is also brought in the name of the Chasam Sofer in Parshas Eikev in the paragraph “vi’amarta bilvavcha”, although my Pashkez/Brooklyn edition does not have it-both sefer Ohel Rama on Brachos 33b and sefer Pardeis Yosef in Eikev 10, 12 quote this Chasam Sofer-perhaps it is in another edition than the one I own](#)). You will find more sources for this below.

In the response I quoted above, R' Moshe Feinstein is of the opinion that prayer to Hashem to help one do teshuva is an ineffective prayer. R' Moshe bases this on the Gemara in Brachos 33b which says "everything is in the hands of heaven except for fear of heaven". According to R' Moshe, the Gemara quoted is teaching that matters of teshuva and choosing good or bad is something that heaven does not meddle with-these are things that are entirely up to the individual so that he retains his free will status. According to this understanding of the Gemara, heaven could not begin to answer prayers about teshuva and the like, because if they did, then people's free will to choose would become influenced by heaven, and this opinion holds that such an idea is "*bewildering*" (that's the word used by R' Moshe).

According to R' Moshe, step seven doesn't do anything at all. It simply doesn't work because "everything is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven". Don't panic-we will explain step seven soon, just keep reading for now.

The Chovos Halvavos asked this same question one thousand years ago and gives an answer that supports R' Moshe's point of view. The Chovos Halvavos asks "*why is David Hamelech asking Hashem so much to help him with his yezter hara? Why doesn't David stop talking so much and just take action? If David has free will then let David simply choose to do good, and stop talking to God about it-leave God alone already?!*"

The Chovos Halvavos answers that even though we all have free will and the ability to take action there are still two reasons to pray to Hashem.

**Reason one**-Despite our free will we can still ask Hashem to remove from our surroundings the worldly things and situations that influence us to choose wrongly. For example, although we may have free will to not look at women in the street, we can still ask Hashem to arrange things so that we don't find any attractive women outside on our way today from the yeshiva to the Doctor's office. In other words, I can ask Hashem to influence the environment to be in my favor.

This is also the idea behind the prayer in the morning brachos "*do not bring me into a test*" (*al tive'ani liday nisayon*). This is also the reason why people like the Vilna Goan and Steipler suggested praying before walking outside of one's home that he should not see any evil.

**Reason two**-Even though we have free will to choose, we might be tired, confused, anxious, or not that physically strong. Therefore, we can ask Hashem to give us mental or physical strength to do a mitzvah. By asking Hashem for this, we can do the mitzvah better, more, or easier.

According to the Chovos Halvavos and R' Moshe, step seven would be better if it would say "we humbly asked God to help our wife make good food so we never get angry at her" or "we humbly asked God to heal our anxiety disorder which reinforces us to drink to ease our edginess". However, asking God directly to remove our shortcomings is not possible, since free will requires us to remove these defects on our own.

*All this is just one side of the story.*

Here's the other side of this debate; we will now bring opinions that prayers like the type on step seven are indeed effective:

The **Avudraham** holds that it *is* effective to ask God for Yiras Shamayim, just like we ask in the end of U'va Litziyon in the siddur (and just like we ask in the bracha of rosh chodesh before mussaf). This is true despite the Gemara in Brachos 33b that says "everything is in the hands of heaven except yiras shamayim ([source-see the Avudraham on the prayer found in the end of Uva Litzion "viyaseim bilibeinu ahavaso viyir'aso"](#) quoted by sefer Ohel Rama on Brachos 33b; the Avudraham itself is found in the Even Yisrael & Frank edition, p. 137, and found in the table of contents under "pirush al tefilah lidavid"). The rationale of the Avudraham as to why one can pray for yiras shamayim is the same as the **Maharsha**, **Nesivos**, and **Vilna Goan** below, as we will soon see. His basis is the Gemara in Yoma 38b and Shabbos 104a which says "if a person takes steps towards purity, heaven will assist him"; in other words, although heaven does not give yiras shamayim out for free, they do give it out to people who seek it.

The **Maharsha** (source see [Maharsha in Moed Katan 28a](#) and in [Kidushin 81b](#); quoted by [Chidushei Geonim in Ein Yakov, Brachos 33b](#)) says that despite the fact that “all is in the hands of heaven except for yiras shamayim”, it certainly helps to pray for yiras shamayim. In fact, Moshe Rabbeinu prayed for the Jewish people to do teshuva as we find in Sota 14b. The Maharsha says the reason why prayer helps is because of another Gemara ([Shabbos 104a](#)) which says that “if a person makes an effort to become pure, heaven helps him”, and this is why R’ Chiya Bar Ashi had a custom of praying every day “Merciful one-please save me from the evil inclination”. It seems according to the Maharsha that when the Gemara in Brachos 33b says that heaven does not get involved in matters of yiras shamayim, it means that heaven doesn’t give out yiras shamayim for free-no one is born with yiras shamayim or has “good mazal” and suddenly stumbles upon yiras shamayim. However, if you were to ask heaven for it, they would give it to you (see also the [Maharsha in Avodah Zara 5a](#) which seems to say that the Jewish people were criticized in the Torah for not asking for Yiras Shamayim, [eyin sham](#)).

