



Drugs – Problem or Solution?

by Rabbi Shaya Cohen; Rosh HaYeshiva; Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh, Founder; Priority-1

Drugs, drugs, drugs. We hear so much about this topic, and yet seem to know so little of what it is really all about. In the general society, drinking and drug use are so commonplace that they barely get much attention, unless something very dramatic occurs. In the Orthodox Jewish world, they are beginning to arouse some attention, but unfortunately it takes “death by overdose” to get any real focus, and even then, only for a short while.

What do we know about substance abuse in the Orthodox community, and what can and must be done about it before tragedy becomes commonplace?

Before we begin we must be aware of an axiom in the field, “Drugs are not the problem, they are youth’s solution of choice.”

Extensive drug use and substance abuse is almost universally a response to a void experienced by the individual user. Many different problems position young people for susceptibility to drug problems. Most of them usually end up with a diminished self-image, lack of good feeling and happiness, and, especially for Yeshiva students, a deep spiritual void that desperately needs to be filled, and for which drugs become the most accessible substitute.

Over the past fifteen years, substance abuse has gone from being thought of as a drug problem, to being classified as a medical issue entitled “chemical dependency disorder.” Recent research asserts that 10% of the population can have some involvement with drugs with no prolonged side effects. This research also indicates that 37% of the population will have some long lasting side effects, which will not necessarily be debilitating. However, 53% of the population will develop a chemical dependency disorder, which can plague them for life.

The population can be seen as divided into addictive and non-addictive personalities. Addictive personalities are prone to chemical dependency and even moderate exposure can prove tragic in the long run. The concept of “light drugs” or “not so serious” drug involvement must therefore be removed from our vocabulary, since we generally cannot know who is more likely to become addicted.

In order to avoid a problem of epidemic and tragic proportions, a few years down the line, we must begin now to address the issue of prevention. This issue must be addressed on two fronts. Amelioration of the factors that lead to problems of unhappiness, low self-esteem and spiritual void must become a priority in childrearing and education. An educational program which deplores the mentality in our society that for every pain there is

a medication, and which promotes the exhilarating feeling of dealing with problems and solving them.

Problems must be viewed as challenges and opportunities for growth, and we must laude the accomplishments of those who overcome adversity. We must teach our children that in reality, G-d heals, and medication only makes the process more natural than miraculous, and therefore allows us healing with even less personal merit. Knowing that healing is from Him and learning to rely on Him, can be the greatest source of strength in the face of adversity and can fill the spiritual void that so many of our youth feel today. Often this void is expressed in a sense of a meaningless and purposeless existence. We must therefore infuse a sense of true meaning and purpose in life, which for Yeshiva students especially, can only come from Torah, as the Divinely revealed blueprint of Creation, outlining the purpose of creation and the directives for us to accomplish that purpose.

Parents and educators must maintain open lines of communication with our youth, to guide them with love and caring and to afford them the opportunity to share their feelings, problems and temptations with us. The adult generation should become more familiar with the early warning signs of problems and drug use and feel comfortable taking advantage of the professionals working in the field. We must, however, remember that the field of substance abuse is a medical issue, with roots in spiritual problems and must always be dealt with in a comprehensive manner.

Denial can no longer be the answer. The answer is education in prevention, early detection and intervention and providing the types of religious and spiritual experiences that lead to feelings of self-worth, happiness and fulfillment.