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ברוכים הבאים בשם ה'!

Welcome to what promises to be the most momentous evening of your life!

It is no coincidence that Klal Yisrael has gathered as one to unite in facing the challenges of modern technology at precisely this moment. We stand in the final days before our annual renewal of *Kabbalas HaTorah*. Our unanimous declaration of “*ונעשה ונשמע*” over 3,300 years ago was our defining moment as a nation. Yet *Chazal* (*Shabbos 88a*) point out that generations later, Klal Yisrael was moved to reaffirm their dedication to Hashem and His Torah.

Throughout our generations of wandering since we entered this long and bitter *golus*, our nation has been faced with many trials. Only by standing together and remaining firmly entrenched in the faith of our fathers have we persevered. Yet today we find ourselves threatened by a test of frightening magnitude, one that has already done untold harm to our people. It is an unseen adversary that jeopardizes our very existence.

Once again we are standing at a crossroads, a defining moment in the history of our nation. Our *Gedolim* have risen to the challenge and called upon us, the rank and file of Klal Yisrael, to join them in taking up the fight. And on a personal level, this is a defining moment in the lives of each one of us. By joining the *asifa* we are reaffirming our dedication to the principles of the Torah, and we are renewing our proud rallying call of “*ונעשה ונשמע*” We are showing the world yet again that through our dedication we are truly worthy of being the nation of Hashem and the bearers of his Torah.

In the words of the *Navi*: “כי הנה החשך יכסה ארץ וערפל” – The darkness will cover the land and gloom over the nations, but on you will Hashem shine and His honor will be visible upon you.” We are at a time when the world is covered with darkness, when it eagerly embraces a harmful and destructive path. Yet Klal Yisrael is prepared to stand apart, to buck the trend and fight the current. For this,

the *Navi* promises us, we will earn that our paths be illuminated by the light of Hashem and we will merit that His glory will rest upon us.

To place this evening in its proper perspective, the following critical points must be underscored:

Internet Solutions

It must be made clear before we introduce the various solutions that will be offered for the internet, such as filters and blocks, that these are not true “solutions.” They do not solve the internet problem. The only real “solution” is to ban all access to the internet. And that, in fact, is what each of us who can do so must do.

A *yeshiva bachur*, kollel fellow or a *melamed* Torah, all of whom are not required to have internet for their job, should not own or come in contact with any devices capable of accessing the internet – with or without filters. **There is no excuse for using the internet where it is not absolutely necessary.**

Internet access must be viewed as a “*b’dieved*,” an absolute last resort where there is no other possible means. The only reason we discuss filters and other solutions altogether is to accommodate businesspeople and the like

Special Thanks!

We wish to thank **Zman** magazine for conceiving, researching and writing this very informative and important publication, produced especially for this historical *asifa*. **Zman**'s well-deserved reputation for in-depth, quality, riveting articles is plainly evident in this work and is the reason we chose them to represent our interests at this groundbreaking event.



who are forced by their situation to use the internet. For them, there are various possibilities that will be discussed in detail to minimize the risks associated with going online.

Anyone who need not expose himself to a dangerous and highly contagious disease is forbidden by the Torah to do so, even if he takes all possible precautions.

Uniting Against the Threat

The *Gedolim* have urged Klal Yisrael to gather as one to fight a common enemy. The problem is truly universal, and requires a united front to deal with. At this historic *asifa*, we must establish a basic standard for everyone to adhere to in their relation with the internet.

The purpose of our gathering together is to unify Klal Yisrael in recognizing the problem that affects all of us. Every Jew in every community must commit to dealing with it. The *asifa* will help us all understand what *daas Torah* dictates as the minimum safeguards that must be in place when we use the internet.

Of course, each *kehillah* must have its own Rav, Rosh Yeshiva or Rebbe to serve as its guide in all areas of life. This issue is no exception. Every *kehillah* may build on these basic standards according to the needs of its members. Praiseworthy are the communities that are able to implement even higher and better standards!

A Unique Opportunity

We are one nation and our gathering together tonight was intended to emphasize this point. Many of our actions and decisions are directly affected by those around us. For example, most of us have little temptation to work on Shabbos or eat non-kosher food, because we draw strength from our peers and the community around us.

This can be a powerful tool in the service of Hashem. At the same time, however, it makes our observance of the Torah and *mitzvos* much less personal. How much reward do we deserve for a

mitzvah we may be keeping largely due to peer pressure?

The trial of the internet is entirely different. This is a very personal *nisayon*, a test of the individual's character. Most internet use takes place in private. As such, the temptation to visit unsuitable sites is rarely tempered by a fear of discovery. It is a fight that goes on within the person and it is entirely between him and Hashem. This is an area where one's *Yiras Shamayim* is of overriding significance.

We must recognize this uniquely personal *nisayon* as a golden opportunity. Perhaps more than in any other area of our Torah-based lives, the internet gives us the opportunity to display our love for Hashem and our determination to fulfill His will.

Each time a Jew holds himself back from visiting a website that he knows is not appropriate, from one wrong click, he is acting out his pure love and fear of Hashem. It is a moment to be tapped in to; a moment that calls out for reflection and prayer. We are declaring through our actions: "Hashem, I am Your son! I love You and I want You to be proud of me! Help me overcome my *yetzer hara*, help me fulfill Your will!"

Maintaining our purity when dealing with the internet is a supreme expression of our dedication to and love for Hashem!

In Conclusion

The Torah states, "והתקדשתם והיייתם קדושים (ויקרא י"א) — Make yourselves holy and you will be holy." *Chazal* derive from the seeming redundancy a lesson that, "אדם מקדש עצמו מלמטה מקדשין אותו מלמעלה" (יומא לט). — If a person makes himself holy below, he will be made holy from above." In other words, if we invest our effort to purify ourselves and rise above the spiritual pollution that surrounds us, we will merit Divine assistance from above.

May your participation in this once-in-a-lifetime event carry you through all the trials you will face in life, and may this merit earn you unlimited blessings from above, for good health, abundant wealth and happiness for you and all of your family! ■

Rabbi Yosef Viener

Family Security And Issues Of Lifnei Iveir



Question

I have internet in my home and office, and a friend of mine claims that if I do not filter or monitor the content, I could be violating the *issur of lifnei iveir lo sitein michshol*. He argues that my allowing unrestricted internet use by my family and employees will no doubt cause them spiritual harm, and the responsibility for the damage will be partially my fault. This concept is new to me. Is it indeed necessary for me to install the proper filtering software, or is it merely a suggestion for those who want to be *machmir*?

Answer

We are going to discuss an issue that might seem like an old topic, because there have been many gatherings to address the issue. Much to my surprise and chagrin, however, the message does not seem to have hit home. The security

we will discuss is that of the sanctity of the family, which is currently suffering from the most insidious and dangerous attack ever leveled against it: the internet.

If you are about to turn the page because you feel that you have heard all there is to say on this subject, please bear with me for a few pages. First of all, I doubt that you have heard everything. Second, even if you do not think that the subject pertains to you, you might learn in the course of the essay that it does. In my years serving the *frum* community, there has never been a burning issue that affects the community at large as profoundly as this one does. If I may borrow a term, the internet is the "silent killer" of the *neshamah*. It is very silent — it can be used in the privacy of a closed room in the home or office — and it's very deadly. One can commit spiritual suicide, and those around him will be none the wiser, until it is far too late. No one can



know whether this problem affects a neighbor, a tablemate in *shul* or a *chavrusa* sitting across from you. As we will see, if it affects someone in your close circle of acquaintances, then it affects you as well.

Yet, people are either oblivious to the danger or are deliberately choosing not to focus on it.

Years back, when the initial gatherings regarding the internet took place, the Lakewood *mash-*

The internet is the “silent killer” of the neshamah. It is very silent – it can be used in the privacy of a closed room in the home or office – and it’s very deadly.



giach, R' Mattisyahu Salamon, *shlita*, would travel from one community to the next and warn people about the danger. I would take the opportunity to “interview” friends and members of my *shul* who attended those gatherings. I would ask people what steps they would take based on what they had learned at the gatherings. To my dismay, a common response was, “I’m sure that this problem exists in other people’s homes, but *baruch Hashem*, my home is safe.” Another response that I would hear is, “I think that the *Rabbanim* are exaggerating in order to scare us into action.”

Unfortunately, the real story is no exaggeration. *Rabbeim*, *rabbanim* and community leaders will tell you that not a week goes by without having to deal with an internet-induced *shalom bayis* problem, *chinuch* problem, or with a very fine *bachur* – or at least what’s left of one – who calls crying and begging to help him extricate himself from the tentacles of the internet.

In discussing this topic, I will present an approach toward the internet geared to those who either absolutely need the internet or don’t have the courage to get rid of it. Before I do so, however, I must issue a disclaimer: If you are among the lucky members of *Klal Yisrael* who do not have internet in their homes, please do not change that because of anything I am about to mention. Ultimately, the best response to the internet remains, and always will remain, not to have any access to it. If you don’t need it, then don’t have it. Not at home, not at the office, not on your cell phone and not anywhere else. That is the best security policy of all. Many people convince themselves that they need internet access, but if they would honestly assess the reasons that they are connected to the internet, they would realize that they could get by without it.

A case in point: some claim they save \$30–\$40 per month shopping online rather than going to the mall. That claim is debatable. Many husbands who track their expenditures have told me that the built-in shopping mall at home actually costs a lot more than it saves, because shopping becomes so easy that it encourages over-consumption. But even if the savings were significant, it’s difficult to justify the danger of having the internet at home just for the convenience and possible savings of shopping online.

The Torah states that when we go to war, the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) joins us in the battle and enables us to be victorious. But the Divine escort is contingent upon one factor: “*V’hayah machanecha kadosh – your camp shall be holy*” (*Devarim* 23:15). The Torah warns, “*V’lo yir’eh b’cha ervas davar, veshov mei’acharecha – He shall not see a shameful thing among you and turn away from behind you*” (*ibid.*). Ultimately, then, one *ervas davar* costs us more than all of the savings and benefits we have from the internet. If we don’t have the *Shechinah* with us, we cannot succeed in any of our endeavors. And the internet does

not come with the potential for only one “*ervas davar*.” Rather, it affords access to thousands of them each hour.

My first plea is, therefore, that every person who has internet access should reevaluate the decision he made when he brought the internet into his home. He should determine whether he truly needs it, or if he can dispose of the potential pitfall – at least in the home, where it is most dangerous.

