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# HELPLESS TO HELPER



**THE  
COURAGE  
TO ASK FOR  
HELP**

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**MOISHE CHANIN**



**I KNOW NOW WHAT  
I WAS FEELING, BUT  
THEN I DIDN'T.**

**W**hen I was about seven years old, I fantasized that one day I'd go out to the alley behind my parents' house, and I'd find a small space that was completely in shadow. I'd take a seat, lay my head on my arms and cry. It wouldn't matter if I got my sleeves wet, or if anyone would hear me; I would cry with no restrictions and finally release the feelings of hurt, self-pity, and loneliness.

And as I'm having my good cry, someone, an adult male, would happen to be walking by. He'd hear my sobs and follow the sound. He'd find me and with sincere empathy would ask, "What's wrong?" And I would find the words to confide in him. Then he'd validate my feelings and reassure me that everything would be okay.



I was called names when I was younger which confirmed my negative self-image, but I now understand that those feelings of low self-esteem would have been there whether I was called names or not. Being mocked by my peers only confirmed what I already knew inside—I was inadequate, clumsy, incapable, “less than,” and I needed to find ways to compensate so I could fit in.

I started looking for ways to make myself feel better because I was desperate and it never occurred to me to ask for help. I started with stealing money from my parents’ pockets and *pushkas* at home, I was then able to show off the things I’d buy and I’d feel like I was worth something for a few minutes. By the age of eight I progressed to shoplifting from stores in Crown Heights. The next year I got more sophisticated—I’d buy *nosh* on

my parents’ account at the local grocery store without their permission and come to school and share it with my friends to bolster my self-worth.

In elementary school I used to wear my coat all day. Without it, I’d feel exposed, as if anyone would be able to see how weak and pathetic I really was.

One day, in fifth grade, I was chosen for a basketball team at recess. I gave it all I had and it was a much-needed boost to my self-esteem. I wasn’t a great player, but I began to do whatever it took to play as much sports as possible. I had arrived at last. I finally fit in. Any time I had the opportunity, I’d go to Lefferts Park to play football, baseball or basketball even if that meant skipping school.

## LIQUID COURAGE

**A**t home, there was always alcohol at special occasions. I would admire people with a high tolerance for alcohol. Man! That was something! I wanted to be like them one day. Some would drink and get violent or wild, but I wanted to be like the ones who were able to “hold their liquor.”

At my classmates’ bar mitzvahs, they’d give us each a shot glass with a few drops of vodka, just enough to cover the bottom of the glass. I’d drink mine and then take the drops from whoever didn’t drink theirs and down it all. Then I’d dance with confidence.

At 14, I spent a lot of time at a certain relative’s apartment. Almost daily, I’d pick up some beer, head to his apartment and drink freely. Nobody bothered me there. He and his friends were kind to me and made me feel accepted; his apartment felt like a safe space for me. There was marijuana and other drugs but I didn’t partake, I had my booze and I was happy.

Every week, my group of friends would chip in to buy some beer and chocolates. Then, on Shabbos afternoon, we got together in my bedroom to drink and schmooze. Then we’d go out to Botanic Gardens or Prospect Park.

The things my friends did with ease were too difficult for me. I was too shy; I didn’t want anyone to notice how awkward I felt, so I’d separate myself from the group sometimes to avoid being noticed.

The first time I realized that alcohol could fix the way I felt was one Shabbos when I was 14. I snuck two bottles of wine from my parents’ basement; I knew no one would realize they were missing because no one

“The substance isn't the addict's problem. The substance is the addict's best attempt at a solution. The only true solution is a personal G-d experience, a spiritual breakthrough that supplies the deep-seated need for union with G-d.”

-Rabbi Shais Taub, Chassidus teacher, *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* columnist, and author of *God of Our Understanding: Jewish Spirituality and Recovery from Addiction*.

liked that wine; it was too strong and sweet. I finished both bottles, one cup at a time.

I stepped out of the house and it was like I was having a spiritual experience. I was free! Free to hear the birds, see the colors, feel the breeze and hear it rustle the leaves in the trees. It was like I had been living in a cave all my life and finally, for the first time, I stepped out and saw the light.

I finally understood what I needed to do to feel strong and confident like my friends. Soon I was drinking at every opportunity. People offered me marijuana but I wasn't interested. I didn't need it; alcohol was enough for me. Some people accused me of smoking pot because my friends did, and that would anger me because that was a line I decided I wouldn't cross; it was the way I proved to myself that I was in control.

