

Nechamie Margolis



A Place of Their Own

An alternative address

It is extremely painful to watch a child or young adult desert Torah and *mitzvos* and become enmeshed in a cycle of self-destructive behavior. Community Centers like Our Place, with their non-judgmental acceptance, serve as a lifeline for these youth, trapped in the personal prisons of their pain, frustration, and self-loathing.

This article is not intended to justify any individual's actions or reactions, but rather, as directed by Gedolim, to open our hearts and minds to the anguish these self-destructive cycles cause and to the rays of hope offered by centers like *Our Place* who take these teens under their wings and slowly — oh so slowly — help them soar above their pasts.

Chanie's Story

I sat huddled with my friend on a bench in Times Square, in New York City. Lights were flashing; music was playing, and the seamy side of life was pulsating throughout. It was hard to believe it was really 2:00 a.m. My friend had a glazed look on her face and was urging me to follow her lead.

This was not always my life. Only weeks before, I had been living with my parents and attending a *frum* school. I recalled the day everything had changed.

"You're out!" my principal thundered, glaring down at me. "I warned you: one more infraction, and you'd lose your last chance to be in our school."

I didn't bother responding to his

tirade. I didn't bother saying goodbye to my classmates, either. For too long, I had been on the fringe, desperately wanting to fit in and just be normal.

But I wasn't normal. Haunting me was the memory of abuse from someone I had thought I could trust. I was too scared to approach my parents for help, and the pain festered inside me, until it exploded. My teachers didn't understand why I constantly flouted the rules and erupted into unexplained rages. So they punished me without ever trying to understand or help me deal with the pain inside. They would be happy to see me go.

Now I couldn't face my parents either. It seemed like I had no choice but

to leave home. I found a new set of friends on the street and moved in with another confused adolescent. I was introduced to smoking and other addictive substances. Sleeping most of the day and partying all night became my new way of life.

With endless time on my hands, I often went shopping. I had no money to buy what I needed, so I "borrowed" the items. "I'll pay it back one day, when I have the money," I thought to myself, ignoring the niggling feeling that my "borrowing" was actually stealing.

One night, one of my newfound friends had an idea. "Hey, Chanie," she told me, "I heard there's this great center called 'Our Place.' They give hot dinner,

and have all kinds of cool activities.”

By now, the streets that had seemed to glitter with such promise bored me and left me feeling empty. I hesitantly agreed to go with her, not having too much to lose.

Nervously I walked into the building housing Our Place. But I needn't have worried. A young married woman, who turned out to be the director, walked over to me, greeting me warmly. “Hi, I'm Shifra Glancz,” she said. “Welcome! Come sit down and eat something.”

Famished, I dug into the hot dinner. I hadn't had money for a decent meal in days. They didn't just offer pizza; they also had salad, calzones, soup, and French fries.

I felt as if I had entered a safe haven. The walls were painted in warm tones, and one wall, painted by the girls themselves, depicted an upbeat graffiti mural. Comfortable couches were artfully arranged in a corner, inviting relaxed, intimate conversations. In another corner, girls were learning a hip-hop dance with an instructor, while other girls were playing a game of pool.

I began going regularly; in the beginning, because there was a great dinner, plus different activities ranging from art therapy to exercising with a personal trainer, crafts, guitar, and dance lessons.

Slowly, slowly, I began opening up to the social worker at the center. I started attending the group therapy sessions and no longer felt so alone, as I heard the tragic stories of my peers.

“I was abused by a family member when I was ten years old,” Shira* began hesitantly. She kept her eyes averted as she spoke. “Although I told my mother, she refused to believe me. Drugs were somewhat able to relieve the pain I felt, but created a host of other problems.”

Devorah* spoke next. “My mother died when I was nine,” she said. “I was in so much pain, but my father didn't seem to care. He remarried even before a year had gone by, and I hated my stepmother. She wasn't loving or nurturing like my mother had been, and there wasn't

anyone in the world who understood my pain. I started acting up in school and got a reputation as the worst kid. I dropped out of school in ninth grade, before they could kick me out.”

“My parents are divorced,” said Shaindy.* “I grew up in two worlds, shuttled between parents who tried to use us against each other. My mother stayed *frum*, and my father moved to a different neighborhood, where he dropped every vestige of *Yiddishkeit*. When I was with my mother I was the model daughter: dressing *tzniusdig*, respectful and polite, and keeping all the *mitzvos*. When I visited my father I became a different person. I didn't keep kosher or Shabbos, and I dressed as I pleased. Eventually I couldn't tolerate the inconsistencies and dropped it all.”

The stories continued, each one telling her own saga of pain. I heard poignant stories from girls who felt misunderstood or abandoned by their parents, teachers or friends, girls whose feelings of rejection led them to leave their former lives behind.

I opened up as well and felt an outpouring of warmth and caring from both the girls and the counselors staffing Our Place.

“Chanie, don't you think it would be a good idea to get your GED (General Equivalency Diploma), so you can find a decent job?” a counselor named Malka* suggested after I had been coming to the center for many months. I took her idea seriously. She had, after all, been one of us — she had gone to the center for several years before returning as a volunteer.

“I'll study with you and help you pass the test,” she offered.

With a GED in hand, I was able to find a job with decent pay. I still came regularly to Our Place because I loved the atmosphere and the people there, but I was no longer homeless and bored, looking for anything to fill the great void inside of me.

I realized how much I had changed when I was in a restaurant one night with a friend. Two girls whom I knew

from Our Place, who had addiction problems, were there as well, acting out in a way that scared me. I almost started crying. “How can they do that to themselves? Don't they know the dangers involved?” I called Miriam Gruen, one of the directors, and told her that two of “her” girls were in trouble.

I had to laugh when a counselor showed up. Pretending she was coincidentally in the same restaurant on a date, the counselor seated herself strategically next to the two girls. I stayed only long enough to see the girls fall into the counselor's arms for a warm hug. I knew they were in the best hands possible.

It took a long time, but slowly, through the Shabbatons organized by Our Place, earnest discussions with the counselors, and taking baby steps, I began to return to *Yiddishkeit*. I stopped wearing jeans and t-shirts. I kicked my addictions and overcame destructive habits and immersed myself in my newfound job and hobbies.

I had learned that just because I didn't fit into the mold and specific society in which I had grown up, it didn't mean that I had to abandon *Yiddishkeit*. I could still be *frum* and fit into a Jewish community.

And I learned to feel better about myself as a person, a beloved child of Hashem, despite the trauma that had caused me to feel worthless.

Most importantly of all, with the gentle but wise intervention of Our Place counselors and therapists, I was able to reconcile with the people who loved me most: my parents.

Our Place is a place of real help. And real hope.

Due to the recent economic downturn, the government funding that made up a large part of Our Place's operating budget has been slashed. Our Place is in desperate need of funds to continue their vital work with our most vulnerable youth. If you can assist in any way, please contact Our Place at 718-253-6016 or 718-436-3542.

**Names changed to protect privacy*