

In all of our lives, when we strive to grow and discern our calling in life, it takes a whole lot of work to not only grow, but to maintain the mindset that has the proper focus.

Today, Michael Solomonov is an award winning chef with several restaurants. But, along the way to that point, there have been a number of side roads he had taken at times that ultimately have led to emptiness before he found the path to true happiness.

Michael has a younger brother, David, and about 20 years ago, he found himself on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, looking forward to soon seeing him when he got a call. "Call me back immediately," his aunt said. "As soon as you get home." Michael didn't want to wait that long. He pulled over. "It's David," she said. "He's dead."

It was Yom Kippur, the Jewish holiday also known as the Day of Atonement. David had been shot by three snipers near the Lebanese border. He wasn't even supposed to be on duty that day, but he'd agreed to sub in for another Israeli soldier, who wanted to go to synagogue. He was

positioned behind a boulder in an apple orchard. A trap was set for him, to draw him out of cover. He was only 21 years old.

Michael got back in the car, desperate to get home. He'd have to make a few calls, book a flight to Israel for the funeral. But there was something else, something even more urgent. As soon as he was in the door of his place, Michael opened a not-so-secret drawer, got out his rock and stem and did what he needed to do first: Get high on crack cocaine, and bury the pain before it buried him.

No one else in his family had any addiction issues. Michael never saw his mom or his dad drunk or high. But even as a youngster, he was never totally comfortable in his skin. He had a sort of sadness. Maybe it was depression, he says; maybe not. It's hard to articulate when you're a kid. From the moment he started experimenting with drugs and alcohol as a teen, Michael felt like he had finally found something that made him feel normal. Like everybody else. He could fit in.

When he was 15, his parents decided that they'd move back to Israel—his dad's home, yet it didn't feel like his own. Michael couldn't wait to return to

the States. He came back for college at the University of Vermont. There his drug use spiraled out of control.

Drugs were how he defined who he was. They gave him a network of friends, a way to commiserate on every setback and celebrate every milestone. Without drugs or alcohol, he felt alone and miserable. Why put up with that? After his third semester, he overdosed and landed in the hospital. Not that he thought he was an addict. He just partied too hard, he reasoned. He needed to dial it back. Still, it was humiliating. He had to tell my parents, drop out of school and go home.

Back in Israel, he got a job in a bakery. It was just something to do, a way to earn money. And yet in that kitchen, Micheal stumbled upon his career. He discovered how much he loved cooking, savoring the smells and tastes of the place where he was born, and thought being a chef could be his calling.

He also grew closer to his younger brother, David. As he was finishing up high school and preparing for mandatory military service (something Michael was able to opt out of), he was enrolling in culinary school in the

States. Michael was learning all the necessary skills, but also drinking way too much—while David entered the Israel Defense Forces infantry unit. With Michael's newly minted culinary degree, he got a job at one of the finest Italian restaurants in Philly. There were tons of challenges but he was moving forward. And getting high all the time.

The summer of 2003, Michael had three weeks off and returned to Israel. David was on leave from the military, and they spent precious time together, going to the beach, hanging out and eating. Michael shopped for produce and spices in the open-air markets and sorted through fish caught in the local waters. He found himself looking at the country through the lens of a chef. There were so many ethnic influences, so many different styles of cooking. But the best part was reconnecting with his brother.

It was the last time Michael would see him alive.

All through the funeral in Israel, Michael felt responsible, guilty. As though he could have done something to stop those snipers' bullets. Addiction will do that to you, he says. It will help you blame yourself for everything. He sat shiva for seven days, mourning with friends and family, remembering

David. As soon as he returned to Philadelphia, the floodgates of addiction opened up. He'd lost his brother, after all. He was suffering terribly. He needed consolation, comfort. People had to sympathize.

From the outside, it looked as if things were going great. He had a business partner. He was a celebrated chef. They were getting great reviews. They talked about opening a new place featuring Israeli foods. He met and fell in love with a bright, capable woman named Mary, and the two of them got married. All the while, he was doing his best—or his worst, depending on how you look at it—at hiding his addiction.

