

CyberTorah: Pray as if Your Life Depends on It

I spent last Shabbat with sixteen 8th and 9th graders from Kol Emeth in Los Angeles. The entire trip was memorable, inspiring, and fun. We visited the Museum of Tolerance, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the Skirball Museum, and Universal Studios. It was great see how the students reacted to each stop. The highlight was our Friday night experience at Beit Teshuvah.

Beit Teshuvah is the only residential facility in the United States (and probably anywhere outside of Israel) for recovering drug and alcohol addicts. Rabbi Graff helped make a connection with Beit Teshuvah because she worked there over two summers while she was in Rabbinical School. Rabbi Marc Borowitz, the director of the program, went out of his way to make our whole group feel welcome at this place of healing and recovery.

When we arrived, our guide gave us a brief talk and orientation. He was a good looking young man in his late twenties, dressed nicely. He told us about his family life in affluent LA and then later great financial success in Hollywood. Through all that time he was a heroin addict. He got good grades in school to please his parents. He got a job that he thought would give him financial success and therefore make him happy. Nowhere along the way, however, did he get in touch with what he wanted, what would make him feel good about his life.

Drugs covered over that deep unhappiness and the feeling that he needed to be perfect. Drugs helped him ignore the emptiness he felt inside, the feeling he was fooling everyone. The only time he felt fulfilled in his life was during the summers, when they had interns. He really enjoyed the feeling of mentoring young people learning the business. Finally, he crashed and entered rehab four years ago.

We then had two other guides who gave us a tour. As we were walking around Beit Teshuvah with them, we learned that both guides were residents of the house and in recovery themselves. It was eye opening for all of us. They were so similar to our group. They were struggling with the demands affluent society puts on us to have no flaws, to be perfect and had “self medicated” to cope.

Friday night services are unique. Part music from the Friday night liturgy and part 12 step meeting, it was an affirming, ecstatic experience that brought hope and faith to everyone in that room. People there prayed and participated as if their lives depended on it. Because prayer is a life line of meaning that helps this room “hold on” to sobriety when the going gets tough. Prayer is a beacon of hope on the days when all else seems dismal and drugs or alcohol are the easy ticket out.

The welcoming quality of Beit Teshuvah was amazing. We have been talking all year about creating a more open community that makes all of us feel affirmed and cared for. Here is a community practicing that Torah. Newcomers are welcomed by the whole community with a blessing. People literally surrounded us, to share their stories and learn ours. Our group was invited up to lead Shalom Aleichem. Beit Teshuvah as a community is passionate about helping people heal and recover. That is a passion they wanted to share with us.

Beit Teshuvah's Jewish practice is inspiring but rarely traditional. At the end of dinner, our group began to bench and sing together. People began to drift over towards our group, to sing or hum along, or just stand near these young people thanking God for dinner. It taught me and the rest of our group that the traditional words have a real influence and reach, especially when people are in process of healing.

I personally found the message of the community encouraging and challenging. I too fight against the desire to be perfect, to be all things to all people. Yet only God is perfect. I am a flawed person. Also, I have bad days that bring out my own problematic behaviors. I too need to remember faith on those days and just "hold on."

Here at Kol Emeth, we pray and learn together with great regularity. We pray for many reasons, varying from deep spiritual commitments to a strong connection to community. Beit Teshuvah reminded me to bring my own problems and fears, my own sense of inadequacy and imperfection, with me when I pray. Because my life too depends on it.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

There will be no CyberTorah next week in celebration of Purim. CyberTorah will resume the following week. If you would like to be added to the CyberTorah list, please email Rabbi Booth at rabbiboorth@kolemeth.org.

Rabbi David Booth

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