

THE Jewish OBSERVER

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*The New Ideology
in Health Care*

and **HOW TO
SURVIVE IT**



CONFRONTING THE DANGERS OF THE INTERNET
REVISITED



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The New Ideology in Health Care... AND HOW TO SURVIVE IT

An elderly man with health problems was admitted to a major teaching hospital. His son was shocked to find that a DNR (do not resuscitate) order had been entered on his father's medical chart. In response to the son's inquiry, the attending physician said that the patient had told the doctor that he wanted a DNR order. The son insisted that his father, being an Orthodox Jew, would want to be resuscitated if his life were in danger. Neither the son nor the doctor had anything in writing from the patient, who was now incapable of communicating his desires. The son managed to get his father's care transferred to another physician, who removed the DNR order and treated the patient. The father recovered, and had no recollection of any DNR conversation with a doctor.

An elderly woman was found unconscious and rushed to the hospital. The examining doctor told the woman's daughter that her mother was close to death,

that very little could be done to save her, and that the best case scenario was that the woman would survive as "a vegetable," so there was no reason to put her on life support. At the Rav's instructions, the daughter insisted that her mother be put on a ventilator. The woman revived, walked by herself out of the hospital two days later, and went on to live another four years.

THE NEW IDEOLOGY

These two true stories, recounted by Rabbi Reuven Drucker of the Agudath Israel of Highland Park at a roundtable discussion at the recent Agudath Israel of America convention, highlight a growing danger facing observant Jews in health care facilities across the country. While many people were shocked recently at how doctors and judges sought to aid and abet the demise of Terri Schiavo, a brain-damaged woman in Florida whose husband sought to end her life by depriving her of food and water, the reality is that the thinking that motivated those medical and legal experts has made major

inroads in medical schools and hospitals across the country.

The new thinking in medical circles, often expressed in terms of the need to "ration resources," essentially seeks to justify letting patients die solely on the basis of the doctor's personal view that a patient's "quality of life" is so diminished as to no longer be a life worth living. Dr. David Hoffman, a medical oncologist who serves as Assistant Professor at Albert Einstein Medical Center and attending physician at Einstein Montefiore Medical Center—and is thus well-placed to know how doctors and residents view end-of-life issues—reported at the Agudah convention that many residents and younger doctors now openly advocate this new approach. Dr. Hoffman added that many hospitals have already adopted actual guidelines defining quality of life that govern when to intervene and when not to, and that medical schools are teaching this material to doctors-to-be. Concludes Dr. Hoffman, "These disturbing trends... have made and will make more inroads into our medical... practice."

Rabbi Biser, Esq. is Associate General Counsel of Agudath Israel of America. His article, "Shalom Bayis. The Need for Formal *Hadracha*," appeared in *JO*, June '01.

BEHIND THE NEW THINKING

One of the major forces driving the new ideology is economics. As explained at the Agudah convention roundtable by Betzalel Stern, a Managing Partner at Strategic Healthcare Solutions and former Chief Financial Officer at Maimonides Medical Center, most hospitals get a substantial percentage of their funding from government, which pays “per stay” and not per day, with strict constraints on the length of each stay based on the patient’s diagnosis and treatment. “Discharge planners” at hospitals thus subtly, if not directly, influence health care decisions, not only about when to discharge patients, but if and when to withdraw life support, nutrition, and hydration.

But economics alone does not explain the widespread acceptance of the view that it is legitimate for doctors to seek, by inaction or action, to hasten a patient’s death. That position is the product of a culture that has largely abandoned the religious worldview of previous generations. If one believes on some level that the ultimate purpose of life is merely to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, that true happiness is dependent on physical comfort or at least physical activity, and that a person’s intrinsic worth is measured by his economic and social productivity, then the new medical thinking follows logically. There is no good reason, in this view, for a person in pain with a terminal illness, or permanently confined to a hospital bed and connected to machines that help him breathe, or in an “irreversible” coma, or indeed anyone who will never again be able to put in a day at the office or even a few hours on the golf course, to continue to live.

The next step, one fears, is that death itself will, in effect, be medically and legally redefined so as to rationalize further steps to cut short the lives of the elderly and disabled. Some respected medical experts, albeit still a minority voice in their profession, have publicly called for a move in this direction. Noting that many organs will no longer be in prop-

er condition for transplant purposes if doctors have to wait for a patient’s heart to stop beating, Drs. Robert Troug and Walter Robinson of Harvard Medical School propose allowing doctors to remove organs from patients “who are either neurologically devastated or imminently dying.” Writing in *Critical Care Medicine*, 2003, Troug and Robinson attempt to justify their homicidal proposal by claiming that we already take the organs of those declared brain dead, which, they admit, is a highly questionable definition of death.¹

In short, as Wesley J. Smith, lawyer for

THE TORAH PERSPECTIVE

Where do we, as Torah Jews, stand on this issue? The arguments that what matters is “quality of life” and that people are entitled to “death with dignity” can sound compassionate, ethical, and at times compelling. To take the extreme case, why maintain the “vegetable” existence (a highly objectionable word which itself dehumanizes a person) of someone in an irreversible coma?

For one thing, as pointed out in the introduction to this article, the doctors

It is not for family members or doctors to decide that a patient has “suffered enough,” and therefore should not receive medical treatment.

the International Task Force on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide, observes in his book *The Culture of Death*, “[T]he attitude that it is better to die than to live cognitively disabled has triumphed so completely in our medical culture that some doctors now report a rush to write off newly unconscious patients as disposable, and consign them to death by cutting off life support before they have a chance to recover.” We have heard reports of pressure from hospital bureaucrats to have elderly patients sign “do not resuscitate” (DNR) orders when they are admitted, thus giving their doctors free legal reign to let them die. It is therefore not alarmist to state that the lives of elderly and disabled patients are at risk in many health care facilities today.

¹ Indeed, Troug and Robinson’s analysis of brain death provides medical support for the position taken by leading *poskim* that brain death is not a halachically acceptable definition of death. See also Gary Greenberg, “As Good as Dead: Is There Really Such a Thing as Brain Death?” *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2001.

are occasionally wrong. Medical technology is far from infallible, and all the more fallible are the technicians and physicians who attempt to make definitive predictions and diagnoses. That there are people walking around today who were once diagnosed as about to die or in an irreversible coma should give pause to anyone contemplating “pulling the plug” on a life support system.

More importantly, even where there is no likelihood that the person will fully recover, we believe deeply that there is value to every precious moment of human life, conscious or unconscious, a value that cannot be perceived, let alone understood, by the world of modern medicine. As my colleague Rabbi Avi Shafran has written,

Suicide is regarded by Jewish law as a sin, and “pulling the plug” of a patient on life-support machinery, even where natural death is imminent, is considered the taking of a life. All the Torah’s laws, with the exception only of the

three cardinal laws (idolatry, sexual immorality and murder), are put aside when life – even for a limited period – is in the balance.

Whence comes Judaism's exquisite valuation of even momentary human life? A likely reason lies in a recognition pondered by far too few, and far too infrequently.... Ours is a culture, after all, where human worth is often measured by intellectual prowess or mercantile skills – even by things like youth or physical beauty, or the capacity to convincingly impersonate a real or fictional character, or to strongly and accurately hit, kick or throw a ball.

The too-little-pondered recognition is that the true value of men and women lies elsewhere entirely, in men's and women's potential to do good things – to prepare, in fact, for an existence beyond the one we know. When that idea – self-evident to some, challenging to others – is internalized, a very different sensibility emerges. And among the perceptions it affords is that there is immeasurable value in human life itself – even in its minutes and seconds, and even when it is fettered by infirmity, immobility or depression.

Basketball or dancing may no longer be options in the confines of a hospital bed, and even tending to one's most basic physical needs may be impossible without help. But are acts there of sheer will – like forgiveness, repentance, acceptance, commitment, love, or prayer – any harder to accomplish, or any less meaningful? Are they compromised in any way by tangles of

There are a number of things that one can do to protect one's parents and oneself...

tubes and monitors?