*Is there an alternative way to read the Gemara which bothered R’ Moshe Feinstein?*

Several commentators explain the meaning of the Gemara in Brachos 33b in the exact opposite manner from which R’ Moshe Feinstein understood it. According to them, the Gemara is teaching us that although everything is in the hands of heaven so there’s no guarantee that one’s prayer will be heard, nonetheless, when a Jew asks for yiras shamayim it is guaranteed that heaven will answer his prayer! (source-see [sefer Pardeis Yosef, parshas Eikev 10, 12](#) in the name of the **Rebbe of Kotzk** as well as from [sefer Arugas Habosem](#) in the introduction to the second edition; also in the name of the **Chidushei Harim** quoted by [sefer Ohel Rama, Brachos 33b](#)).

The **Vilna Goan** (source-see [sefer Even Shleimah 5, 3](#)) teaches that yiras shamayim is something that heaven gives gift to people that show an effort to try to obtain it. This seems to be like the opinion of the Maharsha and Avudraham.

The **Nesivos** (source-see [sefer Emess LiYakov on agada, authored by the Ba’al Nesivos Hamishpat on Choshen Mishpat, p. 31](#) in the [Minchas Shalom](#) edition, also

[found in the sefer under Shabbos 32b](#)) says that although his opinion is that a Jew cannot pray that another Jew gets yiras shamayim or does teshuva (this is a matter of debate-see Chazon Ish vol. Orach Chaim & Moed p. 516 and Maharsha in Kidushin 81b), nonetheless, the Jew can certainly pray for himself to obtain yiras shamayim. To support his opinion, the Nesivos relies on the Maharsha that we brought above.

The **Iyun Tefilah** ([source-see siddur Otzar Hatfilos, on the last bracha of birchos haShachar](#)) asks on the last bracha of birchos haShachar “how could the chazal write in the text of the siddur things in this bracha like *‘force my yetzer to be subdued to you’*? Isn’t this contradictory to what the Gemara says (the same Gemara that R’ Moshe based himself on above in Brachos 33b) that “everything is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven”?

The Iyun Tefilah answers that this Gemara is qualified by a second Gemara in Makos 10b which says “in the way that a man chooses to go, it is in that way that they lead him”. The commentators on this Gemara in Makos explain what it means “it is in that way that *they* lead him”. Who is “they” referring to? According to some, “they” may refer to heaven. If so, then the Iyun Tefilah is essentially giving the same explanation as the Maharsha, that although heaven does not give out yiras shamayim “for free”, they will give it to someone who demonstrates a desire and interest in attaining it.

It is also possible to explain “they” in the Gemara in Makos as referring to angels. The Maharsha there ([see Maharsha in Makos 10b](#)) explains that every time a person has a desire to do anything, it creates an angel. These angels pull and influence a person to continue in the direction in which he desired. If he desired to do evil, the angels pull him to do evil. If he desires yiras shamayim, the angels will pull and influence him to attain yiras shamayim. If the Iyun Tefilah understands the Gemara in Makos this way, then it is a new and unique explanation for how praying for yiras shamayim works; it wouldn’t be the prayer per se that helps the man attain yiras shamayim, but the desire in his mind that he would like to attain yiras shamayim that is the central mechanism. There are questions according to either explanation of who “they” is referring to in the Gemara in Makos 10b, but either way we know one thing for sure—that the Iyun Tefilah is another opinion on the long list of sages who understood that praying for yiras shamayim is something important and effective.

**Author's note:** Realize that the Maharsha above based himself on the Gemara in Shabbos 104a, while the Iyun Tefilah based himself on the Gemara in Makos 10b; yaish liayin what the machlokes is between these two commentaries on the deeper level, vidok. In fact, there are at least three opinions now all within the camp of those who say that one can pray for yiras shamayim

- a) You have the Avudraham, Marsha, [Vilna Goan & Chazon Ish], and Nesivos who says one can do this because of the Gemara in shabbos 104a
- b) You have the Iyun Tefilah who bases himself on the Gemara in Makos 10b
- c) You have the Chidushei Harim, Rebbe of Kotzk, and Arugas Habosem who say the source for this is within the Gemara in Brachos itself, except that one must read the Gemara in the exact opposite way than from the norm, that the only thing that heaven doesn't meddle with is prayers for yiras shamayim, vidok, vian kan makom liha'arich.

