

# Filling The Hole In Their Hearts -- The Story of "Our Place"

By Malky Lowinger

When we were first introduced to the concept of 'Kids at Risk', most of us were shocked. How could this be? Why is this happening to our community's children?

Unfortunately, the years went by, and we've gotten used to the idea. We've grown accustomed to hearing about youngsters from fine *frum* families being turned off from *Yiddishkeit* and turning to substance abuse. We've also become familiar with seeing these youngsters congregating near a nondescript storefront on Avenue M on weekday nights. They go there to find a bit of comfort and healing in a very confusing and often hostile world. They like to call this place "Our Place."

Our Place was established by Rabbi Moshe Binik in 1998 as a haven for young people who have lost their way and are turning to alcoholism, drugs, and self destructive behavior. These youngsters are desperately in need of therapy, counseling, and guidance. Our Place offers a multi-faceted approach to rehabilitating Jewish youth in a loving, non-judgmental atmosphere. R' Chaim Glantz, Program Director, welcomes them and offers food, recreational activities, and friendship. In this relaxed and comfortable environment, youngsters begin the healing process.

The number of youngsters who can be considered 'at risk' is staggering. According to R' Yossi Yurowitz, who volunteers at Our Place, the transition from mainstream Yeshiva *bochur* to confused soul is not as far fetched as we might think. "It starts small," he says. "Perhaps something happens at home or in Yeshiva where a *bochur* feels slighted or rejected. There's a hole in his heart that festers and grows and he has this urge to fill up that hole. The problem is that he fills it with junk and more junk. He can't distinguish between happiness and pleasure and ends up seeking out pleasure rather than finding rewarding activities that will make him happy." It happens so quickly that there's little chance to intervene. R' Yossi says, "I have seen

Rav Mattisyahu Salomon, as well as many local *rabbonim*.

Now that Our Place is in trouble it is the responsibility of the community to join together and help. Over the years, government funding has been instrumental in keeping its vital activities running. The funds covered the costs of counseling, therapy, rehab, and a variety of other services.

Drastic budget cuts have recently been announced, and Our Place will be losing all



of its funding. Ten in-house therapists have already resigned because there are simply no funds to pay them. The thought of "Our Place" closing its doors is unbearable. There's just too much at stake. In desperation, its volunteers and community *askanim* are asking for help.

The esteemed *askan*, businessman, and dynamic orator Avi Fishof has stepped up to the plate as Director. He is spearheading a campaign to keep Our Place alive. The campaign will include appeals, parlor meeting, and various other fundraising events. Recently, he was introduced to the Living Room. Bring along tissues," warned R' Yossi. "You're going to need them."

Over one hundred people were gathered in the Living Room that evening, and all eyes were focused on David, a young man who had conquered his addiction and was proud of his achievement. David told his story to the gathered crowd: "I was a regular Yeshiva *bochur*," he said, "but at a certain point I lost

8:00 and 10:00 in the evening. That's when I'm learning with my *chavrusa*."

R' Avi was moved beyond words. Here,



right before his very eyes, was a *yiddishe neshoma* who was rescued from the depths of the horror. A young man with a new lease on life. How many more can be rescued? How many others are waiting for Our Place to save their bodies and souls? If this wasn't true *hatzolas nefoshos*, then what is?

Yossi tells another amazing tale. When I was in Eretz Yisroel recently, I davened *vasikin* at the *Kosel* and then met a friend for breakfast. We decided to visit the *Kever of Shimon HaTzaddik*, and I stood at the *kever* davening for the welfare of "Our Place" and its youngsters, I noticed a *yeshivish* young man staring at me and smiling. "Yossi," he said, "Don't you know who I am?" When I

confessed that I didn't recognize him, he said, "Picture me without the beard and *payos*." That's when it hit me that this was Yakov, a young man who I had mentored in "Our Place" just three years ago. He had come to Eretz Yisroel and turned his life around. When I asked him why he was at the *Kever of Shimon Hatzaddik* that morning, he said the most amazing thing. "Tonight's my *chasunah* and I came here to daven." Then he looked at me and said, "I'd be so happy if you could join us tonight."

So that night, I watched in disbelief as Yakov stood under the *chupah*. This young man was doing drugs just three years ago but is now learning full time in a Yeshiva in Yerushalayim. He managed to push the 'reset' button and start all over again. It wasn't easy, that's for sure. And we both knew what a difficult journey it had been for him. But when Yakov came out from under the *chupah*, he looked like the happiest guy in the world. And when our eyes met, we both began to cry.

Our Place never gave up on Yakov or on Dovid. Its dedicated staff refuses to surrender their services. We cannot let them down. We cannot give up on Our Place and the many who desperately need its help.

Contributions can be sent to "Our Place", 44 Wall Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, New York, NY 10005. Avi Fishof can be reached at 212-742-0707 ext 40 or at [afishof@ourplaceny.org](mailto:afishof@ourplaceny.org). For more information, visit [www.ourplaceny.org](http://www.ourplaceny.org).

## Rav Dovid Cohen Named Guest of Honor of Ohel's 41<sup>st</sup> Annual Dinner

Ohel Children's Home & Family Services will honor Rav Dovid Cohen as the guest of honor at the agency's annual dinner to be held on Sunday, 9 Adar I/February 13, at the New York Hilton Hotel. The gala event will kick off with a reception at 5:30 p.m., followed by the dinner at 6:30 p.m.

