

The Real Me

The day after a high-school play in which I played a leading role, a friend gave me a note congratulating me on my performance. “Zahava, last night you were transformed into a different person,” she wrote.

It was true. Onstage, I had been bold, charismatic, and animated, while in real life, I was just a nice, regular, quiet girl from out of town. *Who am I*, I wondered. *Am I the star actress, or just plain old me?* It was a question I’d grapple with more and more as life went on.

After seminary, I became a teacher, and the mother of one of my students handpicked me as a *shidduch* for her son. My husband and I moved to Eretz Yisrael, and I gave birth to our first child, a boy, ten months after our wedding. I was living a dream life.

Most women feel tired and a little down after giving birth. Not me. In the days after the birth, I was feeling on top of the world. I didn’t need to sleep or eat; I just wanted to reach out to the world. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was going through the first of several manic episodes I would experience.

My inhibitions went out the window, and I spoke whatever was on my mind to everyone I came into contact with. I walked over to a single girl in the street and told her I knew whom she should marry. Even though I had just met her, I truly believed I could read her like a book.

I also opened a Yerushalayim phonebook and dialed the numbers of famous *rabbanim* and speakers. To each one, I posed the same question: “Are you Mashiach?”

“No,” they each replied in succession.

After making about ten of these phone calls, I turned to my husband and asked, “Are you Mashiach?”

He gave me a funny look. “I don’t know,” he said.

Hey, I thought. *He didn’t say no! Maybe I’m married to Mashiach!*

My mission is to bring Mashiach, I resolved. As part of that mission, I flagged a taxi to go visit a seminary teacher and tell her what I really thought of her. During the ride, I became convinced that the Arab driver was going to kill me as a symbol of revenge. He was an incarnation of Yishmael, I decided, while I was the *gilgul* of Rachel Imeinu. As we headed to my teacher’s apartment, I jumped out of the moving taxi and threw a 100-shekel bill at the driver.

My husband was alarmed by my behavior, as were my in-laws, who had come to Eretz Yisrael for the bris. Actually, everyone I spoke to at this point realized that something was very wrong with me. I was delusional, and saying things like, “I’ve accomplished my mission in this world, so I don’t need to live anymore.”

When my baby was ten days old, a neighbor of mine, whom I’ll call Mrs. Murken, came over to visit. She was about 20 years my senior, and was someone I looked up to as a role model.

“Your family has been telling me how you’ve been behaving,” she began. “I think you’re having some sort of

postpartum reaction, and you need to get help.”

I waved my hand dismissively. “I’m totally fine,” I assured her.

“I’m speaking from experience,” she said. “I had postpartum psychosis after one of my children and I had to take medication to get past it.”

I almost choked. “You?”

“Yes,” she said calmly.

Had anyone else told me to take medication, I would never have listened. But Mrs. Murken seemed to have it all together, and she was the type of wife and mother that I dreamed of becoming. If she had been on medication, then maybe medication wasn’t so bad.

“If you had strep, you would take antibiotics,” she continued. “This is no different. You have an illness, and you need to see a doctor and get on medication. There’s nothing to be embarrassed of — you’re still the same great person you were before.”

“But I don’t want to give up nursing!” I protested.

She touched my hand. “Wouldn’t you rather be a mother to your baby?”

I agreed to see a doctor.

Through Nitza, an organization that helps postpartum women, I was referred to a psychiatrist and a therapist. The psychiatrist diagnosed me with bipolar 1 — which is bipolar disorder with primarily manic or psychotic symptoms — and placed me on heavy sedatives. The therapist helped me come to terms with the idea of taking medication, encouraging me to think of the medicine not as a controlling force in my life, but rather as a good friend who filled in some gaps for me.

As I came out of my delusional universe, I began to feel extremely ashamed of my condition. Unfortunately, I couldn’t keep it a secret, because practically everyone had seen me in my psychotic state. In addition to calling dozens of people and babbling to them with no inhibitions, I had actually run through the streets of Sanhedria Murchevet yelling, “Who’s going to join my campaign to bring Mashiach?”

