

Double Life

“So what do you do when you get angry?”

I was on a date with Suri, my future wife, and her question made me very uncomfortable.

“You’re not allowed to ask that question,” I replied jokingly. “Why not?”

“I guess you’re allowed to ask the question,” I amended. “I just didn’t want you to. Very few people know this, but I happen to have quite a temper. Mostly it comes out with my younger brother, who makes me crazy. But it’s something that I’m aware of and working on.”

Suri smiled. “It’s okay,” she said. “I can handle anything, really, as long as it’s out in the open. The only thing I wouldn’t be able to handle is lying.”

It was a relief, then, that she had asked about my temper. I was hoping that she’d never actually see me lose it, but if she did, she couldn’t accuse me of having lied to her.

For a moment, I thought about the other issue I was grappling with. *No need to mention that*, I assured myself. *Now that I’m getting married, it’s over.*

I WAS A SHY KID, the type that froze up when called on by a *rebbe* and sat at the lunch table silently, wishing I could join the banter. Early in my teenage years, I was playing a game on the family computer, when I stumbled across something called a chat room. I had never heard of a chat room before, but I quickly discovered that in this anonymous environment, I could escape my self-conscious self and role-play the person I couldn’t be in real life: cool, macho, interesting. Together with my chat buddies, I’d weave fantasies in which I was a cowboy, a truck driver, an athlete, a movie star.

The chats started off innocuously enough, but it wasn’t long before they turned inappropriate. I was horrified, but intensely curious, and my curiosity propelled me to keep coming back for more. One thing led to another, until eventually I became a regular patron of cyber-filth haunts.

By the time I flew off to Israel for *yeshivah*, I felt as though I was leading a double life. On the face of it, I was a reserved but otherwise typical *yeshivah bochur* who spent his days learning Gemara. Only I knew that several times a week, I was escaping into a world of prurient fantasy. This was before the days of smartphones, but magazines and movies were readily available — if you knew where to look.

I was hoping that being in Israel would allow me to grow and move past my problem. I did grow in Israel, making considerable strides in my learning and *ruchniyus*, and the problem did get better. But it didn’t go away entirely. I was optimistic, however. Like the guys who smoked, I was sure that after I got married, I’d never succumb to temptation again. My temper, now *that* was something to worry about.

Marriage gave me a brief respite from the schmutz problem —

long enough for me to convince myself that it was over, and long enough for me to blame Suri, in my mind, when it resurfaced. The anger problem, on the other hand, all but disappeared. Not that I didn’t have plenty of opportunities for anger, but for the most part, I was able to control myself.

When we were married for about a year, Suri gave birth to our oldest son — six weeks early. At around the same time, I was laid off from my job in commercial real estate.

I had a preemie baby who needed special care. I had no money, and nothing to do. Suri was irritable, and preoccupied with the baby. My life wasn’t a fun place to be.

At around this time, a friend named Nachi offered me the opportunity to start a business with him. Having nothing else to do, I agreed. Nachi and I borrowed some startup capital, and we began spending long days in and out of the office we rented. One day, when Nachi wasn’t in the office, I logged on to one of my old chat room haunts. I wasn’t actually planning to chat with anyone, I was just curious how the technology had advanced since I had last visited.

The new interface was confusing at first. But it took me only a few minutes to get my bearings and figure out how to access my old account.

The next thing I knew, it was two hours later, and Suri was calling to find out when I was coming home. I quickly shut down the browser and erased the history, utterly disgusted with myself and vowing that it would never, ever happen again.

That promise did not last long. In a shockingly short time, I was back in the same place I had been before leaving to Eretz Yisrael as a *bochur*, going online several times a week, sometimes for hours at a time.

I would stay late at the office, telling Suri that starting up a business took a lot of hard work, but neglecting to mention that much of the time was spent online doing other things. Sometimes I’d go into the office on Sundays just to access the sites that sucked me in, with the excuse that I had work to do.

Several times, Suri noticed that I was not myself, and she asked me what was bothering me. “Nothing’s wrong,” I would insist.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No!”

Suri would accuse me of not being in touch with my feelings, but I would scoff at the notion. “I’m not a woman,” I would say. “Guys don’t talk about their feelings.”

