

Finding My Way Back:

Shlomo's Story

as told to Jeanie Silver

I was an extremely creative child.

I was a big reader. I would paint, draw pictures and write short stories and poems. I played guitar, bass and drums and wrote music. And I loved the great outdoors—camping, hiking and fishing.

We moved around a lot when I was a kid. My father is a banker and whenever a bank he worked for merged, we would have to move to a city close to the new corporate headquarters. I had a really hard time making friends, but I always wanted to be popular—it was the most important thing in the world to me. I would always have one good pal but then I would move or he would move, or we would split up for some other reason. I was very close to my younger brother. Eventually my family settled in a Midwestern city.

My very first experience drinking was with a bottle of vodka. I was thirteen or fourteen. I got a hold of a bottle and kept it in a basement freezer, where I knew no one would find it. Over the next two weeks I finished it. It made me feel good.

My next experience was at my rabbi's house, when I was fifteen or sixteen. We'd have shots on Friday night and get smashed on Sukkos and Purim. My rabbi would invite the whole class over, and he would try to regulate the drinking, but we would always sneak beers out of the fridge. I never really felt like I fit in, but after sitting in my rabbi's house and having a couple of *lechaims*, drinking a beer and singing *zemiros*, I just felt great, like I belonged. It was almost a spiritual experience.

Eventually I realized that I didn't need to drink in my rabbi's house to get that warm, fuzzy feeling that everybody loves me and I'm a great person.

I don't know why I had the [negative] feelings I did, but when I drank they went away. So I would drink with my friends in the park or at their

Jeanie Silver is involved in finding solutions to the problems that create and trouble at-risk Jewish youth in the Torah-observant community. She is a freelance writer and project and program developer. She lives in New York.

homes late at night when their parents weren't home.

Then I got invited to a senior party. It was a big deal for me. I was one of two sophomores at this party. There were about a hundred people in the house, and I was scared out of my mind. [I worried] "Who am I going to talk to? What are people saying about me? Maybe they don't like me." Some guy handed me a Jack Daniels, and I gulped it down as quickly as possible. I felt fantastic. I was mingling with people. I was all over the place. I felt like I had arrived. I was one of the cool kids now.

I ended up passing out in this guy's bathroom. I remember being woken up in the morning. I felt like he was waking me up from the dead. He was like, "Dude, my parents are gonna be here. You gotta leave." And even though I was feeling sick and nauseous, and I probably had alcohol poisoning, I was thinking, "Yeah, I'm the man. This is awesome."

Drinking was an unbelievable way to feel good about myself, and that was something I couldn't get any other way. It became a regular Friday night thing, and then a Saturday night thing and then a Tuesday night thing, too. By the time I was in my senior year, I was loaded all day long.

Before I knew it, I started hanging out with the "popular" kids. One night I bumped into two of my friends and they had some pot. I smoked with them. It was just unbelievable. It was like being drunk times ten over. It felt perfect.

When you're high, in the beginning everything feels new and exciting. I could stare at a doorknob for an hour. I could go into the woods and watch the sunlight play on the leaves and listen to the creek or the birds. When you're high, the average seems extraordinary. If drugs didn't give people such experiences, no one would use them. When you try pot, your hair doesn't turn green. Your legs don't fall off. It's what happens later. With time, all the negative feelings I was trying to escape came back a millionfold. But I was trapped—I couldn't stop. It was a nightmare. Later on, the more I smoked pot, the more I hated it. It made me slow and groggy. I felt burnt out all the time. My grades were affected. I knew exactly what was caus-

ing [all these problems], but I couldn't stop because all my friends were doing it. I told myself: "When they stop doing it, I'll stop doing it."

I had been doing very well in my Judaic studies classes. But once I started using heavily, I lost all interest in them. I didn't want to learn Gemara anymore. I had found my new religion.

Going to Israel for the year brought everything to the next level—I don't know if it was because I was away from my parents for the first time in my life or because so many kids were doing harder drugs. I just felt that anything I did was okay.

