



Women
Speak
by F. Adams

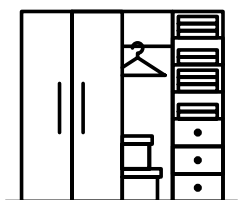
STRENGTHEN US

Zahava was living the perfect life, until it suddenly came crashing down around her just after the birth of her first child. Zahava has been incredibly open about her chronic struggles with bipolar disorder, sharing her story so that others can find comfort and strength in their own struggles. Recently, Zahava and several other women founded Chazkeinu, a support group for women challenged with mental illness, whether in themselves or a family member. Speaking to Zahava, and hearing how incredibly poised, confident and cheerful (and yes, normal!) she sounds, would shatter anyone's preconceived ideas and notions of mental illness. She shares her story here to further spread the chizuk and to provide a lifeline of support for so many in our community who are suffering in silence.

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I grew up in a *frum* home out-of-town, and I was always considered a mainstream girl. I did find that I had two very opposite sides to my personality; while I was totally reserved and quiet in public forums, I was loud and impulsive at home. It wasn't consistent but it wasn't affecting my life in any way, so I didn't think there was any

indication of anything wrong. When I was in seminary, I really discovered that vibrant leader side of me, and I embraced it fully to become a teacher after I graduated. I blossomed in front of the classroom, but I would still get nervous and shy in front of the principal, my boss, or when dealing with parents outside of the school setting. I made a good impression, though, because it was a mother of one of my students who chose me for her son; and so I married my student's brother, who lived only a few blocks away



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from me in our small, warm, out-of-town community.

We moved to Eretz Yisroel after our marriage, and immediately discovered that I was expecting. Ten months after I got married, I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. Life was perfect.

How did all that change?

Within ten days after giving birth, I became psychotic. I experienced very severe mania that was getting worse and worse by the hour. My situation was so unique because it hit so drastically and so suddenly, without any prior signs or symptoms. I was not functioning and I needed to be taken care of right away. This was the beginning of my long, ongoing struggle with bipolar disorder.

I had a friend and mentor who came over and told me that she had experienced the same exact thing, and that she had taken medication and was doing fine now. I was shocked to hear that because looking at her, I never would have known that she ever had such an episode. It was a huge *chizuk* to have her around. I didn't know though that while some people, like my friend, have one bipolar episode and then, as long as they are careful and watch out for the signs, they don't get it again, for others it becomes chronic, with many relapses and a constant struggle for stability. I was one of the others. Had I known at the time how very different my situation would be from hers, I may not have derived the same *chizuk* from seeing how okay she was!

Meanwhile, I was fighting the medication, insisting that I don't really need it. Baruch Hashem, I had the right people there for me. There is a program in Israel called Nitza which provides tremendous support to women postpartum; they sent me to a specific psychiatrist and I was fighting with him about taking medication. The head of Nitza happened to have been there and she came over to soothe me and help me out. She was like a mother figure, and the psychiatrist, who is a tremendous *yorei shamayim*, like a father. I am very blessed to have had them there when I needed them.

How has your illness manifested itself since that first episode?

Unlike my friend, I was never able to stop taking medication. I have had several relapses since that first time and had to be hospitalized at some points as well. I can be completely okay for a while on my medication, on a dose that is great for me, when I will suddenly have another episode. There are some warning signs, like not being able to sleep or not being able to focus on one thing at a time. When I feel myself getting that unusual rush of jittery energy and I become more uninhibited and impulsive, I know that the mania is about to set in.

I had relapses with the births of each of my children, and some in between as well: my oldest is now 11, and I have a 6 year old and a fifteen month old.

My treatment along the way varied, with the treatment I received in Eretz Yisroel differing greatly from the approach of my doctors in America after I moved back here six years ago, shortly after the birth of my second son.

Over there, my doctor started me off on very heavy sedative medications so that I lost my mania right away but was a zombie, and then he slowly lowered it to the point that I was myself again.

Over here, the doctor starts me off on a very low dose and then moves it up until I am at an effective level. This method requires me to be hospitalized so that the doctor can closely monitor me until the mania is under control.

I had my last relapse after my third son, over a year ago.

How have your family and friends reacted?

My family has been amazing.

My husband has been extremely supportive all along. His Rebbe is closely involved with several people who have had postpartum issues, so he has a lot of support and understanding. My husband is also from out-of-town, so it could have a little bit less stigma than in the big city; I'm not sure.

