



# OVERCOMING STIGMA

**Tova Feinman**

*I stood by the grey painted elevators staring at the up button. Ten years of hard, painstaking, emotional work had culminated in this moment. On the 10<sup>th</sup> floor was a research team prepared to grill me for my first professional position in a decade. Was I ready? I knew my stuff. The science, the statistical models, the literature, I had it all nailed down. However, facing six people in a team interview? Hashem, please help me.*

## **THE ELEVATOR DOORS OPENED**

at the receptionist's office. With pride I introduced myself, "I'm Tova Feinman, and I'm here for an interview with Dr. M." I was told to take a seat. I took inventory of myself. Long black skirt, check, long sleeved high neck pink blouse, check, black stockings and professional shoes, check again. Notepad, check. Yep, I was in one piece. Dr. M. came to the waiting area, greeted me cordially, and escorted me to the conference room where my interview would take place. Six questioners and lonely little me. *Turn it over to Hashem*, I prayed silently.

It began. Testing my research knowledge and grilling me about statistical analysis kept my brain leapfrogging. Questions about my last job. After two hours of interrogation, Dr. M. seemed satisfied, smiled, and said I'd be hearing something in about a week. It was all over except the waiting.

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What made this job interview special? It was the first professional interview I had had in a decade. What did I do in that decade? I battled a brutal mental illness that nearly took my life and cost me my freedom. This moment, even if I didn't get the job, was one to be savored. I had climbed from the depth of illness and trauma and reached...normal.

The call came a week later. The job was mine. My first phone call was to my psychiatrist. This was as much his victory as mine. Then the what ifs started to strangle me. Yes, I got this far. True, I hadn't had an admission in seven years and I was really high-functioning. However, I still had bipolar disorder and PTSD. That truth was never going to go away. They were fused into my DNA. They were as much a part of me as being Jewish or having brown eyes. I had long since made the decision to keep my diagnoses private. Potential employers did not need to know about my demons. They just needed to know I could do statistical analysis.

The months passed smoothly. I earned a reputation for being knowledgeable and competent. I didn't realize it, but I was slowly being moved to more and more responsible tasks. My supervisor said, "We aren't going to keep you in the safety analysis dungeon forever. We have plans for you." Months became years. I stayed stable, silent, and productive on the job. Then four years into my employment, relapse happened.

I showed up in my psychiatrist's office on a July day in white shorts, a hot pink tank top, and sandals. Not exactly *tznius* attire. I was trying to convince him that I had discovered the cure to the Ebola virus using the contents of my spice rack. I told him my all-night efforts were being sabotaged by creatures who came from another universe and had wormed a portal into my dining room where I was conducting my research. He listened silently as I paced and rambled, jumping from subject to subject but always returning to the intergalactic forces. He looked at me intently and said, "Tova, we have a problem."

He admitted me to a psychiatric hospital that afternoon. I had to call HR while manic

and psychotic. Work needed to know I was not going to be in for at least several weeks. The director was kind and took down the needed information to arrange sick time and short-term disability. I spent eight weeks inpatient. It was brutal. I had to be restrained, sedated, and heavily medicated. This relapse was powerfully destructive and took several months to resolve. However, it did resolve. My psychiatrist discharged me and gave me permission to return to work. I had recovered, a bit shaken, but essentially the same person I was before the relapse. I was knowledgeable, capable, and experienced at my job. I was the same person who had been promised the promotion. I wasn't concerned.

But I should have been concerned. Word had somehow gotten out about my illness without my knowledge. When I returned to work, subtle changes had taken place. The camaraderie was gone. People were formal with me. My supervisor was curt and abrupt. No one welcomed me back or asked how I was. *Weird*, I thought. Then the hostility ratcheted up. Projects were taken from me. New assignments were not given. I'd walk into the lunch room and people would stop talking. They just stared at each other. At our weekly staff meetings, my opinions were either belittled or discounted all together. That had never happened before. I was always an integral part of all discussions. Finally, a coworker I was friendly with told me to watch my back; it seems there were instructions to not have conversations with me that weren't directly work-related. Then I had reason to believe my computer had been searched. My internet use had been scrutinized. My document files had been scanned. It was a slow turning up of the pressure.

I talked at great length with my psychiatrist about the changes. He told me to go to HR and voice my concerns. So, I did. The HR director was stiff and formal, not in keeping with our previous four-year relationship. After listening to me and playing with paperwork, the director told me, "Be grateful you have a job. No one else would want you." I could feel the tears well up and my throat close. I stayed calm, though.