Not even lack of consciousness, at least as medically defined, need hinder what humanly matters most. We choose to take electronic brain activity as evidence of being meaningfully conscious, of the ability to think and choose, and then proceed to conclude that in the absence of such evidence, those abilities must no longer exist – without a thought (at least a conscious one) of the immense tautology we have embraced.² We do not know, cannot know, when a human being is truly incapacitated – when his or her soul has been released. Only when a heart has stopped beating can we be certain that life in its truest sense has ended. And so hastening or abetting the death of even a physically or emotionally compromised human being is no less an abortion of meaningful life than gunning down a healthy one.

In this regard, Rabbi J. David Bleich writes of visiting an elderly relative in critical condition and in a coma on an *Erev Shabbos*. He examined the patient's medical chart and saw that his relative was not being treated aggressively. The attending physician informed him that this was because the doctors were unanimous in their opinion that the patient's condition was terminal, and they saw no point in trying to prolong her life. Rabbi Bleich insisted as a matter of *halacha* that she be administered the appropriate medication. When he returned on *Shabbos* afternoon to the hospital, he was told that the patient remained totally unresponsive. He nonetheless went to her hospital bed and greeted her with a loud "*Gut Shabbos*." Her eyebrows flickered, and she quietly responded "*Gut Shabbos*." Rabbi Bleich recounts that at that moment there flashed in his mind the comment of Rabbi Akiva Eiger (*Orach Chayim* 271:1) that even the simple, standard *Shabbos* greeting expressed by one Jew to another constitutes a fulfillment of the *mitzva* of *Zachor es Yom HaShabbos le'kadsho*. "At that moment I realized not only intellectually, but also emotionally, that every moment of life is of inestimable value. Here was a dramatic unfolding of the lesson that every moment of life carries with it the opportunity for the performance of yet one more *mitzva*."³

For the family and friends of the patient, there is also profound value in prolonging life that can't be measured or even fully described except by those living through the experience. "I felt so close to my mother when I visited her in the hospital in the days after the doc-

² Studies of those deemed to be in "persistent vegetative states" have discovered significant mental activity and levels of conscious thought and action. See Carl Zimmer, "What if There is Something Going On in There?", *New York Times Magazine*, September 28, 2003, which reports that "a vast number of people who might once have been considered vegetative actually have hidden reserves of mental activity."

³ J. David Bleich, "The Quinlan Case: A Jewish Perspective," *Jewish Life*, Winter 1976.

⁴ Rabbi Becker adds that his mother lived close to two years at home unaided, after doctors said she would no longer have any cognitive functioning.

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tors counseled us to give up hope,” says my colleague Rabbi Labish Becker. “Every moment with her was truly precious. Our older children got to know their Bubby better, and have memories that our youngest will unfortunately never have.”⁴ Prolonging life also enables family members to come to terms with the impending death of a loved one in a way that is often forestalled if the discharge planners get their way. As a man whose mother-in-law was in a coma wrote me, because of Agudath Israel (which intervened to prevent the patient from being transferred to a hospice far from her daughter’s home) “my wife was able to run to [the hospital], hold her mother’s hand, tell her ‘Good Shabbos,’ and then at the end of her visit, hug her mother and tell her that if she had to go, she could, at which point my wife said ‘Shema’ with her mother, cried, and kissed her goodbye.”

Fundamentally, we take quite a different view than the thinking now prevalent in the secular world. As Rabbi Drucker explained, the true nature of the conflict between the Orthodox Jewish outlook on health care and the secular outlook is that the secular world views “personal autonomy” as an ultimate value, and thus holds that an individual should have the right to determine whether to receive medical treatment and what that treatment should consist of. We, on the other hand, believe that *ein lanu reshus al atzmeinu*—we do not have authority over our very own bodies. A Jew may not give another permission to harm him physically⁵ because he is not the ‘baal habayis’ over his own body; our Creator is. Therefore, we are commanded to follow the Torah’s commands, as expressed in the *p’sak* of a Rav, regarding health care decisions that affect us.

Indeed, it is crucial to emphasize that family members dealing with the type of health care issues raised in this article should consult with a *poseik* experi-

⁵ See *Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 420:31; *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Chovel u’Mazik* 5:1; *Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Hilchos Nizkei HaGuf*, 4 (A person does not have the authority over his own body to strike it, embarrass it, cause any pain to it, or even to withhold food and drink from it.)

enced in these matters. There *are* circumstances where a *poseik* may determine that a particular course of medical treatment is not required or not advisable, such as where the risks of the procedure are high, or even in some cases where the patient is in intractable pain. But these are decisions that must be made by a Rav on a case-by-case basis. It is not for family members or doctors to decide that a patient has “suffered enough,” and therefore should not receive medical treatment.

HOW TO SURVIVE

How, given the new health care ideology, can we best protect our parents, our relatives, ourselves? How do we ensure that *halacha*, and not a doctor’s view of what constitutes “a life worth living,” will determine the course of medical treatment for people no longer in a position to speak for themselves?

1. Obtain and sign a Halachic Living Will
Dr. Binyomin Sokol, Associate

Simcha Guidelines

THE VORT

- The Vort celebration is to be discontinued. The *L’chaim* (held at the time that the engagement is announced) should also not turn into a Vort.

THE WEDDING

- Only 400 invited guests may be seated at the *chassuna seuda*.
- The *kabbolas panim* smorgasbord should be limited to basic cakes, fruit platters, a modest buffet, and the caterer’s standard chicken or meat hot dishes.

- The menu for the *seuda* is limited to 3 courses followed by a regular dessert.
- No Viennese table and no bar.

THE MUSIC

- A band may consist of a maximum of 5 musicians (one of the musicians may act as a vocalist) or four musicians and one additional vocalist.
- A one-man band is recommended.

FLOWERS & CHUPA DECOR

- The total cost of these items for the entire wedding should not exceed \$1,800.

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Professor of Medicine at Chicago Medical School and Member of the Ethics Committee at Mount Sinai Hospital in Chicago, stated at the convention roundtable that the first step for all prospective patients (which is all of us⁶) is to contact Agudath Israel of America (212-797-9000) to obtain and complete an Agudath Israel Halachic Living Will. Dr. Sokol added, "It literally can and has saved lives."

What is the Halachic Living Will and how does it work? This legally binding document enables an individual to designate an agent to make health care decisions, should the signer become unable to make or communicate his own wishes. The Halachic Living Will stipulates that all health care decisions are to be made in accordance with *halacha*, to be determined in consultation with the Orthodox rabbi designated in the document. The basic text of the Halachic Living Will was reviewed and approved by leading *poskim*, and newly updated and revised Halachic Living Wills are now available for many states. As Jonathan Rikoon, Esq., a partner in the Trusts and Estates Department in the New York law firm of Debevoise & Plimpton, who helped develop the Agudath Israel Halachic Living Will, emphasized at the convention roundtable, the Halachic Living Will "is intended to be a legally binding document that doctors and hospitals must respect. No Orthodox Jew should be without one."

Rabbinic authorities – among them Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, Novominsker Rebbe and Rosh Agudath Israel – concur that obtaining and signing a Halachic Living Will is a vital requirement.

2. Pick doctors who will respect and carry out your wishes.

In addition to executing a Halachic Living Will, Mr. Rikoon advises individuals to take steps now to ensure that they and their loved ones will receive the medical care and treatment that is needed by choosing physicians and health care facilities that will be responsive to their wishes. There are many good

doctors who don't subscribe to the new medical ideology, and who will vigorously strive to preserve and prolong their patients' lives.

3. Make sure you have an advocate.

Betzalel Stern, cited earlier, says that it is vital in this new environment for family members to be the patient's vigorous advocate. The reality, says Mr. Stern, is that "patients [who]... have family members [who]... are not available do not get the same kind of treatment in institutions as patients whose advocates are available." This is true not only for patients who cannot speak for themselves, but for everyone who is admitted to a medical facility. It is thus wise to designate as health care proxy in the Halachic Living Will someone who will vigorously and aggressively act to ensure that the patient's wishes are carried out—not someone who will be easily swayed by pronouncements from anyone in a hospital wearing a white jacket. Mr. Stern adds that it is important for family members of a patient to consult with many advisors (rabbi, lawyer, other doctors) rather than on relying on one doctor's diagnosis and suggested course of treatment.⁷

4. Stay on good terms with siblings and relatives.

Aside from the general Torah obligation of loving one's brothers, there is yet an additional reason to strive to remain on good terms with siblings: otherwise, disputes over a parent's health care can arise. This is especially important where

⁶ In almost all states, anyone 18 years old or older can make a valid Halachic Living Will. No one likes to think about it, but incapacitating accidents and illnesses can happen to anyone at anytime, and therefore no one should take the approach of "I'll wait until I'm old" to obtain and sign a Halachic Living Will.

⁷ For example, at Agudath Israel we occasionally receive calls from distraught relatives that doctors are about to remove a patient declared brain dead from life support systems. Despite the hospital administrator's usual initial insistence that nothing legally can be done to stop this, in each case in New York State that has come to our attention, we have been able to persuade the hospital's legal counsel to order that life support be maintained until the patient's heart stopped beating.

the person named as health care proxy is not necessarily sensitive to halachic concerns, as well as in cases where there is no health care proxy and one's siblings are not religiously observant.

In one case in which Agudath Israel was consulted, an elderly man living in Ohio⁸ was diagnosed as having Alzheimer's. His non-religious daughter felt that he would not have wanted to live in such a condition, and planned to "let him die" by not providing him with nutrition and hydration. His Orthodox daughter contacted us for help. What made this situation difficult was that the man had signed a standard living will, which stated that he did not wish his life prolonged if he became terminally ill. We helped find an attorney for the Orthodox daughter, and put the lawyer in touch with a doctor recommended to us by the Alzheimer's Association. The doctor was prepared to testify that Alzheimer's is not by itself a terminal illness, and therefore the living will was not yet legally in effect. The lawyer was able to get an emergency injunction preventing the withdrawal of food and

water. The patient continued to live until the time chosen by the *Ribbono Shel Olam* for him to leave this world, rather than dying of dehydration earlier.⁹

In this and many similar situations, the dispute could possibly have been avoided had the observant child taken steps earlier to have himself or herself appointed the health care proxy. Non-Orthodox parents who might be reluctant to sign a Halachic Living Will might be more amenable to a standard health care proxy that names the Orthodox child as proxy. Failing that, building and maintaining a better relationship between siblings, in addition to fulfilling a vital *mitzva* in its own right, can go a long way toward preventing these type of disputes. Even in situations where relations are strained, Rabbi Shmuel Elchonon Brog of Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin suggests

⁸ Some facts have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

⁹ In a similar case, an elderly woman in Florida had designated her son to be her health care proxy. When she took ill, he thought she would want to be removed from life support systems. The woman's daughter contacted Agudath Israel. We

that a genial postcard or at least an e-mail once every week from the more observant sibling can have a tremendous impact on improving such relationships.

VENISHMARTEM ME'OD
LENAFSHOSEICHEM

The bottom line is that despite the new ideology in health care, there are a number of things that one can do to protect one's parents and oneself long before anyone enters a medical facility. Our Torah commands us to guard and protect our health, and taking the steps outlined above are now part of the way we need to fulfill this *mitzva*. Living in a society in moral freefall, which increasingly devalues life and seeks to hasten death, we can and must do everything within our power to embrace life. ■

immediately put her in touch with Florida attorney Spencer Eig, Chairman of the Agudath Israel Commission on Civic Action and Legislation of South Florida, and a member of the Agudath Israel legal network, who together with his law partner managed to get an immediate court order protecting the woman's life.



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Confronting the Dangers of the Internet

– Revisited

The November issue of *The Jewish Observer*, dealing with “Confronting the Dangers of the Internet,” generated an unusual flow of letters – critical and complimentary, confirming the message, yet challenging our treatment of the problem, some praising the medium for its public discussion of the issue, others denouncing it for its detailing of the

harmful repercussions of the Internet. Some representative letters follow in the pages ahead.

In addition to the letters, a number of articles were submitted expanding on what had already appeared in the November issue. Several have been selected for publication because of the different perspectives or additional

information they offer. We are grouping the letters and articles according to topic.

I. Reactions and Responses

II. From the Mouths and Pens of Our Children

III. Over Our Shoulder... And Two Steps Ahead / Looking Back, Anticipating The Future

I. Reactions and Responses



REACTION TO JO ON THE INTERNET: AN ENIGMA

To the Editor:

I cannot begin to tell you how much you have accomplished with your November issue of *The Jewish Observer* containing several articles on the Internet. I must admit, however, that I still have an enigma (“Perplexing, baffling or seemingly inexplicable matter, etc” – Webster’s Dictionary).

Recently, 82 principals of girls’

schools throughout North America undersigned an “Open Letter to all Bais Yaakov Parents,” which outlined, among other concerns, the dangers of the Internet in the home. The letter carefully described the harm the Internet inevitably causes to *hashkafa*, *tzenius*, *arayos*, and how it endangers, with the simple click of the mouse, our entire Torah lifestyle.

To our utter surprise, some educators refused to participate in this letter, even though it was endorsed by the Board of Roshei Yeshivos of Torah Umesorah and was published in *The Jewish Observer* and *The Yated*. These educators felt that the letter was too strong.

The first enigma to be faced is that we teach *emunas chachamim*, the principle of listening to the *gedolei doreinu*, and yet, find hair-splitting and tortured reasons *not* to listen to our *chachamim*

when it comes to allowing the Internet in our homes.

A well-known Chassidic Rav and *Dayan*, speaking from the pulpit, stated how he was *mesader* four *gittin* (officiated over four divorces) over a short span of time due to the infidelity of one of the partners, either husband or wife; this situation was brought about directly by contacts established over the Internet. Why didn’t the entire community ‘*shry chai ve kayom*’ and immediately remove the Internet from their homes? An enigma.

At a recent Torah Umesorah Convention, the Telshe Rosh Yeshiva of Chicago, Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Levine שליט”א, quoted the Novominsker Rebbe שליט”א, Rosh Agudas Yisroel, as saying, “We should put an *issur yichud* (forbid isolation with a person or object) on the Internet in our businesses.” Despite this

clear instruction, many of us provide Internet access in our homes for our children to use right under our very own noses. Is this not an enigma?

A U.S. senator recently demonstrated how after typing in a certain single word, 110,000 web sites dealing with pornography and depravity will pop up onto the screen. It has also been shown that a single typographical error made on some web addresses can unwittingly open a pornographic minefield. Is this not an enigma? A U.S. senator must give *Bnei Avraham*, *Yitzchak* and *Yaakov*

hadracha and *mussar* (guidance and reproof) on the basics of our beliefs!

The Philadelphia Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetsky שליט"א, told me he has first-hand knowledge of a family destroyed by the insidious effects of the Internet. Yet, I was asked by a great *talmid chacham*, "How can we *asser* (prohibit) the Internet in the home when so many *talmidei chachamim* have it in their own homes?" Is anyone able to explain this enigma?

Everyone knows that to *asser* everything is a simplistic and futile response,

since few will listen to blanket "no's." As educators, we believe that change is best effected through a positive approach using warmth, *chizuk* and reinforcement, not radical and harsh measures, which may alienate. Yet, in the face of such peril, how can one respond in a pleasant manner? One does not wish to react in a way that is so shocking and vehement that it appears to verge on hysteria. We know people will not easily be receptive in this negative atmosphere; yet how can one hold oneself back in our fearful situation? An enigma.

A girls' school recently reported an incident in which a few high school freshmen chatting with each other on Instant Messenger were joined on-line by some of their brothers. This led to a date for one of the girls, and a completely new lifestyle change for her. When all the sets of parents were called in to discuss the seriousness of the problem, a few still insisted on keeping the Internet in their homes with excuses to justify their actions that didn't hold water.

Some of the schools that joined the group of principals in signing the "Open Letter" are still not able to stop their secular teachers from assigning homework requiring Internet use, despite the clear, implicit dangers involved. An elementary school attached to a yeshiva posts all of the homework, from all of the teachers (*kodesh* and *chol*) everyday on the Internet. Recently, a mother discovered her eight-year-old child and a neighbor's child on a web site, observing what the Torah calls "an abomination." The mother was shocked beyond words, and was at a loss at how to explain to the children what they were seeing. However, she did not remove the Internet from her home.