The rest of the advice in this essay is addressed to those who must have internet access.

No One is Immune to Harmful Influence

Before we move onto the practical realm of how to deal with the internet, it is important to address those people who feel that their families are impervious to the temptation provided by the internet.

In *Parashas Vayeira*, the Torah relates that Sarah Imeinu saw Yishmael interacting with Yitzchak in an inappropriate manner, and she implored Avraham Avinu to banish Yishmael from their home. The Torah states, “*Vayeira hadavar m’od b’einei Avraham al odos b’no – The matter greatly distressed Avraham regarding his son*” (*Bereishis* 21:11). Simply understood, “his son” refers to Yishmael – i.e., Avraham was greatly distressed that he would have to banish his son from his home. The Chasam Sofer explains this verse differently, however. He says that Avraham was greatly distressed because of his son Yitzchak. *My Yitzchak, the holy Yitzchak, is susceptible to the influence of Yishmael?* Avraham wondered. *There must be something wrong with him if he cannot withstand the likes of Yishmael.* But Sarah Imeinu knew better. *Hashem* told Avraham, “*Kol asher tomar eilecha Sarah, sh’ma b’kolah – whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice*” (*ibid.* 21:12).

Sarah Imeinu taught us an invaluable lesson. No matter how pure and holy a person is, when he is exposed to temptation he is liable to fall prey to it. And if that is true about the relatively innocuous temptation embodied by the presence of Yishmael in the otherwise spiritually uplifted environment of Avraham and Sarah’s home, how much more true is it about the presence of the internet which contains temptations that are so powerful and incredibly accessible.

One lesson we learn, then, is that no one can claim that he is impervious to the temptation of the internet. We must all seek ways to protect and distance ourselves from this threat to our spiritual security.

But there is another important lesson that we can learn from the story of Yitzchak and Yishmael. All of the forms of security we are about to discuss will help only for our own homes. The safeguards we put into place will not help if we do not know where our children are at all times, with whom they are associating, and what those children are exposed to and able to access.

While the problem of harmful influence from bad friends has always existed to some extent, a decade or two ago we could suffice with the knowledge that our children weren’t playing with “real bums.” But today, even the most innocent looking children, from the best families, may have access to the worst images imaginable.

Your son will tell you, “I’m just going to Motty’s house.” Sounds safe enough. *Motty’s a nice boy, you tell yourself. He doesn’t watch movies or hang out with the wrong people.* Little do you know that within minutes of being in Motty’s house, your son can sink to the lowest depths of *Gehinnom*. It is still an unfortunate fact that many Jewish homes have internet connections that are unfiltered or unmonitored.

Parents naively supply their children with media devices (such as iPad and most MP3 players



sold today), without realizing that they all come with full internet capabilities via their wireless connection. It is the parents' responsibility to thoroughly investigate the phones, media players and games that they are providing to their children. One can download damaging content to be viewed with incredible ease, and erase the evidence shortly after viewing, thus leaving no visible trace of the damage that has been caused.

I will present an approach toward the internet geared to those who either absolutely need the internet or don't have the courage or fortitude to get rid of it.



A fellow I know once came running to me, frantically seeking my advice. "My son went to his friend's house," he said, "and they saw some very inappropriate things. I thought it was a good home. I can't understand what happened to this generation!"

"Did you check out the home before you allowed him to play there?" I asked.

"Check out the house?" he asked incredulously. "I sit next to the father in shul. My son is in a wonderful yeshiva, and this boy is his classmate. I already checked out the shul we *daven* in and the yeshiva I send him to. I know the father personally. How much more checking must I do?"

"I'm sorry," I countered, "but you have to start asking whether a home is protected from the dangers of the internet before sending your child to play there."

"I can't ask that question," he insisted. "I'm

afraid to hurt people's feelings. I don't want to step on anyone's toes!"

This response was astounding, considering what this fellow does for a living: he's a trial lawyer. All he does all day is step on toes. He breaks a few, injures others... but for his son's sanctity and safety he's afraid to step on toes. He spends his workday being aggressive, but when it comes to this subject, he's afraid to be branded a "*frumak*," so he'd rather blame it on the generation than face reality.

The reality today is that part of your job as a parent is to make sure you know which houses are protected from the internet and which are not. It is a very delicate issue, and it *can* cause bad feelings, but if you are not willing to check into what your child's friends can expose your child to, you are not doing your job as a parent. If you are in doubt, then it's better to err on the side of caution. When you consider the grave damage that can be done to your child in seconds, you will probably agree that it is better to disassociate from those who are willing to take a risk, rather than have your child caught in the "Net."

So while we will discuss what can be done to protect our own homes, it is equally vital that you know where your children are going each time they leave the house. It sounds wearisome, but a momentary lapse in your vigilance can introduce them to a *yetzer hara* that is extremely difficult to fight.

The Case of Shloimy

A *bachur* – we'll call him Shloimy – once called me to request an appointment, several days before he was scheduled to return to yeshiva after *Pesach bein hazmanim* (intersession). Shloimy entered my study, closed the door, sat down and began to cry. He spent the next 25 minutes crying. I couldn't make out any intelligible words from what he was saying, but the torture that he was going through was expressed clearly with-

out words. When he finally drew himself together, he told me that less than half a year earlier, on Thanksgiving weekend, his parents went away for a *Shabbos* and left him home alone.

The word "downhill" does not do justice to Shloimy's trajectory over the eight or nine weeks that followed. His interest in learning went into such a tailspin that his rebbi called the parents to discuss it. "What happened to my star *talmid*?" he asked in concern. "I ask him questions during *shiur* and I realize that he was daydreaming; he hasn't been doing *chazzarah* (reviewing)..."

The parents didn't know what to make of Shloimy's downturn. Rather than investigate the possible causes, they reasoned that children have their ups and downs, and they figured that Shloimy would eventually come out of the rut on his own. Shloimy – by his own admission – continued to spiral ever-downward for the rest of the winter.

Shloimy comes from an amazing family, and their entire home is run *al taharas hakodesh*. There are no magazines in the home, no television – nothing that can lead a person astray – except for one thing. Shloimy's father is a businessman, and he feels that he needs a computer with internet access in his home. And on that fateful weekend, Shloimy began a descent on the slippery slope that has felled so many.

A while after my conversation with Shloimy, I managed to have a conversation with Shloimy's father without betraying to him that his son had spoken to me. Shloimy's father mentioned that he had been to two of the gatherings discussing internet access.

"What action did you take after you left those gatherings?" I asked him.

He said that he understood that it was important for other families to have the systems that I encourage people to install, but in his family it

was absolutely unnecessary. "You have to know your kids," he said. "Each one of my children is a bigger *tachshit* (loosely translated: *gem*) than the next."

"Besides," he added, "I once installed a filter for a few days, and it blocked out too much, so I removed it."

I add this last detail because aside from the naïveté regarding how powerful a *yetzer hara* we are dealing with, I found the lack of patience in this case to be a bit odd. When we are talking about the spiritual success or failure of our children, is a system that blocks too much so bad? And if it is too much of a pain, why go without any system? Try another one, and then another if you must, but don't go without anything!

Finally, with Shloimy's permission, I told his father what had been going on for the previous five months. "It's a shame that you didn't accept the message from the *asifos* that you attended," I said, "because now we have a broken person to deal with, and we can only *hope* to get him back."

I said we could only *hope* to get him back because, as Shloimy told me during his "confession," not only did he feel terrible guilt for the *aveiros* he had already done, but even as he tried to do *teshuvah*, he simply couldn't concentrate because of the images floating around in his head.

Certainly, *Hashem* gave us a gift called *teshuvah*, and just as a computer has a delete button, *Hashem* can help a person delete those images as well. However, if the proper precautions are not taken, a relapse is possible at any time. An integral part of the *teshuvah* process is ensuring that the proper steps are taken to help mitigate the possibility of transgression.

Issur Yichud with a Computer

I have had tens of cases just like this one. Young, budding *talmidei chachamim* who were at the top of their respective classes in yeshi-



vah became broken and dispirited because they were left in a vulnerable position by parents who were too proud, or too naïve, to acknowledge that their son might be tempted by the impurity that is so readily available on the internet.

For those who feel that they or their children are immune to the temptation posed by the internet, a quote from *Rambam* should dispel that notion. The *Rambam* (*Hilchos Issurei Biah* 22:18–

Finally, with Shloimy's permission, I told his father what had been going on for the previous five months. "It's a shame that you didn't accept the message from the asifos that you attended," I said, "because now we have a broken person to deal with, and we can only hope to get him back."



20) writes, "There is nothing as difficult for the majority of the Jewish people as [the *mitzvah* to refrain] from illicit relationships... Our Sages taught that theft and illicit relationships are sins that a person is drawn to and desires... Therefore, it is worthwhile for a person to subjugate his *yetzer* in this area, and to train himself to act in a holy manner and have only pure thoughts, and to plan properly to save himself from [such sins]. *One should refrain from yichud, because it is the greatest cause [for sins of this nature].*"

The *Rambam* is teaching us that the *yetzer hara* that people are falling prey to on the internet is the most difficult one to withstand. It is foolish to try to fight the most difficult *yetzer hara* on its "home turf." We must try to avoid this *yetzer hara* altogether by getting rid of the internet, or at least diminish the possibility of falling prey to it by having the correct systems installed. Indeed, we must treat the computer with the *issur yichud* that the *Rambam* names as the greatest cause of sins in this realm.

I know that this last statement will sound outlandish to some people. After one gathering regarding the internet, I asked someone who attended, "What do you consider the most powerful line you heard at the gathering?"

He smiled and said, "I know what the most powerful line was, but I think it was a great *chid-dush*. HaRav Mattisyahu Salamon said that if the internet was around in the times of *Chazal*, they would have enacted an *issur yichud* upon it. How can there be an *issur yichud* with a computer – it's not a living being!"

The *Mashgiach's* words were certainly not novel; in fact, they reach the crux of the issue. He understands how powerful this *yetzer hara* is because he has dealt with the fallout. Dealing with the fallout has shown that being with a computer, alone, leaves a person very vulnerable. In fact, we might argue that in an ordinary *yichud* situation, we are typically dealing with two people who can have a variety of reasons for resisting inappropriate behavior: pride, fear, etc. In the case of the internet, we are dealing with one person, with no culpability. The computer will not protest or say anything to anyone later on. If the person's conscience is unable to stop him – as unfortunately seems to be the case in an overwhelming number of instances – he is in a serious predicament.