At the same time, I was trying desperately to grow as a person and as a Jew. In addition to my daily learning *seder*, I began studying *mussar* in a committed way, and I even started giving a halachah *shiur* in my shul. As the years passed, my *shiur* grew, as did my standing in the community. People would come to me to

WHEN I WROTE THE STORY “Broken but Whole,” I knew I was inviting a letter such as this one:

The LifeLines story this week was indeed sad and true to life. However, I struggle to understand the relevance of the woman’s (chassidish) background inserted in the beginning of the story. Surely any mental illness can affect all sectors of society and all can fall prey to marrying a spouse without being aware of the illness and/or implications.

*Furthermore, by describing the woefully inadequate advisor, Miriam, as being a choshuve person in **that** community, you again managed to portray an image of an untrained “chassidish” self-professed therapist causing even more damage in the name of being “special.” Thus an underlying derision of chassidim once again tainting your pages.*

I have found this thread running through your publication, where you view the general Jewish population as “chassidim, and then everybody else,” as if they were a different species altogether and looked upon with disdain.

*All people could be **anything** despite and regardless of their family or particular community. What, pray tell, is the difference?*

I am sad to note that this does not fit well with a magazine professing to promote achdus in Klal Yisrael.

B. Burns, New York

I don’t like to perpetuate stereotypes, and I actually agonized over whether to mention that the protagonist was *chassidish*.

I wanted to omit this piece of information. Yet I didn’t want to sow unnecessary fear among readers by implying that anyone could get stuck in a similar situation. I thought it was important to clarify that a *chassid* with such an obvious degree of dysfunction could only be considered “eligible” in an arranged marriage, where he’d meet the *kallah* only briefly before finalizing the *shidduch*.

Thankfully, by now I have quite a network of LifeLines friends, who span the gamut of human experiences. The protagonist of “Listening Ear” (Issue 520) works at a helpline for people in crisis, and is married to a man with Asperger’s.

I called her up and posed the question to her. “Could this story have happened in a non-*chassidish* setting?”

“Absolutely not,” she replied. “Zalman could never have hidden such a severe

condition on a date.”

“So,” I pressed on hesitantly, “how did you end up marrying a man with Asperger’s? You’re not *chassidish*!”

“My husband is a lot more high functioning,” she explained. “Zalman’s case is extreme.”

In the end, I decided to mention that the couple was *chassidish*, but only in passing. It was the truth, after all. And it was also true, and significant, that the advisor “Miriam” belonged to *that* community, because that respected insider status gave Miriam credibility in the protagonist’s eyes, which is why she followed such terrible advice so blindly.

Do the above decisions point to an anti-*chassidish* bias? I don’t think so. I’ve printed many stories that highlight the flaws of the *litvish/yeshivish shidduch* system, and no one complained then of any bias.

Litvish-style dating hasn’t proven to be superior to *chassidish*-style matchmaking, which is undeniably closer to the traditional Jewish model. Every system has its inherent flaws, however, and acknowledging those flaws is about being realistic, not about destroying *achdus*.

—C. Saphir

This part refers to an earlier story

ask *sh’eilos*, and would even ask my advice on personal matters. I did my best to guide them correctly, all the while imagining how differently they’d view me if they only knew the truth.

Life continued this way for close to ten years. On the outside, I was becoming more learned, more *choshuv*, more serious about life and Yiddishkeit. I desperately wanted to identify with that side of me and escape the inner rot that was tearing me apart. But deep down, I knew I was a *rasha merusha*, evil to the core, and a hypocrite to boot. My marriage reflected this dichotomy: On the face of it, Suri and I were functioning well and keeping up the façade of a stable home. But between us, there was no real closeness. I wasn’t having fits of rage, so she couldn’t accuse me of

mistreating her, but the undercurrent of discontent rarely went away.

What alarmed me most about my problem was that sights that had given me a thrill in the past no longer seemed interesting, and in order to achieve that same excitement, I now had to seek out more and more extreme displays. I was watching debased and even violent material, and when it was over, I was utterly disgusted with myself. Yet within a few days, I’d go right back for more.

That’s not to say there wasn’t any progress. There were times when I went weeks, even months, without stumbling. In fact, my year had a predictable rhythm to it. Each Elul, I would resolve to overcome this challenge once and for all. I’d stay strong through

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, pleading with Hashem to forgive me for my sins and taking on all sorts of *kabbalos* to prevent further slips.

Around Succos, I'd have my first fall. I'd be devastated, and institute safeguards to ensure it would never happen again. I'd beef up the filters on my computer, learn a double *mussar seder*, and penalize myself in various ways. Once, I went an entire year without eating meat, except on Yom Tov.