Everything felt fine until the rabbi [at the yeshivah] told me I couldn't drink over Pesach vacation because I had been caught drinking in the dorms. I said, "Okay. No problem." Then two days later I said to myself, "This is ridiculous. I'm definitely going to drink at the Seders so I might as well start drinking now." I tried to keep [my drinking] private. Most of the kids had gone back to America for Pesach. The dorms were closed so I rented a hotel room with a couple of other guys until our plans fell into place. I didn't want anybody to know I was drinking because it would get back to the rabbi.

“Being *shomer Shabbat* and keeping kosher are no longer the big *nisyonot* [challenges] they used to be. Today, kids are struggling with sexual mores and gender issues. We are more at odds with our surroundings than we've ever been before. The message we give children in *yeshivot* and day schools and the messages they get from the media, billboards and music are in absolute contradiction [to each other].” –
Dr. Norman Blumenthal, licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Lawrence, New York

But, sure enough, I was in town acting stupid and running around drunk, and it got back to the rabbi.

I was thrown out of the yeshivah. To get back in, I had to cut a deal with the administration that I wasn't going to drink for the rest of the year. It was

very hard for me to not drink, but somehow I pulled it off.

That summer I chose to stay in Israel. My experience with the rabbi got me thinking, "Maybe there's a problem here." So I started going to a couple of



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Alcoholics Anonymous [A.A.] meetings in Jerusalem.

The 12 steps [of A.A.] is a set of instructions—people in recovery like to call them suggestions—that help you get healthy enough to stay sober. The steps include things like building a relationship with God, making amends with people you've harmed, talking about all your issues and giving back to the community by helping other al-



"There is a sentiment out there that we have focused too much on the [cerebral] fundamentals of halachah and Gemara and not enough on the more [emotional] aspects of Judaism. We need to remind our children that learning is a religious act, not a marathon; it's [forging] a relationship with God."—*Dr. Blumenthal*

coholics. Unfortunately, the meeting I chose wasn't the best. There was a lot of talk about problems but almost none about solutions. But I did get a sponsor, that is, a mentor who has

been sober longer than you have and has had enough experience using the 12 steps to help you get sober, too. It's the power of example.

During this period, I would stay away from alcohol and drugs for about two weeks at a time. Then I would say, "This is stupid. I don't have a problem. These people have a problem. I'm okay. I don't need this." And I would go out and drink and get high.

During my second year in Israel my drinking got worse. I began to have this hollow, empty feeling. But my efforts to curb my problem weren't sticking. It wasn't until I got back to America that I realized what a bad state I was in. I was unemployable. I wasn't ready to go to college. My parents didn't recognize me. I would sleep until four o'clock in the afternoon and

be out until seven o'clock in the morning—every night.

It got to the point where my parents were worried for my safety. One day I came home and the house was locked. My parents were out and had locked me out of the house. We lived in the suburbs and doors were never locked. So I called my mom. She was crying on the phone and she told me, "We're scared you're going to run away, and we don't want you to leave so just hang out until we get home from work." They thought that if I didn't have access to my clothing and stuff, I wouldn't leave. It was an irrational move on their part. They were desperate.

My response was even more irrational. I had no intention of leaving my parents' house, but in my sick, drunken state, it made perfect sense that if that's the one thing they don't want me to do, then that's the one thing I *have* to do. I broke into the house, packed some of my stuff, got into my car and drove away. The guy I was buying ecstasy from at the time let me crash at his place.

At a certain point, though, drugs and drinking stopped being fun. At sixteen it was fun. At twenty, it wasn't

anymore. I didn't want to do it. Every single night I would curl up in the fetal position and beg God to not let me wake up. "I can't do this anymore. I know what's going to happen. I'm gonna wake up, drink and do something really stupid and incredibly embarrassing, insulting or ridiculous." I just didn't want to go through it anymore. Yet I still drank.