On the very morning that I delivered a *shiur* on this topic, *Hashem* sent me yet another case. This time, a father called me up and said, "I have a very open relationship with my son, and he discussed something with me that I think you can help us with. We need to talk to you together."

I spoke to the father for a few minutes, and then I asked him whether I could speak to his son privately. I knew that the situation would cause an untold amount of embarrassment to the boy, and I wanted him to be able to face his father afterward. The father agreed, and when the boy entered the room, the first question he asked

was whether I had ever heard of the problem before. This boy was under the impression that he was the only one with this problem. I assured him that he was far from the odd man out. "You are very normal," I said. "What makes you different is that you told your father, and I am very impressed that you did. Otherwise, you are unfortunately a prototypical case of a person left alone with unlimited access to the internet."

I could see that it took a load off his shoulders. That doesn't mean that I caused him to view the situation lightly – far from it. But it was comforting to him to know that he was struggling with a normal *yetzer hara*, and that he was not crazy.

This boy explained that when he started failing in this area, he sank into a deep depression, certain that he was depraved and that no one else was struggling with this desire. Once I explained that it was normal, he felt that he could deal with it.

Realize, however, that what I told him was the truth: the sort of honest relationship he has with his father is extremely rare. Most parents will have no idea of what their children are up to at all, and even if they do find out, it will be at a stage at which it will be very, very difficult to undo the damage. *Bachurim* come to me many times to discuss this problem on the condition that I not tell their parents. After hearing the extent of the damage and the frequency with which they have been falling prey, I often ask, "Don't you parents know anything?" The answer is invariably, "They have no clue."

The good news in those cases is that these boys are seeking help. (I can just imagine how many other boys are in similar situations, but are too ashamed to seek help.) The bad news is that I can't tell the parents afterwards, because I have been approached in confidence, so I just have to hope that they attend a gathering on the subject and decide to eradicate the problem from the home without my intervention. Unfortunately,

even when parents of boys that I have met with do attend a gathering, their reaction to what they hear is usually, "I think that it was a very important *d'rashah*. I'm going to tell my neighbor about it the next time I see him."

If the situation I portray seems frightening, it's only because it is. We must make internet security a community priority and a societal norm, to the extent that no one would consider having unfiltered and unreported internet access.

Filtering and Accountability

Let me outline the system that I feel *must* be in place on every computer that has internet access, whether at home or in the office. Again, the best solution is still to have no internet access in the first place, but in cases where that is not an option, we need to have a two-tiered security system comprised of filtering software and reporting software.

There are dozens of programs available, with varying levels of efficacy. Interestingly, many well-meaning non-Jews realize that the moral fabric of this country is decaying because of the terrible impact of the internet, and they are inventing software to combat the problem. So concerned are they about the problem that they are making their software available for free or for a nominal fee of \$10 or \$20 a month – a small price to pay when we realize what is at stake. Some programs do both filtering and reporting, and some do only one of the two; you can install more than one program on your system to provide comprehensive coverage.

Let me explain the purpose and operating method of each of the two types of software.

Filtering Software

The purpose of filtering software is to block inappropriate material from reaching your computer screen. Most filters will allow you to



“white list” the websites that you need to use, so that you can confine your internet access to the minimal number of websites that you really need. You can also “blacklist” specific sites that you don’t want people in your home to access. Aside from the white lists and blacklists, the filters use frequently updated information and advanced technology to scan websites and block those that contain offensive language and objectionable material.

HaRav Mattisyahu Salamon said that if the internet was around in the times of Chazal, they would have enacted an *issur yichud* upon it.



Unfortunately, though, the people who are attempting to spread *tumah* are very determined to get their filth through the filters, and they will stop at nothing. They create thousands of sites each day, many of which are designed to “out-smart” the filtering systems.

In addition, a determined child (or adult) can figure out a way to work around a filter so that he (or she) can get to the inappropriate material, or he can stumble on the password for the filter and disable it.

It is therefore imperative that you add the second layer of protection: a reporting system.

Reporting Software

Reporting software can track anything on your computer, down to each keystroke and click of the mouse if you set it up to do so. Its most important function, however, is to track website visits and searches. The software then gener-

ates a report and sends it to you and someone else via email. It is imperative that you send the report to someone who you will have difficulty facing if the report is unfavorable – a *chavrusa*, a Rebbi, or a rav.

I have made the following offer in public, and it stands for anyone reading this essay: if you cannot find someone with whom you are uncomfortable enough to send the reports to, I am willing to read your reports, as long as you are willing to accept some warm *divrei mussar* if I find something troublesome on a report. I already receive numerous reports each morning, many of which are for internet use of people I don’t even know. Each report takes me only a few seconds to read, because the first few lines of the report contain a brief synopsis – something to the effect of “looks good,” “report needs review,” or “report needs close review.”

Employing this two-tiered system is the only way to have internet access without presenting a clear and present danger to the sanctity of our homes. Many people who have suffered from an internet addiction have been cured after installing such software and being forced to face a rav or Rebbi who actually took the time to read the reports and contact their *mispallel* or *talmid* and discuss it, thus successfully weaning him off of the addiction.

A case in point is a fellow who came over to me after *Maariv* one night and asked to speak to me in private. He waited until all the other people who were waiting finished asking their *sh'eilos*, and then he sat down and said, “I am a regular, card-carrying member of the *frum* community. My children attend good yeshivos, I’m professional, I make plenty of money, I learn *daf yomi* each day, and... I have been addicted to the internet for several years.”

“I’m a lawyer,” he told me. “It is not considered strange for me to stay in the office until 11 or 12 o’clock at night. Little did anyone know that I

usually finished my work much earlier (due to the downturn in the economy) and I spent the rest of the time tearing apart my *neshamah*.”

Quite a résumé. I had to give him credit for coming in person. Most people with this problem call and discuss it anonymously over the phone.

“I need your help,” he continued. “I want to have the reports of my internet use sent to you.”

“I’ll be happy to have you send them to me,” I said, “but only on the condition that if I call you up and give you *mussar*, you’ll listen to me. If you are going to hate me for it or avoid my phone calls, then we are not going to accomplish much by having you send me reports.”

“I’m aware of the consequences,” he replied. “But I’ve heard from others using the system that it works very well, and I need help!”

This man has been on the filtering and reporting system for two months. The good news is that many of the reports were good. That bad news is that several weeks ago, the headline on the page read, “Report needs close review.”

I sent this man an email, “Please contact me ASAP!”

He wrote back, “I am having tremendous *bi-zyonos* (embarrassment) because of this, and it’s going to get better.”

I’m happy to report that it did get better. The last few reports have been much better.

Does this mean that he won’t cave to his *yetzer hara* ever again? No. But he knows that if he does slip, he’ll have some explaining to do, and that is a very powerful deterrent. It is a perfect application of R’ Yochanan ben Zakkai’s blessing to his students, “*Yehi ratzon sheyehei mora Shamayim aleichem kemora basar vadam* – May it be [Hashem’s] will that your fear of Heaven should be akin to your fear of a human.” Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to muster up enough *mora Shamayim* when it comes to

this *yetzer hara*, so we had better employ ‘the fear of getting caught’ (*mora basar vadam*) to boost our immunity.

I cannot overemphasize the need for the reporting software. Filtering is simply not enough. The people who invent these reporting programs consider it so vital that when you set up the options for the frequency at which the reports will be generated, you will notice that one of the options is to have a report sent every hour. If the team that created this software realized how dangerous the internet is, how much more so should we.

A Word on Passwords

One more important point regarding filtering and reporting software:

In order to set up these systems, you have to apply a password that allows you to control the level of filtering, the websites that you want to enable access to, and other features. It is imperative that the people most susceptible to this *yetzer hara* not be the ones to set up the password. If a lonely husband spending summer nights alone in the city finds himself in the vulnerable position of having access to a computer on which all he must do is enter a password and change the filtering levels, then we haven’t gained much by setting up the filtering system. One possibility is to have the husband and wife each enter a few of the characters in the password, so that neither of the two can make a change to the password without the other one’s knowledge. If that is not practical, have a neighbor or friend set up the password.

Toward Greater Productivity: Internet at Home

The art of “killing time” has been perfected through internet use. A simple search often turns into hours of nonsensical activity. It should be obvious that as *frum yidden* we must real-



ize that our job in life is to utilize all the precious time given to us for the *avodas Hashem* that we were created to do. Wasting time surfing the net, even if nothing improper is viewed, and no *lashon horah* is read, is akin to committing suicide with an installment plan. It is a crime to waste precious time on endless net-browsing for men who have

time also involves serious issues of *g'neivah* as well as loss of potential revenue for the firm. And if these sins are not in the realm of *Even Ezer* (which includes the sins associated with viewing improper sites), then they will be in the realm of *Choshen Mishpat*, because employees will waste company time surfing the net if they are left to their own devices.

It took a few weeks of intense nudging to convince the managing partner of the law firm to install an elaborate security system on his computer network. But once the system was installed, it took only a few days until he called me and said, "Rabbi Viener, I don't know how to thank you."

"Baruch Hashem!" I said. "You have the *tz'nius* under control?"

"Not yet," he said, "but I already fired three people. They were caught spending over 30% of their time on the internet—on my dime!"

I don't see why the CEO of any company – *frum* or not – wouldn't rush to install a filtering and reporting system on their computers. If for nothing else, it keeps honest people honest, and productivity will naturally go up—hopefully to the levels that it should be at in the first place.

Similarly, if you are an employee in a firm and you sit alone in an office with a computer that is not filtered, make sure to get the computer technician in your office to place a filtering and reporting system on your computer. If it is impossible to make such changes in your office, perhaps it is time to reevaluate your working there. Remember, turning the *Shechinah* away from you will only hurt your *parnassah* prospects.

A Note to Women

Chazal teach that women lead the way when it comes to maintaining the sanctity of the home. In *Parashas Bo*, Pharaoh offers to allow the men

to go serve *Hashem* in the wilderness, as long as the women and children would remain in *Mitzrayim*. In *Divrei Aggadah*, Harav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv explains that Pharaoh realized that if the men were allowed to serve *Hashem* on their own, they would not last long. They could only succeed if the women were backing and supporting them in their efforts.