Here are the words of **R' Avraham Ben R' Bachman Chazan**, quoting **R' Noson of Breslov** on this topic:

“Tefilah helps to overcome the evil inclination, even though Hashem gave a person free will ([source-see sefer Kochvei Ohr, Emes Vi'emunah 7](#))...and R' Nosson explains on this ([Likutei Halachos, hilchos Pikadon halacha 3, paragraph 7 & 9](#)) that it is impossible in this world to really understand how it is not contradictory to have free will but be able to pray anyhow to overcome the evil inclination....but part of the answer is that by praying to Hashem to help him overcome the evil inclination, it is in this way that he is using his free will-in other words, his free will is being used to ask Hashem for help on a daily basis with the evil inclination-he is using his free will to turn to Hashem for help [instead of not turning to Hashem for help]. This was the custom of Tzadikim of all generations.”

**Rebbe Nachman** ([source-see Chayei Moharan 436](#)) taught that chazal instituted several prayers asking Hashem for yiras shamayim or for repentance, even though the same chazal taught us that “everything is in the hands of heaven except for yiras shamayim”. Rebbe Nachman told R' Nosson that he did not want to reveal to his students how these seemingly contradictory attitudes of chazal are reconciled-but he

assured them that prayer always helps as a way of working on the problem, and accomplishes change as well. Not only should we take physical action to change, we should also pray.

**R' Avigdor Miller** also says this idea. R' Miller writes ([source-see Lev Avigdor, Sha'ar Habchira, siman 4, paragraph 61](#)) that Praying to Hashem for help is not contradictory to bechira. In fact, his decision to pray is his bechira. Not only that, a person is required to use his bechira to choose good by way of prayer to Hashem to help him to keep Hashem's will. This is why we constantly find Tzadikim like David Hamelech asking Hashem for help in the service of God.

The **Chazon Ish** seems to say something that places his position on this side of the debate as well. He asks a different question that is related to our discussion-*how is it okay for a Tzadik or Talmid Chacham to pray for another Jew to do teshuva or keep the mitzvos? Isn't this clashing with that Jew's free will?*

The Chazon Ish is asking the exact same question that the Iyun Tefilah, R' Noson, R' Moshe, R' Miller, and the Chovos Halvavos ask, except that instead of asking "how can I pray for myself" he asks "how can a Tzadik pray for somebody else" ([source-see Chazon Ish, volume of Orach Chaim & Moed, page 516](#)).

His answer is a bit unexpected and very original. He answers that as long a human being did an action to bring someone closer to Hashem this is not a clash to free will. This is because as long as one of God's creations was responsible for the Jew moving closer to God, even if it was via prayer, then that is okay, since ultimately this act is attributed to God's creations and not to God himself. In our case, since the Tzadik's prayer is attributed to the Tzadik and the Tzadik's bechira to pray, instead of help from heaven coming down as a freebie from heaven, this is fine and does not clash with the free will of the sinning Jew. A second part of the Chazon Ish's answer is that all Jews are responsible for one another to keep other Jews from sinning, so certainly it is okay that the Tzadik prays for the sinning Jew.

From the answer of the Chazon Ish it seems clear that praying for one's self to overcome sin is not a problem since this is a form of free will, by choosing to pray, and since this act is being attributed to you and not to God, this is fine. When the

Gemara (the same one that bothered R' Moshe in Brachos 33b) writes that “*everything is in the hands of heaven except for yiras shamayim*” it simply means that heaven does not give out free handouts of help to overcome the evil inclination-but if you draw this help down from heaven through prayer or via a Tzadik’s prayer, that is fine and works effectively. This, then, is another source for step seven.

## **8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.**

**This needs no source**-this man is such a tzaddik for taking this step!

## **9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.**

I would prefer to refer the reader to Orach Chaim 406; by studying the laws there you will see that there are many cases where the Halacha may differ slightly, although this does not negate step nine in any way. Keep reading and I will explain what I mean.

Here are some general rules:

- a) It is absolutely true that one must make amends wherever possible ([source-see Shulchan Aruch 406, 1](#)). This is like step nine.
- b) Technically, Halacha allows somebody to send a messenger to ask forgiveness from the person harmed. However, the Mishna Brura writes that the amends should be made *directly* wherever possible, unless you know that the harmed

person will be more forthcoming to forgive you via a messenger ([source-see Orach Chaim 406, Mishna Brura, 2](#)). This is like step nine as well.

- c) The idea that a Jew should not make direct amends if “to do so would injure them or others” should be examined, so let’s put this under our Torah microscope and take a better look at this.

If by asking one’s friend forgiveness, that friend will become *embarrassed*, then the **Chofetz Chaim** writes that we should still ask forgiveness from them, but do so without telling them what we are asking forgiveness for, so as not to embarrass them ([source-see Orach Chaim 406, Mishna Brura 3](#)).

