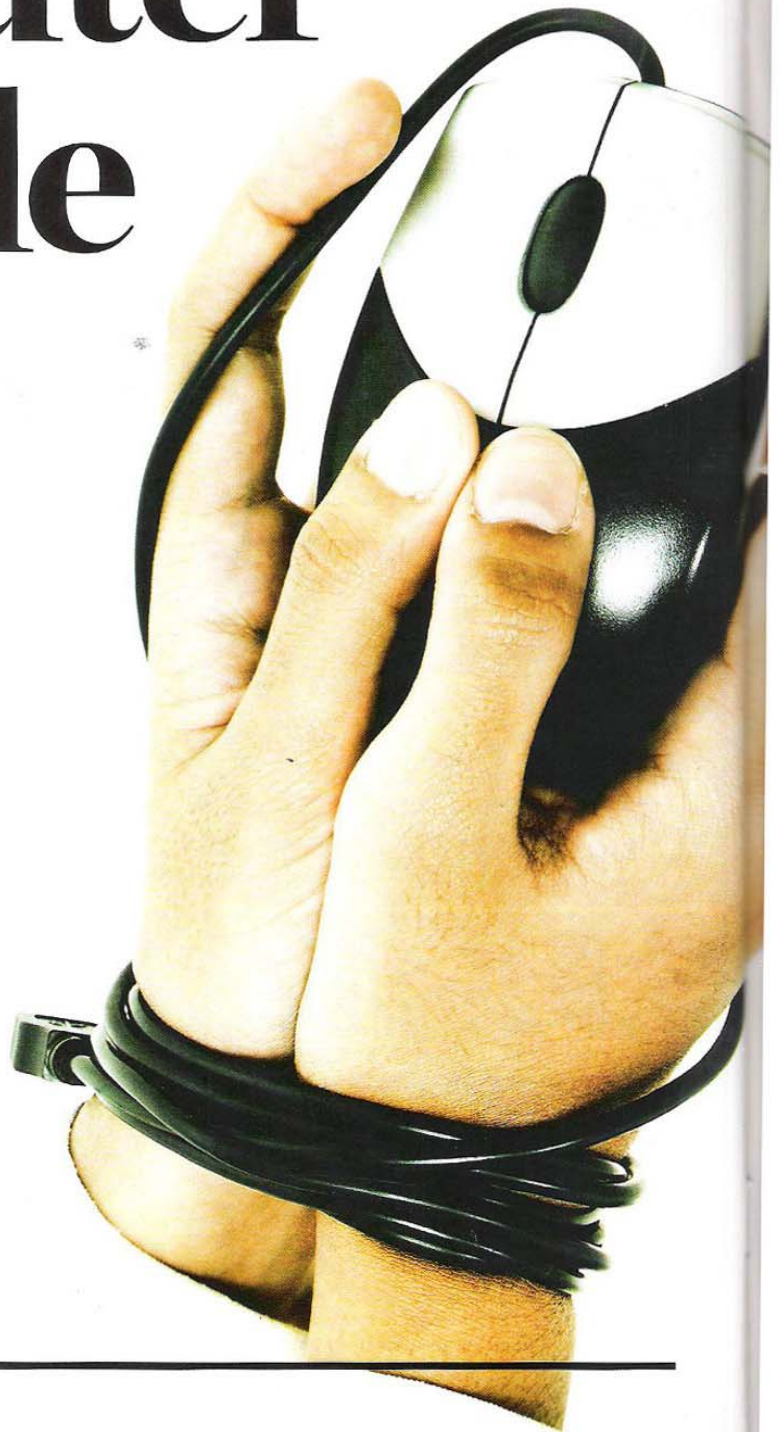


Computer Trouble

It was a long and frustrating Motzaei Shabbos. My wife Shiffy was out at some Melaveh Malkah fundraiser, and I was babysitting. I never enjoyed getting five kids to bed, but this particular night, my four-year-old daughter Miri had given me a really hard time, coming out of bed every two minutes and then crying her head off for an hour after I warned her that she'd better not come out of bed again.



