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An exodus out of addiction

Beit T'Shuvah is both synagogue and drug rehab center.

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By Kurt Streeter

As a reminder of how much his life has changed, Rabbi Mark Borovitz wore a starched blue prisoner's shirt.

He reveled in the symbolism, stroking his beard, dancing a jig, smiling broadly. Then, from a low stage in a well-lit sanctuary, he looked out at his congregants and turned the tale of Exodus into a parable on fighting addiction.

"How," he shouted, "are you going to get out of Egypt this year? What's the inner slavery you are going to leave behind?"

For many inside the temple this night, the question cut to the bone. They have long been chained to trouble -- to drugs or drink or sex, to gambling or stealing or running cons. The story of the Jewish flight from bondage is one they can deeply feel.

It was Passover, the beginning of a Seder feast at Temple Beit T'Shuvah, the House of Return. Occupying a drab two-building complex in Mid-City Los Angeles, it is both a full-fledged synagogue and a drug rehabilitation center, home to 120 addicts, men and women, most of them Jewish.

Its guiding principles are steeped in the Torah: 12 steps meets the 12 tribes.

Borovitz, 58, a burly, effervescent ex-thief who spent most of the 1980s behind bars, and his wife, Harriet Rossetto, 72, a social worker and free spirit, run Beit T'Shuvah. Rossetto founded the place 23 years ago.

The rabbi scanned the sanctuary, packed with residents, guests and plates of symbolic food: lamb bone, boiled egg, matzo, parsley, apple paste and horseradish. He raised a glass -- kosher grape juice instead of wine -- and sang a Hebrew prayer.

A chorus of voices joined him, straining to the heavens for redemption. They came from every corner of society. A mother who couldn't say no to crack. A businessman who lost his house to gambling. A musician who ditched his family for heroin. A lawyer who succumbed to rum.

At the front of the room, near the rabbi, sat Rachel Lurie and Luke Chittick, holding hands. During last year's Passover, they were in back, still new to Beit T'Shuvah, still fresh from the brink, still uncertain if sobriety could bring anything good.

The Seder last week was "a milestone we've looked forward to for a long time," Luke said. It wasn't just that they were a couple now, propping each other up. It was that they felt their lives had meaning. They could see a future.

Rachel and Luke arrived at Beit T'Shuvah in November of 2008. He came first, just after his release from a hospital after another bout of alcohol poisoning.

When Luke entered Beit T'Shuvah, he was 27, bloated and ashen. His brother had found the temple, and because Luke was still woozy, he did not know where he was.

"Just what the hell am I doing in a synagogue?" Luke, the son of a Lutheran minister, recalls wondering.

That day, he was at the bottom of a descent that had begun at the University of Massachusetts and quickened when he moved to Los Angeles in 2004, hoping his handsome looks would lead to acting jobs.

What he found instead was a bartending job -- and OxyContin, the prescription pain drug that mirrors heroin. It seemed to fight the depressive storms that had swept over him since childhood.

"Everything just blew up in my face," he says, remembering terrible moments -- like the day he snorted OxyContin from the grimy floor of a urine- and feces-soaked public bathroom in Tijuana.

By 2007, he was able to replace OxyContin with something cheaper: vodka and bad wine. Soon, living in a string of shabby Compton motels, he had a routine. Drink for two hours and pass out. Wake, drink again, pass out, wake, start over.

He was strapped to gurneys in mental wards. He flunked his way out of rehab stints by getting drunk. With each failure he hated himself more, but he could do nothing to change.

He was taken to an emergency room one day, his blood-alcohol level at 0.53, when a doctor pulled his brother aside.

"You know the actor in 'Leaving Las Vegas'?" the doctor said, speaking of Nicolas Cage, who in the movie drinks himself to death. Luke "is Nicolas Cage."

Rachel understood those depths too well. She grew up in a middle-class Canadian family that practiced a conservative brand of Judaism -- a family that, according to her mother, never quite figured out how to deal with their rebellious daughter.

At 15 she ran away from home, living for a spell on the streets of Toronto. That year, in a rough part of downtown, she was cornered by a neo-Nazi skinhead and sexually assaulted.

By her mid-20s, even though she had kept a string of bookkeeping jobs, Rachel was sinking fast, getting loaded on drugs or alcohol almost every night. Yet somehow she kept her family from knowing the extent of her addiction. She was good at lying.

"Smart enough," she says, "to manipulate, so I could get what I want."

As her drinking and cocaine use increased -- some nights she would go through nearly a gallon of vodka -- she grew delusional. She shut herself inside her apartment and barely spoke. White-hot anger was her preferred mode of expression. She suffered a nervous breakdown.

As she turned 32, Rachel knew that if she didn't get help, the worst was going to happen. "I was going to die," she says flatly.

She flew to Los Angeles to check herself in to Beit T'Shuvah, a place she'd heard about from a friend. She drank the entire way. Then she skulked through her first weeks, crying, green baseball cap covering her eyes.

"Mad as hell," she says. "Mad at what I let myself become."

To hear his wife tell it, Mark Borovitz "was a good Jewish boy who became a crook."