Although I realized that something was wrong in my life, I still couldn't completely admit that it was the alcohol or drugs. I wanted to join the Israeli Army. I thought that if I just had someone to teach me self-control and self-discipline I could get my life together.

My parents had helped me get a job. All I had to do was show up in order to get paid. I wanted to show up but I couldn't. Every day I would wake up, get drunk and high and decide that I wasn't going to work that day. "Tomorrow I'll go," I would say. Finally, I decided to call my parents to get help. It was hardest phone call I ever made. They got me into a Jewish rehab center, and it saved my life.

By the time I got to rehab I was no longer religious. I felt like I was cursed and I was angry with God. I doubted whether He existed. But people said some pretty intelligent things to me in rehab and at A.A. meetings: "If you're mad at God it means you believe in Him, whether you like it or not. If there's resentment there, you've got some sort of faith or some sort of belief." They told me that believing in a higher power was a vital part of my recovery.

About four weeks into the rehab program, I made a commitment that I would do whatever it takes to succeed. Someone there told me, "A lot of people go to rehab. Some don't really work the [12] steps. They come out. They stay sober for three weeks, and they relapse. And they never get sober again. They live a horrible, bloody, alcoholic life and then die from this disease, thinking that they worked the 12 steps and saying 'I went to rehab. I know what it's all about and it's a crock.' And you don't want to be that guy."

He was right. I didn't want to be that guy.

It took me a while to build a relationship with Hashem. A friend in re-

don't have to worry about keeping Shabbos. I don't have to worry about keeping kosher. As long as I'm sober, as long as I don't drink or get high, God's going to love me. I can work on myself through the 12 steps, and I don't have to practice any form of or-

Parents wonder how much is their job and [how much is] the school's. The real *chinuch*, education, happens in the home. No one really learns to love *mitzvos* and good *middos* [strictly] from school." -Sony Perlman, social worker who works with at-risk youth in New York

ganized religion."

I was in rehab for four months. One day, several months after I'd left rehab, I was sitting in an A.A. meeting and I was feeling bad. I thought, "If I choose to drink right now, nothing in the entire world could stop me.

Nothing."

I asked myself, "What's my real understanding of God?" I had this very esoteric concept of a higher power who was somewhere in outer space. Maybe He knew my name, maybe He didn't. I think I probably had the same concept of God before I even started drinking or using heavily. "Yeah, there's a God—He wants me to keep Shabbos; I'm gonna keep Shabbos." But growing up I really wasn't keeping Shabbos for God, I was keeping Shabbos to fit in. I was learning Gemara to fit in. Suddenly it struck me that God is personal and very real. It clicked.

At that point, I wasn't associating with many religious people my age. A friend of a friend who was big on going to classes for *ba'alei teshuvah* would call a few people each week and see who wanted to go [with her], who could drive. I began going to these classes once or twice a week. They weren't really designed for people with a *frum* background. They were inspiring and on a beginner's level. I needed to approach Judaism as if I knew absolutely nothing—to start off on a fresh canvas. Those classes really in-

fluenced me and awakened a spark. It was what I needed at the time.

I had two roommates and on Friday nights a lot of young people would come over to the house to hang out. That's how I met my wife. We began going to the classes together. She also wasn't so religious at the time, but together we slowly worked on becoming more *frum*. We got married, and we continue to work on it.

Today I keep Shabbos. I keep kosher. I try and learn Torah. I give *tzedakah*. I'm teaching my son—who just had his *upsherin*—the *Aleph Beis* and to wash his hands before eating. I talk to God all the time. I struggle with faith; I struggle to believe that everything is good, even when it's not.

When things go wrong in life, I start thinking, "What's going on here?" Maybe I think God owes me something. [I say to myself] "I've been through enough in life that nothing else wrong should ever happen" or "I've made sufficient amends for all my wrongs and also done plenty of good, so everything should be good." But the difference is that today I can divorce myself from my feelings. I've



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learned that my feelings are not facts and it's okay for me to be upset and not understand things. I don't have to act on my feelings. My sponsor used to tell me, "Act. Don't react. When you live life always reacting to other people, you're not living life. You're just a pingpong ball."

