

Chapter 30

A PERSONAL STORY

There is an unfortunate phenomenon of from people whose Yiddishkeit weakens with the twelve-step program. I asked Guard Your Eyes to address this, and received the following response from Dov, who is sober in SA for over eighteen years. This chapter includes Dov's beautiful and profound essay on the topic, as well as several follow-up essays about how he got to this stage.

OUR YIDDISHKEIT CHANGES IN RECOVERY

BY DOV

The Gemara (*Berachos* 13a) discusses whether we will still refer to Hashem as the "One who took us out of Mitzrayim" when Mashiach comes. The Gemara concludes that it will not make much sense to us to do that. It brings the example of a man who is endangered by a succession of wild beasts and the last one is a snake... After he is saved from the snake he thanks G-d mainly for that. For to him, representing G-d as his savior from a lesser foe seems a trivialization of G-d's power. And aside from that, the Gemara is pointing out a fact of human nature: we find the

most meaning in the latest event. Therefore, the Gemara states, “No longer will we refer to Hashem as the ‘One who took us out of Egypt,’ but rather as the ‘One who collected us from the four corners of the world and brought the Final Redemption.’ ”

Similarly, the sobriety and recovery that an addict experiences are often his or her main connector to G-d. The greatest tragedy of his life, by far, was losing control of himself. This is probably even more true for a frum Jewish addict. So, at least for their first few years of sobriety, it is natural that getting saved from that horror eclipses most of the gratitude an addict can have in life. My own wife told me that, in retrospect, the best day of her life was the day I got sober—and the *next* greatest day was the day we got married (eleven hard years before sobriety came). A normal person may not be able to understand that, and that’s natural, too. The normal person sees an addict and asks, “Why don’t you just stop?”

In sobriety, the fact that an addict happens to be a *shomer Torah u'mitzvos* can get second billing for a time. This need not be cause for alarm, for a few reasons. Firstly, the above-referenced Gemara explains that this phenomenon is simply human nature. After all, wouldn’t it seem a terrible thing for the Jewish people to give *yetzias Mitzrayim* second-billing to *anything*? Yet the Gemara tells us it is not. It’s just the way it is for humans. And for the addict, the horror of sinning pales in comparison to his personal horror of being a fraud and living a double life. For that factor is what tells him he has no hope—and he is right. The drunk can be sure of only one thing: that he will drink yet again. And now, as a sober man, the miracle of it is crystal clear to him.

When the suffering addict finally finds sobriety and real hope for wholeness in recovery, it’s perfectly normal for him to feel gratitude to Hashem for that above all else. Even above his gratitude for Torah and mitzvos, and for his wife and children, for his job, his health, etc. Wouldn’t you? At least for a while?

Secondly, let's not forget this: what of his life of Torah and mitzvos before recovery? Was he living as a frum Jew until now? Was his being a Jew and believing in Torah an advantage—or was it actually a great source of misery for him? It is usually bitterness. We *all* sin sometimes, but consider this: was the addict just a sinner? No, the addict knows that he or she was a *fraud*.

Perhaps no one is as poor and sorry as the addict. Perhaps not from his bar mitzvah but certainly from the time his acting out became habitual and obsessive, the addict is an empty, confused person. Whether Jew or non-Jew, frum or not, an addict of any kind is mostly a fake. His dependence on gambling, heroin, lust, or alcohol are all the same in that they seem to replace his allegiance to the values that he wishes he'd live by. No addict wants to face that—and he is certainly horrified to have anyone else accuse him of his bankruptcy.

Getting caught is a heartbreaking experience for the addict. He often blames others, including those who caught him, for his debauchery. But it's not actually the getting caught sinning or drinking that is the killer here. It's his getting caught *being desperate* to get something that no one who thinks they know him can even *imagine* him wanting to do! *That's* the shock, for him as well as for them!

Actually, in the case of a Jew, ***the frummer he is, the greater and more complex a faker and liar he needs to be*** in addiction. "*Meshaneh mipnei hashalom*" becomes the rationalization he lives by. Furthermore, many of us look back and see that in some respects we grew to be our very "frummest," mainly while our addictive behaviors were growing their very worst. So why do normal people expect the frum addict to appreciate a beautiful life of Torah and mitzvos—if all he had for all these years was pain?

Patience and love born of understanding is needed here. The frum addict needs to be treated a bit like a new *baal teshuvah*. Patience and love...even though a normal Yid might

be frightened by it. Frum Yidden who are secure in their own Yiddishkeit will be the best able to help a recovering frum addict. They will not misjudge him in his early recovery. Those who are insecure and try to push him now will end up setting themselves up as the enemy to his return to real Torah observance—and this happens frequently. The addict needs time, for in some respects, he has really *not* been frum till now.