I had been planning to learn the next day's *daf* so I'd be prepared for my *shiur* the next evening, but after finally settling everyone down, I did not have the head to open my Gemara. Instead, I decided to check my e-mail.

I own a landscaping and snow removal business, and although I do maintain a small Web site, most of my work comes through the old-fashioned way, through word of mouth recommendations and advertisements in the Yellow Pages and local circulars. Some of my customers communicate with me by e-mail, but it's rare that an urgent e-mail will come in over Shabbos. If there's an emergency — "Mr. Balter! The squirrels dug up my tulip bulbs!" — I'll usually get a call on my cell phone.

The only client e-mail that Motzaei Shabbos was from Mrs. Milner, an old customer who wanted to know how often to water her new hydrangeas. There was one other e-mail, from Phil Schwartz, a shul buddy of mine. The subject line said "Hilarious!!!! Must See!!!!!!!" and the mail contained a link to some YouTube video. I clicked on the link, just so that I could respond to Phil with an LOL (or maybe LOL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!).

I don't know how it happened, but after I viewed the short slapstick clip, I must have accidentally clicked on a nearby link to a different video. The moment I clicked on the link, I knew that this was not something I wanted to see. But my curiosity was uncontrollable. Just one quick peek ...

One quick peek, and I spent the next hour in front of some of the worst images the *yetzer hara* has to offer. My heart was pounding with horror and revulsion, but as much as I willed myself to click on the little x in the corner of the screen, I could not do it. Only when I heard Shiffy's key turning in the door did I quickly hit "close all tabs" on the Internet browser and then frantically delete the browser's history.

I was terrified that Shiffy would notice that my hands were shaking badly, or spot the guilt written all over my face. But she came in all happy and excited, telling me that she had won a new coffeemaker at the Chinese auction and going on and on about how little space on the counter the new machine takes up.

I felt sick. Sick that I had allowed myself to sink so low, and sick that I had gone behind Shiffy's back and done something that would hurt her terribly, if she only knew.

I walked around the next day, and the rest of the week, with a heavy burden of shame and disgrace hanging over me. Shiffy — who's a pretty astute person — remained blissfully oblivious to the awful secret I was carrying, and the more she carried on with life as usual, the worse I felt about myself.

When Shabbos came, I could no longer bear it. After Shiffy lit candles and wished me a *Gut Shabbos*, I blurted out to her what I had done.

Her eyes widened. "Danny, how could you?" she whispered. "I can't believe it." And then she started to cry.

I found her tears strangely comforting. All week, I had been living in dread of this reaction, and now that it was over, I felt weak with relief.

Still, it was one of the saddest Shabbosim of our married life. The lowest point was when Shiffy reminded me of what I myself had said when she had asked that we install a filter on our home computer.

At the time, I had scoffed at the idea. "A Jew needs a filter on his *neshamah*, not on his computer," I had declared. "A guy who needs a filter to stop him from looking at bad stuff is going to find ways around the filter anyway, and a person who has *yiras Shamayim* doesn't need K9 or Net Nanny to babysit him."

When Shiffy replayed that conversation accusingly, my whole body burned with shame, and I felt a crazy urge to hurt myself. I swore to Shiffy that I would never do it again, but the look of betrayal in her eyes lingered, making me feel rotten and worthless.

Immediately after I made Havdalah, Shiffy stalked over to the computer and installed a filter on it. I was humiliated, but I couldn't say a word.

I helped her get the kids to bed, and then I told her that I was going out to Rabbi Weissman's *daf yomi shiur*. Instead, I went to my office, settled myself in the empty chair where my assistant, Steve, usually sat, and logged on to the Internet. I really wasn't planning to hit those bad sites again — I just wanted to check my e-mail without Shiffy hovering over me, and without running afoul of the new filter any time I clicked a link.

To my chagrin, not a single e-mail had come in for me since Friday. No official from Namibia informing me that I had won \$13 million, no friends writing to tell me that they were stranded in Madrid with no cash, not even a virus notification.

