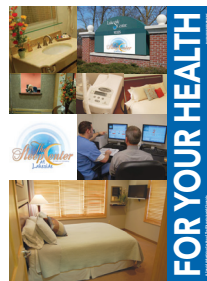


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## Ex-con rabbi brings message of hope to teens

By Austin Greenberg  
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Rabbi Mark Borovitz has a problem with addiction. No, the former thief, con man and alcoholic has not fallen off the wagon. Borovitz's problem is with other people's addiction to an idea, not a substance.

"For me, the number one killer of people is [the attitude of] ... 'Why bother?' 'Whatever,' and 'Who cares?'" said Borovitz, "I call it an addiction to low-grade misery."

On Sunday, Jan. 20, Borovitz confessed to a group of about 35 teenagers that he was addicted to "low-grade misery" for a long time. The teens were gathered at the Harry & Rose Samson Family Jewish Community Center for the Jewish Teen Day of Discovery.

The fourth annual event was presented by the Milwaukee Jewish Federation's Coalition for Jewish Learning and co-sponsored by 25 area synagogues, Jewish schools, youth groups and other organizations.

"The solution I had was not a good solution," said Borovitz, who detailed his teenage years in Cleveland, Ohio, where he sold stolen merchandise, stole and drank; all while trying to maintain a good Jewish life at home.

Borovitz used his personal story to show the teenagers that they have the power to change.

"How many of you get up every day and are excited to start your day and get going?" Borovitz asked his audience, to limited response. "Now you understand what I'm talking about, this low-grade misery.... I get up, I jump out of bed. I usually start my day at about 3:00 in the morning," he said.

Borovitz's typical morning begins with talking to his wife, who is up at 3:30 a.m. He sometimes fits in a workout and, by 5:30 a.m., he's at a café talking or studying with somebody.

"It's a lot different from what used to happen for me," he continued, saying that he used to get up and go to a



Rabbi Mark Borovitz talks about his history as a thief, addict and convict at the Jewish Teen Day of Discovery on Sunday, Jan. 20. Photo: Kipp Friedman.

bar. Until he was 35, Borovitz lived a life of crime.

### From bad guy to rabbi

When he was 25, Borovitz ripped off two Cleveland mobsters, who then tried to pay \$10,000 to have him killed. Luckily, Borovitz was better connected than they were, and their attempt was foiled.

Borovitz then moved to Los Angeles, where he continued his hustling life style. Among his many crimes and transgressions, Borovitz committed insurance fraud, forged thousands of dollars in bad checks, drove drunk and violated his probation. Eventually, Borovitz was caught and spent six-and-a-half years in and out of jail.

In his book, "The Holy Thief: a Con Man's Journey from Darkness to Light," Borovitz describes a divine revelation he had while sitting in the back of a police car, between his two stints in Chino State Prison. He knew he had to change his life, or he would die.

Borovitz spent his second prison term learning Torah, and was released for the last time at age 37. When he

was 49, he became an ordained rabbi.

Borovitz now lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Harriet, where they operate Beit T'Shuvah (House of Return), which is both a synagogue and "the only residential, Jewish faith-based addiction recovery center in the United States," he said.

He also travels the country sharing his story and working to inspire others to see themselves as "holy souls."

"Living a Jewish life means that I don't compare myself, I don't compete; I just do the best that I can every day," Borovitz said. "My job is to be one grain of sand better every day."

### Identity and Darfur

Teen participants also watched "Two Walks," a short documentary film that was produced by the Young Jewish Filmmakers' Project, a division of CJL's Mini-School of the Arts Program. A number of the filmmakers were in attendance at the event.

The beginning of the film showed the teenaged filmmakers discussing the idea of making a documentary about Jewish identity. After a few interviewees described what being

Jewish meant to them ("The food" was a popular response), the filmmakers decided to expand the scope of the film to include the Jewish response to the crisis in Darfur, Sudan.

The documentary showed that there is a difference of opinion within the Jewish community as to whether Jews have a special responsibility to stop genocide when it occurs.

Most respondents in the film expressed feelings of solidarity with the Africans, citing the fact that Jews have also been the target of genocide. Others frankly admitted their lack of knowledge about the subject.

Two interviewees, who appeared to be about 13, encapsulated both responses when questioned about Darfur. "Jews have a special responsibility to help other Jews," one of them said, before his friend interrupted him, saying, "No, they're not Jewish," before the film cut to a different interview.

Judaism is "a lot of questioning, actually," one teenage girl said. It's "questioning if something is right, even if that means you don't always go with the crowd or you don't always do what's popular. It's not being afraid to stand out and make a difference," she said.

The filmmakers noted in the film that they raised about \$1,500 for the victims of Darfur.

After the film and Borovitz's talk, participants selected from eight workshops: "Borat: Good for the Jews?"; "Israeli dancing"; "The 21st century teen: perks, pitfalls and paradoxes"; "What is Jewish music?"; "Israel 101"; "Celebrating Judaism on your future college campus"; "Israeli teen life"; and a small-group discussion with Borovitz.

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