Harav Elyashiv cites a *Midrash* as proof. The *Midrash* states that a righteous man was married to a righteous woman, and they did not have any children. They decided to divorce and they each married another person. The man married a wicked woman and he became wicked. The woman married a wicked man and she made him righteous. We see, concludes the *Midrash*, that "everything comes from the woman."

Women: I cannot overemphasize the difficult *yetzer hara* that the internet presents for your husbands and children. I don't want to cause *shalom bayis* issues, but trust me it is far easier to prevent the problem than to deal with it when it turns into a real issue, *chas v'shalom*.

Please do not assume that you are not in danger as well. Although women are generally not as susceptible to the *yetzer haras* that plague men, the enticing nature of the web can (and unfortunately does) ensnare both genders.

Nashim tzidkaniyos! Insist that the internet be removed from your home if it does not need to be there. If you must have internet access, see to it that a filter and reporting system be installed on all computers, Blackberries and iPhones. If your husband is resistant, speak to his Rav as soon as possible, because your husband may already be in trouble. If he doesn't have a Rav because he frequents too many shuls, make sure he finds one. Very few can win the battle without the help of a spiritual mentor.

Finally – and I address this exhortation to both parents and children – *daven*. *Daven* that your

efforts to maintain *k'dushas habayis* by protecting yourselves and your families from this terrible danger should succeed. Only with *tefillah* can our *hishtadlus* to raise *frum ehrliche Yidden* be met with *hatzlachah*.

I will end on an optimistic note. The fact that the *yetzer hara* has grown so strong in our time, in large part due to the influence of the internet, is a sure sign that *Mashiach* is on his way. Just before the time comes for the *yetzer hara* to be eradicated, *Hashem* is allowing him to unleash every tool in his arsenal to try to lead us astray. It is up to us to neutralize the *yetzer hara's* most powerful weapon, so that we merit to greet *Mashiach* with pure eyes, hearts, and minds.

A small sampling of the many filter and reporting programs available:

- **WebChaver:** www.webchaver.org
- **Jnet** – filter for computer, Blackberry and other mobile devices: www.thejnet.com
- **Eblaster** – very thorough reporting system: www.eBlaster.com
- **NetNanny** – www.NetNanny.com
- **Accountable2you (free):** www.accountable2you.com
- **WebSense** – an enterprise level product if you run a medium size business or larger: www.websense.com

For a rundown on these and other filter programs, see *internet-filter-review* at www.toptenreviews.com. Also, see the Re-Solutions section of this publication. ■

This boy explained that when he started failing in this area, he sank into a deep depression, certain that he was depraved and that no one else was struggling with this desire.



precious little time for their daily learning, and for busy women who struggle to find time for their children, *davening* or *chessed*.

Toward Greater Productivity: Internet in the Workplace

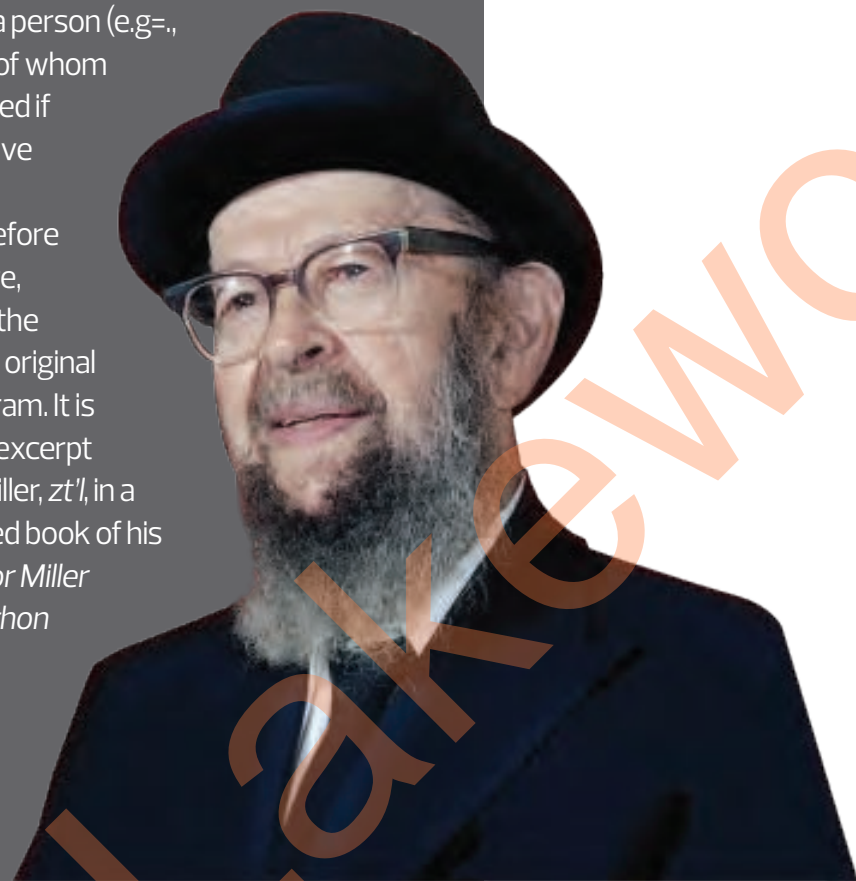
One fellow who came to discuss the problem of the internet with me is a lawyer who owns a large law firm. I told him that aside from the internet security system he must set up in his home, he must also put a security system in place in his office. If an employer has a computer system (for *Yidden* in the office), he may be transgressing, "*Lifnei iveir lo sitein michshol*" if he does not have a filtering and accountability system in place.

Although *lifnei iveir* applies only when it is certain (or very likely) that another person is going to sin because of your actions, in the case of the internet it is almost guaranteed that those working on an unprotected system will be misusing the computer. The misuse will not only be limited to improper viewing. Wasting company



The Best “Accountability” Program

We know that everyone who needs the internet needs ways of protecting themselves from unrestrictive use, and one of the best weapons in this battle is an “accountability” or “reporting” program. This is when all the websites one visits are recorded and sent to a person (e.g., friend or Rav) in front of whom one would feel ashamed if they were found to have visited inappropriate websites. Well, long before the advent of software, and even computers, the Jewish people had the original “accountability” program. It is presented here as an excerpt from Rabbi Avigdor Miller, *zt”l*, in a new, recently published book of his teachings: *Rav Avigdor Miller On Emunah And Bitachon* (Judaica Press in conjunction with the Simchas HaChaim Foundation).



QUESTION

When saying *Shema Yisrael*, what should you think about?

ANSWER

The first thing is *kavanah p'shuta*. You have to know the “simple translation” of the words and think about the words you’re translating. But I will give you a good suggestion [to go beyond *kavanah p'shuta*]. Every day you can add in another *peirush*, another layer of “meaning,” to that.

Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokainu Hashem Echad—*echad* means He is “One.” What does One mean? That if you will travel to the North Pole, *Hashem* is there. If you travel to the South Pole, He is there too—and in between, by the way. You can go all the way to the west or east—wherever you go you will find *Hashem*.

If you travel to Tokyo and are all by yourself in a hotel with a lot of money to spend and a lot of leisure time, know that *Hashem* is looking at you. You have to behave. If you go all the way to Hungary, in a hotel in the mountains, and have a lot of money—behave, because *Hashem* is looking at you. If you’re in the North Pole all by yourself—behave, because *Hashem* is looking at you. If temptations come your way, behave like He is on the spot—which He is. Think this thought every day. *Mizrach, maariv, tzafon, darom, maaloh umatah* [“East, west, north, south, up and down”]—He is One everywhere.

That is one *kavanah* [one meditation]. Do this for homework one day—and the next day think about the next *kavanah*: *Hashem Echad*, “*Hashem* is One”—there is only one interest in our lives. We have a lot of interests, but he is the One interest. When I go to work, it’s only *Hashem* that I am thinking about. When I get married—only for *Hashem*. When I am raising children—only for *Hashem*. When I eat—only for *Hashem*. Even when I *daven*, I am *davening* for *Hashem*. (It’s

a good idea, by the way, to remember *Hashem* when you *daven*.) And therefore, *echad* means: In all the things I do in this world, He is the only interest I have.

The next day, add a new *kavanah*, a new layer of meaning. Think *Hashem Echad* in the following terms. *Hashem* is in this world—*Atah hu b'Olam Hazeh, v'atah hu b'Olam Habah*, “You’re He who is in this world; and You’re He who is in the next world.” *Hashem* is in both worlds, this world and the next. Be aware of Him in this world and fulfill His *mitzvos*, because in the next world we will be together with Him too. You can’t take a dive off the Empire State Building and get rid of Him. No. *Im esak shamayim sham atah* — “If I will go up to the Heavens,” King David said in *Tehillim* (139:8), “there You are. If I will go down to the depths of the sea, there You are.”

Another layer of meaning you can have in the word *echad* is as follows: *Hashem*, You’re the only One that exists. Nobody exists in this world. Nothing exists. It’s all *Hashem’s* imagination. *Hashem* imagined the sun and it came into being. If He would withdraw His imagination there would be no sun. Think about that. When you look at the sun or moon you’re seeing only the *dvar Hashem*, the “word” of *Hashem*. *B'dvar Hashem shamayim nasu*—it’s only His word that you see (*Tehillim* 33:6). When He said *yehi*, “Let there be” (*Bereishis* 1:6), it came to be. That is all you see, the word of *Hashem*. There are no trees... no people... no houses... nothing. There is only *Hashem*. He is the only One that has real being, as the Rambam says in the beginning of *Hilchos Yesodai HaTorah*. *Hashem Elokim emes*—He is the only true being. *Hu levado emes*—He is the only One that is true. All the rest in the world is only imagination. [See also: *Sing, You Righteous*, para. 470–476.]

That is another meaning of *Echad*. In this manner, you can add another *kavanah* (“meditation”) every day in the word *Echad*. I gave you a few things to think about. When you finish with them see me for further homework.... ■



True Stories...



As told to the
Rabbonim and
Professionals
 who deal with victims
 of the internet

The following is a selection of some of the many stories of people who have fallen victim to the internet. They are far from the worst stories, but they reflect the broadest spectrum of people, experiences and communities.

The greatest problem with the internet epidemic is that it is a relatively invisible one. Yet, the destruction it leaves in its wake is often all too visible.

