

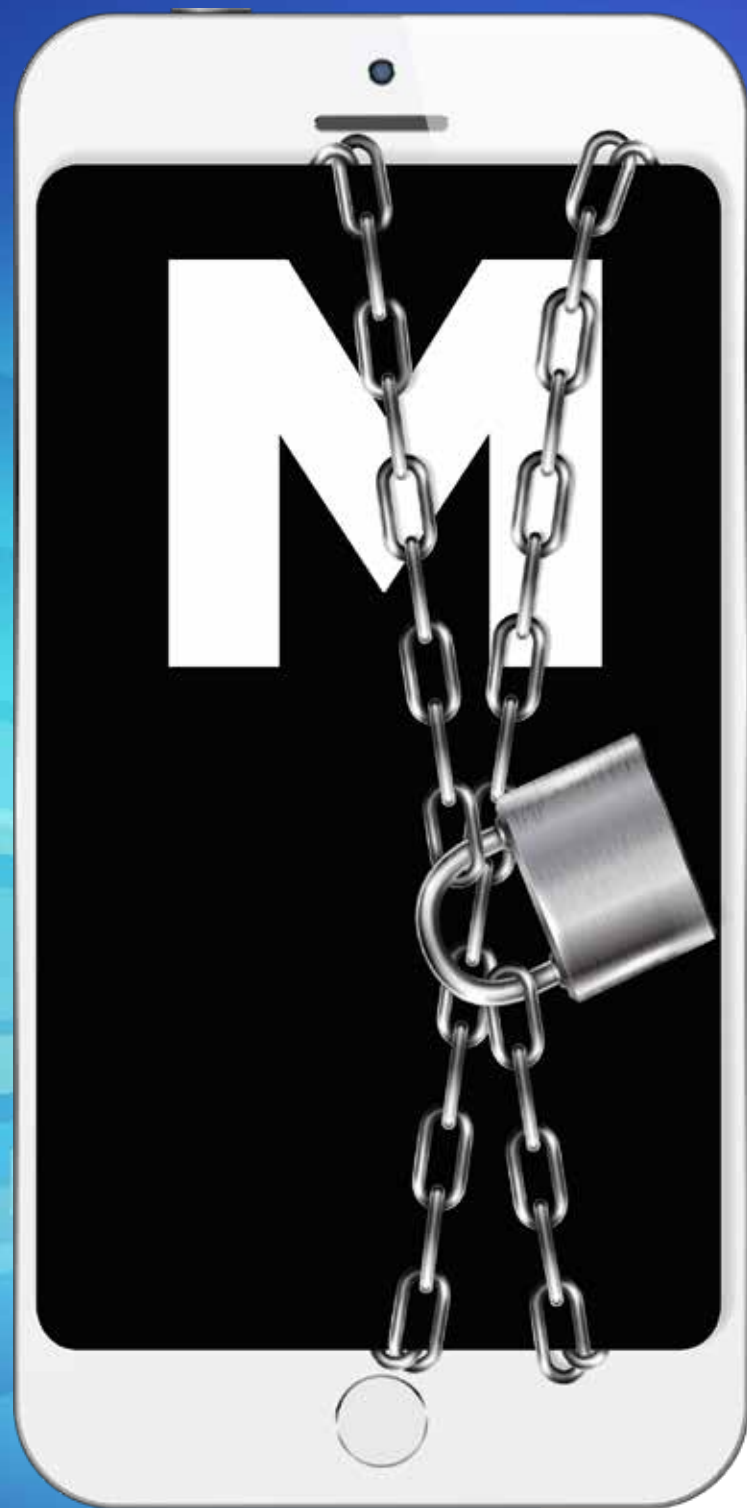


Fight to the



Yossie Strickman is a tech whiz, but when it comes to smartphones, he doesn't limit himself to installing filters and setting up safe technology protocols. With his sixth sense for bochurim in crisis, he heads Project Trust, a support program to prevent tech users from becoming entrapped in the very real dangers of technology, pulling them out of the pit of pain, horror, anger and confusion and helping them put the pieces back together

By **Shmuel Botnick**
Photos **Naftoli Goldgrab**



My meeting with Yossie Strickman begins with a bear hug. No, Yossie is not a long-lost buddy; this is our first time meeting in person. He's just that kind of guy – warm, open, generous. He releases his hold and welcomes me into his Passaic, New Jersey home early one short Erev Shabbos morning. I might be the interviewer but he gets the first question. “You want cholent?” I don't actually, but how can you turn down an offer like that?

