

# Hi, My Name Is Bashie Naparstek, and I Have Bipolar Disorder

*After years of inner turmoil and a hospitalization in a psych ward, Bashie Naparstek was finally given a name for everything she'd experienced: bipolar disorder. With her husband and family by her side, Bashie began the long road to understanding and recovery. Here she shares her story—and her triumph.*



AS TOLD TO SHTERNA LAZAROFF

**I** actually remember a time when I didn't struggle. Up until around sixth grade, I felt just like any other girl, going through life with ease. I hung out with friends, doodled in my notebook during class, and dreamed about my bas mitzvah. I didn't feel different—yet.

Then I became a teenager, and my life

changed.

It was as if an abyss had opened inside me. I walked around feeling filled with... something. Life had once been simple, but now it seemed so complex and heavy. I spent hours wondering about the theoretical answers to inconsequential questions and began dreading any occasion when I had to hang out in a group.

Being around people wasn't easy any longer. My mind would race the entire time.

Was she going to look at me? Ask me a question? What would the question be? What would I say?

Having a twin sister was a *brachah* for many reasons, but especially because I could hide behind her strengths. Where she was sociable, I was quiet. When I was anxious, she was calm. I could tag along in her shadow and follow the path she had already paved. I didn't need to make new friends because I had hers, and honestly, if not for



them, I probably wouldn't have had any.

It's normal for teenagers to go through a shift as they discover themselves, but to me, the shift didn't feel normal. I started noticing a divide between me and the girls around me, and every day the gap grew larger.

I couldn't share my thoughts with anyone. If I did, would they think I was too complicated? Would they still be friends with me? So I smiled as I walked into the school building each day and acted as if I felt okay. Inside, I was anything but.

Today, whenever my classmates or teachers hear me describe those years, many of them are shocked. "We never realized," most of them say apologetically. It makes sense that they didn't. I'd spent those years trying to hide it.

On the outside, with my sister's help, I was a model teenager. I had good friends, made good grades and never acted out. Being perfect protected me. No one would have to know what was going on. If I did everything right and made everyone happy, they would accept me. My parents were very proud of me and had no idea that I was struggling.

But inside there was constant turmoil, and it kept getting worse. I would go out with friends, overthink every sentence of the conversation, and then come home to overthink it some more. At night, I would lie awake for hours, staring at the ceiling and wondering, *Why can't I just let go and have fun like everyone else? Why am I so complicated? Why can't I just appreciate the joke and laugh instead of dissecting it?* Of course, the main question that kept me awake was *Why am I so different?*

The thoughts came one after the other, with no reprieve. I could barely keep up with them; they were always there, from the moment I opened my eyes in the morning until I finally drifted off to sleep.

## High School

In high school, I started writing the thoughts down. Maybe if I compiled them, I could begin to make sense of what was going on. Was this sadness? Worry? What was going on with me? And why?

It was a painful and dangerous descent. I trained myself to have smaller meals, then to skip meals, then to have no meals at all. By the time the school year ended, I was anorexic.

Why?

I sat with my pen and notebook for hours. During recess, I hid in the back stairwell of the school and wrote instead of hanging out with classmates. Putting pen to paper was easier than walking over to a classmate and starting a conversation. Most of the pages were smudged with tears as I sat there in confusion. What was wrong with me?

I kept my writings a secret. If my family and friends saw them, they would know just how problematic I really was. I couldn't let that happen. And it's not as if they had reason to ask; there were no red flags, no indication that anything was going on.

In ninth grade, the volcano erupted.

It started when I had the flu and spent a week at home throwing up. When I came back to school, I was skinnier. And the girls noticed. "Wow, Bashie, you look amazing!" they exclaimed.

*Oh, wow, I realized. I lost weight—and now I'm getting attention!*

Once the connection was drawn in my mind, it was hard to erase it. Weight loss was the answer to all my pleas. If I were skinnier, I would have more friends.

From there, it was a long, painful and dangerous descent. I trained myself to have smaller meals, then to skip meals, then to have no meals at all. By the time the school year ended, I was anorexic.

My mother noticed when I came home from a summer away. I was a fraction of my size. We had a family barbecue that evening, and my mother kept an eye on me the entire time. She offered me a hot dog. I refused it. She tried to convince me to eat it. I finally agreed—but only without the bun. I'd become very disciplined about depriving myself, and my mother was shocked by my stubbornness.

