

# OP-ED

## Helping a beloved brother in difficulty to help himself

### THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN



Dear Bintel Brief:

I have a dear friend who is in trouble. No, why shouldn't I tell you the truth: He's more than a friend, a brother. He has "let himself go" for more than 20 years now, subject to an addiction that he can no longer shake, at least not without an awfully hard push.

With half his mind he knows that, and is waiting for someone to force the issue. This part of him knows that he is holding on as long as he can to the "comforts" of his addicted state, knowing that eventually he will have to give it up. But the other part of him seems to be fully drugged, thinking that he can live this way forever.

If it ever crosses this part of his mind that such a life is one of dangerous and self-destructive illusion, he quickly dismisses that thought by saying, "I have no alternative," since the idea of "cold turkey" withdrawal is just more than he can bear.

Our family must be just like other families in situations like this. At first we were horrified, feeling that our brother had changed in a shocking way. We remembered him as a struggling and brave young man, one whose idealism was an inspiration not only to us but to everyone around him. Now he sometimes seems to be turning into an angry person, frustrated and generally out of control. He gets defensive in ways we do not remember from the early days. Increasingly isolated from those around him (sometimes through no fault of his own), he begins to lash out at the slightest critical word.

But the truth is that we have gotten used to it. Family is family, after all. We continued to visit and enjoy our stays with him, preferring to ignore the problems while we were there. He has a beautiful home with lots of room for guests, and he's always been a terrific host to us and all our friends. We especially like to go for the Jewish holidays.

I guess I should say something more to you about the nature of my brother's problem. We are survivors, you see, and have been through an awful lot. We both want to make new lives for ourselves, and both seemed to do pretty well. But his path was always the harder one. He had enemies, and he had to become a fighter.

I think he didn't know how to handle being a tough guy — something for which we had never been trained — and he started to become consumed by that image. Eventually he won some tough battles, but the victories just didn't work out. Now he's become addicted to holding onto his winnings, to never letting go, and it hasn't made him a nicer person, as you can imagine.

His old enemies seem to be tired and wanting to change things, but that addicted part of him just can't deal with the idea of compromise. His addiction, you see, is not to drugs or to alcohol, God forbid, but to land (we never even owned real estate in the old country!) and power. He just doesn't seem to know how to let go any more.

For the past couple of years, we haven't gone to see my brother. We make like we've been busy and just haven't gotten around to it, but that's not the whole truth. There have been some problems in his neighborhood, you see, and we don't quite know what to do about it. Something about kids throwing rocks, and it looks pretty serious.

That beautiful home of his happens to be located in a pretty rough neighborhood, and his relations with those neighbors are quite awful. We used to believe it was just because his neighbors were nasty people, anti-Semites who never wanted him there in the first place. I'm sure that was true and still is a big part of the problem. But by now, we're beginning to see that part of the problem is caused by him and his attitude as well. Their nastiness just made him hostile, and he never got

to know them very well.

I've just gotten a call from my brother. He's asked me to come visit him. I responded to his call with excitement, hoping that this was the opening I've been waiting for, the chance to bring him to his senses and get him started on the long and painful road to recovery. But now he adds something else before the call is over.

"Come," he says, "I need to see you, and I need your support. But there is one condition to your visit. Please don't criticize. Don't tell me what to do. Don't bother me with your treatment programs. I just want to know that you love me the way I am." And if I am going to speak up, he tells me, he'd rather I not come.

I need your advice, and that of your intelligent readers. The fact is that I do love my brother and want more than anything to help him. I know that he needs me, and that should be enough to make me go without question. But to just go and say nothing? That doesn't seem right, either. I want to help him, not just support his illusion. I can't go and pretend that he has no problems, but I can't just stay home and ignore

him either. Please tell me what I should do.

Yours sincerely,  
A troubled brother

Dear Troubled:

Your situation is not an easy one. It is clear that you love your brother, and it is clear that you have to help him. By all means go, go with God's blessing! But don't feel you have to accept his conditions. Once you are there, try to find a way to talk some sense to him. Do it in a way he can hear, and don't threaten him. He does need you, but he needs you to help him get out of this situation, not just to support him in it.

This task will not be a quick or easy one, and you will have to stick close by him for a long time, and without pronouncing judgments. But you may be his only hope, and you cannot abandon him. We wish you well on your journey! ■

Rabbi Arthur Green is president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncore.