

ADDICTION CAN STRAIN EVEN THE STRONGEST MARRIAGE. YET SOME COUPLES DON'T DISCOVER IT AFTER YEARS OF MARRIAGE, BUT GO TO THE *CHUPPAH* AWARE THAT ADDICTION WILL ALWAYS BE A PART OF THEIR LIVES TOGETHER

# A Match made in Rehab

SHOSHANA SCHWARTZ

Every day for months, Michal and Daniel saw each other across the road but never met; they didn't even know each other's names.

A year later, they met formally at a 12-step meeting and discovered they shared much in common: raised in religious but abusive families, both had gone off the *derech* and were then living with friends. Both were recovering addicts — graduates of Retorno, where they'd first seen each other.

There are countless ways two soul mates can find each other: *shadchanim*, friends, Shabbos hosts... but rehab?

Retorno, the world's largest Jewish drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, boasts several married couples among its graduates. How did these *shidduchim* come about? Knowing firsthand the challenges of addiction, why would someone willingly choose an addict for a spouse? Are there any benefits to marrying someone facing the same struggles as you, or will you just drag each other down?

#### COUPLES IN RECOVERY

Just before her 18th birthday, Michal was brought by force to Retorno's women's program by Israel's Welfare Department. Though she'd seen Daniel many times during her seven months of treatment, there was no contact between the different divisions.

After graduating Retorno and returning to school, Michal was supposed to attend Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 12-step meetings, but she was enjoying her freedom and didn't seek a sponsor (an addict with good recovery to serve as a mentor). She stayed clean (free from

addictive substances and behaviors) only a few months before “falling” — that is, starting to drink again. But something stopped her from falling too far.

“I wasn’t going to meetings,” Michal recalls, “but I was in touch with Retorno. Within hours, I was back with my counselors, getting the help I needed and making the commitment to work the program.” Immediately, she began attending NA and AA meetings in her neighborhood. At almost every meeting, she ran into Daniel.

“He’s seven years older than me,” Michal says, “so at first I wasn’t interested in dating him. I admired him, saw he was serious about staying clean, but that was it.”

After a few months, Michal began hosting a regular Friday night *seudah* for Retorno graduates. Daniel would attend, and, as they got to know each other, they realized they shared many values, not only life circumstances. Despite rebelling against religion, both held on to a belief in G-d. Both also started keeping Shabbos again in Retorno — one of the many rules. They also attended the Torah classes offered on campus, and discovered they enjoyed this added spiritual dimension to their recovery. With strong recovery and looking toward a brighter future, Michal and Daniel married and are raising a religious family. Recently, they celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary.

Yehuda and Helena also owe their relationship to Retorno. At 34, Yehuda, then married to Chaya and a father of five, sought help for his addiction. As a medic in the Israeli army, he saw more than he could handle and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In order to get through some difficult episodes in his life, he turned to “using” or “acting out” (engaging in addictive behaviors). A psychiatrist who didn’t understand the problem told him, “If you want to stop using, just stop!” Yehuda *did* want to stop, and he knew his marriage was in danger, but he was helpless.

Because many forms of addiction are extremely hard to identify — particularly in the religious community — Retorno runs outreach programs to raise awareness about the hidden signs of addiction. That week, Retorno’s play about substance addiction, put on in Yehuda’s neighborhood, touched him, and he contacted the organization. He began treatment at Mifgashim, Retorno’s outpatient facility in Beit Shemesh.

Despite his treatment, Yehuda’s wife didn’t believe they had a future together and filed for divorce. Yehuda completed Mifgashim’s program and became a counselor in Retorno’s inpatient facility. That’s where he met Helena.

At 16, Helena made aliyah from Russia in search of a new life. Instead, she found drugs. During her year of national service, her supervisors realized she was an addict and sent her to Retorno.

“Even if I got a first date with a ‘good’ Bais Yaakov girl, I’d eventually have to reveal I was a recovering addict — in other words, second class”

After graduation, she occasionally saw Yehuda at NA meetings, but since Yehuda generally attended other meetings, their contact was mostly by phone. About a year later, they began to date. They’ve been married now for six years.