Third, for the addict, hanging onto the fantasy that he is caught in that epic struggle to conquer his *yetzer* and do *teshuvah* is the root of his denial all along. It lends some respectability to his struggle, and we pretenders really need some respectability! So we hang on to the lie that we are “doing *teshuvah*,” even though we always fail.

For normal people, it is no fantasy at all, for conquering the *yetzer* and doing *teshuvah* are precisely what they need to engage in. But things get really bad when non-addicts innocently (and sincerely) try to convince an addict that he or she is normal. This just backfires. Confusion grows like a canker for the addict. It’s just as bad as trying to convince a normal person that he must believe he is an addict—and I have seen both of these occur many times on recovery forums.

The famous American psychologist Abraham Maslow said, “To the man with only a hammer in his toolbox, every problem looks like a nail.” We all like to get others to try what works for ourselves and we find comfort in other people seeing the wisdom of our approach when they follow it. But the poor addict who keeps trying tools *that were not made for him* gets very miserable and stays miserable. He eventually feels convinced that he must just have “basic *emunah* issues” or—though he rarely admits it—decides that he is truly a classic *rasha* and grows ever more disgusted with himself. That just leads to needing more acting out/gambling/drinking. Isolation becomes the name of the game.

The feeling that “no one really understands me” starts to

mold his *avodas Hashem* as well. His Yiddishkeit has already been twisted enough to tolerate outrageous behaviors for years and years (“I’m busy doing *teshuvah*”—while he is still acting out) and also to protect his behavior by keeping it absolutely secret (because telling anyone who could *really* help him would just be a “*chillul Hashem*”). He thinks he is hiding his behavior because of shame—but really, long ago, he knew that it needed to be protected at all costs. His addiction behavior became his most precious item—and still is.

His *avodas Hashem* grows even sicker and actually *fuels* his addictive behaviors.² Even though it seems clear to him that when he is being good, he is a true *tzaddik*—he is sure he is a true *rasha* when “falling.” The saddest truth is that either way he is just a sick man on a painful spiritual roller-coaster. He is neither *tzaddik* nor *rasha*. But who wants to inform him of such a terrible thing? Might it not lead to *hisrashlus*, damaging his already tenuous *avodas Hashem*? Who but Shlomo HaMelech had the guts to tell anyone, “*Al tehi tzaddik harbei—Do not be overly righteous*” (*Koheles* 7:16)?

No one wants to be okay with a Yid reconsidering his living a lie, if it seems to jeopardize his observance...but what value is an observance whose primary objective was to cover up and enable drinking and other behaviors? Who has the guts to face that? Few do. Those who try to get the addict to persist in

2 In another post, titled “The Nuclear Reset Button,” Dov writes:

The “nuclear reset button” idea is about how we often allow ourselves to fall in order to reset our “state” to that of *teshuvah* and *kedushah* once again (similar to what they say in the twelve-step groups: “The only way we know to be free of it is to do it”). Addicts unfortunately often thrive on that very honest state we feel after acting out, but no matter how holy we feel in that state, it’s all part of the same sick cycle.

The idea suggests further that since we sincerely crave feelings of pure *kedushah* and hate the feeling of struggling with lust, we end up falling again in order to get out of the struggle and back into that holy, connected, and honest state we often feel after a fall. It’s one of the only ways we know of that practically guarantees plugging into *kedushah* and *teshuvah* again. It’s a dirty cycle in which attempting to reach for *avodas Hashem* and *kedushah* lead us to end up acting out continuously for years and decades.

playing the game—just because *teshuvah* is working for them—are putting a stumbling block before a blind man. And a holy stumbling block is no different from any other kind. It's bad.

But all of this changes when he starts to admit that the elephant in the room is not a Torah or Jewish problem, but a *human* problem. That he is ill. Being sick does not mean he is no longer held responsible for his behavior. As in all diseases, admitting illness is the first and crucial step toward enabling one to start taking full responsibility to *do* what he must to get well! Finally, his acting out/drinking/drugging/gambling is revealed to be what it really is: far more serious than sinning. It is what the Gemara and halachah refer to as "*chamira sakanta mei'issura*," the danger is more severe than prohibitions. Yes, there is a thing that is more serious than sin: a thing that destroys one's very humanity and sanity.

Sure, when one sins we are told the sinner is subject to a spirit of folly (*ruach shtus*)—but addiction is far more than that. It's ultimately a *lifestyle* based on and tolerant of fakeness and cultivation of insanity. It eventually makes the addict's relationships and *avodas Hashem* filled with falsehood. An addict finally standing at his or her precious step 1 knows that a double life is no life. If his broken heart and humiliation teach him anything, it is the humility to accept that he has not just failed at controlling his desires, but at living as himself. *Life*—not alcohol or other addictions—have become unmanageable (as stated in step 1).