“Sholom, let's get some cholent going. Take out the mug, the huge one,” he tells his 14-year-old son. The mug appears, steaming hot and truly huge. Involuntarily, a caption for the article, a really dumb cliché, flits through my mind, something like “the warmth of the cholent, a reflection of the warmth of the Strickman home.” I try to banish the thought because that's horrible literature, but it keeps coming back – probably because it's true: The Strickmans are such incredibly warm people. And warmth, I will soon learn, is the key to Yossie's success. It's how he wins where others have declared failure, it's how he infuses hope where others have long despaired.

A tech whiz, Yossie worked as manager at TAG's Lakewood division, installing filters on smartphones and personal computers, setting up safe technology protocols, and providing ongoing oversight to that end. Today, with his sixth sense for bochurim in crisis, he heads Project Trust, a program of support facilitated

between kids, parents, and schools to prevent tech users from falling into the very real and present dangers of technology – be it cyber bullying, exposure to improper or decadent sites, or a general unhealthy or obsessive relationship with the Internet.



Yossie is a techie, but he's also a self-styled *mechanech*, determined to both educate and spread as much love as his enormous heart can muster. But that heart carries a lot more than love. It also carries the burden of so much pain and suffering – the tragedies that ensue from misuse of technology, the horror, the anger, the confusion. And it's Yossie's mission – with his razor sharp perception of today's teens – to try to put the pieces back together.

He'll Cooperate When Yossie was growing up, his father, Rabbi Shmuel Strickman (currently *menahel* of Yeshiva Darchei Torah's lower elementary school), was a yeshivah principal whose job took the family from Detroit to Baltimore and then finally to Brooklyn. The frequent moves gave Yossie and his siblings exposure to many different types

of people from divergent backgrounds, mindsets, and cultures. While his father dedicated his life to *chinuch*, his mother *a"h* was known as a tremendous *baalas chesed*, her home open and welcome to all. Chinuch and chesed. Yossie is a fusion of both.

Yossie learned at Sh'or Yoshuv in Far Rockaway for beis medrash and then in Lev Aryeh in Jerusalem. Since technology came naturally to him, it seemed like the obvious course when it came time to choose a profession. He enrolled in The Chubb Institute where he received his initial training and certificate in computer science. Upon graduation, he landed a job at Kushner Companies, becoming assistant network manager for the massive real estate empire. He later left Kushner and began working for ArtScroll, serving as its in-house network manager for about five years.

Things pivoted in 2012, after tens of thousands packed the Citi Field stadium for what has since become known as the “Internet Asifah.” An almost immediate offshoot was the founding of TAG, an organization dedicated to assisting the *frum* community with the installation and management of filtering systems in technological devices. At some point, TAG's Lakewood division, which oversees TAG nationally, needed a manager and Yossie Strickman was tapped as the perfect candidate. In TAG, while Yossie was meeting people, talking to them, and learning about their concerns, he began to develop a sixth sense. He started seeing the problems beyond the four corners of the glass screen, hearing the impending crises within the innocent requests for help. He started to engage with his clientele on a deeper level, studying their specific challenges, trying to help



them navigate their problems in a way that was sometimes more personal than technological.

Yossie began to wonder if he should branch out and form an organization of his own that would extend beyond the technical solutions, providing a wider umbrella of services to help families safely find their way through the challenges of technology. There were pros and there were cons, but a particular incident tipped the scale.

