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Parental discretion advised.

Never have I had to preface my column with those words. This one is different. Some may not want their children to read it. Others very much need to have their children read it, even though they probably do not realize this. Regardless of why people read it, many will be discomfited, and even depressed, by what they will learn.

Frumteens.com is about providing answers. It does a particularly good job addressing “kids at risk,” that phantom group of other people’s children that we thought would not exist within our community, and about which we speak in furtive whispers. Frumteens reaches out to these kids, as well as to those who have gone beyond risk, and morphed into their parents’ worst nightmares. Frumteens allows us in on the conversation. Listening to these kids tell their own stories is not easy.

Someone we will call M, for Moderator, started the site in 2000. (Forgive the cloak-and-dagger stuff, but M has good reason to keep his identity secret. It allows him to speak bluntly to

Rabbi Adlerstein tries to be open to all questions as he directs an educational outreach program for the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. He also serves on the editorial board of Jewish Action.

his audience, without defending his positions to everyone who would do things differently. It also forces the reader to focus on the merits of his arguments, rather than to link his words to his politics.) M will tell us very little about himself. Getting an interview with him took some doing. M is not a kid, and he is not at risk. He is married with kids, has several *rabbeim*, and doesn’t live on the East Coast. He will not comment on his interest in kids on the ropes. M is not a rabbi or mental health professional. His day job is completely unrelated. He regards his role at Frumteens as a teacher, not as a savior for lost souls.

Kids, he believes, are particularly disadvantaged by a surfeit of questions. There are so few places where they can express their feelings and personal problems. There are so few resources for those with hard-hitting questions about Judaism. In some parts of the Orthodox community, questions are discouraged, especially those about core beliefs, practices and topics that are regarded as

inherently private. In other parts of the Orthodox world, questions are encouraged, but there is a lack of trained individuals who can give answers that work. When a teen’s questions are suppressed, frowned upon or inadequately answered, we can expect trouble ahead.

M wanted Frumteens to be a place where kids (and initially, adults as well) could ask about anything they want, and expect a Torah-true perspective in return. There are dozens of forums within the site that are open at any time, addressing a potpourri of concerns. Some forums deal with basic Judaism (“things many of you are asking about now but probably will never learn”), career choices, how to navigate familial strife, peer pressure



issues, understanding difficult *mitzvot* and practices and working with a therapist. The section entitled “Deep Trouble” is where the reader begins the descent into the abyss.

Would you know what to say to a child who has been abused, or is contemplating suicide, or is trying to win a battle with bulimia or is experimenting with drugs to drown out his sorrow? Do you wonder how kids react to the advice served up in popular magazines? Would it be helpful to listen to their own words? Welcome to the cinema verité of the Internet:

*I know I shouldn't be handling this on a website but I have nobody to turn to who I can trust. I'm 16. I think I'm pregnant. i didn't go to a doctor yet because I can't tell anyone, but the test from the drugstore came back positive. i don't want anyone to know, I don't want my life to be over. I'm crying and ***** scared to death. Please help me. what do I do? Please write back fast.*

M takes charge, quickly and efficiently. He provides the writer with a list of *rabbanim* who can advise her about halachic aspects, about the fact that under *certain circumstances*, abortion is halachically permitted. Her anonymity is guaranteed—he has provided for that. He stresses that time is of the essence. If abortion is an option (he guides her to decisors who can determine whether her case falls within a *narrow band* in which abortion is permitted), she may not have time to talk to others before exercising the choice. M emphasizes that no one will force her to do anything; she will remain in control. He breaks with his policy and provides her with his cell phone number, and tells her that he will keep it on 24/7 until she makes contact.

She does. Further posts show M’s wisdom even after the adrenalin rush has subsided. He posts messages from other girls who have been there. One of them is from a girl who had an abortion and offers encouragement. He lavishes praise on the original poster. Obviously, she had strayed from halachic practice. But she knew where to turn for help. M writes:

You have expanded your heart to a very different type of love. The love of G-d. The time that you spent with that guy is an investment that caused you a lot of pain in the long run. However, the fact that you came to this religious web site in a time of trouble tells me that you have a very special love deep down in your soul. Congratulations—on finding G-d. Please, never lose Him.

At other times, M is surprisingly silent through rounds of discussion, only occasionally interjecting. When I ask him how this fits into his model for Frumteens as more classroom than chat room, the triumph in his voice is unmistakable. “The most successful classrooms are the ones where the students do the talking,” he says.

M knows when to remain silent, but he knows when to take charge. The message that follows elicited a very quick response. (Some details have been deleted to spare the reader.)

I hate talking about it [an incident in my past] but i havve horrible nightmares and the only way i can express it is with

someone going through what i went through and i also went through abuse as a child and im alone i need someone to talk to HELP I try to commmmmit suiced form it all the time.

M swings into action:

You'll have someone to talk to, that I promise. I read your posts elsewhere on the boards. You went through terrible things. You can get help. I already emailed you privately because of your Wednesday night thing. Please respond. There is help.

It is impossible to read some of the postings without deeply feeling the anguish. A frequent contributor is finally sent away to a non-Jewish school for therapy, where she is reviled for being Jewish:

thang gd its friday so i get 2 go home. im in global right now, took a test got 100 of course cuz this place is pathetic, i was told twice 2day that im hated & annoying & a freakin jew. i am so depressed here & i hate myself so much here ... feel so alone cuz no one here cares. why is my mother doing this 2 me? Why is gd doing this 2 me?

