

# UNVEILED

## LIFE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS #8

### WRITING POETRY IN THE PSYCHIATRIC WARD

Three months after our second child was born, we packed our bags, setting out for a new phase in our life. We had spent six years living in Eretz Yisrael. Despite it being of the most tumultuous years in our lives, it was a *zechus* for us to live there and my husband and I were happy that we had the opportunity to start out our married life there together. While I did whatever I could to be as mentally and emotionally present to my husband and children, including taking my medication and seeing a therapist on a consistent basis, being far away from our extended family at a time when we needed so much support was only getting more arduous. Various members of our families would fly in to be there for us, but it wasn't the same as living nearby.

Since we were at the stage in life where my husband was transitioning from being in *kollel* to working, and I needed to be near my family, we decided it was time to move back to my hometown, where both my parents and in-laws lived. As soon as I arrived back home, I was on a mission: to prove that I could be who I was before. I pursued jobs in fields I had originally worked in, and my success as a tutor soon led to an offer to teach and work with school-aged girls. I felt really good about having "made it," but shortly afterward, I experienced my first relapse. Even while on being medication and in therapy, my mania returned. Before long, not only was I out of a job, but I was admitted to the psychiatric ward for the first time in my life.

When the doctor I was seeing realized that I was getting more and more psychotic as I was talking

to him, he treated me differently than I had been treated in Eretz Yisrael. "If you continue this way," I remember him saying to me, "you could be a danger to yourself." And he sent me straight to the emergency room. When I arrived there and the admission staff asked me if I felt I was a danger to myself or others, I answered, "Not yet."

The first thing they did was administer more medication. But, as the dose increased, so did my mania; I was getting more delusional by the second. The next step the doctor wanted to try in order to calm my mania was electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). In this treatment method, the patient receives a medically induced seizure that is intended to treat both depression and mania. Beforehand, I was shown a video of what the procedure would be like. I was so in another world that I remember seeing the woman in the screen and thinking it was me. In the demo, I was shown how electrolytes are placed on different points in the patient's brain and how the shock that is administered helps reverse symptoms of mental health conditions.

Since the procedure is done under general anesthesia, I have no memory of the treatment itself. When I woke up, it was like waking up from any procedure that necessitates general anesthesia. I felt a bit lightheaded, but none of the side effects that have been attributed to ECT (which I did experience in later rounds). In fact, the ECT helped the medication do its job, which had not happened prior to this. While I did go into depression as a result of the medication (as always), I found that this time, I was able to emerge from it quicker.

Spending two and a half weeks in the psych ward was certainly an experience, one that took a great toll on me and my family. I suddenly found myself in a place that was far away from everyone and everything that was familiar to me, totally detached from the real world. My hospitalization forced me to realize how I wasn't functioning as a wife and mother since I barely took care of myself. On their end, my husband and kids missed me immensely. At that time, because of their young age, my

kids didn't know much except that Mommy was in the hospital and that she would be back soon, but it certainly impacted them, as well.

Because the nurses wanted me to sleep, I was placed in the geriatric section, which is a quieter, more peaceful section of a ward that could get quite noisy and hectic. Of course, I was the liveliest patient there. For the most part, I didn't realize where I was. In my delusional state, everyone I saw was someone else. I saw my being there as part of the *tikkun* I was bringing to the world. But when part of me snapped back to reality a bit, I seriously panicked. What was I doing in a psychiatric ward, of all places? I had no possessions with me; I wasn't even allowed to cut an apple with a plastic knife. Although I was able to get visitors, I couldn't go out to the real world. And this was in the weeks between Purim and Pesach. In my lucid moments, which usually happened at night, I felt so far away from my two little boys, who were home with my family. I remember breaking down crying on those nights, feeling so sad about my reality. It was in one such moment that I sat down to write my first song, which I called "A Hidden World" (see sidebar).

When I showed it to one of the nurses who was a musician, she said, "That's the type of song that will be ringing in people's ears." Later, I had the opportunity to record the song on my friend's music CD.

I was finally discharged from the hospital right before Pesach. I remember sitting at the Seder, listening to my son say the *Mah Nishtanah* for the first time. It all felt surreal to me, especially since I still had a bit of mania. It's like driving a car, and the windshield wiper suddenly comes on. I could be feeling completely present, when I would suddenly be hit by a burst of mania, and it would take some time until I was able to adjust back to myself. When I was present and not thinking about Eliyahu Hanavi and Mashiah, I felt grateful to be home, surrounded by my family. I felt that I was back again. When people would say to me, "I'm so happy you're back," they weren't just referring to my physical presence, but that the real Zahava was returning, too. I had a lot to thank for that Pesach.

### In Hindsight

As I learned over time from my personal perspective, not as a professional, bipolar disorder is a more extreme reaction to the ups and downs in life. While every human being experiences highs and lows in their regular life, an individual with bipolar disorder experiences them with greater intensity. In general, this intensity is sparked by a trauma that is more severe than average. When the pain is so overwhelming, the individual must exercise more extreme mechanisms in order to escape it.

With this awareness, when I look back at my life and the psychotic episodes I experienced, I notice that every time I got sick, a certain emotion came up for me. When the emotion threatened to overwhelm me, my body automatically resorted to mania as an escape mechanism.

Although all of my relapses were similar in nature, each one exhibited a bit differently. The relapse I had when my oldest was six months old, for example, was not the same as when he was two and a half. Looking back, I see each one like an onion peel. With each layer that got peeled away, I got that bit closer to my essence. And once the episode was over, I wasn't the same person anymore. Each one served as a stepping stone into the next level of recovery. ♥

To be continued...

### A Hidden World

*Did you ever wonder what's above  
And see Hashem is filled with love?  
Or have you looked up and see  
That true hopes are for eternity?*

*How do we find Him?  
To find Him will put us at ease.  
Hashem will You help me, please?  
Shivisi Hashem l'negdi samid  
I place Hashem before me always.  
Ein od milvado  
He's there wherever we go.*

*So when do we find the cure  
To reach our neshamah, soul so pure?  
When we stand in harmony,  
Giving others is our legacy.*

*Step out of your own "four amos,"  
For all we do, it's Hashem who knows.  
When we search for Him, it's true,  
That he speaks to us anew.*

*When feeling a bond with our Creator  
And seeing Hashem as our Maker,  
We can hold on to His embrace  
To overcome challenges we all face.*

*New hope is what we will earn,  
As long as we know where to turn,  
To ask for the guidance we need,  
With Hashem's help we will succeed.*

*How do we find Him?  
We find Him in each of our hearts,  
When we ask Hashem right from the start.  
He's there wherever you go,  
Ein od milvado.*