There are numerous tragic cases of those who shed belief in *Hashem* due to the internet's pernicious influence or whose addictions led them deep into the darkest abyss. Others seem normal on the outside but live behind a façade; they walk among us and dress like the typical *frum* person, but are corrupted to the core. For some, it is not enough to have become corrupted but they must spread their disdain through conversations and blogs posted on the internet (in English and/or in Yiddish), expounding upon demoralizing or heretical thoughts of their own making simmering inside them. Many who have not succumbed to this treacherous virus are infected nonetheless, some mildly and others more severely.

And yet, bad as we may think it is, the destructive influence of the internet is worse than people imagine. It is chilling to think about. Yet, this is the reality we live in.

The first step in dealing with this reality is... realizing that it is the reality—and just how profoundly it has affected lives. Therefore, we present a series of real-life stories about others who have fallen into the internet trap. One cannot imagine how many families have been affected. Aside from the spiritual dangers – which a person can mistakenly take less seriously because they are less tangible—these stories testify to the very real physical and financial perils also posed by the internet.

Please note that these stories have been cho-

sen for their relatively "benign" content. They are far from the worst. Yet, they reflect the experiences of all types of people, from all communities and from all walks of life.

How the Internet Ruined Me Financially

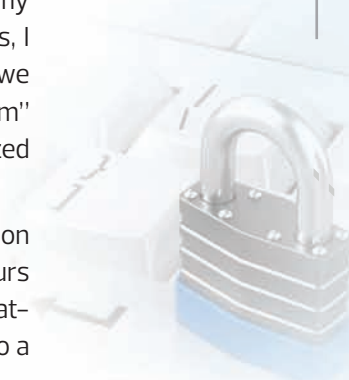
A chill runs up my spine as I recall the dismal levels to which I had sunk before *Hashem* guided me to the help I desperately needed in the nick of time.

It is unnecessary to relate the entire chain of events in all its gory details. It is enough that I describe to you just the tip of the iceberg, enough to help you imagine just how destructive this technology can be, sans the proper precaution.

It all started when I entered into a partnership with my friend, opening an online business together. I was delighted that I no longer had to haul heavy boxes or answer to a demanding boss. I was the luckiest person on earth, or at least that's what I thought.

At first, I would share an office with my partner as we worked together. After a while, however, I found myself alone in the office. While my partner was preoccupied with other activities, I was responsible for the computer work. And we became quite friendly, him and me, and by "him" I mean the internet. A bit too friendly, as I realized only much later.

I gradually became more and more hooked on this miracle technology, and I would spend hours upon hours in its tentacles. Everything fascinated me and I left nothing unexplored. It came to a



point that I simply did not have enough hours in my day to visit all my favorite websites, to chat with all my electronic friends, read all the interesting blogs and surf around the endless sea of the internet. I just had to spend every spare second I had in cyberspace. I would often tell my wife that I had to return to the office in the evening to finish up some business, and then I would sit there well past midnight, clicking my way through the great wide cyber world.

I had often heard *drashos* and read about the dangers of the internet, and I had always assumed that the only peril was accessing decadent and immoral sites. Now, however, I realize that just being addicted to the “benign” parts also posed serious problems. With my addiction to the web, I was only one step away from ruining my life. The *shalom bayis* in my home was adversely affected, I did not have a spare minute to spend with my children, and I had no peace of mind. I lived in my own isolated, fantasy island.

But I finally had my rude awakening when I was struck with a heavy financial blow. My partner eventually realized that I was fooling around and my part of the work was not getting done properly. One dark Wednesday, after an acrimonious exchange, I found myself without a partner and without a job.

I was stunned and shaken. My world had turned black, but I decided to keep the news from my family for as long as possible. Meanwhile, I still hadn't lost my other, more important partner: the internet. And this partner afforded me a full-time job. This was now my official occupation all day long. I fooled myself into thinking I would find other employment shortly. Obviously, however, you find nothing by floating through cyberspace, except for more problems.

My financial situation continued to go from bad to worse, as did my emotional equilibrium. I went through some terribly trying times I wouldn't wish on anyone, and I became embroiled in many other trials and tribulations that I would rather not talk about. I will only tell you the fortunate



It came to a point that I simply did not have enough hours in my day to visit all my favorite websites, to chat with all my electronic friends, read all the interesting blogs and surf around the endless sea of the internet.

conclusion to my story, which took place when a relative got involved and helped me find employment. The new job did not come with the greatest salary, and was pretty similar to my first job—hauling boxes, but I was happy. Yes, I still had that powerful yearning to sit in front of a computer, but in my heart I knew that this was the only way to keep from falling into the trap again. The suffering I sustained was enough to convince me beyond a doubt that the internet was no game, and it could totally ruin an entire family forever.

Dear friend, if your job necessitates sitting at a computer, do everything you can to ensure you will not get addicted and lose yourself to

the world of the internet. Don't let yourself be trapped or you might just end up paying for it with all that is near and dear to you. And you will have no one to blame but yourself.

Hitting Rock Bottom

Undoubtedly, we have all heard and read about the evils of the internet with its inherent pitfalls and dangers. And, quite likely, there are those among us who are tempted to think that these “alarmists” are surely exaggerating. They must be taking things way out of context!

Well, as someone who has learned the hard way, I am now painfully aware that these “alarmists” are in fact realists – with one caveat: If anything, they are *understating* the perils of the internet, probably because most of them have not been personally exposed to it, and therefore cannot possibly know all the sordid and gory details. Otherwise, they would surely leave no stone unturned to eradicate this dreadful plague.

Allow me to share my story with you:

It all began with a BlackBerry back when I was a *kollel yungerman*, fully supported by my father-in-law, unencumbered by any burden of *parnasah*. I am by nature an inquisitive type and my BlackBerry, with its ready access to the internet, swiftly opened new vistas for me. All my free time (as well as my not so free time) was spent searching and surfing the web. This was a big, broad new world and I just couldn't get enough of it.

Eventually, I found the BlackBerry's small screen rather inadequate. In order to satisfy my insatiable desire to experience ever more, I approached a friend of mine who had a small office that he only used for a couple of hours a day and got permission to use it. I ended up spending so much time there at his computer that my friend once remarked jokingly that he almost felt like an intruder when he came by to conduct his business there. That clinched it for me. I couldn't con-

tinue to abuse my friend's goodwill and take advantage of his kindness. I would have to get my own office!

And so I did. I rented a tiny cubicle of an office – just enough to accommodate me... and my computer. It goes without saying that now I was able to spend unlimited time at my beloved computer. So much so that that diminutive office soon became my second home. Or, better said, my primary home.

It was as if I was glued to my chair in front of the computer and nothing could entice me to leave it. And when I absolutely had to leave, i.e. to go home for dinner or the like, it was always with much reluctance, and I impatiently schemed how I could quickly return to the magic of the screen.

Not surprisingly, this addiction came at a cost. It is of course impossible to spend so many hours on the unfiltered internet, no holds barred, without becoming ensnared in the web – both figuratively and literally. For a long time, its influence remained subtle. I still recited *berachos* and still *davened* (more or less). But, my heart and soul were not in it. I was but a shell of the man I had once been, and I did everything by rote without any real feeling.

Initially, I wanted desperately to believe that I was still the same *ehrliche yid*. It was a long time before I realized the stark truth – that the *tumah* of the internet and *kefirah* are intertwined. For after all, when one allows his eyes and heart to wander after the depravity of the net while he is safely ensconced in the privacy and solitude of his home or office, he is essentially expressing pure *kefirah*. He is intrinsically denying the presence of a much higher force, *Hakodosh Baruch Hu*, because if he would be aware that *Hakodosh Baruch Hu* sees and hears everything, he certainly would never have had the guts to click on that mouse. But, at the time, I was so bogged down in filth that such reasoning was beyond me.

Slowly but surely, I lost every vestige of *yiras shamayim*. At first I would only miss a *mincha* or



a *maariv*, and then a *shacharis*. Eventually, it got to the point where I did not step into *shul* from one *Shabbos* to the next. My wife, of course, was blissfully oblivious to this tragic turn of events. As far as she was concerned, her husband's schedule included *shacharis*, *mincha*, *maariv*, as well as several hours in *kollel*. I felt myself sinking deeper and deeper into a quagmire of decadence and deception. But I was too powerless to extricate myself. Every now and then I would experience fleeting pangs of remorse, but my behavior continued unchanged.

This went on until *Rosh Chodesh Elul* when my brother made a *bris* for his newborn son in *shul*, which I absolutely had to attend – my absence would have been too obvious. After *davening*, the *gabbai* took out the *shofar* and blew *tekiah*, *teruah*, *tekiah*. Somehow, the sound of the *shofar* struck a chord in my heart, and I was gripped by an almost palpable *pachad*. Where was I headed? What would become of me? How low could one sink? But sadly, the *yetzer horah*, tapping into the power of my addiction, quickly quashed these thoughts.

And then came *Yom Kippur*, the holiest day of the year. At one point in the middle of *davening*, I paused to take stock of my *ruchnius*, or lack of same. I was overcome by a sudden surge of profound regret. I let my tears flow unabashedly as I thought about my abysmal state. Would *Hashem* ever forgive me? By *motzei Yom Kippur* I felt cleansed. I experienced a measure of tranquility that had eluded me for months.

I wish I could tell you that I then turned over a new leaf and never looked at the internet again. But sadly, the fact of the matter was that the very next day, one day after *Yom Kippur*, I was once again seated in front of the computer surfing the internet. It was as if I was part of the internet.

I'd rather not detail the anguish that my family and I suffered because of my addiction. Suffice it to say that after a long and painful odyssey, I did recover, but only because I had the *siyattah dish-*



Somehow, the sound of the shofar struck a chord in my heart, and I was gripped by an almost palpable pachad. Where was I headed? What would become of me? How low could one sink?

maya to encounter a group of people who dedicated their time and resources to helping people like me overcome addictions.

Today, I spend much of my time doing *teshuvah* and being *mispallel* that *Hashem* forgive me for all that I have wrought. But I know only too well that the decadence and indecency that I have imbibed will not soon dissipate and will always come back to haunt me. I no longer have a computer, but I do have a BlackBerry, albeit with a J-net filter.

If only I could turn back the clock, I would know now that internet addiction is not to be taken lightly. It is as corruptive as it is addictive, and it is far easier to be ensnared in the "net" than to extricate oneself from it. Trust me. I know.