However, suppose he isn’t going to be embarrassed but he will get *angry or upset*. Imagine a case where by asking forgiveness, he is merely opening up old wounds that were already forgotten about. Is it better to just forget about it and not approach the man who we upset, or is it better to approach him and remind him of something upsetting we did to him even several years back? Does it matter that in the name of asking this man forgiveness I am upsetting him even more? What does Halacha say about a case like this?

The classic Jewish answer is of course, that this is a matter of dispute. It gets even better-there is a dispute amongst later sages whether this was a matter of dispute or not!

There are actually two distinct cases:

- a) Where the victim *doesn’t even know* that I harmed him in some way and if I reveal it to him now, he will get upset; it is possible that if the victim knew what happened but now forgot, it is as if he never knew
- b) Where the victim *is aware* that I harmed him but by bringing it up with him now it will make him upset.

Below, I quote opinions that support step nine in the case where the victim doesn’t know that the alcoholic harmed him:

The **Chofetz Chaim** may argue on this point with **R’ Yisrael Salanter** ([source-see sefer Piskei Teshuvos on Orach Chaim 406, letter 4, p. 256 who quotes sefer Az Nidbaru vol. 7, response 66 and sefer Moadim Uzmanim vol. 1, 54; quoting the](#)

Chofetz Chaim in sefer Chofetz Chaim Klal 5, 12; **however**, this is according to the report that there is a letter from the Chofetz Chaim to R' A. A. Kosovsky which supposedly says that he argues with R' Yisrael Salanter; this historical piece of information is found in Mishna Brura Dirshu edition, Orach Chaim 406, 3 in footnote 10; and see Halichos Shlomo in Asseres Yimay Teshuva, note 5, which says that R' Salanter directly argued with the Chofetz Chaim in a face to face manner, and they refer the reader to see "Dugma LiDarchei Avi" authored by R' Leib, the son of the Chofetz Chaim, p. 111; viyeish liayin).

However, not everyone agrees that the Chofetz Chaim argued with R' Salanter about this.

**R' Nissin Karelitz** is of the opinion that they had no argument about this whatsoever (source-see Mishna Brura Dirshu edition, Orach Chaim 406, 3 in footnote 10 quoting sefer Chut Shani, Hilchos Yom Kippur 106).

If the Chofetz Chaim and R' Yisrael Salanter argued about this, then the Chofetz Chaim may argue with step nine in the case where making amends to somebody would harm them and make them angry and upset, while according to R' Yisrael Salanter the Halacha would forbid you from asking forgiveness so as not to upset the man, which is *exactly* like step nine; and if we go like R' Nissin Karelitz that these two Torah leaders never even had a dispute about this, then both the Chofetz Chaim and R' Salanter would be extremely supportive of this clause in step nine.

**R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach** (source-see Halichos Shlomo in Asseres Yimay Teshuva), living one generation after this supposed dispute, rules like R' Salanter that holds the person wanting to ask forgiveness should *not* do so in a case where the person *does not know* about the harm caused, and by revealing it to him it will make him upset. This also supports step nine in cases where the victim *does not know* about what the alcoholic did to him.

Certainly, step nine is rooted on the opinion of one of our major contemporary Torah leaders in the case where the victim doesn't know that the alcoholic did something to him.

What about in a case where the victim does know that you harmed him, but by asking him forgiveness it will make him angry and there's a large chance that nothing

will be accomplished? Even if you know that eventually something will be accomplished, does that justify angering him now? Is it permitted now? Similarly, what if the victim forgot what happened, even though he technically knew about it at one point? By asking him forgiveness it will cause the victim to remember the misdeed and get upset-is a person required to ask forgiveness in this case?

Although I have not finished doing an extensive research on these questions at this time, I did consult with two Rabbis who both immediately confirmed my hunch that even in these cases one would *not* be permitted to ask forgiveness, since, according to R' Yisrael Salanter's rationale, one's obligation to do teshuva and ask forgiveness does not justify making somebody else upset, and therefore "it is not in his power" to ask forgiveness in all these circumstances. According to this outlook, step nine is congruent with Halacha even in the case where the victim knows about what was done to him.

To sup it all up, we discussed three cases:

- a) Where the victim doesn't know what the alcoholic did to him
- b) Where the victim knew at one point that the alcoholic did, but now he forgot what happened
- c) Where the victim never forgot and knew all along what the alcoholic did to him

In any of these three cases, R' Yisrael Salanter would seem to forbid asking forgiveness.

Accordingly, the only case where one would need to ask forgiveness would be in the manner, time, place, and case where by asking the forgiveness it does not cause harm to others.

Now let's look at the words of step nine one more time and see if this fits:

**"Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others"**

Conclusion: This step seems to be exactly what Halacha requires in this regard.