The *ruach shtus* the Gemara refers to has little to do with addiction. Chazal overwhelmingly refer to normal people and their struggle against the *yetzer*—not to addicts and addiction. This partially explains why Torah, *mussar*, Chassidus, TaPHSiC,³ and even, *l'havdil*, basic psychological treatment often fall flat

3 TaPhSic is a technique devised by Guard Your Eyes to resist a powerful lust compulsion. It stands for "The Physical and Spiritual Combo" (in Hebrew, *taphsic* means "stop!"). A detailed explanation of this technique can be found on the Guard Your Eyes Web site.

on their faces for the real addict. *Derech erez* must come before the Torah—there is no other way.

The addict eventually discovers that he cannot become frum, good, or holy enough to beat addiction. A very painful realization. But this self-honesty is the doorway to *avodas Hashem* that can be real (see chapter 3 in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* for a nice description of this idea from the point of view of the alcoholic).

Thankfully, our sanity does not have to be perfect in order for Torah to succeed with helping people grow—as the Rambam makes clear in *Shemonah Perakim*, we are *all* ill to some degree with what he calls *cholei hanefesh*, spiritual maladies. But there is a point where *derech erez*—humanity and sanity—are lacking to a degree that Torah and *avodah* themselves become part of the problem. Where the mind is just too twisted to succeed by “thinking”—what Chazal refer to as “*ein chavush matir atzmo mibeis ha’asurim*—a prisoner cannot free himself from his prison” (*Berachos* 5b). Addicts seem to be just such people, and recovery is here for us.

Chazal did not waste much time expounding on treatment of the small percentage of sinning people who are actually addicts. Instead, Chazal passed on to the whole of Israel a rich and beautiful *Torah She’Baal Peh* filled with powerful tools for the overwhelming majority of Yidden through all generations: normal, struggling people. And it continues to serve the Jewish people very well, *baruch Hashem*.

But addicts need something a lot more basic than what they have always had. For we are the *she’eino yode’a lishol* of the Haggadah...though we always thought we were the *rasha* or the *tzaddik* (as others did, too). *Derech erez* comes before the Torah, and it is *derech erez*—openness, honesty, and sanity—that we need the most right now.

Many of the ideas in recovery may sound like Torah *madreigos*, but they are not. They are just basic sanity and honest living.

They are totally new principles for the addict. They are focused on *acceptance* of truths about ourselves and others rather than just *knowing* them. Normal people do not need this stuff to function. We do. It makes it hard for normal frum Yidden to understand us, and they sometimes think we are moving away from Torah, *chas v'shalom*. But I feel that it is only their own insecurity that causes them to see it that way.

The *quality* of faith is squarely faced in recovery—not its *quantity* or type. What a difference from normative Yiddishkeit! Just see how important appearances are in the community at large. I have nothing against uniforms and standards of dress and behavior. But see what a bonanza all that is for the professional faker (the addict). He fits into something—even while being a secret fraud. Even his *teshuvah* was hidden in fake terms—he was never really ready to let it go. He was only interested in “overcoming it”... letting it all go was unacceptable—like dying. And he knew it inside. What a dramatic and healthy change is honest and open recovery in recovery groups!

As a result of some real honesty, we quit looking for false *kedushah* in recovery—we keep looking for sanity and honesty. *Kedushah* will come of its own, with G-d's help. Returning to the old, grandiose path of “achieving greatness” will quickly drive the recovering frum addict right back into the same craziness and self-obsession that was part and parcel of his old, familiar struggle. And he will soon find himself acting out or drinking again, even as he “grows higher” in his mind and dreams.

The Kotzker Rebbe said, “I prefer a *rasha* who knows he is a *rasha* to a *tzaddik* who knows he is a *tzaddik*.” That is just the sad experience of many religious addicts. We do not ever assume we are *resha'im*, but for us it's finally okay to accept and move on with more humble goals—like realness in our imperfect *avodah*, and honesty to our family and fellows. Our imagined “status” as *kedoshim* or *tzaddikim* finally becomes all and only G-d's business, not ours. Ours is but to live and do.

So the main prescription for an addict is *not* “an overhaul of his Yiddishkeit”; he does *not* need *chizzuk* to try harder or smarter; and he certainly does not need to focus on his character defects or on things like “restlessness, irritability, and discontent” in order to finally surrender his drug and get sober! All he needs at first is to break down and *admit* he has failed, to admit to safe people explicitly and openly that he cannot continue using his drug, period. Normal people may sin—but for him it is a different issue. *Chamira sakanta mei'issura*. He cannot “drink like a gentleman,” and cannot just rejoin the *teshuvah* merry-go-round anymore. He is an addict—not a normal person.

