

White, W. L. (2013). JACS and Alcohol Problems within the Jewish Community: An Interview with Lisa Auerbach. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com.

JACS and Alcohol Problems within the Jewish Community An Interview with Lisa Auerbach

William L. White

Introduction

Since its inception in 1979, the organization Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent People and Significant Others (JACS) has served as a major resource for alcoholism education and recovery support within the Jewish community. For the past twenty years, JACS has been a program of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, in New York. On August 5, 2013, I had the opportunity to interview Lisa Auerbach, President of the JACS Council, about the history of JACS and its major programs. Please join us in this conversation.

Bill White: Lisa, let me just begin by asking how long you've been involved with JACS.

Lisa Auerbach: I've been involved with JACS for approximately thirty years as a member, as a member of the JACS Council, and, for the last three years, as President of the Council. I've also worked as one of the volunteer leaders with the Teen and Young People Network.

Bill White: What are some of your recollections of the challenges that JACS faced in its early history?

Lisa Auerbach: Well, the first challenge was just to get the word out that Jews drank and that Jews could develop drinking problems along with narcotic and prescription drug dependency. I remember going to very early JACS retreats and hearing stories that made me cringe—stories about people going to their rabbis and asking for help with alcoholism and drug abuse and the rabbi saying things like, “Are you sure you're Jewish?” and “Do you know who your mother is?” There was such denial at that point about alcoholism among Jews both in the world at large and in the Jewish community. That was the major hurdle that JACS faced. It was a challenge reaching out to educate the secular community of Jews and the more Orthodox religious communities. Today, JACS has members representing the whole spectrum of religious observance.

I spoke to a woman the other day who has been in recovery for thirty years. She said that until she met Jews in recovery, she had always believed that Jews did not drink. This sort of cultural idea that Jews don't have alcohol problems has been pervasive, and that's why it was so important early on for JACS to get involved in training rabbis and educating the larger community.

Bill White: And I would guess that the personal stories of JACS members remain one of the most powerful vehicles within such education.

Lisa Auerbach: Yes, it still is. I sit on the Divisional Board of the Jewish Board of Children and Family Services and every time the board meets, a different program of JBFCS is presented before the entire board. Last year, the first program presented was JACS and we had a member come in and tell her story. It brought people to tears around the room, and these are professionals in New York City. Those stories always resonate. It's the most powerful means we have to spread the word, especially when those telling their stories range from someone wearing jeans and a tee shirt to a woman wearing a pill box hat and stockings with seams on the back. Our worlds are incredibly different, but our stories are the same. I think that's the power of what we do, what we bring when we go out in the world.

Bill White: Before we talk about the programs and activities of JACS, could you talk about the role of the Council and the governance of JACS?

Lisa Auerbach: Okay. JACS is a program of the Jewish Board of Children and Family Services. I think the thing that fascinates most people about JACS, given the amount of work that we do, is that we only have two paid full-time staff: Sharon Darack is the JACS Program Director and Vickie Griffiths is the JACS Program Coordinator. They help so many people and keep all JACS activities moving forward. JACS also has support from other employees of JBFCS: Jonathan Katz, MSW, Rabbi Simcha Weintraub, and Rabbi Stephanie Dickstein. The rest of the work JACS provides is done by volunteers. The Council is made up of JACS volunteer members, and each one of us has an area of responsibility. For example, I work with programs for young adults, and I've also done a lot of speaking engagements. Other people are more involved in training of professionals: rabbis, social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists. Each one of us comes to the Council with our own passion. We work jointly with the staff, who are JBFCS employees. The Council serves in an advisory and support role.

Bill White: What are some of the major programs and activities of JACS?

Lisa Auerbach: Well, there are many. I think the educational speaking program that we have is amazing. We go to schools and synagogues to do alcohol and drug prevention work in part, by telling our stories. We're also letting people know that they—individuals and families—are not alone in dealing with the addiction of a family member. We convey that alcoholism and addiction can be the hidden force behind a lot of other more visible and “acceptable” problems. Whenever we go on a speaking engagement, people respond. They come up to us after and share their own experiences and struggles.

Our JACS weekend retreats have been held once or twice a year for over 30 years. I recall you coming to one many years ago. Those weekends are transformative. People walk away and they're touched for months from the sharing with people in recovery who are like themselves culturally and religiously. These retreats are a central element of our service to those in recovery.

We do have meetings in the city and in other places in the country where our members come to share with each other. JACS provides trainings for professionals. After these training sessions, we always elicit responses like, “You don't know how long we've been in need of something like this.” Our training and speaking engagements put us out there in a way that people can really relate to our stories and who we are. They find themselves in us.