By the way, even if one cannot ask the victim forgiveness so as not to upset him, he can and should still ask forgiveness in a general manner, without divulging what he is asking forgiveness for. This is mentioned in Halacha and in 12 step literature ([source-see Orach Chaim 406, Mishna Brura 3, viaino mistabeir lichaleik; also see Piskei Teshuvos here exactly on our case, 4; also see 12 Steps and 12 Traditions p. 83](#)).

In regards to money owed to the victim both the 12 step literature and Halacha require that the alcoholic return stolen money or property no matter what ([source-see Orach Chaim 406, Mishna Brura 1 and Shar HaTzion 2; also see 12 Steps and 12 Traditions p. 84](#)). This does not contradict anything we said until now from R' Salanter; it is still possible to return the money without upsetting the victim. According to some Torah authorities, it may be possible to return stolen money even without telling the victim that it was *he* that stole the item. This is the type of question that you should ask your personal Rabbi since there are many opinions about this in Halacha. Alternatively, one may want to ask his Rabbi if one can return the stolen money to the victim without telling him *why* he is giving him this money. This is also permitted by many authorities in special circumstances. I will not delve into this now, viyaaseh sheilas chacham.

## **10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.**

**This needs no source.**

**11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.**

**This needs no source.** Some people are bothered by the language used here, which implies that we only pray for the knowledge to carry out Hashem's will, to the exclusion of praying for things like patience, for a new mini-van, or for money to support one's family. Certainly, **this is not the intention in these words.** The authors are trying only to imply that one should daven to Hashem only for things relevant to serving Hashem, to the exclusion of things that are unnecessary and distract one's self from his true purpose in this world. The **Zohar** says that Jews who pray to God on Yom Kippur for things they want, but without the intent that they need these things in order to serve God, they are like dogs that bark to their master "give, give" ([source-see Tikunei Zohar, Tikun Vav](#)).

**12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.**

**This does not need a source.**

## Other Commonly Heard Criticisms Related to the 12 Step Program in Regards to Judaism

I will be reviewing several more of these critiques in a book that I hope to publish soon, God Willing. Now, I will just mention two that stick out in my mind, both of which are complete errors.

### *Commonly heard complaint-the 12 step program isn't kosher because it does not require Torah study*

The 12 steps were not designed to replace religion (this point is made openly in the AA Big Book) and of course, a Jew is always expected to fulfill all requirements in Halacha. For example, although the mitzvah of teshuva is supposed to be done in a very specific manner as defined in halacha, this still does not make step seven “wrong” in any way by not requiring amendments to be done in this manner-one is not exclusive of the other. Similarly, if our Torah requires daily Torah study, **this still does not make the 12 steps wrong** by not requiring it as one of the 12 steps. Don't forget-only Jews are required to observe Halacha, while non-Jews are expected to observe only the 7 mitzvos of Bnei Noach. There is no reason why the 12 step program should require Torah study. In fact, if they did require Torah study, it would be a problem in Halacha!

Here's the bottom line:

If the AA founders told people to abandon their religions of origin and exclusively observe the 12 steps, the critics would have a point-but *the exact opposite is true*. The AA literature exhorts its members to still observe their religion of origin & consult with their Rabbis and Priests ([Source-see the AA Big Book, p. 87](#)).

There is much to say on this topic, and particularly about step 11 and special step 11 meetings, viod chazon limoed.

*AA critics and well-meaning Rabbis often try to deny Jewish addicted people from attending 12 step meetings. As an alternative, they offer Torah study, making the claim that Torah study alone will cure addiction. Let's explain why this practice is reckless, endangering the lives of the Jewish people, and erroneous from a Torah perspective*

Let me preface by saying that I have no problem with somebody who successfully recovers from addictive disorders using a Torah-study approach. I am pro-recovery & not only pro- AA, so to me, as long as somebody heals from addiction, the goal is reached and there is a reason to celebrate.

Let me also preface that I am not even against people trying a Torah approach for a limited period of time, provided that the person is not in immediate danger or that his current state of health does not infringe on other people's well being. Another condition I insist on is developing a way to measure how the addicted person will know whether this approach is working for him, at what cost is it worth it, and how long it should take. I absolutely disagree with and despise the notion of people doing the Torah approach blindly, forever, with no way of knowing whether it is working or not, and when it is time to move on to the regular approach to addiction treatment. I may be so bold as to say that the Torah forbids using a Torah approach blindly (There may be one very specific sect of Chasidim-[I researched this but choose not to expand on this here] who can properly justify the blind Torah approach according the teachings of their Rebbe, who is a true and acceptable Gadol BiYisrael-so for them, this may be God's will. For the other ninety-nine percent of the Jewish people, this is not the case-and even this sect still refers their Chasidim out for mental health treatment at times).