He admits that it's not merely his drinking or acting out that he cannot manage, but that it is his life itself that is unmanageable. There is a reason that steps 4 to 10 (which refer to character improvement) come *after* sobriety starts, not before. It's only through living sober *at all costs* that an addict starts to see his character through honest eyes. Therapists know that if the man in a rehab center is allowed to keep drinking “a bit” every time the going gets rough in therapy, he will never make progress. The drug use must go first in order for the dependency to end.

Sobriety is the first big surrender (step 1). Clearly coming to see that one is, in a way, crazy; admitting what he really demands from life and from G-d (and from his false gods, too) is step 2. Recovery of the Good Life begins with step 3, and step 3 is only actually implemented by working and using steps 4 through 12. The drug remains unnecessary, one day at a time.

Frum people who fight this reality are just telling the addict to stop and be like them—but he isn't. And he won't ever be just like them. Addicts—even after they get sober—need to live on a different basis than non-addicts do. We can rejoin the human race and be as frum as anyone, but we need certain basic perspectives to remain there. When others try to get us to deny this and sweep it under the rug, they are signing our death warrant

and condemning our families. Patience and love is needed here.

The frum addict discovers that all along, since he began his addictive behaviors, he was never just fooling other people—he was just as fake inside, to himself. Self-delusion and active addiction go hand-in-hand, like a horse and a buggy. To expect that his Yiddishkeit practices must have somehow escaped the delusional pattern of his life and need no rethinking is naïveté. And for a non-addict to *condemn* the recovering frum addict who is questioning his sincerity and struggling to become more honest with himself regarding his Torah observance is just cruelty born of the observer's own insecurity.

Each case is different, and frum addicts need understanding Torah guides to help them, not to condemn them. Our *avodas Hashem* will have to change if our change is real. *Baruch Hashem*, my own experience has been that the changes led to a deeper, better, and more satisfying *avodas Hashem*. For it is now built on a bedrock of self-honesty, not on my old basis of just following the crowd.

Ashreinu!

Dov



The significance of this essay by a person who has eighteen years of recovery can be better grasped by reading two of his earlier articles.

The following article was written in 2010.

DOV'S STORY

This is Dov's first post on the Guard Your Eyes Web site back in 2010. In it, he describes the way he understands the difference between *teshuvah* and recovery.

Someone e-mailed me about your Web site a few days ago and I enjoyed reading a lot here, thanks. It is always nice to "meet"

other people that I can relate to and commiserate with.

After doing the first of the Twelve Steps (admitting powerlessness) and sharing my story with others, it became clear to me that I was actually very ill. For years and years, I had thought I was just plain “bad,” at best pitied by, at worst despised by, Hashem. I was, in fact, doing severe *aveiros* and failing miserably at being an *eved Hashem*. I knew that life was not supposed to be this way, but I always seemed to fall into trouble and act on my compulsions. As a result, my *emunah* that *avodas Hashem* was really possible for me was very low. That continued for over ten years.

Then I got married and it got much, much worse for yet another ten years. I went to a few different therapists and spoke with a few *rabbanim*, usually under the pretense of “having marriage problems.” The real problem was, of course, that I had a double life and it was driving me crazy. Some of those people were a little helpful to me, some quite the opposite. I even called Rabbi Twerski (in 1991 or ’92), who told me exactly what you report here on your Web site: that I probably needed a twelve-step group. I couldn’t do that, though—I thought, because my wife would find out (I couldn’t hide going to weekly meetings!!). Also, I felt that the whole complicated recovery thing would “cramp my style.” I resigned myself to thinking that the best I could hope for would be to die at a ripe old age with a big, giant, ugly secret in my safekeeping.

About six years later, I finally hit bottom. It became clear to me that I was getting only worse, never better, and that if I would take even one step further down—which I felt I *had* to do—I’d have to leave everything behind; my family, my self-respect, my community, the Torah and mitzvos, and even give up on any struggle for a connection with Hashem... In short, everything I defined myself and life by, was “up for grabs.” I saw no way out and was terrified. I had been terrified many times before (usually at getting caught or fearing getting caught), but this

was different. I knew it had nothing to do with getting “caught” by anyone. Even alone with myself “uncaught,” this life became unbearable. I went to a therapist the next week and told her my story, and she suggested I go to SA meetings.

I have been going ever since and have been helped directly and indirectly by Hashem—who I now know as my Best Friend—to stay sober so far. My davening and learning went through a long cold period (for about three years) soon after getting sober, but with lots of help and a few years of patience, it finally turned a corner, and now, like my marriage and my life in general, the davening and learning are better than I ever dreamed they’d be. I often have some awareness that I am really, comfortably, living with Hashem. Of course, I still have plenty of problems and have ups and downs, but they aren’t as big a deal as they used to be, and there is always this “background music” of hope, telling me it’s going to be all right.