The opportunity to recognize Rav Cohen as the guest of honor is particularly meaningful as he has never been honored previously by any organization. Rav Cohen is a

tion to help every member of the community achieve the highest quality of life and to live with dignity. I urge every one of us to support Ohel's commitment to healing, growth and independence for their clients of all ages."

Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz and Rabbi Yitzchok Schick serve as chairmen of this year's dinner campaign.

"We know personally how Rav Cohen and Ohel's intervention have changed and impacted the lives of *achaim*. *Bnei Yisroel*"



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Our Place currently runs three separate divisions, each of them innovative and successful. Its flagship location on Avenue M is for boys only. A Girls Center on East 12<sup>th</sup> Street offers similar services for young women. The Living Room on Avenue J provides substance abuse therapy, rehabilitation, and counseling. The program has been remarkably successful in changing the lives of hundreds of precious *neshomos* and offering these young people a new lease on life. According to its leadership, the rate of success is 70%. Our Place has the endorsement and *haskamos* of Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, the Novominsker Rebbe, and

## Gateways Diaries

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*shul and aron kodesh. Having quit a flourishing banking career, he now began to ply his skills as a builder. He bought a building in the neighborhood, and over the next six months transformed it into a simple but beautiful shul.*

*The day the work on the new shul was finally finished, shul members carted the chairs, siddurim, chumashim and aron kodesh inside. Then they brought the replica of the Bais Hamikdosh and set it down on a newly built platform right outside the beis kenesses.*

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Over one hundred people were gathered in the Living Room that evening, and all eyes were focused on David, a young man who had conquered his addiction and was proud of his achievement. David told his story to the gathered crowd: "I was a regular Yeshiva *bochur*," he said, "but at a certain point I lost interest and I began to cut class. I ended up on the street with a group of boys who introduced me to smoking, and eventually to substance abuse."

Things could have gone from bad to worse for David, but instead he came to Our Place one evening. "From the moment I walked in there," he said, "they accepted me. They put me on the road to recovery. Boruch Hashem, I am proud to announce that today is my anniversary. I am drug-free for one full year and I will never revert back to that lifestyle again. If not for you guys, I would not be here today."

If that wasn't inspiring enough, David's next statement left many in tears. "You all have my cell number," he said, "in case you need to reach me. Just don't call me between

*Pinchas felt exhilarated. In a few days there would be a hachnosas Torah celebration...But right now, his attention was captured by a note his daughter had stuffed into his pocket before leaving for work that day. He unfolded the note.*

*"Dear Dad," she had written, "Congratulations on bringing your dream to life. I haven't been that supportive but I sense things are changing. You've taught me something I'll always remember. In the words of the poet, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for?"*

**\*\*Names and identifying information have been changed.**

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The opportunity to recognize Rav Cohen as the guest of honor is particularly meaningful as he has never been honored previously by any organization. Rav Cohen is a renowned *posek* and *rov* of Congregation Gvul Yaavetz in Brooklyn. Author of numerous *seforim*, Rav Cohen is *mara d'asra* of Ohel, Nefesh International (a leading national organization for mental health professionals), and Hatzolah of Flatbush, as well as one of the four rabbis for Central Hatzolah. He has served as associate editor of the *Encyclopedia Talmudis* and dean of the Long Island Commission of Rabbis.

For more than four decades, Rav and Rebbetzin Cohen have demonstrated a passionate commitment to the children and families whose lives are elevated every day through the diverse programs and services provided by Ohel.

Rav Cohen has often expressed the desire that Ohel will one day be obsolete and the agency's services will be unnecessary. Until that time, however, he has been known to say, he remains committed to Ohel and hopes that "we will be here" to help the most vulnerable among us.

"Ohel has been an important part of my life's work for more than 40 years," said Rav Cohen. "We must never forget our obliga-

tion to help every member of the community achieve the highest quality of life and to live with dignity. I urge every one of us to support Ohel's commitment to healing, growth and independence for their clients of all ages."

Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz and Rabbi Yitzchok Schick serve as chairmen of this year's dinner campaign.

"We know personally how Rav Cohen and Ohel's intervention have changed and impacted the lives of *acheinu Bnei Yisroel*," said Rabbis Zlotowitz and Schick. "There are many in our community who would not be where they are today if not for the intervention of Ohel and Rav Dovid Cohen. We urge you to join and show *kavod harav* and *kavod* for Ohel by participating in this year's dinner."

This year's corporate guests of honor are Abe and Chaya Jeremias, Jacob Jeremias, Chaim Weisz, and David Reiner of Abaline Supply Co. Inc., of Boro Park. Annual dinner honorees also include Avi and Aviva Pifko of Cedar-

hurst, Mark and Naomi Rubin of Lawrence, Aaron and Shahla Weg of Monsey, and Dr. Payman and Nazanin Rabiei of Great Neck.

Ohel President Moishe Hellman has announced a matching gift program again this year in conjunction with the 2011 annual dinner. An anonymous donor will contribute \$1 for every \$2 contributed to the Mel and Phyllis Zachter Ohel Endowment Fund up to \$500,000. The fund serves to help secure Ohel's future.

For annual dinner reservations, to place a journal ad, or to learn more about the event, call 718.972.9338 or visit [www.oheldinner.org](http://www.oheldinner.org).