It was a few days before Succos and Yossie's phone rang. On the line was a bochur who introduced himself as Reuven, but he was honest enough to admit that it wasn't his real name.

"So what's your real name?" Yossie pressed.

"I'm not telling you," the bochur said, a frantic urgency in his voice. "But I need to meet with you."

They arranged a time and place to meet. The boy showed up holding a state-of-the-art laptop. Yossie recognized the brand, and the price tag that presumably came along with it. His sixth sense began to

buzz.

"Where did you get the money for this laptop?" he asked with just enough accusation lacing his voice for the boy to look up, startled by the question. Bingo.

"I stole it," he whispered. "Took the money from my roommate's drawer."

He went on to say that he now wanted a filter, but Yossie already knew something was wrong, even as the bochur kept saying, "I need this laptop for all the *shiurim* I record. I love listening to *shiurim*."

"Listen," Yossie said. "There's something you're not telling me. I know you're not. And I can't help you until I know the whole story. Give me the name of a rebbi, one rebbi, that you're willing to talk to."

The boy gave him the name and number of a former rebbi. Moments later, Yossie told the boy to wait while he went to make a bizarre phone call.

"Listen, Rabbi," he said as the rebbi picked up. "My name is Yossie Strickman. You don't know me but I'm here with a *talmid* of yours. He says his name is Reuven, but that's not his real name. I

Danger Ahead

If there's one component Yossie Strickman considers a top priority, it's awareness. To be aware is to be educated. Educated on technology, and educated on the nuances of human nature, especially when those humans are teenagers. The common belief is that once a phone is filtered, it's out of the danger zone. This, Yossie says, is an enormous mistake.

"Firstly, even if a phone loses all Internet capacity, it can still have an SD card reader," he explains. "An SD card can hold an incredible amount of data, and if it can be inserted in your child's phone, he or she is well within the zone of danger."

Then there are the dangers that lurk beneath the seemingly most innocent apps. "WhatsApp is such a huge problem, although so many parents are convinced it's totally fine," he says. "After all, what's the difference between WhatsApp and regular text? The answer is, everything. WhatsApp is significantly more efficient than text when it comes to sending pictures and videos. And the problem snowballs. Because of its efficiency, there are so many terrible WhatsApp groups out there. If your kid has nothing beside WhatsApp, that can still be a huge problem."

How can parents detect a problem? Over the years, Yossie has learned to spot the telltale signs. "All teens are moody, but when you start seeing drastic changes in moods within a short time period, you have to suspect a problem." Other indicators are extreme fatigue and a sudden, intense obsession with protection over their privacy.

"We have to get educated," he insists. "You can't fight what you don't know."

actually don't know his real name. I'll describe his features to you. And here's what you've gotta do. You've gotta save his life. Something's wrong. Something's terribly wrong with him but he won't open up to me. But I think he'll talk to you. Please try. Thanks."

Yossie hung up, said goodbye to the boy, and carried on with his Succos preparations. Sometime after Succos, his phone rang. It was the rebbi. Yossie answered, hoping for the best, silently bracing himself for the worst.

"Yossie," the rebbi's voice was choked with emotion. "What can I say, you saved a *nefesh* in Klal Yisrael. I spoke with my *talmid* for a long time. I also sensed there was a problem but he wasn't opening up. Finally, he let me see his laptop. I can't describe it to you, Yossie. I just can't describe it. How many terrible things he had downloaded there. He was getting swallowed up, it was so close to over. Yossie, he's willing to meet you again. He's willing to cooperate with you."

They met. The boy handed the laptop to Yossie, who erased everything and returned it to the store. The money was returned to the boy's roommate, and he went for therapy and is doing very well today.

The story had a happy ending but for Yossie, it meant a new beginning. Any doubts he had were dispelled. It was time to start out on his own.

Trust Yourself Yossie was once a proficient athlete, and still likes to use sports-based metaphors to explain what pushed him to the new frontier. "In football, there are defensive positions whose purpose is to stop the other team. But it can happen that the defense player catches an interception and then he turns into an offensive player. He now can charge into the other team's zone and score a touchdown.

