

Escape from Gehinnom

I was sitting in a room in Yerushalayim, surrounded by about 30 other *yeshivah bochurim* and *kollel yungeleit* who looked more or less like me — black hats and jackets, white shirts, tzitzis out.

We were all serious *bnei Torah* who were committed to our learning and to our *avodas Hashem*. And we were all gathered in this room for the same reason: We wanted to grow in our *ruchniyus* and bring more *kedushah* into our lives.

It was my turn to address the group. I took a deep breath. “Hi, my name is Eliezer, and I have an Internet addiction.”

I DISCOVERED THE INTERNET at the age of 12, when my friend Chananya’s uncle bought him an iPod Touch for a bar mitzvah present. I wish Uncle Yechiel had bought Chananya a *Mishnah Berurah*. Or a fish tank.

I had an impressive music collection at home, and Chananya asked me to load some songs onto his new iPod. Inquisitive adolescent that I was, I quickly realized that the device had Internet connectivity, and I wasted no time in punching in words I knew little about, just enough to be curious about what they were.

What I discovered shocked me — and made me crave more.

After that first foray into the online netherworld, I made it my business to get my hands on Chananya’s iPod as often as I could. “Hey, Chananya, I have a new album for you,” I’d say. Chananya would happily relinquish his device for the night so that I could load the latest music onto it, while loading my formerly innocent young mind with unimaginable filth.

From Chananya’s iPod I quickly moved to my home computer. My parents had a password on this computer, which I didn’t know, but I could easily get my mother to enter the password, by telling her that I needed to type up a project for school, or that I wanted to play a game on the computer. She never suspected that I was using the Internet, much less that I was going to inappropriate sites. Even had she bothered checking the computer’s Internet history — which I doubt she ever did — she wouldn’t have known I was online, because I always made sure to erase the browser’s history before finishing my “project” or “game.”

My parents didn’t dream that their computer — which my father needed for work — was being used for anything untoward. They trusted their kids. Besides, the computer was situated right in our family room, facing the front entranceway. Anyone could walk by at any time.

They didn’t realize that because I sat *facing* the entranceway, I had a few seconds in which to close the browser before anyone could see what was on the screen. Not once did I get caught viewing anything inappropriate.

I matured at a young age, and along with my physical development, my interest in explicit material morphed from curiosity to compulsion. At that point, my Internet use became an addiction. I really wanted to stop — I hated what I was doing, with

every fiber of my being — but I couldn’t.

I became bar mitzvah, and began dressing more *yeshivish*. On the outside, I was learning well and succeeding in school. On the inside, though, my life was a rollercoaster. I felt as though I was living a contradiction.

The one reprieve I had from the magnetic lure of the Internet was summer camp. The camp I went to forbade all electronic devices, and was extremely strict about enforcing that rule. Many of the campers grumbled about having to leave their iPods and MP3 players at home, but for me, it was a huge relief. Finally, I wasn’t in the clutches of the Internet, and I didn’t have to deal with the horror and self-loathing that came along with the lurid images I viewed.

Of course, the moment I came back from camp, I headed straight to the computer in the living room. But the summer after ninth grade, when I returned from camp, I discovered that I couldn’t access the Internet. Apparently, my parents had discovered some inappropriate material on the computer and had installed a filter.

I knew with certainty that the inappropriate material they found had not been accessed by me. I had been away at camp for two months, and besides, I was a whiz at covering my tracks. I had a few brothers, and I knew that one of them must have been the culprit. Not that I would ever have discussed this with any of my brothers; I was far too ashamed.

After I returned home from camp, I felt a desperate need to access the Internet. Much as I detested it, the pull was irresistible. But how could I go online if that annoying filter blocked anything interesting?

One day, I mentioned to a friend of mine that my parents had installed a filter on the computer. “Oh, that’s nothing,” he told me, and listed a bunch of ways to circumvent the filter. The next time I used the computer, I couldn’t believe how simple it was to get around the protection my parents had installed.

Once I learned how to bypass the filter, my Internet use became more frequent. I was using it practically every day, and walking around at all times with explicit images in my head. This affected my learning, and in tenth grade, I was put into a lower *shiur*.

That was a disaster for me, because in my new class, two-thirds of the kids had the same problem I had. I should mention that I attended a very respected and prominent yeshivah, and many of my peers came from *yeshivish* families. Yet the fact that we were all in this together made us comfortable talking openly about what we were doing. By then, it wasn’t only about viewing licentious images, it was about violating grave *issurim*. None of us could concentrate on Gemara.