It started in Cleveland, his hometown, when he was 14 and his father died of a heart attack. Lost, Borovitz began peddling stolen goods and drinking heavily. In 1977, in his mid-20s, he moved to Los Angeles. He became an alcoholic, a con man, a purveyor of bad checks and a thief.

From the late 1970s to the late '80s, he was behind bars almost as much as he was free. At the state prison in Chino, he met Rossetto, a high-spirited social worker who backed down to no one. By then, after meeting a rabbi who volunteered at the prison, he'd begun reconnecting full-bore with his religious roots.

When he complained to Rossetto that there were no halfway houses that fit the needs of Jewish ex-cons, she replied that she'd started just such a facility in downtown Los Angeles. "If you know so much," she told him, "when you get out of here why don't you come to help out?"

He did. He also kept trying to soften his edges, kept immersing himself in Judaism. He helped Rossetto with everything, even leading Torah study and Friday services. In 1990, they married.

Especially in the beginning, their work faced resistance from some in Los Angeles' Jewish community who blanched at the thought of addiction and crime as problems. Beit T'Shuvah, a nonprofit getting by on donations and grants, was a world removed from the fancy rehab centers of Malibu. But as more residents arrived, respect and acceptance grew.

In 2000, after six years at the Zeigler School of Rabbinical Studies, Borovitz was ordained a rabbi. By 2004 -- the year "The Holy Thief," a book about his life, was published -- he and Rossetto had moved Beit T'Shuvah to Mid-City.

Today it pulses with the pair's unflagging energy and offbeat philosophy: a progressive view of Judaism mixed with soul-searching psychology.

There are 20 counselors, including one who leads "surf therapy" groups on a Santa Monica beach. There's a small music studio, a house band and a cantor who doubles as a spiritual advisor. Most of the staff have fought their own addictions.

Weekdays start with sunrise Torah study, mandatory for every resident, including the small percentage of non-Jews. Then come ethics classes, group therapy sessions, chores and private

counseling.

Friday services, attended by addicts and non-addicts alike, are the week's highlight. The no-frills sanctuary, which partly doubles as a cafeteria, sways with a vibe more common in African American churches. The band rocks, the cantor sings Jewish spirituals -- and when the barrel-chested Borovitz strides to the stage, it seems anything can happen.

He jokes, curses, dances and delivers fiery sermons. A favorite theme is seeing the humanity in everyone -- even in the self-proclaimed enemies of Israel.

Recently, he spoke of a former resident who had died of an overdose. The man, he shouted, was a "narcissist who didn't care enough for his kids to stay alive!" He turned to the congregants, many of them parents. "Are you gonna be so smart, so 'I know everything so I don't need nobody's help,' that you're gonna rip the hearts of your children? . . . You don't got the right!"

It was that kind of truth-telling -- sacred and profane -- that grabbed Rachel and Luke.

In the beginning, just knowing Luke was a saving grace for Rachel. Because they arrived the same month, they were in the same therapy sessions. They became inseparable.

Judaism would be their road map to recovery.

Rachel embraced her faith as never before. She immersed herself in Torah classes and prepared for her Bat Mitzvah, the coming-of-age ceremony for Jewish girls, which she had missed.

For Luke, Judaism was a fresh way of seeing the world -- one that matched his own struggles. The rabbi told him about the constant wrestling match between man and God. He said all who walk the earth are engaged in an inner battle between *yetzer tov* and *yetzer ra* -- good and bad impulses -- and that taming the bad ones meant embracing them.

But there was a part of Luke that still could not imagine life without a high. One day, he bought vodka at a nearby grocery store.

When Rachel found him, booze on his breath, he slumped in her arms. "What did I do?" he asked, sobbing. "What did I do?"

The question now was: What to do next?

Rachel told a counselor what happened, even though it could have gotten Luke kicked out.

"It was a turning point for both of their lives," Rabbi Borovitz said. Rachel learned she could tell the truth and live with the consequences. Most rehab centers would have expelled Luke. Not Beit T'Shuvah. Luke learned he could stumble -- and bounce back.

They both got stronger, looked steadier.

Luke opened up emotionally as never before. He got a part in a commercial and a job helping out at Beit T'Shuvah. Rachel's anger lessened. She had her Bat Mitzvah and became the rabbi's assistant.

By the start of 2010, Luke and Rachel were in love. Instead of keeping them apart, as would have happened at many other rehabs, Borovitz and Rossetto blessed the relationship, believing it would help.

"Where would we be without this bond?" Luke wonders, noting how many times the relationship has helped give them the strength to stay sober, most recently when Rachel's grandmother died.

Passover was a chance to take stock.

"We've used enough!" Rabbi Borovitz bellowed at the Seder. "Used dope enough! Used booze enough! Used people enough! Enough, enough!"

He asked each congregant to write on scraps of paper the one thing that enslaves them.

"Shame," wrote Luke.

"Fear of the wonder of life," wrote Rachel.

The Rabbi walked just outside the sanctuary and leaned beside a garbage can on Venice Boulevard. Rachel and Luke knelt beside him, watching as he lit a fire and burned the scraps until all that remained were billowing smoke and glowing embers.