Ouch. How could I ever show my face in public again?

For Mrs. Murken, postpartum psychosis was a one-time challenge: she had gone on medication temporarily, and had never experienced another episode. For me, it was different. I had several relapses after that first episode, and was never able to go off medication. I remained on medication throughout my subsequent two pregnancies, and baruch Hashem gave birth to a healthy baby each time. But after each birth, I became psychotic again, even with the medication, and I had to be hospitalized several times and go through medication adjustments and electric shock therapy (ECT). I suffered additional relapses between the births as well. Each episode of mania was progressively worse, and was followed by a painful

Every person in the world is bipolar to some degree.

WE ALL HAVE UPS AND DOWNS, GOOD DAYS AND BAD DAYS, TIMES THAT WE THINK WE'RE GREAT AND TIMES THAT WE THINK WE'RE AWFUL

depression that took months to recover from.

Although there was no way to keep my mental illness a secret, many people advised me not to talk about it. “You don’t want people to think differently of you,” they explained. But that just left me in no-man’s-land, unable to hide my illness yet unable to feel comfortable talking about it.

During the six years I lived in Eretz Yisrael, I went through a few different therapists, taking what I could from each of them and then moving on when I felt the therapy was no longer helpful. When I moved back to the US, I opted for a different approach, joining an Overeaters Anonymous 12-step program to gain control of my weight, which had climbed steadily over the years.

Eating disorders are close cousins of mental illness, and I was pleasantly surprised to hear the people in my 12-step group speaking openly about their mental health challenges and other issues in a safe and anonymous atmosphere. In the past, when I had spoken to people about my struggle with bipolar, I had always doubted myself, wondering what they were going to think of me and how it would affect my children’s *shidduchim*. Now, I learned to speak freely about my condition without feeling shame or stigma.

People think 12-step groups are there to provide support, but these groups also fill the more important function of helping you get out of yourself and reach out to help others who are going through similar struggles. The thinking is that by helping others, you actually heal yourself, as well.

After several years, however, I left the 12-step group. Why I left was a mystery even to me; I was passionate about the program and enthusiastic about the growth and inner work it helped me do. Yet I think that at some point I felt that the 12-step program limited me by defining me by my problem. “I’m Zahava, and I’m a compulsive overeater,” or “I’m Zahava, and I have bipolar disorder,” was too narrow a description of who I was.

Admitting that you have a problem is unquestionably the first step toward healing, but once you’ve moved out of denial and are taking the necessary steps toward healing, you don’t have to think of yourself as synonymous with whatever issue you have. You treat the issue and use it as a catalyst for growth, but it shouldn’t define you as a human being.

Over the years, I had struggled mightily with the question of who the real Zahava was. Was I the nice lady next door who was

happy to watch the neighbors’ kids so they could run out for an hour, or was I the shrieking maniac who had to be sedated in the psychiatric ward? Which one was the real me, and which one was the actress?

After leaving the 12-step group, I began a new type of therapy called Internal Family Systems (IFS). IFS is based on the idea that every person encompasses a collection of subpersonalities that each have their own viewpoint and qualities, in addition to the person’s core self, which unifies all the disparate parts.

Although bipolar disorder has a significant chemical component, successful management of emotions is a key element in preventing relapses. Through IFS, I’ve learned to feel my feelings without being enveloped by them. If I start to feel resentful, for instance, I look at that feeling as a part of me that needs attention and validation. The feeling of resentment is often accompanied by another part of me that fights the resentment and scoffs, “Come on, don’t be so petty.” I tell that opposing part, “Can you sit over here while we talk to the resentment part?” Each feeling is a welcome member of the “family system” within me, and I work on recognizing each one and giving it a voice without allowing it to take over.

If a child pulls at your skirt and you tell the child, “Go away,” the child will only cling to you more ferociously. Even if you do manage to dislodge him, he’ll come back at you later with a vengeance. Similarly, if you try to dismiss a feeling without processing it, you only increase its power over you. You have to look the child — and the child within you — in the eye and say, “Tell me what’s bothering you. Whatever you’re feeling is okay.”