"Until now, I was playing defense, trying to fend off the yetzer hara and prevent

him from infiltrating. But this was like an interception. The ball was in my hands, and I knew I needed to run with it for a touchdown."

Yossie, who still works alongside TAG, knew he also had to take the next step and found his own organization. But what to call it? "I specifically didn't want a Hebrew word — I didn't want it to sound like a *mussar shmuess*," Yossie says. "I wanted people to view me as a friend, not as an authority figure they couldn't relate to."

The word "trust" had the components he was looking for. "Trust had everything we wanted," he says. "Everyone wants to be trusted. You want to be able to trust your parents, your spouse, your child. But most of all, you want to be able to trust yourself." The acronym came as an afterthought: Taking Responsibility Using Safe Technology. "To use technology safely," Yossie explains, "you have to be able to trust yourself."

Yossie wants to set the record straight. "I'm not here to tell anyone that it's okay to get a smartphone. To me, giving a kid a smartphone is the most dangerous thing in the world. I'll do anything to stop a kid from getting a phone."

He means it. Yossie deals primarily with teenagers — he refers to them as "clients" — and his first move is to try and talk them out of the smartphone entirely. He'll offer them something valuable in exchange: a custom-made suit, a trip to Florida or to Eretz Yisrael, whatever it takes. If the parents are capable, he will have them finance the expense. If not, he'll try to find other sources. Yossie is aware that these commitments are likely to be short-lived, but he's okay with that.

"Six months during the teen years is like an entire lifetime," he says. "If I can keep a teenager away from a phone for six months, I consider that a huge victory."

But there's ideal and there's reality, and Yossie's job is to face reality, as disconcerting as it is. "There are all kinds



With *Mishpacha's* reporter in his home in Passaic. Although he's the first to admit he's not a clinician, Yossie is willing to do just about anything to help a kid hitting a slippery slope

of reasons why and how teenagers end up having smartphones," he explains. "Often, it's the result of some family tragedy. Kids will turn to the Internet as a distraction. But that can end up getting them into terrible trouble."

And so, Yossie has to tread carefully. If past trauma is playing a role in a client's struggles, or if there is a real case of clinical addiction at play, Yossie acknowledges that the problem is well beyond his pay grade. He works in tandem with therapists and refers clients for professional help when necessary.

But not only. In addition to therapists, Yossie often turns to rabbanim for guidance and advice. Multiple rabbanim have endorsed Yossie's work, among them Rav Sholom Kamenetsky, rosh yeshivah of the Talmudical Yeshivah of Philadelphia; Rav Elya Brudny, rosh yeshivah of Mir

Brooklyn; and Monsey *mashpia* Rav Yisroel Dovid Schlesinger. Yossie is grateful that he has these rabbanim — who are personally familiar with the issues facing today's teens — on board.

"There was a time, not too long ago, when the accepted custom within litvishe yeshivos was not to discuss *inyanei kedushah* — at least not publicly. The focus was on Ketzos and Nesivos, with the understanding that the sanctity of the Torah would dispel any unholy temptations," says Rav Sholom Kamenetsky. "But times have changed. The perniciousness has so permeated our lives, the accessibility to the worst of the worst just so available. Today, it is the position of many *gedolei Yisrael* that there is just no such thing as not talking about it, albeit with utmost discretion.

"The bochurim should know that this

"Six months during the teen years is like an entire lifetime. If I can keep a teenager away from a phone for six months, I consider that a huge victory"

is not a taboo subject," Rav Sholom says. "They should know that their rebbi is there for them, ready to discuss whatever challenges they may be going through. From discussions with other leading roshei yeshivah and *mechanchim*, it seems clear that every yeshivah needs a member on staff who is well versed in understanding the complexity of the problem, is sensitive to it, and is open and willing to help."