Whenever there was a question (for you can sneak out at night to score some crack for only so long without people noticing) Michael always had an excuse. The death of his brother. Shot down by snipers on one of the holiest days in the Jewish calendar. He did feel guilty about using David as an excuse to get high, but what do you do if you're a drug addict and you have paralyzing guilt and shame? You use more. Self-pity just makes it easier.

And so Michael started snorting heroin. His rationalization? If he took heroin, he would use less crack—denial is amazingly powerful. Soon he was hooked on both. He just couldn't hide it anymore. Steve and Mary sat him down and did an intervention. They forced him to look at himself, the lies he was telling, the mess he was making of his life, how it affected other people, what he was doing to his body. He couldn't be a husband like this, couldn't be a business partner. He was on a road to ruin, his very life hanging in the balance. They took him to rehab, where he detoxed for the first time since college and got serious about getting clean.

Coming back to work, Michael was fragile. He didn't trust himself. He was glad to be back in the kitchen, cooking, but he didn't want to drive by himself anywhere. So his business partner and wife drove him.

He got a 12-step sponsor. He went to outpatient rehab for a year. He went to meetings every day. He went to therapy. He had to be honest with every person he knew—his parents, his in-laws, his wife. No lies, no manipulation. No claiming that David's death was a reason to get high. There was no escape. He had to be a grown-up for the first time in his life.

Most of all, Michael says, he had to be honest with God. He had to turn over to his higher power everything, good and bad.

Zahav, his signature restaurant, opened that spring of 2008. A terrible time to start a new restaurant. World financial markets were in free fall. Nobody was going out to dinner. That first year, they had to make painful staffing cuts. Steve and Michael stopped taking paychecks. At one point, they were a month away from turning out the lights. Here he was, clean and sober, and life was harder than ever. So was temptation.

But the work itself was healing. He loved being right in the middle of the action at the bread station with his kitchen crew. They had a mission, showing the world that Israeli food was more than hummus and falafel.

In the end, Zahav proved to be more successful than either Steve or Michael could have ever imagined. On Israeli Independence Day 2017, he was given the James Beard Award for Best Chef, a little like getting the Best Actor Award at the Oscars. Michael says he only wished he could share the good news with his brother.

In rehab and in 12-step meetings, Michael says he saw how people struggled to put a new life together. One thing that was very important was good food. Good food and proper nutrition, something he knew a lot about. And so he started serving as a volunteer chef at the Broad Street Ministry in Philadelphia, where they give the hungry and homeless a three-course meal. Guests are waited on, as at one of their own restaurants, and he often recognizes people from meetings he's been to. Helping them is a way of helping himself. Steve and Michael feel so strongly about it that all the profits from one of their newer restaurants, The Rooster, went to supporting the ministry. The pain of losing David hasn't gone away. What's different is how he deals with it. Not with drugs but by giving, caring for his loved ones, volunteering at Broad Street and staying clean.

Today, his restaurants are still going strong, as his his health as he weathered the Covid 19 storm, and even connected with a competitor and helped him out. All because Michael now knows where he's going, and has the ability to deal properly with the demons that are always out there.

Temptation comes in so many forms. In Michael's case, it was dealing with stress and grief that led him to fall further into the abyss of addiction. But

even after he overcame that, surely the temptations for drugs weren't just always there, but temptations to focus on his business over his family, or to become famous having one that award. Yet through it all, he maintained his faith, but also started giving back to his community and making a difference rather than focusing on his own glory.

Each year on the First Sunday of Lent, we will reflect on Jesus being led into the desert. And it gives us a chance also to reflect on our temptations.

This year in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus encounters 3 temptations that could cause him to deviate from the path that He has been called to follow by the Father. As a footnote each temptation occurs at a slightly higher place of elevation; in the desert itself, atop the mountain, then atop the Temple. And the temptations that Jesus goes through are ones that Michael went through and we go through as well.