It seems that the Internet has taken such a strong hold in our community and is so difficult to eradicate that it can almost be compared to a form of substance abuse. In order to prevent further addiction, we must listen to our *Gedolim* without question. The enigmas detailed here will never be explained, and the problem will not be conquered through education or *seichel* (intelligence). We know that the *yeitzer hara* can't be edu-

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cated. "Ein apotropos le'arayos," and, therefore, the only option is for it to be destroyed.

For us to hope to emerge from this quagmire, we must accept as a *chok* (decree) set by the *Einei Ha'eida*—"Thou shalt not have the Internet in thy home.

There is neither wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against *Hashem*." With the acceptance of this *chok*, we can then move forward knowing that the seemingly insurmountable obstacles in our path can be breached, that the battle is not lost, and that we can conquer the view that the Internet is so essential and pervasive, it cannot be eliminated. Once a foolproof method to eliminate the undesirable material is found, it is hoped that the *Gedolim* will then remove the *issur*.

Not everything one thinks should one say; not everything one says should one write; not everything one writes should one publish (attributed to Rav Yisroel Salanter). This wisdom certainly applies to our subject. We can, however, think, say, write and publish a message consistent with the adage: "Listen to our *Gedolim*." After all, the Talmud advises us: "If youths tell you 'build,' and elders tell you 'demolish,' listen to the elders and do not listen to the youths, for the building of youths is destruction and the destruction of elders is building."

RABBI S. AISENSTARK

Principal of Beth Jacob D'Rav Hirschprung
Montreal

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To the Editor:

Your latest issue that featured the Internet use must have been one of the most difficult for you to publish. Four out of five featured articles contained suggestions for reducing risk and for shielding against damage, which is good for those who need this advice. However, I was deeply saddened by the fact that almost every author wrote how important these measures are for *us*. That is, it is "we" who need the information, and not "they" who need it.

I can't imagine the pain and anguish that our dear leadership and your edi-

torial board experienced in this publication, for it reflects a somber recognition of a widespread cancer of destruction within the crown jewel of American Jewry. In a community where so many of us are children of survivors of the physical Holocaust of the 1940s and who survived the spiritual Holocaust of the twentieth century, we sadly witness such a destruction, such a denigration.

The stories that are told by the *Rosehi Yeshiva* and *Rabbanim* are horrific. The rate of devastation is horrific. It is a loss of sanity, responsibility, self-respect. Such despair.

This was a bold and painful step for many. I take your hand in sympathy and sorrow.

Please allow me to provide some constructive insight – perhaps for another issue, if needed.

Given the context, I did not think that it was appropriate for one of the authors to plug a web site in his article, and especially by name. There are other venues for doing this. There are other times for doing this.

I would like to have seen the contribution of someone with credentials of a computer professional, for this person would have addressed the need for password and computer security. Also, none of the authors suggested any tools for coping with e-mail smut.

From the words of this issue, it appears that having Internet for the family is a growing norm. However, I am assured this is not normal. Many resist this temptation. We are thriving, and so are our children.

I share my following thoughts as an additional source of strength:

Look around and take note of the percentage of people who are of marriageable age and who succeed in marrying. *Baruch Hashem*, they are well within the majority. Obviously, the merits that one needs to become married are easily within our reach. There are some exceptions for reasons that we are not privileged to know. May *Hashem* bless us to make it unanimous.

Next, look around and take note of the percentage of people who are married and who succeed in having children. *Baruch Hashem*, they are well within the majority. Obviously, the merits that one needs to become parents are also within reach of most people. There are some exceptions for reasons that we are not privileged to know. May *Hashem* bless us to make it unanimous.

Then, project yourself back in time a hundred generations. I believe that you will find these percentages to be the same for them as they are for us.

And now do something painful. Make the somber mapping between the families in that generation in our distant past

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to their descendants who live with us today. Come up with a statistic for those who have descendants in our generation, and for those who didn't make it.

I believe that you will conclude that the merits that one needs for his/her family to survive and endure through many generations of Jewish history are very elusive. They are not easily within our reach. And there are some exceptions for reasons that we are not privileged to know.

If I had evidence to prove that having the Internet in the family will definitely hurt its chance of survival, then I would tell you. But I don't have any. If I had evidence to prove that keeping the Internet out of the family will definitely increase its chances, then I would tell you. But honestly, I don't have this either. I just know that if this trend repeats itself, that many family lines that exist today will not survive Jewish history over the long term. And I recognize the stress that families are experiencing by blocking out the Internet. And I know that sacrifices are meritorious. And I now that *Hashem* counts every merit.

And if you have the Internet in your

family, then I provide you with the following opportunity for great merit. Don't talk about it in public, and tell your kids to keep this quiet, too. In doing so, you will make it easier for others in our community to keep the Internet out of their homes.

Do not give up on yourselves. If not today, you will find the strength for repair, *ה"ח* soon.

RABBI TZVI BLACK
Lakewood, NJ

REPRINTS FOR PARENT
BODY OF SCHOOL

To the Editor:

Thank you so much for permitting us to reprint *The Jewish Observer* articles on the misuse of computers and the Internet.

We have warned our parents about the dangers of the Internet and we feel that these excellent articles are very important for them to read. Hopefully they will encourage all parents to increase their vigilance when allowing their children to use computers.

I am enclosing a copy of the cover sheet which states that it is reprinted with permission.

Kol hakavod.

RABBI MOSHE ZWICK
Executive Director
MRS. SHULAMIS GOLDBERG
Associate Principal
MRS. BATYA NEKRITZ
Associate Principal
Shulamith High School, Brooklyn, NY

BREAKTHROUGH IN INFORMATION,
BREACH IN PROTECTIVE BARRIERS

To the Editor:

In the Cheshvan issue of *The Jewish Observer*, a most important issue has been addressed, that of the *gidrei tzenius u'kedusha* (safeguards of modesty and sanctity) being breached.

Although I find all of the information discussed to be correct, both in its content and in its need to be addressed, I do have one major objection to this collection of articles. The fact that it is described in such detail, which is, of course, in order to issue a major wake-

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up call to those who feel it is not harmful, is great cause for distress.

In many Torah homes, *The Jewish Observer* is read by young and old alike. I can only see the reading of these articles by our youth – especially our teenagers – as a cause for those who are being protected to have their curiosity aroused by such detail. This seems to outweigh the benefits of such articles.

I feel that issues of *The Jewish Observer*, such as this one, should possibly carry a warning label, such as “To be read by mature adults ONLY.”

Aside from this, I feel that the JO does a wonderful job at documenting the issues of the day, in a format to which *b'nei Torah* can turn.

YECHAZKEL NUSSBAUM
Spring Valley, NY

EDITORIAL RESPONSE

The articles that appeared in the Internet Section in the November *Jewish Observer* were all reviewed and approved by our rabbinical advisors. The Shulamith School, which wrote the previous letter, is one of a number of yeshivos and day schools that either ordered copies of the November issue or received permission to reproduce copies of the Internet section for distribution to their parent body. N.W.

CONFLICT BETWEEN EDITORIAL MESSAGE AND ADVERTISEMENTS' VALUES

To the Editor:

Your carefully selected detailed articles on the dangers of the Internet left me more than a little confused. You see the same issue of *The Jewish Observer*, which spelled out the destructive powers of the Internet, also containing no less than 8 advertisements which included web site addresses – not counting e-mail addresses. And one of these is a full-page announcement of a convention to improve the quality of outreach (*kiruv*) work!

Your disclaimer that you take no responsibility for the advertisements in your magazine may be legally correct, but

it is inadequate in Jewish terms.

A paper or magazine lends credence to its contents, and anything printed in it will be associated with the general attitude and message of the publication. After all, you have never advertised *treif* foods or mixed dances or any other services that are obviously foreign to Jewish values or practices.

One is left with the very uncomfortable feeling that you either do not quite believe the messages in your articles, or that you lack the confidence to practice what you preach.

Whether an individual business decides to have/use an Internet facility is between them and their *daas Torah*, but their web sites should be excluded from advertisements.