When I was 15, my parents saw I wasn't doing well so they sent me to a new yeshiva out of town. Before the school year started we all got together with our *Rosh Yeshivah* at *farbrengens* on Sukkos. We would all drink and I fit right in. On one occasion I drank about six full glasses of Benedictine and vodka within two or three hours. The older *bachur* next to me was impressed which made me feel powerful, so I continued drinking until I wobbled home and crashed.

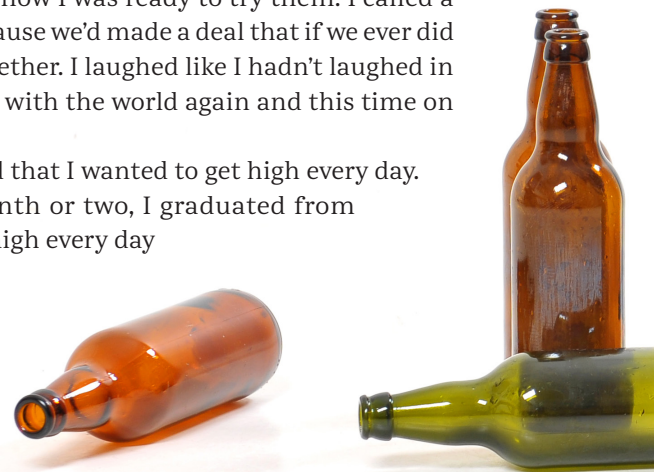
The next three years I learned an incredible amount of *Chassidus* and I drank an incredible amount of alcohol. We kept to the Rebbe's directive of only four ounces but sometime I'd drink it all at once for a stronger effect.

At 18 I went to Israel and got introduced to the bar scene and "Polish butterflies," a drink that includes 80-90% alcohol. I was having fun with my friends and my drinks, and I was happy.

## CROSSING MY RED LINE

After I came back to New York I was again offered drugs, and now I was ready to try them. I called a good friend because we'd made a deal that if we ever did it, we'd do it together. I laughed like I hadn't laughed in years. I was one with the world again and this time on another level.

It was so good that I wanted to get high every day. But after a month or two, I graduated from *wanting* to get high every day



to *needing* to get high every day. The hustle of finding ways to get some drugs was exhausting; the desperation was humbling, or rather, degrading. Getting high was hardly a luxury any more.

At 19, I went back to Israel and joined a school as a dorm counselor. I was getting high and missing classes, and the principal told me I had to leave. I welcomed the idea. I joined another yeshiva, this time to learn *semichah* on my own. I found an apartment with three friends where we could get as high as we wanted. We were like our own family: we cooked, cleaned, and hosted Shabbos meals and daily jam sessions. I didn't have much money, so I would buy drugs in bulk and sell them so I could get high for free. Meals were not as important, and I frequently ate nothing more than pita and hummus.

The days that I didn't have drugs were tough, desperate, and sad. I'd look through pairs of pants, other roommates' things, and drawers. I'd get on my hands and knees and comb through the rug to try find crumbs that I dropped from my last stash of drugs. Some of the crumbs were not drugs at all, but I didn't care, I'd just smoke it.

At some point I realized I had to stop doing drugs. It was on a short visit home from Israel, and I was invited to isolate myself at a relative's house to detox. I didn't do drugs but I most certainly made up for it with booze.

One week later, back in Israel, I was getting high again. I didn't plan on it. In fact, I had told my roommates of my decision to never get high again and they respected it. They kept it away from me until one day I said, "One won't hurt," and then it was back to how it was before I'd ever thought of stopping.

Life continued like that in Israel for two and a half years, until the day came that I felt I'd outgrown my surroundings. I returned home to start working in the family business. Every night after work, I would party with my brothers, other family members, and friends.

## BROKEN PROMISES

**T**he day I got engaged to my wife, I woke up after a drinking spree. I wanted to stop, I really did! I promised myself I'd be clean 30 days before the wedding. Fail. Then one week, fail. Then I promised I'd be clean from the moment I went to the airport until my wedding overseas.

Fail.

When I arrived in Australia for my wedding I had no appetite. I was plagued by anxiety and had trouble sleeping, so I got high the night before my wedding.

I stayed clean from drugs the entire duration of *sheva brachos*. I was only getting beers during the day, convinced that I was, very sophisticatedly, "trying all the different types of Australian beer."