When I Lost My Husband

It is not easy to talk about it, but it is crucial for people to hear about the havoc that the internet can leave in its wake. Until recently, I would never have believed that the internet could so effectively destroy someone. Even today, I do not entirely comprehend the powerful grip it could extend to the point that a normal intelligent person loses complete control of himself. But, simply put, it happened to me.

Ever since my husband acquired a computer with internet connection, I basically lost him. In the beginning, I didn't realize how far matters could go. I didn't want to nag him about it and always pull him away from the computer. I thought I was being nice, but as time went on, however, things only became worse, to the point where I couldn't pull him away even when I desperately wanted to.

When I sometimes took it upon myself to look into just what he was doing on the computer, I realized that pursuits in cyberspace were simply endless: he would search for information on various products, scroll through dozens of news websites, peruse politics (both within the Jewish community and in the world at large), view all kinds of clips (i.e., weddings of Chassidic Rabbis, silly tricks and stunts and other nonsense), chat with pals he befriended on the internet (for which he even set up a microphone system), play games for hours on end, manage bank accounts, do computer-related favors for family members like finding the cheapest prices for anything they might want to purchase, Googling any phone number or address they needed, and providing them with computerized directions to any destination. And last but not least, checking for new emails every few seconds and then forwarding them on to others.

I felt he was interested in everything in the world except me. I simply did not hold his interest. On the rare occasions that he wasn't sitting at the computer, he was playing with his iPod.

He just had to be connected to technology every second of the day. I already knew that "I'll be done in five minutes" often meant endless hours. Even when he said that at midnight, I knew that he still had countless websites to browse before he could part with his computer.

Strangely enough, he didn't at all consider himself an internet addict, since he was always busy "getting things done" on the computer. But someone who is familiar with addictions once explained to me that an addict cannot bring himself to stop what he's doing for any price. And it was clear that this was my husband's reality. It had taken over his entire life – and I remained alone.

I felt helpless. I had no idea how to deal with it. You sometimes hear the term "living orphans." I was a married divorcee. I was alone in the world. I had no one to share my life with – no one with whom to share the pleasure of seeing our child take his first step or saying his first words. My husband just wasn't unavailable. He was like a piece of wood, an inanimate object, with the exception that he ate and slept.

And if you think this was the worst it got, read on.

My husband's addiction quickly spiraled out of control. It might have started innocently, but after a while he began visiting "unacceptable" websites, to put it mildly, and that was when his addiction reached its climax. He simply couldn't tear himself away from the screen. He was so attached to the internet that he neglected his job. Needless to say, it wasn't long before he was fired.

But if you think that was enough to jolt him out of his addiction and make him realize the dire straits he was in, you are mistaken. In fact, it was just the opposite. Now he had nothing to keep him from his addiction. He stopped supporting the family altogether. We subsisted completely on government assistance, which was obviously not enough to feed a family, pay the rent, elec-

tricity and water bills. But he didn't care. I pleaded and cajoled, but to no avail. It was as if I was talking to the wall.

He kept a crazy schedule. He woke up in the morning, rummaged through the pantry and the fridge, looking for food. Then he went into his computer room, locked the door and remained inside all day. He browsed the most depraved of websites and watched a host of immoral films. In the evenings, he came out and gruffly demanded dinner. After devouring his meal in solitude, he returned to his dark world and once again isolated himself from his family and the rest of the normal world. There was no "good night" to the children, no questions about how their day had been. Nothing. Zero.

I cannot begin to tell you how many tears I shed during that period of my life. I wept and grieved, but kept my pain to myself. I was ashamed to speak to anyone about it, and I tried my best to ensure the children didn't feel they were lacking something because they didn't have a father.

And so I suffered in silence until it came to a point that I could no longer keep quiet. One day, my husband apparently forgot to lock the door of the computer room, and one of the children abruptly pushed the door open.

My husband leaped up and tried to cover the screen, but it was too late. To this day, I don't know just what the child saw. But, my husband lunged out of the room, ranting like a madman. How come I couldn't take proper care of the children? Why couldn't I teach them not to bother their father when he was busy? That was when I fell apart. The fact that it had come to a point where my children's spiritual and physical well-being was in jeopardy because their father was addicted to the worst of the internet broke me completely, and I decided that the time had come to demand a divorce.

Dear mothers and wives, don't let it come to that. Don't let your family go to ruin because of

the poisonous internet. It is bitter and painful. Save your *shalom bayis* before it is too late.

Little Anecdotes of Internet Victims

A businessman relates:

We once encountered a problem with our computers at the office. Everything began going ever so slowly and freezing. I needed to call an internet technician. His diagnosis was that a virus had entered through one computer and infected the entire network. He found the computer that had started it all, which belonged to a certain young man who had been working at the company for many years.

After taking care of the problem, he showed me the history of that computer, which included everything our employee had been up to. It emerged that this employee had been spending hours on countless websites that had no connection to his work duties. And I had only become aware of this after he had been working here for three years! (As an aside, according to the computer technician, the virus had entered the computer through one of the decadent websites.)

I was surprised that I hadn't caught onto it earlier, and I couldn't even say that I would've guessed it from the young man's demeanor. I had never even suspected him.

I immediately summoned the culprit and summarily informed him that he was no longer welcome to work at our office. I also told him that he might want to ask a Rav if he wasn't required to compensate us for the many hours he stole from the business. He broke down, crying and pleading with me to give him another chance. I did not have the heart to refuse him, and I agreed to give him another chance. But I immediately limited his internet access by creating a whitelist, which only allowed him access to specific, pre-approved sites. I only regret that I hadn't done it three years earlier.



I felt he was interested in everything in the world except me. I simply did not hold his interest.... He just had to be connected to technology every second of the day.

A woman relates:

Years ago when I was in school, we had computers on which we learned to use various programs like Word, Excel, etc.

Several students, 16- and 17-year-old girls, came up with a way to connect the computers to the internet. Incredibly, this occurred in one of our *heimishe* schools.

They didn't get very far with it and they did it more for the thrill of it, not because they were actually bent on searching the internet. But it was enough to demonstrate that even in school, where one would imagine that our children are most secure, the girls managed to access the internet. The school administration is probably still unaware of this incident.

A young man relates:

Years ago, my father had a computer in our house. After hearing so much about the havoc such a hazardous piece of technology could wreak on a home, he decided to throw it out. I tried to convince him that it wasn't necessary, that we only used it once in a while to play games, but he persisted. That night, he followed through on his word, and discarded the computer in the trash.

I was still a young *bachur*, but I knew enough about computers to understand that I could get "my money's worth" from this. The following day, I awoke at dawn and retrieved the computer from the trash and brought it into our cluttered, rarely-used basement.

Now it was all mine. Over the next few years, I wasted countless hours sitting at that computer. I spent many hours with that old computer and tried to fix it myself on countless occasions, and with time I became a real expert in computers. Today, my skill has led me to become a computer technician.

My father did not dream, at least not until after my wedding, that this is what his actions had brought me to. But for me, it was a real lesson about how one can never be too careful. Though he had decided to take the warnings to heart and throw the computer out, it was already too late. I had found a way to outsmart him.

Another lesson I learned from this story: if there is something I don't want my children to have, I discard it in a dumpster *far away* from my house.... Seriously, in my home today, though it's not easy, we don't have a computer at all. Nobody has to convince me that children can often outsmart their parents.

A man told us:

I always wondered about my neighbor who had teenagers in the house and a computer with internet access. I actually liked the fact that when I needed internet access from time to time I could



go to his house and use his computer. However, I often took the father to task, warning him about the dangers of the internet, and questioning his awareness of the perils it posed in a home.

He always waved my concerns away, assuring me that he knew all about how to protect his children. He was himself computer-savvy and controlled the amount of time they spent on it. He would also explain that his children were good, *ehrllich* and obedient and were not even interested in the bad stuff. In short, they would not be hurt by the computer.

After a while, I moved away from the neighborhood, so I don't know exactly how events unfolded. But I do know that today, all those good, *ehrlliche* children look very different these days. Some of the boys have fallen far away from *Yiddishkeit* and the daughters do not bring much *nachas* to the family, either.

Every time I see these adult children and the state they are in, it breaks my heart. I remember the father's self-assurance and I can't get over how drastically they have changed. Sometimes I even blame myself for not being more persistent in my warnings to the father. It is a vivid, painful lesson for me every day.

A father relates:

We had a laptop in our home which we used for various things, but it wasn't connected to the internet. At least that's what we thought.

Imagine how stunned we were when our young *bachur*, part of a new generation that knows much more about technology than we do, discovered the fact that the laptop can pick up internet signals from the neighbor's internet service. (Wi Fi.)

We caught him red-handed several weeks after his discovery. He really is an innocent kid and only used it to play around and for harmless nonsense. But the potential for danger was not lost on me. I couldn't throw the computer out because we really needed it, but we locked it up very securely and also asked the neighbor



One Sunday, with her parents away, the girl invited a classmate and friend to join her in her activities on the internet. This went on for a year and a half....

whose internet my son had been able to tap into, to do something about his internet connection.

I don't want to think about what could have happened if we hadn't caught on in time....

A man tells us that his friend, a *ben Torah* in his fifties with a large family of older children, once asked if he could come up to his office to download *Shas* from the computer onto a CD. The man readily agreed.

So this *ben Torah* arrived at the office around 5 o'clock in the afternoon and began downloading. The downloading process was supposed to take about two hours, and our man had to leave the office. He told his friend he was leaving and that when he was done he could shut the computer and lock the door.

The next morning, at about 6 AM, when the owner came back to work, he noticed that the

light in the window was on. He was sure that his friend had left it on by mistake. When he entered the office, his shock knew no bounds when he found his friend still sitting at the computer, glued to the screen. The *ben Torah* blushed and mumbled some excuse about having problems with the downloading and how everything took much longer than expected. He excused himself and left the office.

Curious, the owner checked his computer and discovered that the *Shas* had finished downloading at nine o'clock the previous evening. When he searched the history to see what his friend had been busy with for so many hours, he was shocked. Apparently, his *ehrlliche*, middle-aged friend had spent a whole night prowling the internet and visiting sites that were far from appropriate for any *yirei shamayim*.

He decided to be frank with his friend and ask him about it. His friend shamefully admitted that he did in fact have serious problems every time he found himself with access to the internet....