Here is my point: The traditional AA approach saved my life. By this I mean that the AA message that I have a mental illness of addiction (to lust), a spiritual disconnect from Hashem and from people, and a physical allergy (to lust) that will eventually kill me. Immoral lusting in any way makes my life completely unmanageable and makes me useless to others. Many other people appear to be able to use it a little without suffering as I do. For them it is just a “moral failing,” while for me it leads to a downward spiral of insanity and failure, just like alcohol for an alcoholic.

In my case, focusing on my struggle as having to do with my normal *yetzer hara* was a sure recipe for failure. It made me simply try harder, use new tricks, and get yet more support. The message of AA to me (through SA) was not about any of those. It was about accepting the fact that I am fundamentally different from non-addicts, and accepting that I am not a *bad* person getting *good*, but rather a *sick* person getting *well*—with help from Hashem. I had to accept that this disease had me

completely beaten, just like cancer or diabetes. You don't struggle against a disease, you get the treatment. Plenty of people don't, and they die as a result.

The standard *teshuvah* thing did me no good at all, simply because it's not structured for crazy people. This was not just a "*ruach shtus*"; it had become my standard of living. I needed to first learn to get honest with myself and others. That took me about a year and a half of frequent program calls, regular meetings, work with my sponsor, and the Twelve Steps.

And my recovery was still clearly a *neis*. Just like Hashem cures people from cancer and other illnesses when the patient takes his or her medicine and treatments, I had to do the same, and He did the same for me. And Hashem continues to do it each day, because I believe that I would still use my addiction and continue to ruin my life, should I just get uncomfortable enough with living. Putting the steps into action every day keeps me comfortable and sane (at least it has so far!).

I think that some frum people, especially those who feel strongly about either beating the *yetzer hara* themselves as a supreme *kiddush Hashem*, or who feel that the answer must be in the Torah if they only look hard enough, may have a hard time with this approach. But I doubt they would use that approach with any other disease. For me, it was too confusing to mix *mussar* concepts with the Twelve Steps, particularly early on. It was toxic, actually.

Yes, I know that lust—i.e., using and acting on lust—is not exactly like alcohol, as it involves *aveiros chamuros*, while drinking alcohol is not an *aveirah* per se. Nevertheless, hanging onto the purely religious approach would have left me as I was for twenty years: looking for the answers with broken eyeglasses. The way I read them, the Twelve Steps are about getting my eyes (i.e., my mind and body) fixed and then getting frummer, not about getting frummer in order to stop. In fact, I got very frum, but the frummer I got, the sicker turns my addiction took! I

grew quite disgusted with myself along the way, to put it mildly.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that any other approaches are wrong, I'm just sharing what worked for me.

Even though the principles of the Twelve Steps are Torah-based, AA, in my experience, is a sanity-building tool, not a religious one. Because I am a Jew, though, after I started to gain sanity and some freedom from the compulsive acting out and lust-thinking, I was able to start growing, thank G-d, into the Jewish man that Hashem wants me to be. And the steps are a tool that I use to stay on that path now as well, one day at a time. I wish all the people using this Web site *hatzlachah* and I send my love to all of you, my brothers!

DOV'S STORY, PART II

The issue of addiction vs. *yetzer hara*, *aveiros*, and *teshuvah* has been discussed many times before on GYE, with me as a participant, too.

I *love* these issues, as they touch on the core of recovery for me and what it has done for my life, my wife's life, and the lives of my children.

I am absolutely convinced that if I had not surrendered to the facts about myself, I'd have continued down the exact same useless and deadly path I was on for yet another twenty years or so, until I'd have died from it. And on the way, the lives of my wife and children would have been irrevocably damaged. That would mean another few generations of severe pain and *chillul Hashem*, too.

I became frum over the years of my adolescence, as do many. My parents are not what you'd call "really frum," but are traditional. Nonetheless, I chose to learn in a post-high school yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael and continued after that in an unpaid *kollel* arrangement for about three more years after getting married, then went to school and am now working in a profession,

learning (Torah) quite a bit on the side, *baruch Hashem*, and helping raise a family.

That is what you'd have seen, had you seen me as a neighbor, in shul, yeshivah, etc. My wife knew me pretty much as that guy, too.

The truth was that I was busy trying to get in as much lusting and acting out as I could—**to remain comfortable**, while doing all those “real life” things. Not that I was really *seeing* it that way. My attitude was that I was preoccupied with **trying to stop!!** Ha.

My inner preoccupation was not about *Tosafos*, Ramban, loving my wife and kids better, *kiruv*, and doing for *klal Yisrael*, or creating *nachas ruach* for Hashem. My struggle was in finally beating this *yetzer hara* that was torturing me. I was reading *mussar sefarim* to try and overcome it, and I would cry almost every time after acting out. And my acting out drove me *extra* crazy, knowing in my heart that I'd never *honestly* be able to expect the non-frum Yidden I was trying to be *mekarev* to give up their cheeseburgers and other “freedoms” as long as I was still using my favorite diversion, pleasure pill, and stimulant, lust. *I* just couldn't seem to stop, and I knew that it made me a hypocrite. I was inescapably a hypocrite.