The *rebbe*, and the *hanhalah*, were aware of what was going on in the class, but they had no idea how to deal with it, and never addressed the problem directly. The yeshivah did hold a symposium for parents, educating them about the dangers of the Internet and making it obligatory for families to install a filter on their computers. (This was four years ago, when awareness of this issue was starting to become widespread.) But it was too little, too late. My friends and I were beyond filters.

I was beyond my parents’ home computer, too. I bought myself a prepaid phone with Internet, which meant that I had access 24 hours a day. My parents never knew about this phone.

How I suffered from that little phone. I would lie in bed at night, crying into my pillow and wishing that I could get over my addiction. Each time I turned on the phone, I wanted to kill myself. Yet I could not stop myself.

One day, toward the end of tenth grade, I gave my phone to another kid and told him, “Get rid of it for me.”

Finally, I was free of the phone. But the computer was still there, sitting in the family room, with nothing but a feeble filter standing between me and the worst of the Internet.

My11th-grade *rebbe*, Rabbi Farkas, was amazing. He made an effort to connect with each of his *talmidim* and help them work through whatever personal issues they were facing. After talking to me a few times, he realized that I was having communication issues with my parents — I was locking myself in my room frequently, and isolating myself emotionally from my family. Whenever possible, I would go to friends’ houses, even eating Shabbos meals away from home as often as I could.

Years of keeping secrets from my parents had driven a wedge between me and them, and they had no idea why I had become so withdrawn. In response to my antisocial behavior, my father would get angry with me, and my mother would become sad and helpless, but they couldn’t get through to me. How could they, if they had no idea what a tortured existence I was living?

Rabbi Farkas suggested that I speak to the school psychologist about my relationship with my parents. I didn’t tell the psychologist anything about my Internet problem; I was too ashamed. Instead, we talked about healthy communication, and the emotional transition from child to adult.

One night, I had enough. “Hashem,” I cried, “this has to stop! I can’t take it anymore!”

It was the darkest point in my life. I knew I had to get help. Thankfully, at this point I had a line available to me. The next day, I went to the school psychologist and blurted out, “I’m struggling with Internet issues.”

“Okay,” he said calmly. “I can refer you to a therapist who deals with that.”

The problem was I didn’t want my parents to know anything.

They didn’t know I was seeing the school psychologist. But now that I had to see an outside professional, I needed my parents to pay.

I did give the psychologist permission to tell Rabbi Farkas what my real issue was. He was shocked. But he agreed to call my parents and ask them to pay for my therapy, without revealing to them what the nature of the issue was.

My parents, however, insisted on knowing why I was being sent to therapy. Rabbi Farkas could not tell them, because he had pledged to protect my privacy. It went back and forth, back and forth: Why does our son need therapy? I can’t tell you. Then we’re not paying for the therapy. But your son needs help. Why? I can’t tell you.

Desperate to get help, I myself appealed to my parents to send me to therapy. But when they asked why I needed it, I couldn’t bring myself to tell them, so they refused to pay.

In the midst of all this, I fell into a deep depression. Finally, I had opened up somewhat to my parents, yet I was experiencing only frustration as a result. Now, not only did I have to deal with my own guilt and shame, I also had to bear the humiliation of knowing that others were aware of my problem — and that my parents were bound to find out about it. I stopped going to school, and spent my days in bed.

The school psychologist had referred me to a therapist named Dr. Spanner, and my parents did research into his area of specialty. When they found out, they were stunned — and they immediately agreed to send me to therapy. To their credit, they did not display any anger or disappointment toward me. They also managed to walk the fine line between being overbearing and indifferent, asking me occasionally how the therapy was going without being too inquisitive. They showed that they cared, while respecting my personal space.

Immediately after discovering that I had a problem, they purchased a really strong filter. Unlike the free filters, which were a joke, this filter was impenetrable, even for a pro like me. It worked on the level of the router, which meant that the whole house was protected, not just the computer.

In therapy, Dr. Spanner addressed the emotional issues I was experiencing, along with giving me tools to conquer my Internet problem. Gradually, my relationship with my parents improved, and I started communicating with them normally. I started attending school again, and decided to get my life back on track.

At the end of 11th grade, I approached the principal and requested that for 12th grade, I be moved to a higher *shiur*, where the *rebbe*, Rabbi Blumstein, was known as a slave driver — he didn’t stand for absence, lateness, or slacking off. The principal was surprised. “You know that if you’re in Rabbi Blumstein’s *shiur*,

you’re going to have to show up,” he said.