IF IT ITCHES...

“When you have a mosquito bite,” says Rabbi Eitan Eckstein, founder and director of Retorno and a foremost expert on addiction, “you scratch until you realize you’re only making things worse, then you stop. An addict scratches, draws blood, wants to stop, and can’t. Not only does he feel he *must* scratch no matter what, he’s also completely certain that the next scratch will cure the itch.”

Rabbi Eckstein explains how treatment helps. “Addiction means you have no free will. You scratch because you feel you must, and only afterward do you notice you’ve drawn blood. Treatment sends a signal to your brain just *before* the first scratch. It gives you a moment to pause, to recognize the itch and make a conscious decision not to scratch. Treatment returns your free will.”

Why would anyone choose to marry an addict, knowing he lives with a constant struggle not to “scratch”?

“Addicts have a unique personality,” says Udel Bergman, MS, BSW, director of the English-speaking program at Retorno’s inpatient facility for over ten years. “Many of these features — compulsivity, black-and-white thinking — are not very conducive to a standard life.” What happens when two such people get together? If one falls, there’s a risk of bringing down the other. Who picks up the pieces? And what if there are children?

But marrying a fellow addict has its

pluses, Udel adds. “They understand each other, they’re nonjudgmental. They can encourage each other, not sabotage with unrealistic requests or temptations. It’s an in-house support system. Plus, if one does fall, the other knows what needs to be done to help the spouse get clean again.”

If two addicts want to marry, Udel cautions, they must make sure they have two things: a solid 12-step program, and *daas Torah*. “There are enough *rabbanim* today who understand addiction. A couple must make this a part of their marriage.”

ALL THE WRONG REASONS

Lack of a solid program is exactly what went wrong for Shimon and Hadassah, a third Retorno couple. Shimon explains how he ended up in rehab. “During my third year in *yeshivah gedolah*, my 18-year-old sister got sick. I visited *rabbanim, kivrei tzaddikim, mekubalim...* The one visit I didn’t make was to my sister. I couldn’t see her like that, couldn’t handle her ‘Why me?’ While at Amuka, I learned she died. I was struck with major guilt. Why hadn’t my prayers saved her? Why hadn’t I visited? Just as I couldn’t face her before, now I couldn’t face myself.”

After the shivah, Shimon’s *dirah*-mates tried to comfort him. When nothing helped, they pulled out the whiskey. “I’d never had whiskey before, and the minute I drank it, I fell in love with the bottle.” Every time he felt bad, all he had to do was drink. I was happy, friendly, productive. In retrospect, I was an empty shell. It was all a show. But on the surface, it was my best *zeman* ever!”

Then Shimon experienced a miracle. His addictions got him entangled with

the police. I’d never been so terrified in my life! Leaving the police station, a stranger handed me Rabbi Eckstein’s phone number and said, ‘This number will save your life.’

“Three days later, I was sitting in Rabbi Eckstein’s office. The rabbi said, ‘I know you have all the reasons in the world to drink.’ Because I sensed he wasn’t judging me, I was willing to talk — and listen. He said something that would change my life. He said I have to forgive myself. He understood I blamed myself for my sister’s death.” Shimon began treatment within a week.

“One day,” Shimon relates, “I was working in the kitchen, and three girls from the youth program came to take food for their dining room. One grabbed a tray and said, ‘Oy, it’s heavy!’ Without thinking, I said, ‘I got it.’ Now, this is totally against the rules — there’s no talking to women or youth, certainly not carrying their trays! But she was this sweet little Bais Yaakov girl, right around my sister’s age when she died, and I thought, *If I’m nice to her, it’s like I’m being nice to my sister*. I knew I’d be in trouble later, but I had to help her!”

Until they both finished treatment, all Shimon could find out was her name. “I moved back home, started learning again. I asked my parents to set us up. At first, they were appalled. ‘What? You want to marry an addict?’ But they were also realistic. Even if I got a first date with a ‘good’ Bais Yaakov girl, I’d eventually have to reveal I was a recovering addict — in other words, second class. If Hadassah and I married, both families could cover up the fact that we were addicts!”