I read the *Yesod Yosef* that the *Kitzur* suggests to use to stop doing lust activities, searched many library stacks for articles in frum psychology journals on the *yetzer hara* and such, memorized much of *Mesilas Yesharim*, fasted occasionally, and cried in davening, especially in Eretz Yisrael while davening at *kivrei tzaddikim*. I was into *deveikus* (not just the album) and expected to be close to Hashem, yet I felt confused and frustrated that I was continually “falling,” as folks like to say it here.

I spoke to Rav Mendel Weinbach, the Steipler, and other great people, my rebbes in yeshivah, a few *rabbanim* in my town, went to a few shrinks under the pretense of “having marriage problems” (I had to hide behind the marriage issue to get my wife to be okay with me going to a shrink). Needless to say, by

the time I was done trying to secretly do *teshuvah*, I had a whole double life. I was a “normalish” frum guy on the outside, but a tortured Yid on the inside.

To make matters worse, I viewed the lust problems I had—and the “*teshuvah*” from them—as “the struggle of my life,” “my secret mission.” At times, it placed me in a category above others, for I was “working on big things.” I—as I see many do here on GYE—romanticized the struggle with the *yetzer hara*, as though it were some epic battle of good versus evil that I alone could wage for the honor of Hashem. Some people go so far as to view whether they succeed or fail as something that will bring Mashiach—or delay his arrival, *chas v’shalom*.

If my attitude upsets you at this point, please at least give me a chance to explain. I understand that it doesn’t sound like what most of us are told in yeshivah and *sefarim*.

I never got better until I saw that the extent and quality of my acting out was indeed **ill**. The frum approach that I was familiar with was not working, and I could see that. The reason it wasn’t working wasn’t because I wasn’t trying hard enough, but rather because there was something wrong with *my* approach. After all, Hashem’s Torah is perfect!

And something *was* wrong with me. Not being absolutely sure what it was, I went to a shrink and laid out my entire history of acting out, mind games, inner tortured life, etc., to the very last detail, and she suggested I go to a twelve-step fellowship called SA.

I came to SA the next week and discovered that I was in a room filled with other people who were stuck in a pattern of using lust in a way that was destroying their lives—and *in spite* of it destroying their lives—but many of them finally got out of it and **stayed** out of it. In other words, they were perverted, but found a way to live differently.

In addition, I discovered the following:

1. As long as I looked at myself as separate from the acting

out, meaning: “I am a regular, healthy guy on the whole, but sadly have this terrible habit”—I’d *never* get better. [Author’s note: Dov is saying that it is not just a habit, it is a reflection of who we have become; i.e., we are “ill.”]

2. By the same token, as long as I remained absolutely *disgusted* with myself—which I was (and I was sure there was a whole litany of secrets I’d quietly take to the grave with me)—I’d also never get better. [We are not “bad” people who need to become “good,” but simply “ill” people who need to get “better.”]
3. Whether or not the process qualified as “*teshuvah*” is something that I need to leave up to Hashem. Thinking into these types of things has always been just another way for me to feel a sense of control over my *madreigah*. Now Hashem gifts me with what you may call “*madreigos*,” if He wishes to. I am getting better on *His* schedule, not mine. **My business is doing His will for me today to the best of my ability, period.**

I have no interest in being a big *tzaddik* one day. Neither do I think about never acting out again! Thinking about “getting free of it” or “never doing it again” was always poison for me. I live one day at a time.

“*Asher anochi metzavcha hayom*, which I command you today”—only **hayom**. I believe that “now” is all that He wants from me. Really.

I don’t ask Hashem—tempting as it is—for sobriety this week or this year. I ask Him for today only.

You see, the lusting and acting out struggle was so intertwined in my development as a frum Yid that I believe it twisted my idea of Hashem, punishments, right and wrong, *teshuvah*, you name it. For if those things were **not** all screwed up, I ask you: How could I have ended up so messed up?

The *passuk* says, “*Shelach al Hashem yehavcha*—Throw

your burden on Hashem.” I therefore send this entire *pekkel* of *frumkeit/teshuvah* / “*yetzer hara* winning and losing” stuff onto Hashem. For I see that **that** was the *pekkel* that was weighing me down all along.

The Dubno Maggid has a beautiful *mashal* about packages. He teaches that *avodas Hashem*—if done right—is a relatively light package. After all: I’m doing what makes my Father in Heaven so happy! What could be more natural and simple? Not *easy* but *simple*.

This was the opposite of my way back then. I dare not go back.

So, in acting out, either I am sick or a *rasha*—you choose. I pick sick. I did and I got better.