Here's another important introductory point-there is a difference between deciding for one's self to use a Torah approach, and trash talking all other approaches other than the Torah approach. Often, people using the Torah approach exhibit symptoms of the dangerous "I'm holier than you" syndrome, particularly by saying that the Torah approach is the only legitimate way to recover for addicted Jews. This happens often enough that I'd like to devote one paragraph to this. Deciding to use the Torah approach on one's self is a great risk, but a matter of personal choice; free will is given to each man to do as he wants. However, under no circumstances does any Jew have permission to deride other treatment approaches to friends and other

addicted Jews. **When people make light of other treatment approaches, it usually ends up hurting somebody down the line.** For example, if Reuvain Smith was considering attending a 12 step program until you belittled it in front of him, and now Reuvain never attended the treatment he needed because of your witty comments, I would not hesitate to say that you bear full responsibility for whatever happens to Reuvain as well as to his wife and kids, employer, community, and extended family. Just like it is forbidden for an AA member to deride psychotherapy or a Torah approach, it is forbidden for a fellow using a Torah approach to deride the 12 step program. Foolish or haughty comments like these can kill people and tear apart families.

I need to make one more introductory comment so that the reader properly understands this topic. In the realm of Psychology and Professionally directed addiction treatment, most addiction specialists will tell you that there are three levels of addictive disorders on a spectrum, ranging from mild to moderate, with severe at the opposite end of the spectrum. It is entirely possible from the approach of psychology and the specialty field of addiction counseling that a Jewish addicted person can recover from a mild addictive disorder using only a blind Torah approach.

This answers the common misunderstanding where a Rosh Yeshiva or Rabbi suggests the blind Torah approach to one student and it results in great success; not understanding that addictive disorders come in varying levels of severity, the Rosh Yeshiva or Rabbi now proscribes the blind Torah method to everybody, including severely addicted Heroin users or moderately addicted Pornography viewers. They fail to understand that what works for a mild-level addiction may not work for addictions higher in severity on the spectrum. Although this is not *always* the case, it is *often* the case. I am cautious from using the words “it is *usually* the case” only because I don’t have the scientific data needed to make such a claim. Certainly, my hunch and clinical experience as well as the experience of all of my colleagues is that the blind Torah approach does not work for moderate or severe addictive disorders as a stand-alone method of treatment to the exclusion of other forms of treatment.

Now, I will explain why the Torah approach is greatly misunderstood in regards to addiction treatment.

**Let's clarify that when I talk here about the Torah approach, I refer to the suggestion to simply study Torah to the exclusion of other types of treatment, in the hopes that as a result of the Torah study, the addiction will somehow disappear or be cured.**

There is no question that technically, the power of Torah study is so great and powerful that it can transform a person and help interrupt any bad habit and perhaps even addiction that is known to man. I can fill the next three pages with sources that confirm this idea, and I can bring my quotes from Litvish, Chasidic, and Sefardic traditional sources. This is why it is a very good idea for an addicted Jew to study Torah. There is no question about this whatsoever. Not only this, but the Halacha actually requires all Jewish males to study Torah as much as they can every single day.

**The problem lies in the fact that two mistakes are made by those proscribing Torah treatment.**

**Problem a)** The Torah method seems to only work as intended within certain conditions, as we will soon below. Without these conditions, the Torah approach may be entirely ineffective or at best only partially effective (this may be a matter of debate, viain kan makom liha'arich). Neither is strong enough to arrest addiction by itself. Not only that, but by studying Torah without fulfilling the proper conditions, it might actually reinforce addiction and sinful behavior. I will bring sources for this below.

**Problem b)** There is no reason why one should only keep a Torah program to the exclusion of the regular method of psycho-social addiction treatment. This very idea may even run contrary to the Torah except according to a very small minority of opinions; I refer to the extremely small minority of opinions in our Torah that forbid formal medical treatment. I assure you, you probably do not rely on these opinions when it comes to your physical health, and therefore there is no reason why you should rely on them only in regards to mental health. Unless you don't go to doctors when you have a strep throat, you also should not be against formal mental health treatment. I will explain in more detail below.

Read through the next few sources that I bring, and then you'll have a better grasp of the points that I am making here.

The author of the classic sefer **Erech Apaim** ([source-see sefer Erech Apaim by R' A. Yelin from Weingrab, p. 14](#); see the approbation of this sefer given by the Chofetz Chaim in which the Chofetz Chaim writes "the truth is that mussar books do not need *haskamos*", [vian kan mikomo](#)) writes "I saw this happen so many times that it is now basically a rule by me...that anyone who learns a lot of Torah...without also devoting specific time and effort to also refine his character traits, he is undoubtedly haughtier and has worse character traits than all other people..."

The author explains that some Torah scholars think that by merely reading Gemara, their bad character traits somehow magically melt away. Because they study a lot, they feel assured that they are working on themselves and in no need of repair, *eyin sham*. Here you have a source saying how people who study a lot of Torah without devoting serious time and efforts to mussar behave worse than the common man.