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I asked for a Family and Medical Leave Act form (FMLA). FMLA is a federal law that prevents people with disabilities or serious illnesses from losing their jobs if they need to take time off for treatment. I was handed the document. It would be my only protection from being fired.

I did everything to hold on to this position against mounting and overwhelming odds. I literally would go into work only having a few hours of tasks to do and no human being to talk to. I was being isolated. I suspected their plan. Put enough pressure on me that I would quit and they wouldn't have to pay unemployment. I wasn't going to give them that satisfaction. I was determined to outlast them.

After three years of this stalemate, I finally cracked. I had developed breast cancer at the same time and could not fight two battles.

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I went into my psychiatrist's office one afternoon, curled up on his floor and rocked, sobbing hysterically. I had reached a point where the pressure I was under had become trauma and I was having PTSD reactions because of my employment. I would have trauma reactions when I saw my highway exit driving to work and even when I heard the clickety-click of my supervisor's shoes coming down the hall. My psychiatrist was gentle. "Tova," he said, "this situation is not sustainable. You need to leave."

I knew he was right. I also knew it was stigma that was driving me out. I wasn't being driven out of my job because I was incompetent or had made some lethal mistake. I wasn't even being driven out by my cancer. I was being driven out by stigma because I had bipolar 1

disorder and had gotten treatment. It's very hard to prove, legally, discrimination based on disability and I wasn't strong enough for a big legal fight. I negotiated out of the stalemate, leaving work with some of my dignity intact. It was the only way to save myself.

I learned from this experience that stigma is alive and well when one is living with mental illness. It ruined my science career. However, it opened up a new avenue for me, fighting stigma by taking mental illness out of the closet and humanizing it. I write about navigating life with a mental illness. I've written a book about navigating treatment, parenting, and soon I will write a book about navigating stigma. It's my mission to reveal the effects of mental illness in all its facets and take it out of the closet and onto people's dining room tables.

Yes, stigma ruined my science career, but it opened a new door, writing about it so others know their struggles matter. I can't say I'm grateful for the work experience, because it was humiliating. However, I recognize that it was a process I needed to go through. It led me to my ultimate purpose...writing about my life's experiences with mental illness to blaze a trail for others.

I am profoundly honored that the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* has welcomed my articles on living with a mental illness. The subject I write about deeply affects many people in very different ways. Sometimes this makes an article difficult for a reader to take in. It is a gift to me that the *NCN* has had the courage to print my work. On a personal note, Rische Deitsch has been an amazing literary and personal support with every article challenge. I am humbled to call her not only my editor but also my friend. ❧

*Tova Feinman has the soul of a writer and the training of a scientist. As a scientist, she has been involved her entire professional*



career in biomedical research, making use of her expertise in chemistry, biochemistry and toxicology. As an author, her first book, *Teacup in a Storm: Finding my Psychiatrist*, describes the development of the clinical bond between her and her psychiatrist, Dr. Yaakov Guterson, a bond that transformed Tova's life and taught Dr. Guterson valuable lessons about treating gravely ill patients. Tova also has a newly released book, *I'll Be Right Back: Parenting While Mentally Ill*, where she

describes the depths and heights of parenting while mentally ill. She starts with her first tears of postpartum depression and concludes with her tears of joy at her daughter's graduation from

high school. Tova also has many published essays, including the following: "Manic at 16": *Mental Health Talk*; "Mania, a Hat, A 55-lb Rabbit and Dr. Rosen": *Mental Health Writers Guild*; "Faith and Academia Unmask a Psychotic Bipolar Depression": *OC87 Recovery Diaries*; "Descent for the Purpose of Ascent—Ones Woman's Journey Out of Darkness": *N'shei Chabad Newsletter Shvat (Feb.) 2019* and [nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives](http://nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives); "Message to Chana: Empowerment Vanquished Shame": *N'shei Chabad Newsletter Tishrei (Sept.) 2019* and [nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives](http://nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives); "Stigma": *N'shei Chabad Newsletter April 2020* and [nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives](http://nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives); "Thinking about Dumping Your Psychiatrist? You Might Not Need To": *Psych Central Author Blog*; "Thinking About Dumping Your Psychiatrist? Examine Your Expectations": *Psych Central Author Blog*, "Thinking About Dumping Your Psychiatrist? Keys to Resolving Conflict": *Psych Central Author Blog*

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