One respondent finds that a Julia Blum song² says it best:

*There's a princess who lives in a faraway land
Royal by blood and the scroll in her hand
The scroll in her hand and the flame in her heart
And the castle that keeps her apart.*

*The other girls play at the foot of the hill
Dancing in circles whenever they will
Laughing at princesses who stand apart
And hating her deep in their heart ... deep in their heart.*

*Come to Me, My princess child, bare your soul to Me
Talk to Me, My princess child, share your mind with Me
I'll be there for you, princess child. My face you'll never see
But I will hear you, princess child, the day that you call Me.*

Songs, however, do not cure the problem. We rejoin the conversation, a few days later. (Again, some details have been deleted.)

Would you know what to say to a child who has been abused, or is contemplating suicide?

My dad freaked & told my mom that if she doesnt get me outts there he's kidnapping me, he said hes gonna call the police.rav _____ said i shouldnt be there. the most awful; part bout this is that im not sure my mom believes me & that hurts the most. yesterday was pretty bad, but im doing ok now. i became friends w/ 2 gothics & 1 black, theyre basically the only nice ones, so im getting used 2 it. love u all. thanx 4 listening...

Reading these posts is like watching an *ER* for the soul-wounded. M knows when to be tough and when to compromise. A question about the body-building drug herbal ecstasy leads him to lecture about its terrible dangers at high dosages or when it has been prepared by the unscrupulous. Rather than insist that the user desist entirely (which would not work), he suggests a health food store where one can get a clean supply at a safe dosage. To others, he is simply informative. A girl learns that a friend was born to an unmarried mother, and fears that she bears the halachic status of *mamzeret*. (Relax, M tells her. A child born out of wedlock is allowed to marry without restriction, and is not considered a *mamzeret*.) A writer is concerned about the eating habits of a friend; M responds with a concise and useful list of the warning signs of severe eating disorders.

Well-meaning adults offer the benefit of their experience. One writes to a girl who feels utterly rejected by

her parents:

Don't be so hard on your parents. They don't really hate you. They love you. They just have difficulty expressing it. That is why their own marriage is so full of strife. They have trouble expressing their love to each other as well. And they would never be demonstrative about their love for each other in front of you and your siblings, because that is inappropriate.

Another adult interjects:

Your are just plain wrong. Face it, some parents really do hate their kids. And brother, are you wrong about it being wrong for adults to demonstrate affection for each other in front of their children.

The hardest posts for me to read are the ones where the writers are contemplating suicide. They are some of the longest discussion threads, and it is not because so many well-adjusted people offer their sage suggestions about how the originator of the discussion can glue back together the jagged-edged shards of broken lives. Rather, the discussion often gets sidetracked by those drawn to offer why they, too, are considering ending the pain.

The reader will be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of questions. Yet, says M, he posts only a small fraction (between 2 and 5 percent) of the 300 messages he receives each day. He has help, but not that much: a social worker and a handful of helpers for halachic matters. He has contacts to whom to refer emergencies in most cities in the United States and places abroad that have large Jewish populations. He has arranged it so that kids who need help can access these triage resources without revealing their identities. There is no advertising, and M and his colleagues are beholden to no one.

Does it work? M points to kids in crisis who have emerged through the site, stabilized their lives, married and now participate by sharing their advice and experience with others. What advice does M have for parents? "Once kids become teenagers, stop trying to control, and try to influence."


A note of caution. Frumteens is really two sites in one. Part of the board deals with kids (and parents!) and their problems. Another carries on discussions on all sorts of Jewish topics, halachic and general. M does not mince words, and his attitude in many areas (e.g., Zionism, Rav Kook, the value of secular studies, the legitimacy of Modern Orthodoxy) will not delight the heart of the typical *Jewish Action* reader. My hope is that the stridency of his remarks on these topics will not interfere with readers' appreciation of what he is accomplishing in reaching out to kids who need to be heard.

Not all the stories conclude with Cinderella endings. A curious participant asks the moderator what happened to a rather desperate girl who drifted on and off the board. M answers:

I don't know. Of the literally thousands of teenagers that visit this site daily, and the thousands that have posted here since it began, I know only a handful. I, too, wish she would return.

As a community, we are beginning to realize that we would like many people to return to their roots, to their people and to fulfilled lives. The Torah tells us that when Moshe grew up, he "went out to his brethren and saw their burdens." Rashi elaborates: "He focused his eyes and heart to be distressed over them." Moshe would not have "gone out" unless he was already motivated to help his brethren. He knew that he would do a better job if he could make the pain of others his own, by examining it up close.

Frumteens is a veritable lifeline to the confused and confounded, but it offers much to us, the oftentimes complacent. Following the discussion threads can motivate us to be better parents to our kids. It can teach us to be alert to the warning signs of trouble in children who are not being cared for. It may make us feel responsible enough to take an interest in a teen at risk, or to provide the little bit of something positive for a younger child, to make sure she never becomes one. We might decide to seek out the organizations that help kids, or to better understand the role of NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) in making sure that the hearts of our day-school children keep up with their minds. We may be inspired enough to insure that our schools are better equipped to address the questions that kids are asking, out loud or otherwise.

Judaism generally prohibits inflicting pain upon oneself. Reading Frumteens is one of those exceptions, where the expected gain can far outweigh the loss. 

Notes

1. Although this thread catches the eye of the reader (and of this writer), M assures us that pregnancy within the observant community is not an epidemic. This is the only thread on pregnancy that he can recall. It is included here to demonstrate the quick mental reflexes that M brings to his work.
2. "Princess," used with the permission of Julia Blum.