"It shook me to the very core to realize that the internet can entrap even people of his caliber," the man told us. "I would never have believed it. I had always wondered why people were making such a hullabaloo over the internet while it didn't pose any serious problems for me. But today, I understand it all too well. I asked my son-in-law to put a good filter on his smart phone and in return promised to pay his entire cell phone bill. I can tell you this much, that if I were a wealthy man the first thing I would do with my money would be to sponsor J-net or any other good internet filter for every single Jew. I would even fund the telephone bills of those who put filters on their phones. It is, in my opinion, the greatest mitzvah one can perform with his money today.

A family had a computer at home, locked in the father's private room. The parents were completely secure with the knowledge that none of the children had any access to it. The reality, however, was very different.

One evening, the parents left for a *simchah*, leaving their older daughter home to babysit. After a while, she became bored and entered her father's private room. It didn't take her long to locate the key, and she sat down to spend some time at the computer.

The next time her parents left for the evening, she had already formulated her plan and quickly made herself comfortable at her father's computer. Gradually, the enjoyment of it began to grow on her, until she actually began looking forward to the times she would have to babysit. The girl was 15 at the time.

One Sunday, with her parents away, the girl invited a classmate and friend to join her in her activities on the internet. This went on for a year and a half, with the girl spending every second she could on the internet, and her friend joining her whenever possible. The friend also began bringing along CDs she had picked up somewhere. Then, the father took the computer out of the home, not because he suspected anything but because he had switched jobs and needed the computer at work.

The parents never discovered what had happened until she revealed it to them after she was married. They found it difficult to believe that their young daughter was able to pull that off. "But they would find it far more difficult to believe the kinds of things I did on the internet," the woman tells us. "I have never told them the details; it would break their hearts. But it would certainly help them understand some of my behavior at that time for which they didn't have any explanation then. They can now also understand why I always urged them to go out at night because 'I just loved babysitting.'"

"Believe me," she concludes, "not only do I bar any computer or internet from my home, but I was against my husband taking a job with internet access. In the end, I was forced to give up my battle and J-net was installed at a very high, restrictive setting. Even with all that, it still bothers me. I know all too well what the internet is all about." ■





Challenge of the Times

Every epoch has its challenges. Every generation has its demons. When thinking about a terrible era such as the Holocaust we may think that we have it easy. And we may... in many ways. But that only makes the challenge of our times that much more deceptively difficult. Make no mistake about it: today's challenge in many ways is the most difficult in history. Certainly, if we don't recognize the challenge for what it is and do something about it, it threatens to sweep us away like a tsunami. Yes, that challenge is the internet – the easy connectivity we have to the world, including its worst influences. No one can uproot the internet from our lives, but working together we can neutralize the threat...



In the course of our wanderings over the last two millennia, the Jewish people have been beset by the most brutal enemies: Romans, Crusaders, Inquisitors, Cossacks, Czars, Emperors, Sultans, Nazis, Palestinian terrorists, Ahmadinejad.... Did I leave anyone out?

Over the past two centuries, particularly in America in the past 50 years, Jews were faced with a new challenge: assimilation. Gone are Pharaoh, Haman and Hitler. In their place is emancipation and freedom. Rather than cowering from the stick, now we are enticed by the carrot.

With emancipation, the Jew was offered enticing opportunities to partake of the greater culture. He sat at Achashverosh's table, so to speak, alongside the other nations, being wined and dined on the delights of the modern world. To the early assimilationists, it was the dawning of a new era, a dream come true. They were proud to become lost in the new European culture and then in the American melting pot.

However, eventually Jews realized that in partaking of this newly found emancipation, they slowly began to lose their sense of a unique destiny, their special role in the larger world. Moreover, the emancipators turned out to be not as sincere and not as friendly as they first thought. The more the Jew succeeded in the Gentile's world, the more he became an object of scorn. And then came the Holocaust.

Our rise from the ashes has indeed been astounding, unprecedented in the history of the world. A small core of dedicated and sincere Jews became the seed of a new beginning. Gedolim and leading layman fought valiantly to create a comprehensive infrastructure of Torah institutions to educate the next generation. They oversaw the implementation of guidelines for behavior in our newest home in America. They strove to rebuild the sense of a Jewish

community, an identity that would protect our distinction as the nation of G-d.

Instead of collapsing, our people have thrived like never before. Yeshivos, kolelim, Bais Yaakovs and shuls sprouted up all over, and Torah study and observance are on a scale perhaps not seen for over a century. It was all over. Attempts to break the Jewish people failed miserably.

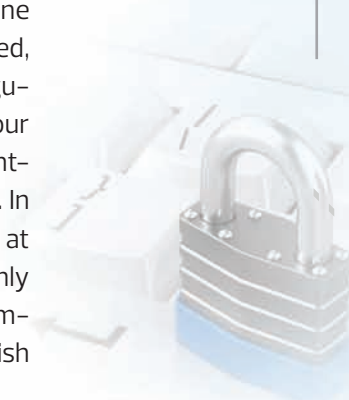
Until the internet....

Instead of beguiling the Jews to leave the safety of their homes and blend in to their surroundings, the surroundings are being brought right into our homes! Remain in your own home, in a separate Jewish community. No need to change your clothes to fit in, no need to give up your Shabbos cholent. Keep lighting your menorah. Keep going about every aspect of your life as a fine Jew. No need to go out and buy a television, only to have to hide it from your neighbors. No video screen, not even a computer! We have it down to a palm-sized device, right there masquerading as your innocent cell phone. No one will ever know. Just keep it safely in your pocket until everyone is out of sight. Now, take it out, look for that info you needed to find and....

Bam!

Got you!

Every sin ever invented all wrapped up in one pocket-sized device. Even if you're discovered, you can always excuse yourself with the argument that you absolutely must use it for your business. And there are so many Torah-oriented activities and sites that you want to visit. In fact, who said you will ever need to misuse it at all? Just mind your own business and look only at what you need. Outwardly, you may resemble a Jew, but inwardly there is nothing Jewish about you.



Of all the many traps facing the Jewish people in its long trek through history, none has come close to this latest ruse. The best has been saved for last. Just as *Mashiach* finally seems to be perched on the doorstep, the most potent poison of all is released. And the devastation it is leaving in its wake is absolutely horrifying.

Challenging Times

Hashem, in His infinite wisdom, saw fit to allow the internet to be introduced in our day and age. It is our weak generation, battered by the tests of so many centuries, that is being confronted with the *nisayon* of modern technology. Yet the Torah response is timeless. There is no question that unnecessary and/or unfiltered use of the internet is completely forbidden, no ifs, ands or buts.

Why then is it that we don't automatically wrinkle our noses in disdain whenever we see it? Why don't we avoid it with the same implicit disgust with which we would run from pork? The answer is that the internet question has been settled de facto. The internet has already wended its way into our daily lives, into

our conscience, and it is no longer possible to simply uproot it from our midst.

The internet not only exposes things going on around the world, but also creates virtual realities that do not exist anywhere else. It is estimated today that there are around 366 million websites. If only 1% of them were *treife*, that would still mean more than 3.5 million forbidden sites. In reality, the overwhelming majority include forbidden text, images and ideas. How

then can we in good faith walk around with such a powerful tool for *aveira* without the slightest bit of protection and still consider ourselves responsible Jews?

Even those who are compelled by their work to access the internet must treat it with the proper caution it demands. Would anyone choose to stand in a bull ring for one second more than necessary if there were a wild bull raging? Or, in the words of the late Rosh Yeshiva Harav Reuven Grozovsky זצ"ל, would any person in his right mind remain for one extra second amid the unpleasant stench of an out-house? Each time a person connects to the internet he must realize that he is standing at the edge of a precipice and the fall is so far that the ground below cannot even be seen. "גיהנם פתוח לו תחתיו"—The depths of Hell are revealed beneath him."

Statistics show that a typical browser changes screens every two minutes. Links permit one to connect to new sites tens of times a minute. If one site does not catch you, the next one will. Surfing the web means dodging burning coals as they are falling from the sky like hail. What are the chances of avoiding burns? Of emerging alive?

All-In-One

The purpose of the internet, as envisioned by the technicians who created it and the government officials who promoted it, is to create an "information superhighway" by which all people everywhere can share ideas and information with everyone else. Its very nature then, is to connect diverse elements and bring everything together.

From the perspective of a Jew who knows that his purpose in the world is to serve his

Creator, this means that the internet is also a tool to provide access to every type of vice to which a human may stoop. The internet provides an opening for each person to fall prey to his unique weaknesses.

Let's take the individual who has a weak spot for gossip. He or she just loves to hear what is going on in the world and in the neighbor's home, and cannot hold back from sharing this gossip with others. One day he discovers the internet and now he has a means of gathering slander from all over the world and sharing it with millions of potential listeners. Business has never been so good!

Another person has a hot temper and is constantly getting into fights and disagreements with others. Words fly bitterly and it is only by a miracle that the fists do not join in. Now that person is introduced to the Word Wide Web. Instead of sleeping on the matter and cooling down by the following day, they can act immediately by sharing their anger with millions of others instantaneously. The flames of *machlokes* can be fanned like never before.

The impulsive shopper no longer has to wait for good weather and the availability of the car to head for the nearest mall and spend a day throwing out hard-earned money on expensive items that will never be used. There isn't even an opportunity to sleep on a decision. At the press of a few buttons they can have the thrill of spending more than they could ever afford without even having to get out of bed!

The person with a weak spot for inappropriate entertainment need not risk exposure by

heading to the seedy side of town. It's all available at any time right in one's own home. And the list goes on....

Because it is always accessible, 24/7, a person need not be entirely dissolute to be trapped. You can stand strong day after day and resist the temptation to sin. The internet is patient and will wait quietly to manipulate you in your moment of weakness. Thirty days may go by without sinning. Don't worry. The internet will still be there for you on day 31. You had a hard day and need something to distract your mind, and just when you let your guard down... everything is there just for you.

You recoil from what you see and pulling yourself together you log off. But the internet is a difficult enemy to shake. The memory of what you saw and the thrill you felt will nag at you. You just have to see it again—but you won't look at anything else. You return to that site, but it doesn't give you the same rush as the first time. One more second, there's something else here that looks really interesting... you are trapped in the web.

Whereas in the past, weak individuals sinned in private, today they drag others along with them. The internet has raised the science of temptation to all new heights.

Look at the prayer we recite after the morning's daily *berachos*: יהי רצון מלפניך שתצילנו היום — "Save us today and every day from the brazen, from brazenness, from wicked people... and from the destructive Satan...." Is there any item on that

A Jew who enters this crowd can circulate without his yarmulke, with no identifying features to brand him as a member of the holy nation



list that cannot be found in all its graphic glory on the internet?