I always think about what would have been if this happened before I got married. Would I have been able to find a *shidduch*?

My mother-in-law is amazing and she never regretted choosing me for her son; she doesn't think of me as any different. My father-in-law will ask me how I am

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FRACTURE CENTER

Moises Kaweblum, MD

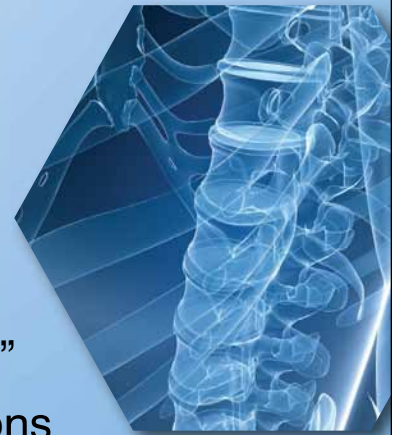
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feeling and how I am doing; they are all incredibly supportive.

Especially now that I am doing well and I started *Chazkeinu*, they are proud of me.

Being open about my illness comes with the freedom of not having to hide such an incredibly heavy burden and deal with it alone, but it also comes with the inevitable hurt of people who aren't so understanding and supportive. For the most part,

Don't pry, let the person decide how much they want to share with you, but do let them know that you are there for them,

my friends have really been incredible. I have friends who will call me and ask me what they could do for me, friends who treat me like anyone else.

At one point, I underwent ECT (electroconvulsive therapy) and one of the side effects I experienced was short term memory loss. I would ask the same questions again and again, without remembering that I had just asked. People got frustrated, "I just told answered that; don't you remember?" I began feeling really stupid and

didn't want to open my mouth for fear of saying something repetitive and then getting called out on it. I had one friend who was so patient. I asked her a question and she answered it without the slightest indication that this wasn't the first time she was responding. The only way I figured it out was because the answer sounded familiar. But when I asked her if I had already asked that question, she just shrugged nonchalantly and said, "You may have mentioned it before."

Things like that helped me feel normal and respected even as I was struggling.

Then there were friends who avoided me because they were afraid of saying the wrong thing, but that was so much more hurtful! I've had friends that would tell me honestly, "I don't know what to say!" and I was just so grateful that they weren't avoiding me or treating me differently. Don't pry, let the person decide how much they want to share with you, but do let them know that you are there for them, that if there is anything you can do they should let you know. Don't avoid them or not invite them to events you are making because you are afraid to be around them. That just hurts.

What led you to start Chazkeinu?

The seeds were planted in my mind a while before I actually founded the organization. I was in an OA Twelve Step program and I was so amazed at the power of that platform.

I had a forum where I was sharing my story, and even though the meetings revolved around eating issues, I would talk about my psychosis and bipolar and was met with great support. I had this entire network of people in it together with me. I loved the way they formed the meetings, that you can be so anonymous and open at the same time, where everyone was comfortable being open because there were solid boundaries in place. I began forming my own meetings and sponsoring people and I saw how much of a difference it made for so many people. I had to stop once I was expecting my third child but that experience definitely stayed with me.

I also became good friends with a woman whose husband struggled with mental illness. A relative of hers connected us, and once we became friends it felt like a huge burden lifted off my shoulders. It wasn't just because she was giving me *chizuk*, but because I was able to give her *chizuk* as well. By listening to her I was able to understand my own husband's struggles as a spouse, and she was able to understand her husband's struggles as a sufferer. We were able to relate to each other really well and became very close as a result.

I had originally met her when I mentioned to this relative how much I wished there would be a phone support group for people struggling with mental illness, much like there are for so many other challenges. She connected me to my now-friend, who is not as open about her husband's struggles. Together, we decided to make this dream come true, and that is how Chazkeinu was born. There were actually five of us who founded it, and how we all got together is an incredible story itself. Each cofounder came onboard through another instance of *hashgachah pratis*; each of us suffers from mental illness and we all have the same goal to stop the stigma and strengthen ourselves through

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connecting with and strengthening others.