“I know,” I replied. “That’s exactly why I want to be in his *shiur*.” As expected, Rabbi Blumstein was on my case from day one, railing at me if I came even five minutes late or shmoozed with my *chavrusa* during *seder*. I was delighted.

With my *rebbe* breathing down my back, I resolved to stop watching movies — *all* movies, no matter how innocuous — and listening to non-Jewish music. My Internet use tapered off; it didn’t stop as quickly as I would have liked, but it did go down significantly, even if there was still the occasional flare-up.

I graduated high school in a much better place than I started, both emotionally and spiritually. I continued therapy through my first year of *beis medrash*, and my learning took a giant leap forward.

For a few months, I was completely sober, which was a huge achievement for me. I thought I had conquered my problem.

Then, during *bein hazmanim*, my family spent a few days with some relatives in the mountains, and the room I was sleeping in had a computer. My parents asked the hosts if the computer was protected, and they assured my parents that there was a password on it. But when I sat down at the computer, I discovered that it was already logged on — there was no need to enter a password. And there was no filter at all.

We stayed in that house for four days. Three out of the four nights I was there, I was up all night, until seven in the morning, watching movies online. And when I got back home, I reverted to my old habits with a vengeance.

Devastated, I called Dr. Spanner. “What’s going on?” I cried. “I thought I was cured!”

At this point, Dr. Spanner decided to send me to an addictions specialist, in addition to my twice-weekly therapy sessions. The addictions specialist introduced me to Guard Your Eyes (GYE), which was an incredible resource for me.

Through GYE, I joined a 12-step program in my hometown for *frum* Internet addicts. When I moved on to a yeshivah in Yerushalayim — a top yeshivah, I should add — I began seeing a local addictions specialist, who found me a GYE sponsor and introduced me to the Yerushalayim chapter of the 12-step program.

With that combination in place — 12-step group, addictions specialist, sponsor — I finally had a program that could help me. The Internet habit was totally out of my control at that point — it wasn’t just a *yetzer hara*, it was an addiction that I was powerless over. Only after I accepted that I had no control over the problem could I begin to fight it.

The 12-step group also helped me to become more understanding of my parents and forgive them for their neglecting to shield me adequately from the Internet. I realized that they

were simply naïve and unaware, and I learned to focus on all the good they had done for me over the years: paying my tuition, providing me with ample food and clothing, funding my therapy, and, above all, showering me with love.

It’s been a year since my first 12-step program meeting in Yerushalayim. I still struggle with my Internet addiction, but at least I have a plan that I know can work.

I’m not fooling myself, though; this is a problem I’m going to be dealing with for the rest of my life. In a year or two, I’m going to be in *shidduchim*, and chances are, I’ll be considered a great catch — I’m a nice, *frum* boy, I come from a good family, I went to the right yeshivos, and I know how to learn.

But marriage is not going to be easy for me, or for my wife. I’m in a much better place today than I’ve been since age 12, but the images I’ve seen still haunt me, and they’ll never leave my mind completely. I also know better than to naïvely believe that this problem is going to go away the day I get married. In terms of building a relationship, this addiction is a lot worse than alcohol or drugs.

Today, there’s a lot more awareness about this issue than there was seven years ago, when I first got sucked into the filth of the Internet. But I’m sorry to say that it’s still a losing battle. Parents and *rebbeim* are always a step behind their kids, and they’re just not doing enough to protect their kids — even if they have the best filters, and even if they update those filters regularly.

“What more can we do?” you ask.

Let me put it to you this way: If there was a predator living next door, what would you do? Would you suffice with putting up a fence and checking that fence every once in a while?

Well, the Internet is nothing less than a predator, out to abuse your children and destroy their lives. I’m not talking about *kedushah* here, although that’s obviously an issue. I’m talking about their emotional health, their relationships, their very future.

I decided to share my story, even though the problem is one that everyone knows about, precisely because I’m not a *mashgiach*, or a *rebbe*, or a psychologist. I’m just a regular *bochur* — a *bochur* who knows what Gehinnom is, and is going to be working for the rest of his life to escape it.

Why Hashem gave me this *nisayon*, I don’t know. I accept that this is what my life was meant to be like, and I hope to one day be able to use my experiences to help others who are struggling with the same problem. Sadly, I’m sure I’ll have plenty of customers. ●

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.