I got high again the night after *sheva brachos* and continued for another five years, sneaking some smoke at night while my wife was asleep, and then sneaking some smoke on Shabbos while my wife was asleep. I felt like I was living a double life. I had a beard, I looked religious, I was a faithful husband, but was I?

My wife found out, and I explained to her how much I *needed* it. She seemed to understand, so from then on I thought it was somehow okay for me to smoke on Shabbos.

When my wife got pregnant she begged me to stop and I agreed that once the child was born I'd go clean. I didn't succeed. For the second pregnancy, same promise, same fail. By that time I had lost faith in myself that I would ever overcome my addictions.

I was high through it all.

From within 10 minutes of opening my eyes I was high. I would come home and wouldn't say hello until I had a few cups of booze and a few hits of pot. Somehow, throughout all this, I was able to go to work and make a living, but just barely.

The end was dark. I was getting high and drinking before and after absolutely everything. I was now seeking oblivion. I didn't want to feel my guilt, shame, and resentments from my past, or hear the pleas from my crying wife. I couldn't handle my reality—I *had* to get high. Drugs were my escape, the only thing that made living tolerable.

I tried quitting again on a trip to Australia.





The night my first son was born, eight years ago, I was high within an hour. On my daughter's fourth birthday I was in rehab. Today by the grace of G-d I am here at the first birthday celebration of my third child, present, useful and sober. I could never have done it alone. For those who have supported me and continue to do so and are reading this (there are many), thank you. This moment is a product of your kindness and strength.

Nightmares and sweats bothered me, but not as much as my wife did. "If only she would be who I want her to be. If only she would accommodate my wishes and not make mistakes, then I'd be okay," I thought. But she wasn't going to change, I concluded repeatedly, and that made me angry, then sad, then hopeless, until I just knew the only option left was divorce.

Fear plagued me. I was checking windows at night, hearing noises, thinking someone was breaking into my house or car. I shouted at some people in the middle of the night because I thought they were about to break into my car. I'm still not sure if it ever happened.

Nights found me trying to sleep at 4 a.m.; I knew I was going to die in my sleep. I'd get out of bed and kiss my kids goodbye.

## THE GIFT OF DESPERATION

**G**-d finally gave me a gift on Simchas Torah 2012; He made me desperate enough to get help. I had no access to drugs, only booze. I drank liters that day but

stayed sober, so I drank more.

As Yom Tov ended, I came home and my wife told me she wanted to go visit someone who needed her help. I looked sober so, with my agreement, off she went. I was supposed to finish feeding the kids and put them to bed.

My wife came home and found me passed out.

After many attempts, she woke me up. I was a madman, angry, raging like never before. I expressed admiration for my friends who had died due to drugs and alcohol "They are smart! They know how to deal with the way I feel now!"

I looked in the mirror and was so enraged and disgusted by my ugly reflection that I broke the mirror with my head. I decided that death was the answer. I was going to go upstairs, climb to the roof and run to the edge, and leap as far as I could... and find peace at last.

On my way to the roof a gift from G-d was given to me. I paused long enough to call my brother for help. "Please come stop me from doing something really bad to myself." My brother came and cried. "Moishe," he begged me, "I look up to you; you have so much. You have a beautiful life and family, *why?*"

My desperation gifted me another moment of clarity, a moment that was the turning point of my life. Surrender. I agreed to get help. The Hatzalah member was persuasive enough to get me into his vehicle. "I really hope this works," I told my wife before we drove off. "If it doesn't there's no hope for me."

Locked up in a psych ward for seven days, I detoxed. But I felt, I believed, *I knew* I didn't belong there. What was a nice guy like me doing in a place like this?

My family, mainly my wife, pushed me to go to an inpatient rehab, but I was hearing nothing of it. "Outpatient or nothing," I said.

G-d sent me an angel, Jack M., *a"h*, my roommate in the psych ward. Jack talked to me in a way no one ever had. He heard me, he understood me, when no one else did. My lifelong fantasy of being approached by an empathetic stranger was unfolding.

I was able to listen to him because he spoke a language that my heart understood. I agreed to go to rehab. I know now that the power of that conversation was the therapeutic value of one addict talking to

another. It slayed my long-held belief that, “If you knew who I really was, you’d hate me as much as I hate myself. You’d want to kill me, too.”

After being released from the psych ward and getting into the car service to go to rehab, the driver tried to reassure me. “I don’t know what they do in the rehab, but when I drive the guys back home they always say they’re sad to leave.”