Call When You're Ready

Yossie himself is willing to do just about anything to help — although he's the first to admit that he's not a clinician. The services he offers are diverse and constantly developing, his job description pretty loosely defined. In a single day, he'll drive to Lakewood to install filters in the computers of a new office, and, once there, he might drop by a yeshivah to check up on a former client. He'll then travel to another yeshivah and meet with an entire class to discuss technology. Once back home, he'll consult with therapists regarding an ongoing crisis, visit a home to try and mend ties between parents and their adolescent child, and then head over to yet another yeshivah for a meeting with a rebbi of one of his clients.

But even that might be too rigid a description.

"I recently got a call from a father regarding his son," Yossie says. "The boy is struggling socially and is turning to technology as a replacement for real friends. The boy's father wanted me to help him. So once a week I play big brother — I spend time with the kid, we just go on a drive and shmooze."

Yossie's resolve to do whatever it takes grows with each experience. The more he sees the damage, the more determined he is to fight back. "The negative effects are so far-reaching," he explains. "It's so much more than a spiritual problem. It goes to their very functionality as human beings. I've watched kids go from being

fun, popular, high achievers academically, to becoming almost nonfunctional. All because of too much exposure to the wrong stuff on the Internet."

But versatile as his job description may be, his message is constant: Be educated. "I don't *pasken*," Yossie emphasizes. "My message isn't about *muttar* or *assur*. That's for a rav to decide and I encourage all to consult with their own *daas Torah*. My message to parents and rabbanim is just this — education. Regardless of your position, we need to get educated. We need to understand what's out there. That means knowing what the relevant apps are and learning what they have the capacity to do. It means appreciating the effects they can have, not only on one's religious observance, but on one's ability to interact with society and maintain healthy and durable relationships."

And as he calls for the older generation to become familiarized with the potent powers of the Internet, he deals firsthand with the younger generation who are all too cognizant.

Yossie understands the pitfalls inherent in this line of work. He's dealing primarily with teenagers, and the discussions revolve around some of the most private details of their personal lives. To that end, he's set up personal security and safety measures: a security camera operating at all times in his office, and a policy of never meeting with a girl, or a boy under 15, unless there is at least one other person in the room.

The services aren't free, Yossie notes almost apologetically. "I charge for my time, I have to. But what I'm really giving isn't the time. I give them my heart, I give them my soul."

Yossie structures the payment plan differently, depending on what the needs are. Usually, he will charge a separate fee for every meeting. But some yeshivos use Yossie's services so frequently that he charges a monthly maintenance fee. (The organization now has 501c3

status, allowing for charity deductible donations.)

No two clients are the same, and Yossie takes all sorts of variables into account before selecting a plan of action. Sometimes, the client has just purchased a device, has not had any negative exposure, and simply wants Yossie to install the proper filter. But too often, by the time they arrive at Yossie's doorstep, the problem has exacerbated, and at that point, a filter can even be counter-productive.

"If the client isn't ready," he explains, "forcing them to filter will just come back to bite you." And so Yossie finds ways to compromise.

Recently, a bochur approached Yossie and asked him to filter his phone, as required by his yeshivah. Yossie looked at the phone and saw that several highly inappropriate apps had already been downloaded.

Yossie explained that the filter would be useless with these apps still operating. The apps would have to go. But the boy couldn't do it — he just wasn't ready to part with them yet.

"That's fine," Yossie said. "Keep them. But let's be in touch. Call me when you're ready to let them go."

And that's what happened. A few weeks later the boy called. He was ready.

"This actually happens quite frequently," Yossie reflects. "Often a client isn't ready to take the necessary steps. I take down their phone number and keep up with them. For me, most of the job is about the ongoing relationship. The filter is just the beginning of the process."

Toward the Future Why are these teenagers willing to open up with Yossie when his stated mission is to separate them from their beloved smartphone? "They know that I care about them," he says. "Someone once asked me if I check the history of the browser before putting on the filter. I told him, 'I don't look at the

history. I look at the future.'"

Or, as Rav Kamenetsky put it, "One of the most important points that should be stressed is never to be *miyayesh*, never to wallow in failure or dwell in past mistakes. There's always a brighter future and that has to be the focus."