Shimon and Hadassah married. “At first, it was terrific. I helped Hadassah, took care of her, protected her. She

## A Different Kind of Rehab Couple

During her internship at Retorno two years ago, Leora — an MSW who specializes in youth at risk and trauma survivors — worked closely with addiction counselors who have been clean ten or twenty years. “The depths and level of their coping skills, the authenticity that expressed itself in their lives, was mind-boggling. It’s a privilege to be with someone like that. At the same time, there’s a fear. Can addiction take over? What can happen? But,” she adds, “you can ask the same question of anyone.”

Leora knows better than most the value of the tools recovering addicts acquire through powerful treatment programs like Retorno and how they can affect a marriage. She met her husband, Binyamin, also an MSW, through Retorno; he did his internship there at the same time.

“Retorno is an environment where you have to face yourself,” Leora explains, “not like the outside where you can hide behind the persona you create. People are forced to face themselves. So many issues are explored — trust, asking for help, overcoming challenges, healing from previous trauma, relationships.... Binyamin and I had to explore our own perspectives regarding personal growth and development, choice, how much is in our hands and how much is out of our control — these were all conversations we had within the first week of working together.”

Official dating came later, but it was during a horseback riding workshop that they realized they were right for each other. Rabbi Eckstein created a situation in which the riders felt powerless.

“I was terrified! We had a whole group discussion about this afterward. Could I have admitted my powerlessness over the horse? Could I let go and trust someone to help me? In other words, can we acknowledge our powerlessness in life and let things go? Do we face reality or hide from it? When Binyamin and I heard each other’s answers, we clicked.”

had worked so hard to get clean, but her family stayed the same — critical, nonaccepting, unhealthy. They’d push all her buttons, make her want to start using again. I was all she had, and I felt important!

“Looking back, I understand that my ‘saving her’ felt like a *tikkun* for not having saved my sister. I was drawn into a cycle of endless giving. I thought, *I just need to help her through this next crisis, just one more bump in the road.* It got to the point where I davened with a phone in one hand, in case she tried to reach me. I stopped going to 12-step meetings, because what if Hadassah needed me?”

Together, Shimon and Hadassah helped each other drown. Or, as Shimon puts it, “Hadassah was busy drowning, and I was busy saving her.” They developed a codependent relationship (an unhealthy enmeshment in which your existence is defined by your connection to another). Sadly, their marriage ended in divorce.

Shimon doesn’t blame addiction for his failed marriage; he personally knows three successful addict couples. “I blame myself for not asking for help when things started to slide downhill. And for shutting out my sponsor when he hinted our relationship needed work.”

## “I married Ari, who has multiple addictions, because of who he is today, not because of where he was in the past”

### CHOOSING THE CHALLENGE

Perhaps it’s understandable why an addict wouldn’t mind marrying another addict. But would a non-addict consider it?

Sarah did. At 23, she was not an “older single,” didn’t come from a dysfunctional family and hadn’t been off the *derech*. “I’m just open-minded,” she says, smiling. “When I was *redt* the *shidduch*, my parents and I gave the matter serious thought. In the end, I married Ari, who has multiple addictions, because of who he is today, not because of where he was in the past.”

Does she worry about Ari relapsing? “We have some particular challenges other couples don’t,” Sarah admits, “but every couple has challenges with *shalom bayis*. At least I know what ours are.” She goes to Al-Anon meetings, where family members of addicts don’t just learn about addiction, they also work the 12-step program. “The program doesn’t give tools only for handling addiction — it gives tools for handling frustration, resentment ... whatever life throws at us.” She too mentions codependency, adding that their therapist says it’s extremely

common even in non-addict families.

Dina also married an addict. She liked Motty’s open, friendly manner, his candidness, and his desire to help others. But she had no clue what she was getting herself into. “I knew Motty was an addict,” Dina confesses, “but I didn’t know what that meant. I’d never met an addict before, never even read a story about an addict! As a *baalas teshuvah*, I handled my own *shidduchim*, so there were no concerned parents.”