MRS. D. LEITNER
Salford, England

EDITORIAL RESPONSE:

The rabbinical leadership of Agudath Israel has gone on the record, pointing out major moral hazards that exist on the Internet, urging people to exercise caution, adopt safeguards and impose limitations on its usage, as the articles in the November JO had conveyed. They did not, however, issue a blanket prohibition against use of e-mail or the Internet. While neither *The Jewish Observer* nor any other Agudath Israel department maintains a website, we do recognize that many people are dependent on the Internet for their business, professional, and even personal needs, such as purchasing and research. It is for those who do use the Internet that websites are included in paid advertisements. Our rabbinical leadership has not prohibited JO from accepting such advertisements. N.W.

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II. Out of the Mouths of Our Children

The Hazards of the Internet

– as experienced
by our teenagers.

Rabbi Shmuel Gluck



HOW DIFFERENT IS YOUR CHILD?

Discussing the Internet with the intention to “scare” parents is a daunting and often impossible task. Although the objective mind can easily find many valid points that emphasize the risks of the Internet, the points themselves are not a guaranteed deterrent. For a combination of reasons, parents are likely to dismiss my conclusions by responding that “My kid wouldn’t do that, my child is different.” If reasoning is not effective, how can I convey my experiences in a manner that would override the parents’ preconceived opinions of their own child?

I realize that what is really needed is to bring to the public what our children themselves are saying. Parents have some very sensible views, but their views are based on assumptions. These views represent how they believe their children act and react to different situations. My goal is to convey what our teenage boys

Rabbi Gluck is director of Areivim, an organization that offers our youth advice and assistance, with a wide array of support systems. For educational material or for assistance: 845-371-2760 or Areivim@juno.com. His article, “*Shalom Bayis: A View From Your Child’s Eyes*,” was featured in JO Jan. ’02.

and girls are actually thinking.

I therefore sent an e-mail request to about 45 of my teenage friends. My e-mail request said:

I have been asked to speak in a school, to parents, on the subject of the Internet and why it is not a good thing to have in the home. I am looking for some insight on this from the teenage mind. I am also looking for horror stories, but only those that involve kids whose parents are unaware of what is happening.

The reason that I added the last line was to highlight the point that parents think they know their kids, and on a basic level they do. Children, though, like adults, are more complex than they appear. This point brings us to our first misconception.

TO HONOR, TO VIOLATE – OR BOTH?

Parents would like to believe that children live their lives in a morally consistent manner. Let us accept that our sons do learn two hours straight on a *Shabbos* afternoon without prompting. That does not exclude the possibility that they desire to look at things that they are not supposed to be looking at, such as pornography. What

should be mutually exclusive in the world of logic is comfortably intertwined in the practical world of human weakness. Man was created with the ability and a desire to achieve greatness. Man was also created with the ability to sink to the depth of immorality.

I would like to submit that both these urges can be found within each and every one of us. Allow me to explain.

The majority of us perform well when placed in a positive atmosphere. The average teenager will therefore do well in school, behave in *shul*, and integrate well within his or her family. The common threads in these few examples are that these environments support good behavior. Most people do not behave against the system. Peer pressure is one reason, laziness is another, being inherently good is yet another.

This does not exclude that the same person, when in an environment that supports negative behavior, will not enter a chat room. It does not exclude the teenage boy, when alone, from staring at something that popped up on his screen by mistake.

I am not criticizing anyone’s child when I state my belief that they will, when it is accessible, take advantage. I am stat-

ing that they are normal, and react normally by demonstrating the typical lack of self control which almost all of us may have.

Here is the first of the several quotes that I have based my conclusions on.

A young boy writes:

I am a frum yeshiva bachur attending a very strict and a very famous yeshiva. About one-and-a-half years ago, I was eager to look at pornography, but I never had the guts to do that aveira. One day, a kid in my class took me to his house to delete the temporary internet files because he didn't want to get in trouble. As I was erasing them, I was also looking at them and then we went onto websites. And I REGRET SO MUCH, because it has changed my life forever.

There is a misconception that girls have more self control than boys and that less control is needed for them. A Bais Yakov girl e-mailed me the following experience:

I know a friend who went to Bais Yaakov of———. She was smart, popular and on the top of her class. I mention this to highlight that the Internet problem is not limited to the underachiever or the less popular girls. This girl was just a healthy curious girl who, behind her parents' back, met, and became heavily involved with a boy right after their first initial meeting. She was really broken after that. I don't know if she went for help or what, but she began smoking pot and suddenly went from a normal above-average girl to a problem one. Today she is married baruch Hashem to a good guy, but there remains this real messed up look in her eyes where she looks like she still has emotional issues

DEFINING "ACCEPTABLE RISK"

Before I continue with other examples, I feel the need to bring up a common response. It is true that the previous example represents an extreme and small percentage of our teenagers' experiences, not the majority of them. It could be said that enough people get hit by cars while crossing the

The productive kid learns the system well enough to never be caught. It is often a single mistake, often years later, which makes their parents recognize that they have been misled during the past few years.

street, to make it a hazard too great to ignore. Yet we still cross the street. Logic should then say that we should still allow our children to have access to the Internet.

I have put in a lot of thought into this point. It is a logical one and is based on the fair assumption that everything in life offers risks, yet we all recognize that we must continue to live our lives. My response is to ask the reader to consider their definition of acceptable risk.

Acceptable risk is dependent on two things that must be considered simultaneously. We must weigh our anticipated gain against the risk involved in attaining this goal. Because of the nature of the Internet, we must add one more factor. In addition to the risk, we must be concerned with the general, more subtle exposure that all teenage Internet users are subject to.

The positive of the Internet is the access to necessary information, such as for school reports, and the ability to keep our children busy with acceptable activities such as sports, online purchasing, emailing and instant messaging with their friends.

The negatives are harder to discuss, as every family has their personal point system. I personally would not want my child to download music from the Internet, others might not be concerned with secular music. Parents must rate themselves, on a scale of one to ten, if the following took place:

How upset they would be if their child saw flashes of hard pornography two times a week. This happens constantly

through unsolicited pop-ups.

How upset would they be if they were certain that their child entered a chat room often and once a week made small talk with a boy/girl? Adding to this concern, what would their thoughts be if it was the same person each time? I am told from teenagers that this, too, is a certainty for those that enter chat rooms.

How would they feel if one night every week or two their child was up until 4:00 in the morning instant messaging?

Now let us consider the more extreme possibilities. I would suggest that a number greater than one out of a thousand is dramatically affected by the Internet. I use this number because it initially does not cause a stir in the hearts of parents. My experiences speak of a

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more serious danger. Let us substitute this issue with a deadly sickness, G-d forbid. Who would consider it an acceptable risk to expose their children to a one-in-a-thousand chance of any terrible sickness simply to give them an opportunity to become more educated, or to be updated with their favorite sports team?

Let us now consider that we might have two or three children with access to the Internet. Please tell me, how important are these advantages when compared to the certainty of the Internet's subtle effect, in addition to the more extreme risks of the Internet? Would anyone consider a one-in-a-250 chance acceptable risk when it centers around such serious issues?

THE UNACCOUNTABILITY FACTOR

There is another aspect of acceptable risk that must be considered. Acceptable risk must allow the person to monitor and assess the risk on a constant basis. Because of the privacy your children have in regard to what sites they see, because of their ability to wipe off these addresses as soon as they finish viewing them, it is impossible to accurately assess the risk.

Please consider this. Unlike your child's bringing home a new friend, you never really have an opportunity to check up on the advantages versus the risks.

Does it make sense that a single decision should decide your approach to parenting, without your ability to make a knowledgeable and informed reassessment?

One boy wrote: By the way, there are other ways to track Internet usage besides Temp files, but as the computer expert in my house, I know how to get around them all, so it's not much of a 'worry' for me

Another common misconception is that parents are confident that if they made the wrong decisions, there will be flashing lights warning them of any problems. Parents believe that if their child is speaking to a girl then they will suddenly stop doing well in class or maybe something more extreme like put on an earring.

Sadly, this is not always true. In these past few years, I have spoken to many parents who believe their child would not know what to say to a girl, while the child has admitted to me of *aveiros chamuros* (severe transgressions) that he or she has done. Teenagers consider it a challenge to be able to fool their parents.

As a matter of fact, the more put together the child is, the better he or she is at keeping secrets. It is the immature and unsuccessful child who gets caught. The productive kid learns the system well enough to never be caught. It is often a single mistake, often years later, which

makes their parents recognize that they have been misled during the past few years.