Yossie does his best to convince his clients to look at the future for another reason: Teenagers often fail to understand the lasting effects of their current behaviors.

"I have WhatsApp and that's how I communicate with most of my clients," he relates. "I check their statuses and sometimes, they're less than appropriate. Not long ago, I watched as a boy I was working with posted one status after the next, all of them very problematic. I called him up and said, 'Listen, I'm not your parent, I'm not your rebbi. You know what I am? I'm your friend. And as a friend, I want to tell you that those statuses are going to hurt you. Your siblings are seeing them. Your cousins are seeing them. And they'll never be able to respect you if you keep this up. As a friend, I'm asking you, please delete them.' A few minutes later, the statuses were deleted."

The attachment that some teens have with their phones is truly remarkable, and Yossie has found a way to use that to his advantage. "I was once dealing with a kid who was very resistant to getting a filter installed," Yossie tells me. "I tried all my usual tactics but nothing worked. Suddenly, I had an idea. I asked to see his phone. He handed it over. I looked through his apps and noticed that he had the Nike app. I asked him if he ever used it. 'No' he confirmed. 'So can I delete it?' I asked. Very begrudgingly, he said yes. A few days later he came back, he was ready for a filter." What was happening, Yossie explains, is that the resistance to the filter was based on nothing other than the intense attachment to the phone, in all its particulars. "When I deleted that dormant Nike app, I forced

WORK WITH ME

Sometimes the biggest problems can be lurking where you least expect them. Yossie tells of a boy, an incredible *masmid*, a star *talmid* of a top yeshivah, a model of hard work and diligence. But then he'd go home to his unfiltered phone, and that's where the trouble lay. By the time the boy reached out to Yossie for help he was so deeply entrenched, there was just no way to remove him from the phone entirely.

Yossie knew that the boy's rosh yeshivah would have to get involved and he'd have to play a central role. Which meant exposing the rosh yeshivah, known for his strict anti-technology policies, to a shocking side of his prized *talmid*. Jaw set, Yossie reached for the phone and dialed.

The rosh yeshivah answered, and Yossie responded by saying, "My name is Yossie Strickman, please don't interrupt me until I'm finished talking."

He didn't. Yossie described in great detail the challenges this boy was going through, the desperate levels that he had reached. He concluded by saying, "Listen, I'm begging you not to throw him out. I need you to work with me. Take the phone from the boy, keep it in a safe place. I'll put the appropriate filter in, but, once a week, let him use it. Let him use it in your office so that you can supervise. Please, do this. It's the only way we can make progress."

That's what they did. The rosh yeshivah insisted that he remain anonymous, this story being so out of his character, but, as Yossie puts it, "he saved the kid's life."

him to readjust his familiarity with his phone." Yossie has since used this tactic multiple times and is always surprised at how effective it is.

Yossie has become a skilled negotiator and has learned how to employ incentives to gain maximum results. He was recently working with a boy going through a very hard time. At some point, the boy mentioned that he had no intention of installing any filter on his phone whatsoever. But Yossie got a glimpse of the boy's phone, and noticed immediately that it was an older model, with a few cracks in the screen as well.

"Hey," he said casually. "No pressure on the filter, but how about a brand new phone, say a Galaxy S21?"

The boy was practically drooling, and Yossie knew he had him. "All right," he said, extending a hand. "I think we have a deal. But you're gonna have to filter it, you know?"

They shook hands and the boy broke out into the widest, most beautiful smile.

Since the bulk of Yossie's clientele are boys learning in yeshivos, he knows that the only way to affect real change is to engage the rebbeim and roshei yeshivah. But for a rebbi to have an effective impact when it comes to Internet regulation, it has to come from a position of knowledge and understanding.

"I'm often called to meetings with rebbeim in yeshivos or teachers in Bais Yaakov. They want to talk technology. I start the conversation by saying, 'All right, name me three apps.' Many times, they can't."