We have programs for young people, as we call them, who are between the ages of eighteen to almost thirty. We have a wonderful Sober Purim Party that we do for our young people. Instead of a holiday celebration, which can be focused largely on drinking, this is a place where we can go and say to others, “Come, you can be safe here.” We have other sober holiday programs. We do a model Recovery Seder every year where the focus is freedom: freedom from addiction. We have a newsletter for members that we put out once or twice a year. It tells our members what we’ve done all year and also gives our members a chance to speak to us. We have “Spiritual Days” where we bring in speakers such as Rabbi Abraham Twerski. From the beginning of JACS, Rabbi Twerski has been such a wonderful supporter of all we do at JACS.

Bill White: You also mentioned in an earlier conversation supporting travel of young people in recovery to Israel.

Lisa Auerbach: Yes, that goes through Birthright, but it is done in conjunction with JACS. We just had our fifth trip. It is for young people in recovery, from ages eighteen to twenty-six. You can find us when you look on the Birthright website. While on the tour, we help reinforce the participants’ sobriety, e.g., connecting them to other people in recovery in Israel. When we were there, we visited the Jerusalem Sober House and a rehab in Jerusalem and attended 12-step meetings. When you go on a Birthright trip, you can extend your trip for three months. Some of the kids from our last trip, in June 2013, are still there and are connected to meetings and connected to people in recovery that we know.

Bill White: I think our readers will be interested in whether JACS is centralized in New York City or if JACS chapters and meetings exist around the country.

Lisa Auerbach: The JACS office is in New York City, as is our Council, and most of our activities are in the New York or the tri-state area, but there are JACS groups throughout the country and in other countries. You can access a directory of JACS meetings at <http://www.jbfcs.org/programs-services/jewish-community-services-2/jacs/meetings/#.UgT9L5K2O2Y>

Bill White: When you look over the years of your involvement in JACS, what do you think are the most significant contributions JACS has made to address alcohol problems in the Jewish community?

Lisa Auerbach: We’ve opened the doors. Through JACS, we’ve opened doors to let people go to their rabbis and say, “Why do I have to go to a church basement to have a 12-step meeting? Why don’t we do it here?” A lot of that has happened. We’ve opened doors across the spectrum of Judaism—across all the factions that divide our community.

What is amazing is that in JACS, there are no labels. When we come together, we come together as Jews in recovery. Working together to strengthen our recovery doesn’t focus on what you’re wearing or how you choose to live your life in terms of religious observance. I think that inclusiveness/togetherness is the major thing. It overcomes the denial and stigma, which is such a big obstacle to recovery. I once sat next to a woman at a JACS meeting who observes very differently than I do. We were sitting there in this very intimate conversation and I looked at her at one point and I said, “If my friends back home saw us now, they would think I was crazy

because they wouldn't understand this." They really wouldn't. They wouldn't understand we could come together as equals.

Bill White: What is your vision for the future of JACS ?

Lisa Auerbach: Well, I want us to keep doing what we're doing. I want us to keep fighting to break down the personal, family, and community denial. I want us to be not only around, but stronger in terms of our ability to open those doors I mentioned earlier and keep them open. I'd love us to have our own retreat house so that we could always have open doors and have meetings 24 hours a day. That would be amazing. But the main thing is that we help people come together who are very like-minded in their needs and goals. I think JACS has an important place in the world.

Bill White: There's a larger movement now of people organizing to put a face and voice on recovery—coming out publicly, not as AA or NA members, but as people in recovery. Is that movement beginning to influence the Jewish community?

Lisa Auerbach: JACS brings us all together, but disclosing one's addiction is still very difficult, especially within the more Orthodox communities, because of the stigma that still exists. You go to Hollywood and everybody's in recovery. It's like a badge of honor for some people to say, "I beat it. I'm in recovery from an addiction. I have a great story." If you do that in other communities, there's a lot at stake. Our message is not just about alcohol problems; it's about hope for recovery from those problems.

Yesterday in the New York Times, there was an article about trauma and how we all live with it. A psychiatrist, Mark Epstein, just wrote a book called, *The Trauma of Everyday Living*. We all have it, whether it's big traumas or little traumas. If you live long enough, you're going to experience loss. You're going to experience pain. You're going to experience grief. We live in a world where everybody wants closure and everybody wants things tidy. And in my 57 years, things aren't tidy. Life isn't tidy. There's no closure. There's moving through the pain, and being more connected to others helps you move through it. And that's where I see JACS coming into play. As we break down walls and allow ourselves to have honest conversations, we don't have to feel alone in the world. That's what JACS does.

Bill White: Lisa, let me ask one final question: What's the best way for any of our readers to get involved in JACS or get further information about JACS?

Lisa Auerbach: The contact information for JACS is as follows:

JACS Info: <http://www.jbfcs.org/JACS> or email us at JACS@JASCWEB.ORG

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Bill White: Lisa, thank you for taking this time with us.

Acknowledgement: Support for this interview series is provided by the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) through a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). The opinions expressed herein are the view of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA, or CSAT.