The first big surprise came three months after their wedding. Dina found Motty’s “Step Four Inventory” — a life history that helps the addict expunge hurts and resentments, take responsibility for his actions, and forgive others. It’s detailed, brutally honest, and is not meant for spouses to read.

That discovery was Dina’s first inkling as to what marriage to an addict was all about. It’s also what pushed her to attend Al-Anon meetings, which she’d been resisting. “*He* had the problem,” she says, “why should *I* go to meetings?” Today, she credits those meetings together with couples therapy as key factors in a strong marriage. In fact, she believes their marriage is healthier than many others. “Sure, there’s frustration and anxiety. But we know what to do with it.” Dina adds, “If I had to do it all over again, I’d still marry Motty.”

Still, Dina’s greatest fear is that Motty will fall, which he has — twice in 12 years. Though frightening and dangerous, his backsteps were short lived. “I went straight to our therapist, while Motty turned to his sponsor. Motty knows that as long as he’s honest with me, I can help him, and we can get through it together.” Because Dina’s boundaries are clear — for example, she’d never allow him near the children while using — Motty has a strong support system and good incentives to stay clean.

### BECOMING A BETTER HALF

As terrifying as it was for Dina when Motty fell, as a non-addict, she wasn’t in any immediate danger of using herself. Not so with Michal — when Daniel fell after four years of marriage, she knew it could easily trigger her own relapse as well. She brought him, still unconscious, back to Retorno, which she considers the only home she’s ever known. Daniel fought her and made all sorts of promises: He’d stay clean, go to more meetings, never do anything in front of the children, etc. But as a recovering addict, Michal knew what those promises were worth. She refused to allow him back home without additional treatment at Retorno.

This trying experience taught them several key lessons about maintaining sobriety as a couple. Rule number one: They are each responsible for their own recovery. They don’t try to be each other’s sponsors; they don’t even go to the same meetings. “How open can you be about frustrations at home when your wife is sitting right next to you?” Michal points out.

“There are definite advantages in speaking the same language, in having the same struggles, in being able to express real feelings and be accepted,” Michal continues. But there are pitfalls, too. “The pressure of living in what amounts to a therapeutic community can get overwhelming. Even normal conversations turn into ‘meetings.’ When your other half is ‘normal,’ you can afford to fall apart every so often, you can expect ten minutes of quiet when you need it. Living with an addict, you’re always on guard, careful not to do something that’ll trigger your spouse.”

There’s also the issue of different guidelines. “My sponsor considers energy drinks to be drugs, but Daniel’s sponsor allows them. So Daniel drinks them — but not in the house.”

Like Michal and Daniel, Yehuda and Helena also didn’t give much thought as to how “safe” it would be for two addicts

to marry. And like Shimon and Hadassah, their relationship was quickly becoming codependent. But unlike Shimon, Yehuda confided in his sponsor, who explained that he had to support Helena, but she also had to support him. They began attending separate 12-step meetings, and Yehuda added Al-Anon meetings to his itinerary to gain better tools as the spouse of an addict.

Yehuda says, “When I tell my sponsor I’m angry at Helena, he doesn’t let me get away with a list of complaints. ‘What’s your part?’ he asks. I know I can’t change

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her — I can only change myself. We have problems like any other couple, but the program gives us a way to work on having a great marriage.”

Everyone agrees that an addict without solid recovery is not a good candidate for marriage. But when there’s strong adherence to the 12-step program, a history of staying clean, and *daas Torah*, a recovering addict can have healthy coping skills, good *middos*, and *yiras Shamayim* — and become a stable life partner.

Rabbi Eckstein quotes a well-known metaphor in the recovery world. “An addict is like a pickle. You start out as a cucumber. Once you’re pickled, you can never revert to being a cucumber. But a good pickle is worth more than even the choicest cucumber.” ☺

*Shoshana Schwartz is an addictions counselor at Retorno — and a popular Family First serial writer.*