The Terrible Virus

If users would contract a fatal disease each time they logged on to the internet, there would be no need for a mass symposium to describe the danger to the public. The internet would instantly be outlawed. Sadly, users are dropping like flies; we just don't see it.

We have all heard individual stories of wholesome youths who became troubled after experiencing the internet. *Shabbos*, yeshiva and the practice of Judaism all fell to the wayside. We have heard even more horrifying stories of families that have been irrevocably destroyed as a result of the internet. We cluck and shake our heads. It's too bad that 1% of our people are being burned.

But wait, is it really just 1%? Or are we lulling ourselves into a false sense of security? According to those who work with troubled youths, the rate is far higher. So say also those who deal with *shalom bayis* issues. And the *dayanim* who serve on the *Bais Din* for *gittin*. And the *rabbonim* who are involved in all of these cases and more. It becomes apparent that the true toll of internet casualties is higher, probably shockingly higher, than any of us can imagine. What we have seen and heard is only the tip of the iceberg.

We must realize that to be honest with ourselves we cannot count only those who have openly dropped their former lifestyle as a result of internet exposure. There are many who con-

tinue to go through their daily lives as before, continue to go through the motions of maintaining the Torah observant way of life, yet inside they have rotted completely.

How many boys continue to attend yeshiva, how many girls continue to attend Bais Yaakov, yet their hearts and minds are plugged up by what they have learned elsewhere. The delicacies they are served by their *rabbeim* and *mosros* cannot compete with the junk food and pork they gorge in secrecy. The young man who sits next to you in shul with *tallis* and *tefillin* may feel completely estranged from his own actions as a result of tasting from the illicit waters. These people are going through the motions, while on the inside they have hardened into something not Jewish.

It begins with running late for *davening*; next the daily *shiur* is dropped. How many mothers and wives learned only months later that the all-important *shiur* was really a daily *chavrusa* with Mr. Internet? *Minchah* falls to the wayside and eventually the entire façade is dropped. Why bother dressing as a *frum* Jew when there is nothing *frum* about the person anymore?

And that only covers the people who have been destroyed entirely. What about all those who use the internet at work and only "occasionally" come across inappropriate material? If only we could have all internet users fill out a secret poll about how many times they chanced upon disgusting photos, *lashon hara*, immoral movies and clips, we would learn very quickly just how safe internet use really is. Better yet: How many *frum* internet users would willingly submit to having the log of all the websites they visited in the past 12 months publicized for the entire world to see?

The first alarm was raised, in fact, by computer technicians. They are the only ones who have free access to view what their fellow Jews

were doing in the privacy of their own offices and homes. When they began to realize what seemingly respectable men and women were stooping to, they ran to the *rabbonim* crying, "We are in deep, deep trouble!"

Everyone knows that it is dangerous to log onto the internet without any antivirus protection. There are literally thousands of worms, viruses, Trojan horses and other forms of spyware that are out to get you. They steal your personal information, destroy your computer and expose you to criminals who are there to hurt you and take advantage of you. Does exposing yourself to even worse spiritual dangers deserve any less concern?

Deadly Attraction

107 Trillion.

With a "T."

No, we're not talking about the federal deficit. We're talking about the number of e-mails that were sent over the past decade. That averages nearly 30 billion e-mail messages per day. Admittedly, the vast majority of those are junk mail, receipts and automatic responses, but there are still plenty of messages left over to keep people busy all day.

Add to that 152 million blogs, 25 billion Twitter messages that are sent out per year, 50 billion notices on Facebook per month, 2 billion videos viewed on YouTube per day, over 5 billion photos already posted on Flickr, another 36 billion pictures that are uploaded to another popular site each year, the over 366 million websites now in existence and millions more that are being added each year.

The above information should give you an idea of how many billions of hours are being spent on nonsense or worse by the estimated 2

billion internet users around the globe. It should also bear witness to the terrible addiction which results from connecting to this universe of information.

These statistics should also go a long way toward explaining why no self-respecting Jew who is aware of his elevated status and purpose in this world has any business wiring his mind to the rest of the world's population. If so many precious hours are being wasted by the general population, how many Jewish hours were lost?

Just how addictive is the internet? Studies have been performed to discover how strong the attraction is. In one such survey, a majority of participants responded that they would sooner give up all of their other interests and pleasures rather than give up the internet. Another study of 20,000 people in 20 developed countries showed that 73% would give up alcohol to keep the internet. 10% were prepared to give up driving to retain internet access. 83% would let go of buying prepared food products....

Let's face it. Plenty of internet users readily skip a breakfast, a lunch or a dinner because they cannot tear themselves away from the screen. That means the web is more important to them than nutrition. That is what we call in English an addiction.

In one extreme case, a couple in Korea would spend 12 hours a day away from home on the internet. They would run home once a day to feed their three-year-old daughter. She died of dehydration and malnutrition. There have been incidents of people who assaulted and even shot others for posting negative comments or embarrassing photos about them. One 15-year-old shot his own father after his internet privileges were revoked. The problem of the internet being used by teenagers to attack and ridicule others and the resulting emo-

It's too bad that 1% of our people are being burned. But wait, is it really just 1%? Or are we lulling ourselves into a false sense of security?



tional issues has become so alarming that in 2006 the CDC (Center for Disease Control, a federal agency) called a conference to address the crisis.

While all these cases involve non-Jews, it is important to realize that we are playing the same game of Russian roulette as they are. The consequences cannot possibly lag far behind. It has been documented in the medical world that internet users who are blocked access to the web suffer the same physical withdrawal symptoms as hard-core drug abusers. In one case, students were denied access entirely and 79% reported suffering severe edginess and depression. It would be extremely foolish for anyone to convince themselves that they are above internet addiction.

The Jewish world has suffered its share as well. In one case, several years ago, a man was spending night and day tied to his screen. His wife complained that she could not go on living with a husband like that and he would have to choose between the internet and his family. By then it was too late. He chose the internet.

But the situation does not have to be so extreme. Even those who do not drop out of life entirely find that the internet has them bound up sufficiently to materially interfere with their lives. When a parent sits down to supper with one hand holding the fork and the other his smartphone, from which he cannot unglue his eyes, that parent may be sitting with the family in a technical sense, but the children realize they are technology orphans. Their emotional needs cannot compete with the lure of the web.

When a mother sits down with her children

in a restaurant and spends the entire time talking on her phone, she is guilty of committing the same crime of abandoning her children. (I only witnessed this recently, but I'm sure it is a daily event.) And if the father must check his phone first thing after arriving home *motzaei Shabbos* before even bothering to wish his family "Gut voch," then they are essentially fatherless.

Technology has also reduced everything we take seriously to the mere butt of a joke. This past *Tisha B'Av*, by the time we got up from the nighttime reading of *Eichah*, there were political translations of the *Megillah*, pictures of various rabbis sitting on their stools and text messages making light of the mourning circulating all over.

Imagine what the *Seder* night would look like had the Torah not have forbidden *melachos* that include the use of electronic items. The father in his *kittel* would interrupt his recital to e-mail a clip of the youngest reciting "Mah Nishtana" with that cute lisp. The account of our slavery and delivery from *Mitzrayim* would take second place to the texts poking fun at the most meaningful aspects of the evening.

This widespread irreverence completely undermines our *chinuch*. It has eroded our most basic values and created an atmosphere in which nothing we preach is taken seriously. It is destroying us as a nation of servants of *Hashem* in a way that nothing we have ever faced before could have done.

World Fair

Imagine that once each a year a major international fair is held at the Javitz Conference Center in Manhattan. People from all over the world get together for several days to share business ideas, exchange news, meet friends and just enjoy themselves. For the sake of equality, everyone dresses similarly and wears

a name tag that may or may not reflect the name they go by at home.

It sounds like a wonderful thing, cultural dissemination and all. But after the first year, the reputation the conference earns is not as rosy as its promoters would like to have the unsuspecting public believe. Sure, there's plenty of business opportunities being exchanged, people find themselves jobs and all, but the breakdown of normal social boundaries has led to an atmosphere of general debauchery that would make anyone from the previous generation blush.

Would a Jew be permitted to attend such an event?

That conference is now taking place every nanosecond and it's bringing together 2.3 billion anonymous people from around the world. You can access it anytime, anywhere (to paraphrase the favored slogan of the US Army's Special Forces). The worst aspects of humanity are being shared and everyone knows that it has a tawdry reputation. A Jew who enters this crowd can circulate without his yarmulke, with no identifying features to brand him as a member of the holy nation. It may take only seconds for someone to forget their inner connection with their people under such circumstances.

The setting encourages some to display their knowledge, others their sense of humor, and yet others their ability to mock authority. The irreverent attitude is all-pervasive. And since no one knows who you are, there is nothing to worry about, no one to be embarrassed of.

Studies have shown that the written word is often taken at face value when the same idea would have been rejected outright had it been presented orally. The articles, observations, notes and blogs read on the internet come from people whose opinions would mean nothing to

us if we met them in person and knew who they were. Yet every wild statement posted on the internet sears itself into the mind of its viewers.

Nor are the "Jewish" news sites any better. Perhaps they are far worse, as they present the opinions of the infamous self-haters, the drop-outs from our community who are not satisfied to leave the *frum* life behind them but must take cheap pot shots at the community as well.

We are so careful not to eat food until we see at least some sort of *hechsher*. We may even refrain from buying a *sefer* until we see a *has-kama* (approbation) from a familiar rabbinical name. How is it then that we can trust ourselves to study the words of people whose beliefs and guiding principles are directly at odds with everything we hold dear?

Assimilated Jews— You and Me?

We have read the stories of the impossible trials of keeping *Shabbos* in America during the early part of the previous century. The green-horns who came from Europe were immediately mocked by the established Jews who told them there was no future for religion in the New World. Those who ignored the derision, the daring few, soon discovered that the words they had been told were a reality. There was no way to find a job if one insisted on keeping *Shabbos*.

And so a new Jew developed, Jews who would wear a yarmulke and keep kosher but go to work on *Shabbos*. There were *hashkama minyanim* for the workers to finish the longer *Shabbos* morning prayers early enough to reach their jobs in time for the opening of the doors.

Looking back with the hindsight of over 50

How many mothers and wives learned only months later that the all-important shiur was really a daily chavrusa with Mr. Internet?