Was it my *yetzer hara* all along? Maybe. My beef is just that all the thinking and ruminating on the “*aveirah* approach” got me sicker and *kept* me sicker.

Am I running away from the truth?

My answer is: No.

But what difference does it make anyway?

Am I serving Hashem *now*? Yes.

Was I then? Not really.

I believe that I was really serving lust. I depended on it (kind of like *bitachon*), it took up my entire mind so often (like *ahavas Hashem* is supposed to), I did it in private (like my relationship with Hashem is supposed to be), and I protected my access to it by keeping it safe and secret—because even though I hated myself so much for it, I desperately feared losing it. Just try to force any addict to quit and see how long it takes him to feel absolutely desperate—after the bravado of “sure, I can go without it” is over and done with...

I see little difference between being preoccupied with *fighting* lust, and *lusting*. For me, they inexorably lead to the same thing.

My job in recovery (after working my steps) is to focus on Hashem and being useful to Him. Anything else is a distraction,

including lust/acting out. That's all. And I can't get distracted by lust, because if I do I won't be able to control it. So I can't struggle with lust any more than I can *use* it.

Recovery, in my experience so far, is about a different focus than the one I used to espouse. And that is why the "yetzer *hara* model" is useless to me and many other frum addicts who are sober today.

If saying such things is an *aveirah* (to paraphrase Rav Chaim of Brisk), "I'd like to see the Gehinnom for it."

A disclaimer: There may be plenty of folks who are really *not* preoccupied with lust (or the struggle with it—same thing), whose lives are *not* being controlled by it, and who just act out occasionally and see no progression of their problem nor any powerlessness. For these people, the normal *teshuvah* approach may be wonderful! The only question I'd ask them is why it has gone on for so long—if it has. I also wonder what poison the secrecy is putting into their relationships—especially the most important and far-reaching of all human relationships: their marriage.

We need to be honest with ourselves, above all, for in the end, there is no way to run from the truth about ourselves.

Hatzlachah with everything. If I offended at all, you have my sincere apologies. I love you without any question. Hashem will take care of you as He takes care of all of us.

Dov

POSTSCRIPT

GYE forwarded Dov's post to me and wrote as follows:

Dear Rabbi Twerski,

I would greatly appreciate if the rav could read through this piece by "Dov." Today Dov is sober in SA for over ten years and he posts very wise advice on our forum. However, his approach may sound a little strange to some, as it seems to go against some of

the standard things we are taught in mainstream Yiddishkeit. I'd be most curious to hear the rav's take on the issue.

RESPONSE:

I think that Dov's statement that one needs to focus primarily on being with Hashem and doing what Hashem wants and to stop preoccupation with the *yetzer hara* is valid. The Kotzker Rebbe said, "An *aveirah* is like mud. Whichever way you handle the mud, you get dirty."

IN RESPONSE TO DOV'S POST, SOMEONE WROTE:

I think it's an interesting approach. If one can do it, I think it's certainly ideal, but I don't think I have what it takes to do this. It's just not realistic for me to transform my thought process that way. Maybe if I work on it little by little I will eventually get there, but that is probably a lifetime's work, and frankly, I don't have that much time. I need freedom from lust NOW.

GYE'S RESPONSE:

Personally, I think this approach is a lot easier and quicker than "struggling with the *yetzer hara*" all the time. We need to learn to ignore the struggle and say: "This struggle might be good for others, but I can't deal with it because I am lust addict. Instead, I leave the whole 'struggle issue' to Hashem. It's His business. For me, lust is a distraction, that's all. It distracts me from my outward focus and from doing Hashem's will for me today, to the best of my ability."

The twelve-step approach that Dov is sharing with us makes freedom from the addiction a lot easier than it is for those who are always having epic struggles with their lust (and ultimately falling).

WORKING WITH A SPONSOR

INTRODUCTION BY GYE

One of the most inspirational members on the Guard Your Eyes forum is a guy named Dov. He is sober in SA for many years and continues to join SA meetings until today. He often posts how the Twelve Steps help him remain sober and live with Hashem day by day, but he never really gave us a glimpse into his personal *avodah*—and he probably never would have—if not for a recent post on the forum.

One of the well-meaning members of our forum who considers himself recovered without the Twelve Steps (through hard work and understanding of the proper attitude in this struggle) posted the following about Dov:

I cry for a holy neshamah that for eleven years feels like he still needs his goyishe sponsor to help him be human. After whatever time it takes to break the cycle, it's time to grow!

Dov believes in SA philosophy, which says that he needs to continuously concentrate on preserving his humanity. For preserving humanity, a goyishe sponsor is indeed appropriate. But a Jew should be able to move beyond "preserving his humanity"!

All the sins are caused by the yetzer hara who has become "baal habayis," but once we evict him, we can begin to soar. The very best way—according to the Torah—to affect the sinner positively is to get him to understand that he is holy!