I am dealing with several cases of *chasanim* whose wives have found their husbands visiting pornographic sites. Can you imagine what this does to a marriage? Can you imagine how ingrained it must be within the boy to continue looking at such sites, even after marriage?

THE CHAT ROOM SCENE

Permit me a comment about chat rooms. I have a letter from a fine girl who, I believe, never met a boy. She nonetheless utilized the chat rooms. She writes:

I've been so fed up lately about the whole AOL online chatting issue. I could say about 90% of any frum community has access to the Internet, and probably about 75% of the teens and kids that have access to the net are chatting with guys and girls, mostly behind their parents' backs. The reason I think it's suddenly bothering me so much is because I used to be involved with these kinda things, and now that I'm back from seminary, it disgusts me. For me, chatting was a sort of an escape. I was a Bais Yaakov girl – never would get involved with guys in the "real" world, but in a chatroom, I could be whoever I wanted and have the fun of talking to guys. So I was involved with things for a while, and it was so easy for me to get wrapped up in these "relationships" that really didn't exist. I would never let a guy call me – or give out any real private info about myself – but I would think about the guy for a lot and wonder if maybe I should.

It was so bad, and I realized how wrong it was, and now that I'm back from seminary it kills me even more. I hear about little 12- and 13-year-olds getting involved online without their parents' knowing. When I was doing it, the youngest kids involved were like 14, 15, and now the ages are getting younger and younger, and it's upsetting me more and more. So many kids from so many frum families – their parents never suspect a thing, because what do

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they know? And even if the parents know about the problem and are conscious about it, if they go out one night to a chassuna, the kid goes online.

Another girl wrote me:

I know at least fifty kids that for a period in their lives have gone online after their parents are sleeping and STAM DID NOTHING from midnight to six AM, slug around school, don't pay attention, are not happy because they don't sleep, and they need structure and their PARENTS ARE CLUELESS. You just SIT there for hours and stare at the screen. It is SO scary, addictive, that I can't describe it. You can sit online until your eyes are tearing and flaming red, and your whole week is down the tubes, but you can't get off. Someone said a quote: "Logging off the internet is like pulling the plug on a loved one," and all the kids in the room AGREED B'LEV SHALEM. Any kid will tell you it's addictive. It's really bad because this can happen to the most yeshivish kids, and no one will chap that they are killing their brain cells slowly. And also they don't feel like a human when they cannot sign off when they want to.

Also, if there is a BY girl who likes boys, it could be that the reason she doesn't deal with them is because she's scared, of people or Hashem. But on the Internet, she can shmooze with guys and convince herself it's not a big deal. This has happened to the finest girls.

VACUUM AT THE TOP?

I would like to make one final point. Parents have a misconception that their children believe that there is nothing wrong with the Internet and that they do not want their parents to interfere. We therefore conclude that our child will be angry with us if we restrict their privileges. It is true that they will be angry at us. But at the same time, they will also understand us. Even more, they want us to be firm because within every child is the belief that their parents know better. Within every child is a very clear moral guide. Believe it or not, our chil-

dren are often more shocked with our permissiveness than we can imagine.

Please read this last quote from one of my e-mail friends!

It makes me sick that parents are so clueless. It pierces itself into the neshama and stays there always. Your kids won't respect you if you let them. They don't know that you are unaware of the dangers of the net. They think that you know and you don't care. No kid will respect their parents if they allow this stuff. I mean it.

May I offer one more story, unrelated to the Internet. A friend of mine who is a Rebbi in a non-mainstream yeshiva related the following incident to me. He was talking to a student a few days before Rosh Hashana. He suggested that the talmid take an English Siddur while davening because "understanding what he was saying will at least remove the monotony of the davening."

The boy responded that ArtScroll had a Tehillim with the English translated right under the Hebrew words. My friend was surprised that he would ever have looked into an English-translated Tehillim, and asked him where he came across such a Tehillim. The boy responded, "I bought it for my mother, so that it will be easier for her to daven for me to become frum."

I would like to close with the following plea: For those parents who feel the Internet is either harmless or simply unworthy of the large amount of attention devoted to it by our Gedolim, please reconsider your stance. Do it for your children. They themselves are asking you to. ■

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II. Out of the Mouths of Our Children (Continued)



NOTES FROM A RECOVERING VICTIM

To the Editor:

In an important and sobering discussion of the dangers lurking on the Internet, one section from the piece by Rabbi Aaron Twerski caught my eye (“A Ubiquitous Challenge, An Insidious Trap,” Nov. ’03). He recounts two stories. In one, the wife of a man who fell into the Internet trap “is convinced (with considerable justification) that her spouse’s moral compass has been damaged for life.”

In another instance, a woman who strayed anguishes, “I was the *frummet* girl in my class and I will never get back there again.”

While both sentiments may indeed be true, they need not be. As more and more people are – as your cover puts it, and as *Gedolei Yisroel* and professional family counselors have concurred – “ensnared” by the Internet’s dark side, it is imperative to remind the readership of the power of the *teshuva* process.

I am a former yeshiva *bachur* and a recovering Internet addict. For someone

who had commanded a great deal of respect from *chaveirim* and admiration from younger *bachurim*, it was a great fall. Today, I wake up many mornings with feelings of utter worthlessness. “Who am I to go to *shul* today? Who am I to learn today? After behaving in such a way, what a hypocrite I am! I’m not worthy of Torah. I’m not capable of *kedusha*.”

These are the most dangerous thoughts that can pass through a Jewish person’s head. Even after escaping the clutches of the Internet, the climb back to *frumkeit* is daunting. It is virtually impossible not to become ensnared in feelings of hopelessness and loss – not merely of self-esteem, but of one’s entire sense of self. How he or she responds to these thoughts is the difference between having sinned and becoming a lifetime sinner.

The *yeitzer hara*’s most powerful tool is to have us wallow in self-denigrating pity, crumbling under the stares – real or imagined – of our family, paralyzed by unimaginable shame.

It is vital that we as individuals – with encouragement from *rabbanim*, coun-

selors and the community at large – tap into our *yitzrei tov* and remind ourselves who we *really* are, and who we are capable of becoming.

“*Makom shebaalei teshuva omdin, tzaddikim gemurim einam omdin* – The place where *baalei teshuva* stand, the perfectly righteous do not stand” (*Berachos* 34b). In other words, explains the *Rambam*, the level of a *baal teshuva* is higher than that of one who never sinned.

The aforementioned *baal teshuva* is not the returnee to whom the term is applied colloquially. Rather, the classic *baal teshuva* is the subject of our discussion – one who grew up with Torah values, who strayed, and who has returned. In these dangerous times, it is ever more critical that the tenet of *teshuva* be broadcast.

We live in the here and now. We must struggle with society as it is. “Vigilance, vigilance and more vigilance is our only recourse,” as Rabbi Twerski says. But for those who weren’t vigilant enough, we must at the same time remember that “*Sheva yipol tzaddik vekam* – The righteous fall seven times and get up.” As one great Rosh Yeshiva put it, “The mark of a *tzaddik* is not that he, too, falls, but that he always gets up.”

May *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* give us the strength to keep standing.

NAME WITHHELD BY REQUEST

A CONFESSION... AND A PLEA FOR SANITY

To the Editor:

Sadly, the experience is almost commonplace, even in the dens and computer rooms of *bnei Torah*. I know this letter is not anything new to the now-awakened community at large. I am simply crying out to the masses from my own personal pain. It is from the realization of the destruction that I find within myself that I request, for the benefit of the *klal*, and as a *zechus* for my eventual *tikkun*, that this letter be printed.

Entering my adolescent years, I was a very good student, and a very pleas-

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ant person. I was among the cream of the crop. When I entered Mesivta in 9th grade, everyone expected the best of me, and their hopes were fulfilled. In my first couple of years in Mesivta, I grew in *ruchniyus* tremendously, in an extreme way, by leaps and bounds. In learning, in *yiras Shamayim*, in *middos*. I had much to be proud of. I was alive, I had direction, goals. My *Rebbe'im* saw a success story in me. It was through them that I had come this far, and they saw a future destined to be filled with continued success.