Jesus first tempts Jesus to turn the stones into bread. Stones are common in the desert where Jesus was to this day; they almost look like bread, and Jesus is hungry. The devil says turn them into bread to satisfy your hunger. These are the things that we think will satisfy our sensual desires but

ultimately lead us to emptiness. For Michael it was drugs. For others it might be excessive alcohol, gambling, or sensual images that objectify the body. Sometimes pleasures are sinful always; other times there are wins that aren't bad; a little drinking, some gambling for fun, a hobby we enjoy, etc. But they can get out of control, and for some they take over our lives. This is why when tempted, like Micheal, if it's serious stuff we are battling, we need someone to keep us accountable. It can also help if we have an addiction to have an action plan; such as calling someone if tempted to take a drink, or if the computer is a problem keeping it in a public spot in the house, or putting the phone away so you can hear it but not use it if the phone is causing the problem, or maybe just leaving the house to go exercise or do some yardwork outside if tempted. Some things are always wrong; other things can be done but get out of control. The key is not saying yes all the time much like a parent doesn't say yes to the child who always wants something at the store because it won't be best for the child's health. Temperance is what helps us to keep these temptations in check.

Then Jesus is shown the kingdoms of the world, and says all these are yours if you bow down and worship me. In this there is the temptation for power. What a seductive thing it can be. Case in point: Vladimir Putin. We

all know names like his and Napoleon, Henry VIII, Alexander the Great; people can get preoccupied with power. Power isn't a bad thing; we all exercise it and sometimes those in power do very good things. But we need to be on guard when we look at our power; the power of a parent over a child as he or she grows; over others at work if a person is a supervisor; or the power even one has on a committee at a church or on a school board; perhaps even over a spouse as one can manipulate the other. Sometimes we can be tempted to have it our way or to not listen to others. Jesus says you will love the Lord your God and Him alone you shall adore. As such we want to use our power for God's glory; to make ourselves, others and this world a better place. We must strive to listen to God and also to others, and to make sure power is never something we lord over others.

Lastly, Jesus is taken to the highest spot and told throw yourself off and the angels will catch you for no harm can come to you. This refers to honor. The Temple is the most important building for the Jew in the time of Jesus, where God dwells on earth. All went there and standing on the parapet of the Temple means "I'm the center of the world; all see me and notice me." How seductive this can be too. When Michael won that big award, and

started getting noticed though, note it didn't go to his head. He continued to work hard with his employees and build up them and his restaurants and not seek his own glory. Sometimes we can get preoccupied with ourselves; we might want to be seen be it the likes on social media or people saying "hey there goes an important person." A person can also not hear the voice of God and what He wants for them when they are so focused on themselves and their ego. It's why prayer and introspection matter so much. That's what caused people like Katharine Drexel to give up her fortune and serve God by becoming a nun who helped Native Americans, or caused Saint Therese of Lisieux to "grow up" spiritually when she overheard her father saying "at least this the last time we'll do this" as he put out some candy in shoes by the fire that she overheard from the top of the stairs and rather than cry she came down the stairs with a smile because she would realize at that point this isn't about me. Honor and praise aren't bad things, but when we make them the goals of our lives or rely on them more and more we can forget why we do certain things in the first place and that God sees what we do which should make us happy. We also need humility and to be able to take criticism if we are going to truly grow.

Temptation is with us every day, and that's not a bad thing; it makes us stronger, and helps us with pride so we don't think "hey I've overcome this or that forever and now am on cruise control" But going into battle with us is our Lord. All of us fall at times, but the key is to ask for forgiveness, but also to be aware of why we fall and those subtle things we give into that we might not always be aware of such as how our authority over others and need for praise can get out of control. True happiness can only be found in God. Falling into temptations may make us feel good momentarily, but ultimately as Michael found they lead to emptiness. But as he also found God was with him as were a number of others who loved him. He learned from his mistakes and became stronger; but first he had to look them in the eye and admit to himself that he had fallen, and then put together a plan of action to deal with those temptations when they came again. Temptations don't end come Easter Sunday, but this sacred season gives us a great time to learn how to identify them and confront them, knowing that while giving into a temptation may give momentary pleasure, defeating them with our Lord will give everlasting happiness.