With this approach, I was able to identify the real Zahava. I’m the navigator of the ship that includes all the aspects of my personality. I’m not bipolar — bipolar is one part of the ship, a diagnosis that is useful only insofar as it helps the doctors know how to treat me. I have so much more to offer the world than bipolar disorder.

Every person in the world is bipolar to some degree. We all have ups and downs, good days and bad days, times that we think we’re great and times that we think we’re awful. The difference is that a person with bipolar tends toward extremes and has to work every day on maintaining the equilibrium that comes more naturally to others, while faithfully following a regimen of medication and therapy.

Denial was the first stop on my journey with bipolar. The next stop was begrudging acceptance, and the stop after that was full acceptance, which happened when I recognized that the disorder was helping me to become a better person and was nothing to be ashamed of. I’d be embarrassed if I robbed a bank, but why should I be embarrassed of something I did not choose for myself? Today, I talk about having bipolar the way someone would talk about having asthma. It’s part of who I am, but it’s not me.

Once I reached the glorious stop of full acceptance, I decided to take the journey a step further. The more comfortable I became talking about my condition, the more I realized how much stigma the *frum* community attaches to mental health challenges, and the more I wished there would be a safe forum for these challenges.

Our community boasts support organizations for people with all sorts of issues: infertility, divorce, cancer, special needs. Shouldn’t there be one for people with mental health issues? I posed this question to many people, and the answer I heard again and again was: “There should be. If you find one, can you let me know? Or maybe you want to start one?”

So I did. The nice, regular, quiet girl from out of town teamed up with a few other committed women who had gone through their own journeys with mental illness and started an organization called Chazkeinu. Chazkeinu’s mission is to provide *chizuk* to Jewish women coping with mental illness, whether their own or that of a family member. Our mottos are: “We strengthen ourselves through strengthening each other,” and “The stigma stops here.”

We launched the organization with enthusiastic encouragement from *rabbanim* and therapists, and our first, modest endeavor was the creation of a weekly support call based on the 12-step model. The phone meetings feature personal stories, anonymous shares from the participants, and Q&A sessions with a wide range of mental health professionals.

Shortly afterwards we launched a partners program, in which we pair people struggling with similar issues who can give each other support. Subsequently, we opened an online forum, a davening group, and, most recently, a non-emergency hotline manned by professionals twice a week. In the year since the

organization was founded, we’ve expanded to two weekly phone meetings and hundreds of members spanning the globe.

This past December we held our first Shabbaton, in Monsey — and close to 50 women came! We had been warned that no one would want to show their face, for fear of meeting their across-the-street neighbor, but they came anyway. Although the participants were at many different ages, stages, and religious levels, the common bond they shared gave rise to palpable love, empathy, and acceptance. That Shabbaton was followed by other face-to-face meetings throughout the tristate area and Israel.

Early in my journey, I thought I would have to wait until 120 to look back at my life and understand why I had to go through the challenges I’ve faced. I’m only in my mid-30s, but it’s clear to me that I had to go through this journey so I could provide *chizuk* to other people and give a voice to so many who suffer in silence.

I get calls all the time from people who tell me, “My child needs to go on such-and-such medication.” Whatever medication they name, I’ve probably been on it. If they tell me, “I’m in the hospital and no one understands me,” I can tell them, “I know exactly what you’re going through.”

My husband and his parents, as well as my own parents and siblings, have been behind me every step of the journey. My mother-in-law, who handpicked me, never showed any sign that she regretted her choice. And today, the entire family is proud of the work I’m doing, spreading awareness about mental illness in our community and fighting the stigma that has doggedly accompanied it.

When I first stepped onto the stage of life, I naively thought I could write my own script. I’ve come to realize, however, that the script of my life has already been written, and my role is to read my lines as well as I possibly can. Then, I can star as the real me.

The narrator can be contacted through LifeLines or the Mishpacha office. ●

To have your story retold by C. Saphir, e-mail a brief synopsis to lifelines@mishpacha.com or call +1.718.686.9339 extension 87204 and leave a message. Details will be changed to assure confidentiality.