**Rebbe Nachman** writes ([source-see Likutei Moharan 12, 1](#)) "this phenomenon that we observe, that people who study Torah a lot *usually* speak disrespectfully about Tzadikim with great haughtiness...", *eyin sham*. Here you have a source saying how people who study a lot of Torah usually are haughty and speak disrespectfully of holy people.

A 3<sup>rd</sup> generation student of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the sefer **Yosher Divrei Emess** ([source-see Yosher Divrei Emess, paragraph 8](#)) writes "many Jewish people seem to appear in their eyes as well as in the eyes of the general population that they are great Torah scholars, and they imagine themselves to also be great in the fear of heaven...but the truth is that these people haven't even reached a small understanding of our Torah... it is known to everyone that there are several Torah scholars who engage in promiscuous sexual activities"

In a second place he writes ([paragraph 4](#)) "if a person really wants to get close to Hashem through Torah study and mitzvah performance, he must fulfill many conditions; these conditions are ignored by the famous Torah scholars of our generation". Here is a source saying how many Torah scholars ignored the conditions

that make Torah study effective, and that Torah scholars engaged in inappropriate sexual activities.

The **Lechem Hapanim** (authored by the Ba'al Misgeres Hashulchan on Kitzur Shulchan Aruch; found in sefer Lechem Hapanim, Hilchos Chanuka 139, in Lechem Hapanim note one, p. 355 in Shai Lemorah edition of the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch accompanied by the Misgeret Hashulchan) writes about Torah scholars who were gambling on Chanuka even though it is forbidden by the Torah "people make a mistake and think that because Torah scholars were seen gambling, it makes it okay to do. You need to know that in these generations...you cannot bring a proof anymore from any person's behavior or conduct to do something that is contrary to that which we know from the Talmud, the Shulchan Aruch, or that which we were taught by Tzadikim...." Here you have a source where Torah scholars were gambling even though it was forbidden by the Torah.

Although I will not quote it here, it is worth looking up sefer **Even Shleimah**, chapter 3, in the author's footnote one, found on page 44 in the classic menukad format. There, he runs through several common ways that religious people hurt other people in the name of truth and under the guise of doing "Hashem's will".

In Sefer **Meged Givos Olam** (source-see [Meged Givos Olam volume one, page 25](#), also found in chapter "Ahavas Torah", 15) he brings a story where the students asked R' Aryeh Leib Mahlen how it was possible that a "massive" Torah scholar was caught doing something shocking and despicable (the book doesn't record what the Torah scholar did)? R' Mahlen replied that "the Torah is not an oven". The author explains that Torah study alone is not able to change people. It is Torah study and working on one's character traits that does the job, as well as putting up a fight against one's evil inclination. Here is a source saying how Torah scholars are capable of doing shocking and despicable things.

The **Ramchal** (source-see sefer [Derech Hashem section 4, chapter 2, paragraph 5](#)) writes "in order for Torah to have its desired effect it must conform to two conditions-one is having reverence for the act of Torah study itself, as well as the constant rectification of one's deeds." Eyin sham. Here is a source implying that if

Torah is studied without fulfilling these two conditions, it will *not* have its desired effect. This is the implied converse from the words written by the Ramchal.

The **Vilna Goan** ([source-see Even Shleimah 1, 11](#)) teaches that Torah influences a person in either a good or bad way, and that Torah is like dew which grows whatever is planted underneath it. If a weed is planted there, then the dew makes the ugly weed grow larger, and if a beautiful flower is planted there, then the dew of Torah makes the flower grow larger. The Vilna Goan there expands on the idea of how Torah study might actually make people even worse than before, because of its nature to work like dew. Because of the way Torah works, the Vilna Goan warns to do teshuva before studying Torah so that the Torah doesn't make him even worse than before, *eyin sham*.

The **Ramchal** in another place (source see Mesilas Yisharim, chapter 3) writes "if he examines his actions and finds something that is not good, he should think and contemplate which strategy he can use to stop performing this sin and to become pure from it". In other words, here the Ramchal is teaching us that in order to uproot sinful behavior, we will need to use tactics and strategies to be successful in changing our behavior; this implies that merely reading Gemara is not sufficient, and that also proactive action needs to take place in order to facilitate change.

Even when Torah study alone is able to be effective, it still needs to be done in the right dosage. For example, the **Reishis Chachmah** compiled a list of sources saying how anger is very bad to have. However, the Reishis Chachmah ([see Reishis Chachmah, sha'ar Anava 83; quoted by sefer Erech Apayim in the introduction ,11](#)) writes that reading these sources will help specifically if he reads it *all of the time*, as much as he can. This is similar to the **Ramchal** in his introduction to Mesilas Yisharim, who writes that the reader will not gain from his book by reading it only one time. Instead, the reader will gain from the book by reviewing its contents *all the time*. This is also similar to what the **Ba'al HaTanya** writes about contemplating God's presence. The Tanya writes that if a person contemplates about God *all the time*, then it will work to help him acquire da'as, but if he doesn't do it *all the time* then occasional contemplation of God will only produce vain imaginary thoughts ([source-see sefer HaTanya, end of chapter 3](#)).