I have to believe that whatever God does is ultimately for my good. I may not understand that and that's

okay. If I understood everything then I would have serious problems, because I don't want a God that I can understand.

When things aren't going well, instead of doing things that are self-destructive, I'll call my *rav* and talk about it. Because I know that even though I might not feel like putting on my tefillin at that second, I can tap into a powerful force—someone who is defi-

nately more plugged in than I am—to help shed some light on the situation or to comfort me or just to tell me, "Life's tough. Get over it."

I see that a lot of teens at risk have certain things in common: They tend to be deep, sensitive and extraordinarily creative. They often try to deal with their feelings through creativity. If they can't find a way out, they take the next step—self-medicating. I've heard this from a lot of people, and I feel the same way—if I hadn't discovered drugs and alcohol, I would have killed myself. I needed a lot of help, and no doctor was going to prescribe what I needed. What I found did the trick. It completely obliterated all those [negative] feelings.

[When I was younger], I spent a lot of time talking to my parents about not fitting in. They would give me advice, but there were things that I couldn't discuss with them, particularly if it concerned them. If I had had a role model or someone I could be close to and talk about the issues in my life it would have helped me significantly. I think that a lot of young people would benefit from having someone to talk to, someone they could really trust.

Today I have been sober for more than seven years. I have a family and a good profession. I'm doing very well. Life's great. I have no complaints.

What has helped me get to where I am is the fact that I am constantly working with other people. I make myself available to help people who are going through and who have been through what I went through.

I am a sponsor and I've got a sponsor. I go to A.A. meetings, and try to give back to the community. Whenever there's a major crisis in my family or my work life, I talk to people. I have friends today who I can communicate with, and I've got people who I look up to and I can go to for advice. If something still bothers me, I turn it over to God, and trust that everything will be okay. I didn't come this far in life to just fall on my face. I talk about all these experiences I had before I got sober but it almost feels as if I'm talking about somebody else. I'm a completely different person today. ■

Helping Parents, Helping Kids

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

"Parents need to know what normal teenage behavior is and when it crosses the line and requires intervention," says Frank Buchweitz, national director of Community Services and Special Projects at the Orthodox Union (OU). Buchweitz has been bringing "Positive Jewish Parenting" workshops to the Jewish public since 2000, providing insights and advice to parents from leading Orthodox mental health professionals.

"Families face a myriad of distressing issues today," says Stephen J. Savitsky, OU president. "The OU acknowledged the need for educational programs that could provide parents with the tools to address these challenges."

The first such workshop, held at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in Manhattan in January 2000, featured keynote speaker *Jewish Action* columnist Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, an expert on drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and met with immediate success. Seven hundred and fifty participants heard from an array of prominent mental health professionals addressing a variety of topics, such as the impact of technology on children, building a child's self-esteem and the behavioral development of teenagers. "The purpose [of the workshops] is to address issues that parents face on a daily basis," says Buchweitz.

Encouraged by the initial response, Buchweitz designed educational workshops to deal with practical parenting issues that affect families. Several of the programs were presented in conjunction with other community service organizations such as FEGS Health and Human Services System, the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services and the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York.

Positive Jewish Parenting soon went national and workshops were hosted in communities such as Miami, Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles and Toronto. "The programs are planned in conjunction with the communities" and are tailored to each community's needs, says Buchweitz. "The bottom line is by helping to educate parents, we're helping our kids."

"It's critical that we educate ourselves so that we can perform well in one of the most important jobs we will ever have—being a parent," says Emanuel J. Adler, chairman of the OU's Community & Synagogue Services.

For information on how to arrange a Positive Jewish Parenting program in your community, call 212-613-8188.

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