I spoke to Rav Shmuel Kaminetzky and other Rabbanim about it, and I spoke to many therapists and mental health organizations who helped me get it off the ground. The Rabbanim, therapists and organizations then passed the word along to those they know who need the *chizuk*, and through word of mouth, we got a good number of participants. I also shared my story a couple of weeks ago on the Chazak Inspiration Line, and since then, close to one hundred people have contacted me.

How does it work?

Chazkeinu is unique because it brings family and friends of the mentally ill together on the same line with those who are actually ill.

So far, we started with teleconferences; we have two weekly phone meetings, on Monday and Wednesday. Our first phone meeting was on March 7th, so it's all relatively new. On our latest teleconference, we had 42 participants.

Our Wednesday call is at 1 pm, which attracts an international crowd due to the timing. We have people from Eretz Yisroel and throughout Europe on that line, and hope to attract people from even more places.

Each call follows the same specific format. It's peer led, and the moderator follows the script in conducting the meeting.

The meetings include a speaker who shares her personal story on the line or a woman with a family member or friend who has a mental illness share their experience, as well as mental health professionals or Rabbanim who share *chizuk* and encouragement with the group. The line is then open to all callers to share what resonated with them from what the speaker spoke about. Everyone has a designated amount of time to speak, and then we end off with *tehillim*.

The privacy and anonymity of the callers are always respected. Women do not need to share their name on the line and phone numbers are never shared either. For those

People who have never mentioned their illness to a soul now have a place where they can have a voice and talk about it, whether they themselves or a family member are ill.

who don't wish to be heard on the line their call comments can be e-mailed to us, and will be given over by a co-founder.

There is also a choice to write your story, and then have a moderator read it to the group at the meeting.

Afterwards, whoever wants stays on for an open meeting where we just shmooze and network with each other without the format, though with a general time limit.

I basically took the concept of a structure used by OA and adapted it to meet our needs.

The phone meetings are positive and inspiring and we have heard great feedback about the calls and look forward to continuing. We are always looking for more women to join and have the opportunity to help many more people.

People who have never mentioned their illness to a soul now have a place where they can have a voice and talk about it, whether they themselves or a family member are ill. They can actually express aloud what they are going through and get *chizuk* from so many others who are going through similar struggles. They feel like they have a whole community, a whole family of people who accept them unconditionally and understand them like no one else can. At the same time, they can remain anonymous even in this safe forum, if they would like to. Everyone has a choice of mentioning her real name or not, or even texting or emailing comments to be read aloud on the line so that she can't be identified by her voice. No phone numbers come up; it's a really, really safe space. And people who never dreamed they'd talk to others about their struggles gain the courage here to do so. Many start slowly; they speak up first to lead the *tehillim* at the end, then maybe to thank the speaker. And eventually, they feel comfortable enough to share their story and open themselves up to the *chizuk* they receive, and at the same time, give.

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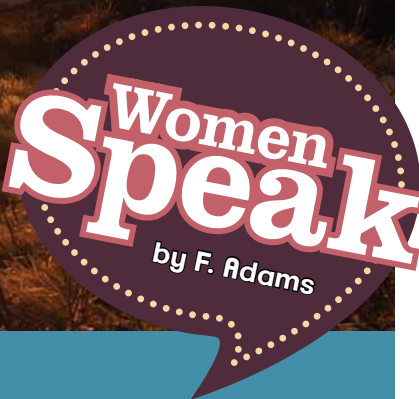
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What are some of your plans for the future of Chazkeinu?

We do have many plans for the future, but right now we are taking things step by step. We recently set up partner programs, where participants are assigned a peer to talk to one-on-one, someone who can relate to them as they support each other through their similar struggles. We appointed two founders to coordinate the program, and are continuing to work to make it as effective as possible. We are also working on setting up a website and on becoming a 501(c)3, so that we can accept donations to further help all those who need it, such as by subsidizing therapy.

When I met with Rabbi Benzion Klatzko of Shabbat.com, he loved our idea and basically took us under his wing. His graphic designer is making our website and he offered to help out in various ways. The support we have received from truly great people in the *frum* world has been beyond my wildest dreams.

Ultimately, whenever I am busy with an endeavor, I ask Hashem to help me be *matzliach*; in this case, I wish there wasn't a need for a Chazkeinu; I don't want it to grow with more and more people needing our services. So I just *daven* that I should be well and that everyone should be well, and that as long as there is a need Hashem should help us be able to fill that need.

What made you decide to be so open about your story?