I'd stay strong for another few weeks, maybe even until Chanukah, but then there would be a spree of failures, in which I'd find ways to circumvent or eliminate the filters on my office computer, or find a new device with Internet connectivity. At some point during the winter, after fighting with myself unsuccessfully for weeks, I'd despair of ever beating the problem. Then, the floodgates would open, and the *yetzer hara* would totally engulf me. Feeling helpless against the temptation, I'd succumb time after time, hating myself for not even putting up a fight.

I'd have a bit of a reprieve from Pesach until Shavuot, using the inspiration of the Yamim Tovim and Sefiras Ha'omer to uplift me. But once the summer started, I was back to my old habits, and only when Rosh Chodesh Elul came around would I be able to muster the strength to do battle again.

Between all this, I was learning with my kids, going to shul three times a day, and continuing to give my *shiur*.

When my business started to falter, I blamed it on Nachi, I blamed it on the lousy economy, I blamed it on the competition. The fact that I was wasting two or three hours online most days — a quarter of my time at the office — had nothing to do with our financial woes, I assured myself. When Nachi blasted me for ignoring clients' calls and missing important meetings, I blew up and told him to stuff it.

I also convinced myself that my *shalom bayis* issues had nothing to do with me or my problem. If Suri would have been a better wife and nagged me less, I would have been nicer to her.

Things came to a head when I decided to make a *siyum* on *Bava Kamma* in my shul. I ordered a catered breakfast for a Sunday morning. But I miscalculated how long it would take me to finish, and a few days before the *siyum*, I was still a long way from the last *daf*. I was so nervous, I couldn't buckle down to learn. All I could do was lose myself on the computer and numb my mind to the public humiliation I was about to experience.

On Sunday morning, I came to shul to find the tables set up and the waiters putting out platters. I got up in front of the shul and made the *siyum*, as though I had actually finished the *masechta*. After that, I fielded mazel tovs from my *rav*, my friends, my *shiur* attendees, my own sons. And I wanted the earth to open up and swallow the vile creature that I was.

I could not believe how low I had sunk — to pretend I had

finished a *masechta*, when in fact I hadn't finished it because I was spending hours every day immersed in filth.

After the *siyum*, I turned my face heavenward and said, "Hashem, I can't do this anymore. You take over."

A couple of weeks later, I was reading the news on a Jewish site, when I noticed an ad for Guard Your Eyes (GYE), an organization that helps people with *shemiras einayim* and related problems. When I clicked on to their website, I found articles and forums addressing my problem, and discovered that there was a whole network of people experiencing the same struggle.

So excited was I by this discovery that I signed up for the GYE 90-day chart, and then immediately went home and told Suri that I had found a solution to my problem.

"What problem?" she asked.

"Well," I began sheepishly, "I've had this problem for years, but I was too embarrassed to admit it to you. But now, it's history! There's this website called Guard Your Eyes, and it's going to help me beat this thing."

I had thought, in my naïveté, that Suri would be understanding and supportive. Quite the contrary. She was absolutely devastated by my revelation, and oscillated between quiet fury and mournful weeping.

Two days later, I found myself standing, against my will, in the office of my *rav*. He gave me some *chizuk*, and tried to put me at ease by telling me that he'd heard worse things. But Suri wasn't satisfied with that. The next thing I knew, she made an appointment for me with a therapist who specialized in addictions.

Having been forced into therapy, my main goal was to convince the therapist, and Suri, that I was really fine. So I white-knuckled it through the next few months, fighting the *yetzer hara* with every ounce of energy I had. Another goal of mine was to convince the therapist that Suri was the problem, not me. "I slip once in a while," I told him, "but it's really under control. The real issue is that my wife is so moody."

I was sober for six months, which was longer than I had gone since my bar mitzvah. I had made it onto the GYE "Wall of Honor" twice over, once for each 90 days, so I was unquestionably cured. But after six months of sobriety, I felt suicidal. The constant struggle wiped me of every last bit of strength and vitality, and I felt that I'd rather be dead.

Nor was my recovery helping my marriage. I had learned, in the interim, that for a wife, a bombshell-style revelation of this sort was a trauma on par with being violently attacked. I should have been in recovery for a significant amount of time before telling her, and the revelation should have been made gently, in the presence of a therapist who could have given her emotional first-aid on the spot.

Now, instead of being able to count on Suri's support and encouragement, I had to continue facing her grief and anger.