Skimming over the articles in the pages of November's *Jewish Observer*, one sees a particular term repeatedly: *sakanas nefashos*. Over and over, the dangers of the Internet are described as such. But extreme terms in today's day and age are given very little respect. Something described as "unbelievable" could be easily fathomed. "*Pilei pela'im*" doesn't necessarily indicate something particularly extraordinary. I am writing to tell your audience at large that in this case, *sakanas nefashos* means just that, the risk of death of a *nefesh*.

I fell into the grips of the *yeitzer hara*. It came in an instant, it was not intended. In issues of *kedusha*, I was particularly careful. The temptation had come before, but I suppressed it. Just curious, "just this once," my entire life turned upside down in an instant. I fell, and have yet to really climb back out.

When one falls like that, becoming quickly into what in many ways is an

addict, all else falls with it. It leads to a tortured existence, to living two lives. To this very day, people think of me as a very good *bachur*. My parents are proud of me, my *Rebbe'im* don't suspect that I could possibly be involved in the mud of society. One face towards the world and one face towards myself. Years of pondering: Am I a *yerei Shamayim* or not, a *ben Torah* or not – an *adam kasher* or not? I still don't have the answer to these questions. Maybe I'm just too afraid to answer them.

• • •



My parents are proud of me, my *Rebbe'im* don't suspect that I could possibly be involved in the mud of society. One face towards the world and one face towards myself.



Life has no meaning. I have become a person full of only selfishness and self-indulgence. Such a life is worse than worthless. I've tried to get out of the rut countless times over the years. Picture someone who smokes, without anyone knowing it. He can have a cigarette whenever he wants, where no one will see. This person is told to quit – without family, friends or a counselor, and definitely

without the luxury of a patch. I am an addict, my insides destroyed. *Yiras Shamayim* is but a distant memory. I have been living like this for years, not months. Years. I feel directionless and see no way out.

To the casual observer, I am a good yeshiva *bachur* in a very prominent yeshiva. I keep *sedorim*, *daven* with *kavana*, even do an occasional *chessed*. Inside I am controlled, torn, hurt and semi-depressed. I ask you to ask yourselves, is that not *sakanas nefashos*? If that *sakana* was a *sakana* for me, it is probably a *sakana* for your son, husband, and brother as well. If you wouldn't put food on his plate without a *hechsher*, if you pay thousands upon thousands of dollars in yeshiva tuition so that you should see *Yiddishe nachas*, you shouldn't, you couldn't, knowingly allow the smallest possibility of such an outcome. For his *Olam Hazeh* and *Olam Habba* – I beg of you! – don't let it be. A house filled with only *kedusha* produces products of *kedusha*. A house where one finds publications or opportunities that don't fit with the ideals of the Torah will inevitably produce results in kind.

Years from today, people will look back on our generation and wonder – did people who were careful with *kashrus* allow this? The generation of the Second *Beis Hamikdash* was missing only one integral factor. It was possible then, and it is still today. *Hashem yerachein*.

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III. Over Our Shoulders & Looking Ahead



MORE TECHNOLOGY
STUMBLING BLOCKS AT HAND

To the Editor:

Thank you for raising awareness and openly discussing the risks faced by our communities in this era of modern technology. Clearly, awareness is the first step in addressing this insidious danger to our sacred way of life.

I have counseled numerous adolescents and families struggling with the aftereffects of various Internet-related difficulties. I have also been involved in prevention, presenting an interactive demonstration on this subject for *menaholim* at last spring's Torah Umesorah National Convention, as well as for parents at schools nationally.

A common thought expressed by parents and *mechanchim* is that they can't keep up with the technology. Children and adolescents, however, are on the cutting edge in their understanding of emerging technologies. As parents we have a responsibility to be conscious of our children's interests and to stay abreast of their activities.

Perhaps the greatest risks to our *yeshiva bachurim* and Bais Yaakov students are cell phones, laptops, PDAs and pager devices which have become "necessary" for many of our *bnei Torah*. The most obvious threat of these items is similar to that of the computer. When these devices are wireless Web-enabled, they include *all* of the same perils of the home computer, with an added dose of privacy and availability. Even when these devices are not Web-enabled, they can be problematic. It is not uncommon to see 5th-8th grade students with PDAs (the ones that they "need" to record their home-



work) swapping ("beaming") files at school. Many of these files would be considered innocuous, but some would not. For example, one popular PDA game involves the glorification of drug use. Additionally, PDAs and cell phones are now available in full color, and often have cameras built in. They can be used to capture, view and trade images of any kind.

A pervasive yet under-emphasized hazard for our youth, related to the technologies listed above, is instant messaging (computer, cell phone and wireless versions). While the dangers of chat rooms and communicating with anonymous strangers have been addressed and are well known, parents are less suspecting of children communicating with their *friends* via instant messenger. Children often believe that "*the friend of my friend is my friend.*" They are frequently instant messaging with those whom they have never seen, yet they do not consider them to be strangers. Even though the participants are *frum* and their real names are known, the language and content of online conversations may quickly cross the line of what is acceptable. This is due to the impersonal nature of the instant messaging medium. The pro-



gression of events in these exchanges often spirals downward leading our *teiere kinder* to inappropriate relationships and high-risk situations.

When access to instant messaging is extended to the cell phone or other wireless device, these unhealthy interactions can become addicting diversions that continue 24 hours a day, perhaps even within the hallowed walls of the *beis hamidrash*.

RABBI NORMAN LOWENTHAL,
M.S. ED., MSW
St. Louis, MO

INTERNET USAGE:
CAUTIONARY ADVICE

To the Editor:

There has been much talk and discussion regarding the Internet. Pages and pages have been written concerning the potentially dangerous effects of the Internet. The articles that *The Jewish Observer* featured were nothing less than wonderful!

I would like to comment about this very important issue. We have faced many *nisyonos* (tests and trials) in the past. For example, the influence of television in the Jewish home. There are many thousands of families that have not fallen prey to this problem, whereas the Internet seems to have become quite acceptable in many households. Why is this so?

Business. In order for most businesses to function properly today, they must have Internet access. Many people have businesses in their homes. Therefore, the Internet has made it into their homes. Then the great *nisayon* arises. When is it really business-related and when is it unnecessary?

Schools. Many schools (especially high schools and seminaries, especially those that offer college credits) require information from the Internet. Again, this

poses a problem when such information is required.

Torah. This perhaps is the greatest *hechsher* (certification of legitimacy) for Internet usage. Never has any authentic Torah organization made usage of television. The tv never received a Torah endorsement, *whereas there are many, many Torah organizations that have Web sites.* It is very difficult to encourage people to refrain from Internet usage, when we provide and sometimes even encourage its usage! This, in my opinion, is the greatest obstacle in besting this tremendous *nisayon* that is creating havoc in *Klal Yisroel*.

We have to be very honest with ourselves, and if we really *must* make use of the Internet, it should be done with a reliable *shmira* (safeguards). Here are some suggestions that may help:

Do not place your computer near a phone line. Make sure every time you are connected, a long phone line must be pulled across the house (dining room, living room, kitchen etc.). This way, whenever someone is online, others are aware. Of course, this means no wireless access. (Even though this takes longer, it may save yourself and your children!)

A password must be used *every time* someone is online. Do not allow a child access alone.

Children (including older children) should not have their own e-mail address. The danger is just too great.

Every person must come up with some idea to protect himself or herself and his or her children from this tremendous *nisayon*. One who sincerely puts forth effort and seeks guidance from our *Gedolim* will *היא* see *dor yesharim u'mevorach*.

Again, thank you for the wonderful articles concerning this issue.

AVIGDOR NEINSTEIN
Baltimore, MD

**"AND WRITE IT ON THE
DOORPOSTS OF YOUR HOUSE"**

To the Editor:

Your Cheshvan issue concerning the danger of the Internet leaves us with a feeling of defenselessness.

May I offer a simple suggestion to help protect ourselves and our friends, particularly parents of young children, against this insidious threat to *kedusha* and *tahara*. True, its beneficial effect would be slow in coming, but it can only be positive.

Under the *mezuzah* on our doors, affix a small but clearly printed sign, such as "Our Home is Clean of TV and the Internet. Welcome!" or a similar sign without the TV reference.