I clicked the refresh button a few times, hoping that somehow an e-mail would materialize that would make it worth having lied about the *shiur*. But there was none, so I found myself typing, as if possessed by an invisible demonic force, the words that would bring me to the online netherworld I had stumbled upon the previous week. It was close to midnight when Shiffy called to find out when I was coming home. A flood of guilt washed over me when I heard her voice, and I hurriedly shut down the computer and left the office, feeling like a cesspool.

When I came home, I told Shiffy that I had a headache and went straight to bed. Thankfully, she was on the phone, and she didn't ask any questions.

I made up my mind that I wasn't going to go to those bad sites ever again, and for a few weeks I managed to keep myself away. But then, one afternoon when Steve was gone and I had to take

care of something at the office, it happened again.

I came home feeling like a clod of dirt, and when Shiffy greeted me, I told her in a low voice that I had stumbled again.

Shiffy was flabbergasted, and furious.

"You promised! You told me you were never going to do this again! How could you?"

The more she carried on, the more oddly detached I felt about the whole thing.

When she demanded that I go for therapy, I didn't put up any fuss. She booked me an appointment with Dr. Randolph, a psychotherapist, and I obediently explained to Dr. Randolph that my wife had a problem with my Internet use.

"How do you feel about your Internet use?" he asked.

"It's not such a big deal," I averred, hoping that the session would end quickly.

We talked a bit about behavior modification strategies, and then Dr. Randolph ended the session, saying that he was confident that I'd be able to make positive change in my life.

The moment I returned home, Shiffy started cross-examining me. "What did you tell him? What did he say? How long do you have to go for therapy?"

"It went really well," I assured her. "We're working wonderfully together."

I met with Dr. Randolph a few more times, and each time I reported to him that things were going "just great." I didn't bother telling him that I hadn't implemented any of his strategies, but I managed to hem and haw my way around his questions so that he'd be satisfied with my answers.

After every meeting with Dr. Randolph, I'd stop at the office on my way home instead of going to my *shuir*. I felt horribly guilty about it, but I just couldn't control myself. Besides, the lascivious images that were flashing in my head made it impossible for me to concentrate at the *shuir*.

Davening also became very difficult for me. I felt that Hashem couldn't possibly love me, and I started to procrastinate *tefillos* until the latest possible time. There were days when I laid tefillin only minutes before sunset. In other areas, though, I became even more scrupulous than before. I insisted on a particularly stringent type of *shechitah*, and I stopped carrying in the local *eiruv*. I guess I wanted to feel holy somehow.

Shiffy discovered the truth about my Internet habit when Bracha Schwartz, Phil's wife, met her one day and innocently mentioned something about my dropping out of the *shuir*. That day, Shiffy had another fit, and I didn't really care.

But the next day, when she told me that she had spoken to Rebbetzin Weissman, I did care.

"How could you do that?" I whispered, shocked to the core that

Shiffy would go behind my back and speak to the *rav's* wife about this.

"I have to take care of myself," she said softly. "Rebbetzin Weissman told me that this has nothing to do with me, it's between you and Hashem. I know that this is hard for you, and I am davening that Hashem should help you."

From then on, Shiffy completely dissociated herself from my problem, not asking me any more questions about my Internet use or about my therapy with Dr. Randolph. She behaved kindly and politely to me, and we'd go through the motions of normal family living, with Shiffy dutifully serving Shabbos meals and me singing *zmiros* and reading the kids' *parashah* sheets at the table. But the feeling of closeness and trust in our relationship was missing, and that pained me greatly.

To my surprise, I realized that I *wanted* Shiffy to ask whether I was misusing the Internet, I *wanted* her to tell me that what I was doing wasn't okay, I *wanted* her to cry and carry on. I couldn't stop myself, and being left to my own devices was extremely scary.

One evening, when I came home I announced to her that I had just been surfing the net.

"I'm so sorry," she said calmly. "This must be very hard for you. I am davening for you."

There was no trace of anger in her voice, only pity.