On top of that, I had to deal with her mistrust — she no longer believed anything I said.

Eventually, I fell back into my old behaviors. But this time, I was smarter than to tell anyone about it. Not Suri, not my *rav*, not my therapist. Once again, I felt totally isolated in my struggle, except that now, I was also lying about it straight-out.

All this time, I was receiving the GYE daily e-mail. Sometimes I read it, sometimes I didn't. There was this fellow Dov who described his long journey to sobriety, and what intrigued me about his account was that he seemed to be at peace with himself. Here I was, fighting with myself every hour of my life not to succumb to temptation, while he had the same problem, and yet he sounded as though he was actually enjoying his life.

My curiosity piqued, I decided to sign up for GYE's 12-step phone conferences, which were just starting a new cycle at the time. The four-afternoon-a-week phone conferences were a life changer. Suddenly, I was not alone in my challenge — I was among people who could understand my struggle and respect me for it. And the people on the calls were not a bunch of bums or losers. They were businessmen and professionals, *mechanchim* and *kollel yungeleit*, serious people who spanned the religious spectrum. We called ourselves “the *chevrah*.”

In addition to the support and camaraderie of the *chevrah*, several of whom became cherished personal friends, I was now acquiring tools for true, lasting recovery, not the white-knuckle “dry drunk” sobriety I had managed to achieve previously.

Through the phone conferences and the 12-step work they required, I learned to identify my maladaptive coping mechanisms and replace them with healthy ones. One healthy coping mechanism I learned was to listen to my body and my emotions. For years, I had been completely out of touch with what was going on inside me, and when I was angry, sad, stressed, tired, or even hungry, I had turned to schmutz for relief. But the schmutz only made me feel worse about myself, so I then had to resort to my one and only coping mechanism: schmutz. This was the vicious cycle of addiction.

Now, when I'm hungry, I eat. When I'm tired, I take a nap. When I'm stressed, I use relaxation techniques. When I'm sad or angry, I write down my feelings or share them with a caring friend. In the past, I thought friends were for schmoozing with about news and politics. Now, thanks to the *chevrah*, I have real friends, friends who can be there for me when I'm down or weak and feeling vulnerable to temptation.

Another coping tool is the ability to face myself and my character defects. When I find myself becoming resentful of the people around me, I try to figure out what *I'm* doing that's contributing to the dynamic and rectify it. I also turn to Hashem for help regularly, acknowledging that alone, I am powerless against the *yetzer hara*.

Actually, in retrospect, the first step I took toward healing was on the day of my pseudo-*siyum*, when I turned to Hashem and acknowledged my powerlessness. Until then, I had been in denial, thinking that this was a religious problem rather than an emotional disease known as addiction.

Addicts don't have control over their addiction. But by taking control of other areas of our life in which we do have power, we can develop the tools that will enable us to fight the addiction as well. Because our real problem is the pain in our lives that makes us vulnerable to addiction. Addiction is the self-medication for the problem, not the problem itself.

I am fortunate that Suri was willing to stick with me through this journey. She had to go for her own therapy and utilize GYE's resources for spouses to deal with her pain and find her way out of codependency, and there were a number of rocky years before we were able to rebuild a relationship based on honesty, trust, and friendship. But all in all, her awareness of my problem turned out to be a blessing in disguise, because it spurred me to finally get the help I needed.

Just as an alcoholic can never trust himself around liquor, a person like me can never trust himself around temptation. I had to tell the IT guy at work about my problem and ask him to make it impossible for me to get around the Internet filter. And I have to keep doing the 12-step work and participating in the phone conferences, knowing that the potential to escape into schmutz is always latent, even though I have been sober for years already. But I have the comfort and confidence of knowing that as long as I stay connected and continue working on myself, the addiction will not have control over me.

Let me be clear — lust addiction is not an Internet problem. It's a disease that existed before the Internet, and exists even among people who have no access to Internet. But the Internet, with its accessibility and anonymity, has done such a good job of spreading the germs of the disease that today, it has become an epidemic, one that spares no sector of *frum* society. And because it's a disease that breeds in isolation, the shame and guilt that prevent people from seeking help only cause the disease to spread further.

But the same Ribbono shel Olam Who created the disease also created a remedy. My *chevrah* and I are living proof. ●

To have your story retold by C.Saphir, e-mail a brief synopsis to lifelines@mishpacha.com or call +1.718.686.9339 extension 87204 and leave a message. Details will be changed to assure confidentiality.

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