A rebbi who needed a fast lesson in technology recently called Yossie. "Reb Yossie, I need your help," he told him. "I have a *talmid* who's about to get married, and by way of conversation, mentioned to me that he plans to download several social media apps on his phone. I know it's wrong, but I don't know enough to explain why. I asked the boy to come meet me,

and we have a meeting scheduled in a few hours from now. I need you to help me. What should I tell my *talmid*?"

Yossie gave the rebbi a detailed rundown of the precise functions of these particular apps. He then sent the rebbi a few links to articles written up on these apps. The next day, the rebbi called back.

"Yossie, the conversation went incredibly well. My *talmid* walked into my office, expecting the same old *shmuess* about the Internet being *treif*, *assur*, *tamei*, and so forth. But instead, we had a lengthy, thorough, and pointed conversation. I was able to explain exactly what these apps do, how it would affect his *ruchniyus*, how it could ruin his marriage. And he really listened."

Yossie tries to be low on drama, high on facts. "I don't say any *chiddushim*," he says. "I just tell them what it is. I want them to know exactly what they're up against." Sometimes that means familiarizing the educators with specific jargon used on certain social media platforms. "If you hear your *talmidim* saying this phrase," he tells them, "you know you've got a problem."

Rabbi Yaakov Bender, rosh yeshivah of Yeshiva Darchei Torah in Far Rockaway and a member of the Vaad Roshei Yeshiva of Torah Umesorah, believes that it's not enough for *mechanchim* to be only reactive. "We can't wait for the problem to happen," he says. "We have to be proactive and tackle the problem head on." But the problem, he notes, has two sides to it. "There is the phone, and there is the user of the phone. Filtering the phone solves the technology problem but the human problem is still there. Without properly addressing this, we are only solving half the problem. And this is where schools and yeshivos come in. The dangers of technology have to be addressed in the yeshivah system. It is tempting to think that, at least in the stronger yeshivos, we are beyond it, that these are safe havens

where the spiritual enemy cannot enter. But this is just not the case. The problem is everywhere — no one is spared.”

Family Business Teenage Internet use and abuse is not always just a matter of giving into temptation. Yossie says he often sees a direct correlation between difficult home situations and Internet obsessions. Yossie has no formal training in social work, and navigating the complexities of family tensions is not something he picked up in computer sciences. “I’m a tech guy,” Yossie readily admits, “but I learned a lot on the job. Many times, after sending a client for therapy, I will seek the required consent to either consult with the therapist myself, or to join the sessions.”

Rabbi Dr. Zev Brown is a psychologist with private practices in Far Rockaway and Lakewood. “What I’ve come to note is that technology doesn’t cause mental health issues as much as it exacerbates them,” he explains. “An underlying disorder can spiral into a huge problem due to overexposure to the Internet. Disorders such as ADHD have skyrocketed because smartphones lend to such a task-switching type of brain pattern. Depression is up, academic performance is down, and so many relationships have been profoundly hurt.

“Technology has a profound impact on human behavior,” he continues, “and when people realize that, it’s easier for them to come to terms with the necessary regulation. When I’m dealing with a teen or a young adult, I find that there is real progress when you explain how this will affect their future, how it can damage their relationships, how it can cost them their jobs.”

Yossie knows he’s not a therapist and is careful to refer his clients to professionals when the situation is out of his purview. But with his years’ worth of experience, along with constant consultation with experts in the field, he has developed his own sixth sense when it comes to complex family issues and can contribute to the healing

“I’m often called to meetings with rebbeim or teachers. They want to talk technology, so I start the conversation by saying, ‘All right, name me three apps.’ Many times, they can’t”

process within his own ambit. He tells of a young client who he understood had to be dealt with sensitively. He knew the boy couldn’t be expected to immediately disconnect, that certain social media apps would have to stay for the time being.

“How about let’s sit down with your parents, and together we’ll try to map out a plan,” Yossie suggested.

The boy shook his head vehemently. “My parents hate me,” he said bitterly. “There’s no way they’ll agree to a meeting.”