DOV REPLIES:

What I am about to share with you is not tooting my horn at all, with Hashem's help. It is to let people who may not understand become aware of what it is like for this *addicted Yid* to have a non-Jewish sponsor and still be going to meetings and using the steps while in the twelfth year of Hashem's gift to me of recovery from all-consuming addiction to lust.

Before and during the years I was acting out, I was exposed

to Yiddishkeit (a product of a Modern Orthodox day school, yeshivah high, etc.), and I was always a bit attracted to frum people, feeling that there was an answer there to something...

I cried at NCSY sing-alongs and felt a strong “*deveikus*” inside. I went to yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael after high school.

I started SA in 1997—and I’ll fast-forward to the past five years, as my *avodah* began to warm up. I was still going to meetings and using the steps in my daily life. My sponsor shared how he worked them with me. He is now more of a friend than a sponsor (as his sponsor now is to him). I have many program friends, sponsees, etc., and I get and make recovery calls many times throughout the day. I do not see any advantage in pretending that I “got back on some kind of track” and that now I am okay, because I have experienced that my “allergy” to lust has not gone away. But I **am** free of lust almost all the time, *baruch Hashem*, and my focus is on living with Hashem, as I’ll elaborate on in a bit. I go to one meeting a week.

Over the past six or seven years, my *avodah* got a boost from my finally going deeper into *Sefas Emes*, *Bnei Yisaschar*, and *Divrei Chaim*. This occurred around the same time that I had a little trouble with lust and finally started to work the steps into my daily life more seriously. Gemara and Tur have become more of a success over the past three years since I joined a Dirshu morning program (initially with an SA *chavrusa!*). I *baruch Hashem* gravitated toward *Kisvei Arizal* with a group learning them in my neighborhood, and I began finding deeper meaning in my davening. This is in consonance with the twelve-step program concepts as well, *baruch Hashem*, and bolstered with *Shaarei Ramchal* for three years already.

I was moved to start wearing Rabbeinu Tam tefillin about a year ago, and I find going to the mikveh a great experience. I ask a *tzaddik* in my neighborhood for advice regularly and surrounded myself with experts on *Chumash*, *mussar*, and *Kabbalah* as much as possible. For the past two years I have

been going through much of the *Shelah HaKadosh* on the *parashah* and sharing ideas from it with friends and family. My relationship with my wife, as well as my relationship with all people, has been growing in ways that I see described in the *sefarim*, thank G-d, and it is exhilarating. I am mostly able to be motivated by being useful to others, rather than by getting/taking. Enough said there.

My experience has been that either I grow and change, broadening and deepening in *avodah*, or there is no point to it all. I perceive a force more powerful than I can understand drawing me closer to Hashem. Still, I feel at peace most of the time. Because of being awakened by the steps, I want above all else to live with and be useful to people, more than ever before, yet be alone with Hashem all the time. My formerly very self-centered *avodah* never allowed me to do that, even though I was convinced I was a “*kadosh*.” In fact, before the steps, the idea that I was intrinsically a “*kadosh*” was a tremendous ball and chain for me. It made failure so much more disappointing.

And please don't assume that “if only someone would have explained to me what it really all means, I'd have been ‘okay.’” That is not my experience. For most alcoholics and other addicts I know, the holier they think they are, the worse and more depressed or pompous they get. I know what you really mean (which is that a Jew should see his intrinsic holiness as a great honor and responsibility). I believe you can *tell* addicts about it (or even convince them that they should believe it), but you cannot *convince* them that it is really true. This is a concept non-addicts do not seem to grasp.

Finally, I have been able, for the most part, to avoid looking at “normal” Yidden who do not seem to need the depth and intensity of a relationship with Hashem as unfortunate. I also avoid showing my perceived awareness in their face by asking them, for example, why they say *berachos* in a rush, as opposed to the way we'd say thank you to a person. You know, stuff like that...

I have seen others give this “*mussar*” as though it was their own. It is not pretty, and it’s unhealthy for me to pretend I deserve any awareness I got through my addiction/recovery. They were all free gifts and will stay that way. And I assume I’ll lose them (along with my sobriety) if I forget that and start acting as if they are truly mine.

So I ask you, what more should I expect from myself, an addict? I am sure we can all do better—me most of all. But do you really still think I need to be cried for, and that the fact that I look up to a non-Jewish man for sharing his sanity with me is hindering me?

Finally, I do not accept that my addiction to lust should be described in terms of “*aveiros*” and the “*yetzer hara*” as you describe it. I choose to **live right** today, and I rely on Hashem to make the *tikkunim*. Yes, it is clear that recovery has led me on what—in retrospect—the *sefarim* describe as *teshuvah*. But I choose not to “understand” the process that much, and instead to leave it to Hashem.