We went through similar exchanges a few times, until eventually I felt that I was going to explode with guilt and shame. Shiffy and I were like strangers, like ships passing in the night, and although I wanted desperately to regain the warmth that had previously characterized our marriage, I could not break through the invisible wooden barrier that had sprung up between us. Finally, when I saw that Shiffy was dead serious about not listening to any confessions from me, I realized that in order to escape from the clutches of the *yetzer hara*, I was going to have to reach out for help. I hadn't seen Dr. Randolph since Shiffy stopped booking me appointments, but I knew that he wasn't going to be able to help me. Instead, I decided to unburden myself to Rabbi Weissman.

Rabbi Weissman listened empathetically, looking more saddened than shocked. "This is unfortunately very common," he said. Then, he gave me the name of a therapist, Benjy Sanders, who specialized in Internet addictions. "A regular therapist or marriage counselor isn't going to be able to help you," Rabbi Weissman explained. "You need someone who is trained to deal with this specific problem."

It was shocking to think of myself as an addict, but I subsequently learned that that designation was critical, since addictions don't respond to standard forms of behavioral therapy; they're in a class of their own. Benjy Sanders was a recovered addict himself, and unlike Dr. Randolph, he knew exactly how to deal with a client

like me. “In order to heal,” Benjy told me, “an addict has to decide of his own accord to pull himself out of the mud. If you’ve reached that point, I can help you.”

He explained that in the past, when I had admitted to Shiffy that I was viewing inappropriate images, the very act of unloading the burden of secrecy had given me an emotional release, which in turn encouraged the cycle of my addiction. “Confession alone is a dangerous thing,” Benjy informed me. “If it’s not followed by immediate action to prevent further slip-ups, it positions you to fall back into the same behavior, since you’ve cleared your slate of some of the guilt.”

With Benjy’s encouragement, I swore off the Internet, rejoined Rabbi Weissman’s *shiur*, and instructed Steve to put a filter on my office computer, making sure I didn’t know the password. Benjy also advised me to join GuardYourEyes.com, a Web site that provides resources and support for *frum* people who struggle with viewing inappropriate material.

I asked Shiffy to white-list Guard Your Eyes on the maximum-strength Internet filter on our home computer, and through that site, I discovered that there were other *frum* people who were suffering — or recovering — from the same problem I had. Knowing that I was not alone in my problem gave me tremendous *chizuk*, and hearing again and again from my anonymous Guard Your Eyes friends that Hashem still loves me no matter what spurred me to work on rebuilding my relationship with Him. I began davening to Hashem to remove the *yetzer hara* to surf the Internet and to help me regain Shiffy’s trust and respect, and through Guard Your Eyes, I joined a phone-in 12-step addiction recovery group.

In the meantime, Shiffy learned from the Guard Your Eyes Web site that there was a support group for wives of *frum* men with Internet addictions, and she joined the group. Being part of this group helped her to reinforce the belief that she was not to blame for my problem, and to view my problem as a difficult *nisayon* for me, rather than a betrayal of her. We also went for marriage counseling to restore the shattered trust in our relationship.

Shiffy and I have gone through Gehinnom as a result of my addiction, even if on the outside we managed to maintain a semblance of normalcy in our lives. I’m grateful to her for giving me the space to work out this issue on my own, and I’m grateful to her for working on herself to accept and respect me despite my problem. At the beginning, it was extremely difficult for her not to take my issue personally, but she’s grown to recognize that it’s not about her — it’s about a trap of the *yetzer hara* to which even the most filtered *neshamah* can succumb, in the absence of safeguards.

It took close to five years for Shiffy and me to rebuild trust in our marriage, but baruch Hashem today our relationship is stronger than ever. I wish I could say that I’m cured of my Internet addiction, but part of moving past an addiction is recognizing that recovery is a lifelong process, and that the word “cure” doesn’t exist in an addict’s lexicon. Unless you’re constantly on guard, you’re fair game for the *yetzer hara*.

Coming next week: *My makeover was a lot more than skin-deep.*

To have your story retold by C.Saphir, e-mail a brief synopsis to lifelines@mishpacha.com. Details will be changed to assure confidentiality.