Yossie was undaunted. “Give me their phone number,” he said. Moments later, he was on the phone with the boy’s parents.

“Look, I know you’re going through a rough time,” he said. “Your son is struggling and that hurts you. But right now, your son thinks you hate him. So when your son comes home tonight, I want you to have a conversation with him. I don’t really care what you say, as long as you make sure to say the words ‘I love you’ in the process.”

Later that night, he got a text from the boy’s father: “*Just had amazing conversation with our son.*”

Yossie responded, “*Then text him,*

not me. Tell him, thanks for the mature conversation, love Mom and Dad.”

A few minutes later, the father texted him again. “*Did that. He said ‘I love you too.’*”

Yossie is amazed every time. “It’s not the phone, people have to realize... Sometimes, it’s just not the phone.”

And he shares yet another story. A boy came to Yossie’s office with a smartphone, at his rebbe’s behest, and Yossie installed the standard filter. But the boy lingered, not willing to leave. Yossie looked up.

“You need something else?” he asked.

The boy nodded. “Yossie,” he said slowly. “Would you call my father for me? You see, my father is a very prominent rav. I love him, I respect him, but I just don’t think he gets me. I think he looks down on me for having a smartphone, for not being as *frum* as he is. Would you call him for me?”

Yossie Strickman has this thing: he can’t say no when people ask for help. He took the father’s number and dialed.

“Hello, Yossie Strickman here.” He went on to explain that he was working with the rav’s son, how the boy loved his father and wanted nothing more than to feel accepted by him. The rav thanked Yossie and promised that he would speak to his son.

A few weeks later, the boy called Yossie back. “Yossie, I’m going home for an off Shabbos, and it’s the first time I’m seeing my father since we spoke. Can you call him again to make sure we’re still on board?” Yossie did that, and the father assured him that he would make every effort to ensure that his son felt loved and accepted.

On Motzaei Shabbos, Yossie turned on his phone to find two messages, one from the father, and one from the boy — each essentially saying the same thing: “Yossie, thank you so much. It was the most beautiful Shabbos we ever had.”

In It to Win It’s said that sometime back in the 19th century, Rav Chaim Volozhiner prophesied that Torah would emigrate to America, what he called “*Der*

letzte stanza — the final station.” But the prophecy didn’t end there. Rav Chaim then sighed and concluded, “*Un oy, veht es unz kusten* — It’s going to cost us.” This final station would be fraught with challenges. Challenges that would cost us. Terribly. Could technology be what Rav Chaim was referring to?

“Yossie,” I ask before taking my leave, “I wasn’t at the main Internet Asifah. I was in Eretz Yisrael at the time and they made a smaller *asifah* there as well. Rabbi Yosef Elefant was one of the speakers and he said something that has stuck with me all these years: He said that when Yaakov battled the Angel of Eisav, he reached the point where he essentially won. But then, at the very end, the Angel hit Yaakov in the thigh, the *gid hanashe*. Rabbi Elefant suggested that this fight was a microcosm of the eternal battle between Klal Yisrael and the yetzer hara. We’re going to reach a point where we essentially won, but then, in a parting gesture of sorts, the yetzer hara is going to hit us hard. And that final battle, he said, is the Internet, and when we win, Mashiach will come.” Yossie nodded, seeming familiar with the idea.

“So Yossie, here’s my last question: Are we winning?”

And Yossie Strickman, the guy who marches into yeshivos and yells at boys to get filters, the guy who calls up random parents and instructs them on what to tell their children, is silent.

“It’s a short Friday and we both have to go,” he says after a long pause. “I’ll answer your question after Shabbos.”

Sometime after Shabbos I receive a voice note from Yossie.

“You asked me if we’re winning. Let me tell you something. We’re winning. I see it every day. The calls for help keep coming, and as long as they’re calling, we’re winning. And the more educated we are, the more we understand the enemy, the easier the fight will become. We are going to win this.”

We are going to win this. Of course we are. It’s the final station, after all. ●