To some extent, my situation was never quite hidden, because when I was manic I did many things in public that enabled people to realize that not all was well. Concerned individuals would try to keep me away from people because of what I might say or do; they were trying to protect me, but it was hard.

I don't regret my decision not to hide, even though it has had its ramifications. I lost my job as a result of my illness, and I have been hurt by comments. But I have gained so much more. When we can rise above ourselves and our challenges in order to help others, there is no greater feeling. The more I tell my story, the more people understand those who are struggling with mental illness and the stigma decreases. It feels so free to walk around openly, to know that you don't have to hide. Hiding something so huge doubles the *nisayon*, because you are suffering from the actual illness, and then you are suffering from the heavy burden of the secret that you carry around with you wherever you go.

When I tell people that I have bipolar, it makes me feel so normal, not like I have this deep, dark, shameful secret. And so often, people tell me in response, "Wow! I never would have guessed!" which makes me feel really good.

Obviously you aren't going to tell the world, but you tell people that you know you can trust to be there for you, and if someone lets you down, or someone not so understanding finds out once you've let go of the secret, it can be very difficult, but the liberating feeling is so worth it.

I always have this thought process of, "Am I Zahava or am I bipolar?" And I have to remind myself that am not defined by my diagnosis. I am not bipolar. I am Zahava and I have bipolar. The only reason why I need a diagnosis is so that doctors know how to treat me, not so that I can be defined by it.

I always tell that to people who are afraid of getting a diagnosis. And when people are afraid of going on medication because it will control them, I tell them that medication is like a good friend who completes you. She fills in the areas in which you are lacking. Your medicine is filling in a chemical imbalance in your brain. It should complement you, not change you or control you. If it is changing or controlling, you are on the wrong medication or the wrong dosage. Talking about my illness enables me to give *chizuk* to others because they hear my story and then approach me to share theirs. There are so many people in our community who have mental illness, whose spouses or children have mental illness, and they have nowhere to turn.

Being open also helps me chip away a little bit of the stigma that is so prevalent. When people with mental illness come out and talk about it, it helps others see what normal, accomplished people they are. It helps mothers of boys in shidduchim realize that a girl with bipolar can still be an amazing wife and mother.

When one has bipolar but is taking care of it, taking her medications and seeing her doctor, it is just like any other illness. Yes, for some it can be chronic, but there are also chronic physical illnesses. Everyone has challenges in life, and by bypassing any girl with challenges that you know about, you are not setting yourself up for a daughter-in-law who is challenge-free, but rather for a

Being open also helps me chip away a little bit of the stigma that is so prevalent.

daughter-in-law whose challenges you have not yet seen, and whose extent and severity you have no idea of. No one is perfect, and there are no guarantees of a perfect life. Look at me; my mother-in-law actually hand picked me for her son, and none of us ever dreamed what the near future would hold!

It's important for people to understand that having mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of. When we associate shame with it, then people suffer not only from the judgment of others, but from self-stigma as well. We need to do everything to ensure that people with mental illness are surrounded by friends and family who are accepting, encouraging and non-judgemental, and that they don't feel they need to hide their struggles in order to be treated like a normal human being.

How do you navigate life as a wife and mother even as you struggle with mental illness?

Ultimately, if I am doing my *hishtadulus* in terms of going to the doctors I trust, who are committed to helping me stay stable, and staying on the treatment program that works for me, I can live a normal and accomplishing life.

I am open with my children, each on a different level. We talk about my work at Chazkeinu and we talk about bipolar. They know that it is an illness that is not scary and that can be taken care of. Just tonight, my older son asked me, "What would happen if you didn't take your medicine anymore?"

I answered him, "Baruch Hashem that I do; I wouldn't want to know what would happen. But when I wasn't well I went to the hospital and took more medicine, which helped me get better."

The more they know, the less scary it is to them.

I also work on not being too hard on myself; if I have a hard day, I try not to get frustrated and think, "Why can't I be like everyone else?" I accept any help I can get.

And I hope to do as much as I can to ensure that those with mental illness get all the help and support that they need, and to fulfill the two mantras of Chazkeinu: "Strengthen ourselves through strengthening each other" and "The Stigma Stops Here!"

You can reach Zahava and Chazkeinu at chazkeinu@gmail.com

If you or someone you know has a story to share, please contact fradl@lakewoodshopper.com.