Finally, we should mention on this topic that the entire **mussar movement** of R' Yisrael Salanter was based on the observation that Torah study without mussar did not influence behavior.

I do not wish to quote the dozens of teaching of the ba'alei mussar about this, but I will leave you with one teaching I learned from a Rabbi of mine when I studied in Yeshiva that is dear to me. My Rabbi told me (I recorded exactly what he said and even when he said it so that what I am telling you now, years later, would be accurate) that he heard personally from R' Moshe Shmuel Shapiro of Be'er Yakov that the Brisker Rav told over how R' Chaim Brisker argued with R' Yisrael Salanter's movement, claiming that Volozhin yeshiva did not need mussar study, and that mussar study was only for sick people. The Brisker Rav then said how later on, Volozhin's halls became filled with wicked Torah students who did not even keep shabbos or other Torah laws and R' Chaim Brisker admitted that it was a mistake to argue on R' Salanter and deny mussar study in Yeshivas Volozhin.

The Gemara says ([see Brachos 19a](#)) "if you see a Torah scholar that did a sin at night, don't think badly about him by day, because he for sure did teshuva by then for what he did wrong." What do you see from this Gemara? That it is possible to know a lot of Torah and to sin.

After quoting an onslaught of sources about Torah students and scholars going astray, what do we see from this?

That using Torah study blindly as a stand-alone treatment approach to addictive disorders is not so simple; and that proscribing this to the exclusion of regular psychosocial treatments is reckless and probably forbidden by Jewish law and spirit.

In order for the Torah approach to work, one must:

- a) Must know what the requirements are and fulfill these requirements in order to make Torah study produce the desired outcome

- b) Must have reverence for the study of Torah
- c) Must be constantly working to improve his character traits
- d) Must repent each time before he studies Torah

Torah study being used to treat addiction is, after all, not so simple. We just saw quotes about Torah scholars that gambled, engaged in promiscuity, and were haughty and made fun of Tzadikim. I could make this list much longer but I limited it to the sources I had within the books in my living room. Remember the short catchphrase I quoted above-“Torah is not an oven”.

There is no guarantee that simply opening up a Gemara and reading it will cure addictive disorders; in fact, this was precisely why the mussar movement was founded. Certainly, it is reckless to proscribe only this as a form of treatment from addiction to the exclusion of other things.

It is also worthy of mention that there is already a major dispute whether the word “Torah” in most places in chazal refers only to “Torah study” or strictly to reading Torah books, or refers more broadly to “Torah” which includes as prayer, mussar study, and mitzvah observance. In other words, perhaps the word “Torah” is used to refer to the Torah as a whole, and not to refer only to the single mitzvah of Torah study, viain kan makom liha’arich. Understanding the word *Torah* differently in the Talmud makes an enormous difference in understanding what all of the teachings found in the Talmud about “Torah” are telling us, vidok. Similarly, a massive dispute exists about what Torah lishma means, which is also related to this discussion because it allows us to understand what one must do to be worthy of the things promised in perek kinyan Torah, viain kan makoms liha’arich.

As far as the people that claim that the Torah approach must be used because it is a lack of faith to use psychological treatments, this is a major error. I do not want to delve into this now. Perhaps in my book I will cover this in more detail. Right now I will just mention that the source that these people usually quote for forbidding

modern medical treatment is the Ramban; and I must inform you that according to the Birkei Yosef and Poskim in our generation, this Ramban only applied in the time when we had prophecy, and is therefore now irrelevant. Not only that, the Birkei Yosef adds that it is forbidden to deny one's self from receiving medical treatment based on this Ramban, and that somebody who does this is relying on a miracle to occur, which is forbidden, ain kan makom liha'arich, viod chazon limoed.

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I hope this paper helps to open the doors for addiction recovery and good health for the Jewish people. My prayer is that Jewish people everywhere access the guidance, tools, and assistance they need in order to get ever closer to Hashem Yisbarach, and merit to live a fulfilling life of avodas Hashem.

**With gratitude to Hashem that we have now completed this paper in good health, erev Rosh Hashana, September 2014,**

*Keep in touch,*

*Avi Tenenbaum*

Contact the author at [avitenenbaum9@gmail.com](mailto:avitenenbaum9@gmail.com) or [avi@jnars.org](http://avi@jnars.org)

USA: 011-972-54-845-1458    Israel: 054-845-1458