My first day there, I was welcomed by fellow addicts with a love that flowed freely and un-self-consciously. They brought me in, showed me around, hugged me, and assured me it would be okay. I quickly realized that here I could cry, share honestly without holding back, and trust that my listeners would not judge me. Instead, they would encourage and even compliment me. They taught me that I was not bad, I was just sick. I had a compulsion that I simply could not control with my own willpower or reason. I had an allergy to drink—one that makes me crave more, no matter how much I have.

My experience in rehab was 29 days of pure heaven. The driver was right; I did not want to leave. He picked me up from rehab and took me straight to the outpatient treatment center I would join. The intake person picked up the phone in front of me and called Mendel, a guy from Crown Heights. He was sober and volunteered to be a support for me. I’m still very close with him and tens of other sober people in our community.

I went to the Intensive Outpatient Safe Haven for about 12 months which included personal, group, and couples therapy.

## NEW PAIR OF GLASSES

In the past six years not much has changed on the outside. My marriage, my kids, my past, my community, and my job stayed pretty much the same. But my life has improved tremendously; my perception of my past and present were altered completely. Everything I needed to work on was an “inside job.” I no longer believe that if others or my circumstances change then my inside feelings will improve.

I used to turn to G-d and say, “Hashem, I’m trying so hard. Why are You making it so difficult for me?” I believed in Hashem, but I didn’t think that Hashem believed in me.

**I BELIEVED  
IN HASHEM,  
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HASHEM  
BELIEVED  
IN ME**

The biggest part of my recovery today is my healthy and ever-growing relationship with Hashem. When I’m sad, restless, irritable, resentful, embarrassed or regretful I first check in with Hashem. I invite Him in with me. I pray a lot and ask Him to guide me through. Over time my trust in Him grows; if I let Him in, Hashem gives me strength to stay calm in stressful situations, to be reliable, to stay present at *simchas*, and to be productive despite my fears.

Because of my disease and recovery, I’ve had the merit of helping countless people seek recovery. I am an ICF (International Coach Federation) certified Life Coach and an Addiction Recovery Coach. Today, with Hashem’s help, it has been six years and two months since the last time any drink or drug entered my body. I have not felt the need for any alcohol or drugs.

***Asking for help is an act of courage, not weakness.*** ❧

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## **WHAT WAS YOUR GOAL IN SHARING THIS VERY PERSONAL, PAINFUL STORY? WHAT DO YOU WANT READERS TO TAKE OUT OF IT?**

First, thank you, N'shei Chabad Newsletter, for publishing my story. I know it is sensitive material but I have no doubt it will save someone's life.

My purpose in sharing is, first of all, to let all those experiencing what I did know that they are not alone. There are others who felt the same way. Also to show that there's no shame in asking for help. There's hope, and you can get better.

I also want those who have an addict in their lives—family, friend, student, etc.—to understand the inner world of an addict, to know what's going on in their minds and hearts. I want to give people a foundation for empathy. Next time you see an addict, maybe you won't condemn or recoil from them, but reach out with love and support.

## **DO YOU FEEL THAT THE ADULTS IN YOUR LIFE FAILED YOU BY NOT BEING THERE FOR YOU AS A CHILD?**

I don't find it helpful to blame anyone. I do my best to focus more on gratitude than blame. I believe that the adults in my life did the best that they could with the tools they had at the time, and I have much to be grateful for.

## **WHAT IS YOUR MESSAGE TO PARENTS OR TEACHERS WHO HAVE A CHILD GOING THROUGH ADDICTION, OR ARE TRYING TO PREVENT A CHILD FROM FALLING INTO ADDICTION?**

Although, to our knowledge, we can't prevent all addiction, we still need to make a substantial effort to cultivate a relationship with our children. Whether you have one child or 12, every child needs to feel loved, cherished, and noticed. Fathers, especially, need to learn to show warmth to their children. Too many people I know have fathers that are too rigid and have inordinately high expectations. They don't realize they could save their kid's life with a warm word and a hug.

We can work to instill the confidence in our children that they can turn to us for anything and we won't judge them for it. We can try to do anything in our power so they should know we will always have their backs.

## **WHAT ARE THE RED FLAGS FOR PARENTS TO WATCH**

## **OUT FOR? WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF ADDICTION?**

There is no magic trick to ensuring that your child will not abuse drugs or alcohol, or become an addict. Nor is there a foolproof way to predict or recognize addiction or abuse. Open, honest and loving communication, however, go a long way toward maintaining a healthy relationship with your child so that if problems do arise, you can address them before it's too late.

