

UNVEILED

LIFE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS #4

In my manic state following the birth of my first child, I thought I could read people's minds. I would walk on the street and start a conversation with random people. To one seminary girl I met, I told her I had a *shidduch* for her and invited her to my house to come see a picture. During the day, I would see myself as the best person in the entire universe, but at night I'd feel I wasn't needed in this world, that I was done with my *tafkid*, and there was nothing left for me to accomplish in the painful world from which I was desperate to escape.

When my husband had come to learn in Eretz Yisrael as a *bachur*, he got to know some families in the neighborhood, spending time in their homes. Later, when we came back as a couple, although I had lost interest in social connection in my mild depressive state during pregnancy, he persuaded me to build a connection with the women of these homes.

I was particularly impressed with one woman he introduced me to. The mother of a large family, Batya* exuded the kind of warmth and understanding that made me feel so comfortable in her presence. She always prepared delicious food, and I was drawn to the friendly and peaceful atmosphere in her home. Batya was the wife and mother I wanted to be. I hardly went to her because I was so shy in public, but when I did, I enjoyed her company very much.

After my baby was born, my condition was brought to Batya's attention. She called up my husband and asked him if everything was okay. When he said it was, she was persistent. "Is everything okay?" She pressed. When he didn't answer, she said, "I'm coming over."

A few minutes later, Batya was in our apartment. "Zahava," she said, "I think you're having a postpartum reaction. You need to go to a psychiatrist and get medication." And then, she said the words that made all the difference: "I know what it's like to go through this. I went through this too."

At that point I was already out of touch with reality. Of course, I didn't want to hear of going to a doctor and getting medication. It meant I wouldn't be able to nurse anymore, and I wasn't going to let that happen. "You'll be a healthy mother for your child," Batya reassured me.

I remember Batya telling me, "Zahava, think of it as if you have strep. Wouldn't you go to the doctor to get medication and feel better?" My reaction changed from being so excited at seeing her to intense crying. It's normal for postpartum women to have mood swings, but this was

extreme.

Upon Batya's behest, my husband reached out to Nitza, a postpartum network in Yerushalayim. They referred me to a therapist, as well as to the psychiatrist Dr. Michael Bunzel of Bnei Brak. In an interesting chain of events that exhibits his concern for every patient, we went all the way to Bnei Brak to meet him, thinking that our appointment was in his regular office, but at the same time he had come all the way to Yerushalayim to see us there.

When we finally met, our conversation was centered on my resistance to medication. I was so convinced that I was okay, that it was everyone else who had a problem. I remember going behind my husband's chair and silently pointing to him so the doctor would realize we were really in his office to heal my husband.

Both Dr. Bunzel and Ahava Winston, the head of Nitza, tried persuading me to do this for my own wellbeing and the good of my family, but I wouldn't hear of it. What ultimately convinced me was my delusional view of Dr. Bunzel and Ahava as my spiritual parents. In my delusional state, I told myself that if I took medication I'd save the world. And so, I finally acquiesced. ♥

In Hindsight

I ended up having 7 manic episodes, including after the birth of my second and third children, and each one presented differently. My very first episode reached its peak 10 days after giving birth and some of the other relapses escalated in record speed. Some people are hypomanic for a significant amount of time before they reach the point of severe psychosis that I did. Every case is individual and deserves its own support toward healing. It meant so much to me that my husband believed me when I shared my story with him, even in my manic state.

At the same time, when people distanced themselves from me, it hurt me to the core. If only people would have shown more acceptance, my experience would have been so different. Mental illness is in no way a reflection of the individual. It is often a biochemical reaction to painful triggers from the past that robs the person of their free will. No one should feel judged or stigmatized when that happens. A friend of mine once told me that when I was in my manic state people had cautioned her, "Don't hang around with Zahava. Her condition might be contagious."

To be continued...

*Name changed to protect anonymity.

Zahava List is the founder and director of Chazkeinu, a peer-led support organization for Jewish women who struggle with mental illness and their female family members.