

Are the Twelve Steps Kosher?

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The 12-step programs have been a very effective method of overcoming the scourge of a variety of addictions—alcohol, drugs, food, gambling, sex—and several others. Some opinions have been voiced regarding the propriety of these programs for Torah-observant Jews, and I'd like to bring some clarity to the issues.

In as much as most of the meetings are of mixed genders, this has been raised as an objection. This is not a fault of the program, but rather a logistic problem, and can be resolved by forming separate meetings for men and women.

Since the majority of meetings are held in church basements or social halls, some feel that these are Christian programs. The sad fact is that very few synagogues have made themselves available to program meetings. Inasmuch as the various addictions have seriously affected many Jews, it would be a mitzvah for synagogues to open their doors to meetings.

It may be argued that the first of the 12-step programs, Alcoholics Anonymous, was the outgrowth of a Christian group. This is true. However, as we shall see, the content of the 12-step programs is not only compatible with Torah, but actually seems to have been adopted from Torah sources. I cannot understand how the founder of AA, Bill Wilson, had access to concepts that we find in the Talmud and the *mussar* writings. The fact that they were adopted by a Christian group hardly disqualifies them, just as the *kedusha* in the *amidah* was not disqualified by its adoption into the Lord's Prayer.

Some people mistakenly thought the 5th step to be like the Catholic confession. As we will see, it is not.

Let us now look at the 12 steps.

Step #1

We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step #2

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

This is essentially the Talmudic statement (Kedushin 30b) that one's *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) increases in strength every day, and were it not for the help of G-d, *one would not be able to withstand it*. In other words, without the help of G-d, we are powerless over the *yetzer hara*. Indeed, the Talmud relates that two of our greatest *tzaddikim* were tempted by Satan and were actually in the process of submitting to the sin, and were saved only by the intervention of G-d. (Kedushin 81a).

The Talmud refers to sin as due to temporary insanity (Sotah 3a). Thus, just as we are powerless to resist the temptation to sin without G-d's help, so the alcoholic is powerless to resist the temptation to drink, and only a Power greater than oneself (which we define as G-d) can prevent the insane behavior.

Step #3

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of G-d as we understood Him.

The phrase "G-d as we understood Him" has been a source of confusion. It was meant to avoid reference to the deity of any religion. The Jew should say, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of Hashem." This step expresses two Torah concepts. (1) Set aside your own will in favor of the will of Hashem (Ethics of the Fathers 2:4) and (2) "Cast upon G-d your burden, and He will sustain you" (Psalms 55:23).

Step #4

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves

All *sifrei mussar* repeatedly stress the importance of *chesbon hanefesh*, a personal accounting which could not be expressed any better than "a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." This must indeed be

fearless, because it takes great courage to honestly search oneself and confront parts of our character and personality whose existence we may be reluctant to acknowledge.

In doing a moral inventory, we must list our assets as well as our liabilities, our merits as well as our faults, because only this way can we achieve a true self-awareness. The *mussar* authority, Rabbi Yeruchem Levovitz said that if a person is unaware of one's faults, one does not know what one must correct. However, a person who is unaware of one's character strengths is even in a more sorry state, because one is unaware of the tools one has to live a proper life.

Step #5

Admitted to G-d, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

This step has been misconstrued as being the Catholic confession. This is not so. In his guide to proper living, Rebbe Elimelech of Lizensk says that a person should avail oneself of a trusted friend, to whom one can admit everything has done, and even the objectionable thoughts and desires one has harbored. Verbalizing these breaks the hold of the *yetzer hara*.

Step #6

Were entirely ready to have G-d remove all these defects of character.

Step #7

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

We generally can control our behavior, but we may have little or no control over some of our feelings. It is evident from the Talmud that we are born with some character traits, some of which we can sublimate and redirect to positive goals. We may not, by our own efforts, be able to extirpate some undesirable traits.

The saintly Chafetz Chaim was known to pray tearfully at the Ark of the Torah that G-d relieve him of his feelings of anger. The Chafetz Chaim

never exhibited anger, because he was in control of his behavior, but he could not eliminate feeling angry, and he prayed that G-d remove these.

Obviously, we must do our homework to rid ourselves of objectionable traits, and this is how one becomes “ready to have G-d remove all these defects of character.” Once one has done whatever is within one’s power, one can then “ask G-d to remove our shortcomings.”

Step #8

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

Step #9

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

The Talmud says that whereas a person’s sins are forgiven on Yom Kippur, this does not apply to offenses committed against another person. Divine forgiveness is granted only if one has genuinely sought forgiveness from the person one harmed or offended.

It is of interest that there is a difference of opinion between ethicists whether a person should seek to make amends if doing so would be displeasing to the victim. A man asked me to forgive him for having spread a bad rumor about me. I did forgive him, but I wished that he had not told me about this, because now I was worried about what bad rumors might be circulating about me.

In such cases, Rabbi Yisrael of Salant said that one would be better off *not* asking for forgiveness, because this aggravates the person. The Chafetz Chaim, however, said that one must ask forgiveness nevertheless. I was amused that Bill Wilson had gravitated to the opinion of Rabbi Yisrael of Salant.

Step #10

Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.

In *Alei Shur*, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe says that one should carry a notebook and record occurrences of a moral or ethical nature, and review them at the end of the day.

One cannot emphasize strongly enough “when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.” The natural tendency is to defend a mistake and rationalize it. This is a gross error. Recent political events have proven that “cover-ups” do not work. One will have much better results if one overcomes the tendency to defend a mistake, and admit it *promptly*.

Step #11

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious with G-d, praying only for knowledge of His will and the power to carry it out.

The *mussar* and Chassidic literature is replete with this principle.

Step #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.

Torah teaches us that we have a duty of *arvus*, of mutual responsibility for one another. There is a Scriptural mitzvah of *tochacha*, of giving reproof for improper behavior. Indeed, if one has the possibility of positively influencing another person and fails to do so, one is held responsible for the other person’s misdeeds.

The Talmud says that there is one verse on which all of Torah depends: “Know G-d in all your ways” (Proverbs 3:6), Torah rejects the idea “Give unto G-d that which is His and unto Caesar that which is his.” We do not have two standards, one for religion and the other for the secular. We are required to practice the principles of Torah “in all our affairs.”

My book, *Self-Improvement? I’m Jewish*, was written at the request of a recovering alcoholic who wanted a program based on *mussar*. At the end of the book, I cited the 12-steps, pointing out that they essentially comprise a program based on *mussar*.

Are the 12-steps kosher? I think they are *very* kosher.