Red flags? The full answer is this, from thefix.com:

### **Behavioral Changes**

- Has changed relationships with family members or friends
- Uses chewing gum or mints to cover up breath
- Often uses over-the-counter preparations to reduce eye reddening or nasal irritation
- Frequently breaks curfew
- Has cash flow problems
- Drives recklessly, and has car accidents or unexplained dents in the car
- Avoids eye contact
- Locks doors
- Goes out every night
- Makes secretive phone calls
- Makes endless excuses
- Has the "munchies" or sudden appetite
- Exhibits uncharacteristically loud, obnoxious behavior
- Laughs at nothing
- Has become unusually clumsy: stumbling, lacking coordination, poor balance
- Disappears for long periods of time
- Has periods of sleeplessness or high energy, followed by long periods of catching up on sleep

### **Mood & Personality Shifts**

- Exhibits mood changes or emotional instability
- Sullen, withdrawn, depressed
- Shows loss of inhibitions
- Silent, uncommunicative
- Hostile, angry, uncooperative
- Deceitful or secretive
- Less motivated
- Unable to focus
- Hyperactive
- Unusually elated



## Q&A WITH MOISHE CHANIN

### Hygiene & Appearance Problems

- Smell of smoke or other unusual smells on breath or on clothes
- Messy appearance
- Poor hygiene
- Red, flushed cheeks or face
- Track marks on arms or legs (or long sleeves in warm weather to hide marks)
- Burns or soot on fingers or lips (from “joints” or “roaches” burning down)

### Health Issues

- Unusually tired
- Lethargic movement
- Unable to speak intelligibly, slurred speech, or rapid-fire speech
- Nosebleeds
- Runny nose, not caused by allergies or a cold
- Frequent sickness
- Sores, spots around mouth
- Seizures
- Vomiting
- Wetting lips or excessive thirst (known as “cotton mouth”)
- Sudden or dramatic weight loss or gain
- Skin abrasions/bruises
- Accidents or injuries
- Depression
- Headaches
- Sweatiness

### School and Work Concerns

- Absenteeism or loss of interest
- Loss of interest in extracurricular activities, hobbies or sports
- Failure to fulfill responsibilities at school or work
- Complaints from teachers or supervisors
- Reports of intoxication at school or work

### At Home and in the Car

- Disappearance of prescription or over-the-counter pills
- Missing alcohol or cigarettes
- Disappearance of money or valuables
- Receiving unusual packages in the mail
- Smell in the car or bottles, pipes or bongs on

floor or in glove box

- Appearance of unusual containers or wrappers, or seeds left on surfaces used to clean marijuana
- Appearance of unusual drug apparatuses, including pipes, rolling papers, small medicine bottles, eye drops, butane lighters, or makeshift smoking devices, like bongs made out of toilet paper rolls and aluminum foil
- Hidden stashes of alcohol

### YOU WROTE, “THE OLDER BACHUR NEXT TO ME WAS IMPRESSED, WHICH MADE ME FEEL POWERFUL, SO I CONTINUED DRINKING UNTIL I WOBBLED HOME AND CRASHED.” WHAT CAN OLDER BACHURIM DO WHEN THEY SEE A YOUNGER BOY DRINKING HEAVILY?

Be aware that a young boy (or adult) who drinks excessively like that is likely hurting inside. On the contrary, instead of being impressed, act. Reach out to those who have an influence on him and to a professional so that you can help him.

### WHERE CAN ADDICTS (OR PEOPLE LIVING WITH AN ADDICT) TURN (BESIDES TO YOU)?

Below is a partial list only. *B”H*, there are many more organizations that help *frum* addicts.

[Neshamos.org](http://Neshamos.org) (646) 580-9842

[tlrny.org](http://tlrny.org)

[thelivingroom1860@gmail.com](mailto:thelivingroom1860@gmail.com)

[aa.org](http://aa.org) (212) 870-3400

[Amudim.org](http://Amudim.org) (646) 517-0222

### DID YOU READ ANYTHING THAT HELPED YOU THAT YOU CAN RECOMMEND TO NCN READERS?

Yes! I recommend the book *God of Our Understanding: Jewish Spirituality and Recovery from Addiction*, by Rabbi Shais Taub. *God of Our Understanding* was the first book I read in recovery. I took it with me through the psych ward and rehab and read every word with a highlighter. I basically highlighted the whole book. Do read it. 📖