In addition to their sale in stores, such permanent signs should be offered for sale in synagogues and Jewish centers, and recommended by the Rabbi and other congregational leaders.

SAMUEL M. SCHWARTZ
Jerusalem

**CONTROLLING THE INTERNET'S
INFLUENCE: AN UNFINISHED AGENDA**

To the Editor:

Thank you so much for addressing this important issue in such an informed way! Up until this last issue, I never came across any rabbinic authority who was well informed on the various issues involved with computers and Internet access. This had been a source of frustration to me.

We have a graphic design business in the basement of our home, with children who grew up in a very computer-savvy environment, so we definitely are very concerned with all the issues you addressed! Your articles were very comprehensive, and I was glad to see so many of my thoughts reflected there.

Aside from my obvious need for the computer, e-mail and Internet, I do agree that computers and the Internet are here to stay. Although the comparison to the history of television is obvious, the difference is that television is purely for entertainment and the computer is becoming a way of life. The best defense will be a good offense.

I'd like to stress the question of who are we trying to shield – the people who are specifically looking for trouble, or the average child/adult who natural curiosity needs to be protected. I feel that no matter what precautions we take, some-

one truly determined to look for trouble will find. It. Such people unfortunately always did and always will find ways to indulge in forbidden activities. When establishing barriers to the garbage out there, we should bear that in mind.

I have a firewall which, for the benefit of your readers, is a box through which all Internet activity must pass. I have a password-protected lock which simply turns off the Internet every evening. Before Succos and Pesach I adjust it to be off completely. I am the only one with access to this firewall. Another idea for a business run by men is to have a two-part password. Both have to present to type in their own password.

I definitely agree that children have no business on the Internet, period! Browsing idly is also not a good thing for anyone! At best, we're exposing and desensitizing ourselves to a decadent culture.

Here are some ideas that are (unfortunately) very incomplete. I'd love to see a committee formed of informed individuals to address all these problems and come up with real solutions. I'd suggest a service provider that sends a weekly or monthly statement to the user of all sites accessed. That immediately removes the privacy issue. One who knows that his actions are being tracked and will be played back to him will automatically act differently, even if he's the only one seeing it! I have a feature on my firewall that gives me that list, but I'm sometimes lazy to read it through, so I'd go a step further and create an Internet provider with a *hechsher*! Filtering doesn't really work, but let there be a panel of people randomly checking through the lists of websites used. The problem with that would be the concern of privacy. For example, if someone's checking up a medical condition, he may not want that fact advertised.

I still feel that these solutions should not preclude the strong advice to the general public to use the Internet sparingly. It should not be an entertainment tool.

Let me end by saying that by putting our collective heads together, I'm fully confident that our community can come up with viable solutions.

NAME WITHHELD BY REQUEST



“No”

to Interfaith Dialogue

Pointless... For Good Reason

The issue of interfaith dialogue is one of those hardy perennials. A recent conference sponsored by Boston College’s Center for Christian-Jewish Learning discussed the continued applicability of the ban posed on such dialogue by Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, the towering figure of Modern Orthodoxy.

Atarah Twersky, Rabbi Soloveitchik’s daughter, insisted that her father’s views never changed, despite the changes in the attitudes of the Catholic Church in the nearly thirty years between the Church encyclical *Nostra Aetate* and Rabbi Soloveitchik’s passing. While her testimony may be dispositive as to her father’s views, it is nevertheless worthwhile revisiting the issue, if only to understand how little such dialogue offers and the dangers it poses.

Interfaith dialogue is pointless because it can change nothing. *Halacha*, or Jewish law, is the province of those with a full command of the vast halachic

Rabbi Rosenblum, who lives in Jerusalem, is a contributing editor to *The Jewish Observer*. He is also director of the Israeli division of Am Echad, the Agudath Israel-inspired educational outreach effort and media resource. Versions of this article appeared in *The Jerusalem Post* and the *Baltimore Jewish Times*.

literature. There is no more place in the halachic process for the opinions of those lacking such a grounding, be they Jew or gentile, than there is for polling synagogue members to determine halachic practice.

Admittedly, it would be a great boon if Islamic imams could be convinced to stop issuing fatwas condoning suicide bombing. But only the most naive would expect theological dialogue with rabbis to be the means of persuasion.

True, Catholic doctrine concerning the traditional charge of deicide against Jews has changed greatly in recent decades. (Unlike rabbis, the Pope has the power to enunciate new doctrine.) Yet here, too, it is doubtful that Catholic doctrine changed because of theological arguments raised by rabbis, whose area of expertise is presumably not the Christian Gospels. Rather, it changed because of the Church’s guilt over its complicity in Hitler’s Final Solution and the legacy of Jew hatred based on millennia of Church teachings.

A Dangerously Blurring Influence

Interfaith dialogue is dangerous because such dialogue inevitably leads to the blurring of Judaism’s own mes-

sage. The nature of dialogue is that one elicits concessions and compromises from the other side only by making one’s own concessions. England’s Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ comparison of interfaith dialogue to marriage counseling is highly germane, for in marital counseling both sides will be urged to make concessions.

The controversy surrounding Rabbi Sacks’ book *The Dignity of Difference* provides an object lesson in the dangers inherent in interfaith theological dialogue. Certainly, interfaith dialogue has few more enthusiastic proponents than Rabbi Sacks, who boasts of having met secretly with a leading Iranian imam and has expressed his desire to meet with Shiekh Abu Hamzu, of the Finsbury Park mosque, a Taliban sympathizer who admits to sharing the views of Osama bin Laden.

The quest for interfaith dialogue led Rabbi Sacks to attempt to construct a general theory of religion in *The Dignity of Difference*. The result, however, severely distorted central Jewish beliefs, and forced Rabbi Sacks to rewrite the book after not a single British rabbi across the Orthodox spectrum could be found to defend it.

In the process of constructing his

general theory, Rabbi Sacks was forced to deny the absolute uniqueness of the Revelation at Sinai. "G-d has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, through Islam to Muslims," he wrote. The price of such ecumenicism was to ignore the Kuzari's classic distinction between Judaism and any of the other monotheistic faiths: Judaism alone of the monotheistic faiths is based on a revelation to an entire people, not on the claims of a solitary figure. Nor did Rabbi Sacks specify where, when, or how G-d is supposed to have spoken to Christians or Moslems.

Rabbi Sacks again failed to emphasize Sinai as a unique event in human history when he blithely asserted that no faith is complete and each has some share of the truth. One wonders what a rabbi will tell a young Jew who defends his decision to marry out on the basis of Rabbi Sacks' book: "What's the problem? Each of our faiths has only part of the truth. Together we will possess more truth."

"The G-d of the Hebrew Bible lov[es] each of his children for what they are: Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Israel and the nations..." is a lovely, politically correct thought. But it is also hard to reconcile Rabbi Sacks' words with a recent *Haftorah* reading – "Yet I loved Yaakov; but Esau I hated..." (*Malachi* 1:3), or the Torah's description of Ishmael as a wild man, "his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him."

"Yitz" Greenberg, another long time enthusiast for interfaith dialogue, went much further towards heresy and blurring the distinctions between Judaism and Christianity. (Rabbi Sacks did eventually release a revised edition absent the offending passages.) According to Greenberg, Jesus was a "failed Messiah," just as Abraham and Moses were also "failures." Both Jews and Christians err in advancing exclusive claims of chosenness, according to Greenberg, because there is enough love in G-d "to choose again and again and again."

For What Function?

Finally, interfaith dialogue is unnecessary because its absence in no way prevents the development of pleasant, fruitful relations between people of different faiths. Religious people do, in fact, usually find large areas of commonality between them. Orthodox Jews, for instance, experience a much higher comfort level with evangelical Christians than do secular Jews, despite their eschewal of theological dialogue.

The late Cardinal O'Connor would

effusively hug Rabbi Moshe Sherer, the long-time head of Agudath Israel of America, whenever they met. Under Rabbi Sherer's leadership, Catholics and Orthodox Jews worked together productively on a host of issues concerning non-public schooling and public morality, without ever engaging in theological discussions. Indeed, avoiding discussion of the chasm of belief between them fostered the ability to maintain a close alliance.

Pointless, dangerous, and unnecessary – those should be enough reasons for avoiding interfaith dialogue. ■

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