After the barbecue, my mother took me to the bathroom and refused to let me leave until I stepped on the scale. When she saw the number, she gasped. As a nurse, she knew firsthand just how badly the story could end. "We're going to the doctor," she said, and I burst out crying. I didn't know how to help myself at that point. I needed her.

Our doctor referred us to an eating disorders specialist who got me back on track toward a healthier life. The eating disorder cleared up, so life should have been fine—except that it still really wasn't. The eating disorder had only been a symptom of deep-seated anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. We'd cured the problem but ignored the roots. And those were still growing.

I continued to spend every social outing wishing I were home instead of in a crowd. *If they only knew what was in my head, they wouldn't want me here either.* I was still going in circles in my mind, obsessively trying to dissect the way I thought and felt. *Why can't I just be like everyone else?* I continued to struggle throughout high school.

## Seminary

In 2005, my sister and I split up for seminary. We'd spent our entire lives together in the same bedroom, in the same school, with the same friends. All that now changed. My sister had a flight booked to a seminary in Australia, and I'd filled out a registration form for our local seminary in Montreal. I couldn't live in her shadow anymore; she wasn't there to shield me or create my path.

I didn't know who I was without her. Our family had never compared the two of us, but I always did. Everything was black and white: I was the studious one, and she liked

to party. I was serious, and she was funny.

For the first time in my life, I was responsible for my own image. I remember one day early in the seminary year, when I was sitting in the classroom with some friends during a break. We were all laughing, so I looked around to see where my twin was. Whenever there were smiles, she had always been the one behind them. But when I glanced across the room, it dawned on me that it was *my* humor they appreciated. I had never been the life of the party before.

That was the day I started coming out of my shell. "I have my own strengths," I realized. I approached the head of Bnos and asked if I could get involved in some of their afterschool projects. I walked over to some of the out-of-towners and invited them to my house for Shabbos meals. I was on top of the world, shining and actually enjoying life.

### Summer

After a year apart, my sister and I made plans to go away together for the summer. I was going to be the head counselor at a day camp in Florida, and she would come as one of my counselors. We counted down to the day we'd reunite. Two months until we'd be back together. A month. A week.

A few days before her flight home, I felt something inside me shut down. I remember turning to my mother in the kitchen one night and saying, "Ma, I'm so scared."

"Of what?" she asked.

I didn't have the words to answer. She must have seen the shift in me too, the way I fell back into the mold of the old me, so she booked an appointment with a therapist.

"You're a jack-in-the-box," the therapist explained. "When your sister is gone, you come out of the box, and when she's around, you go back in."

"Maybe," I agreed, "but what am I supposed to do about it? I have all these thoughts that are consuming me."

She told me to think of the thoughts as a school of fish. "They all swim over at once and overwhelm you, but just let them keep swimming and they'll all leave together, too."

I didn't think her advice could work. My thoughts had had much too much power

for too many years. They were more like a huge whale than a school of fish. They didn't swim past me; they barreled over me instead.

"You know you're allowed to stay out of the box even when your sister is here," she added. I nodded and left the session.

But then my mother and I went to the airport. I stood in the terminal, scanning the crowd for my sister's smile, waiting to squeeze her after such a long time apart, but inside I felt everything shutting down. I couldn't access the parts of me that had thrived that year. I couldn't remember a time when I hadn't been anxious or depressed. It was as though I had been dialed back—and I couldn't get myself to move forward again.

Years later, my sister said that the second she saw me, she knew that something had changed. We were so attuned to each other that she felt the quiet click as everything inside me went dark again.

I thought I had moved past the heaviness, but it had returned with a vengeance, ripping through me. I felt myself falling back into the abyss as the world grew farther and farther out of reach. It was scary to know exactly where I was heading and just how horrible that cold, dark place felt.

That summer, instead of spending time with my sister, I spent hours in my bed. I couldn't even live up to my commitment to head the camp. While I hid under my blankets, my sister stepped in to run the camp for me. Because I was depressed, I shirked my responsibilities, and because I shirked my responsibilities, I felt horrible about myself—which made it even harder to see through my depression. I was in a tailspin, digging myself deeper and deeper into the negativity.

*See, Bashie? You thought you were responsible enough to run a camp? You aren't even responsible enough to get out of bed!*

Needless to say, that month in Florida was a disaster. No one realized just how big a disaster, though. People weren't on the lookout for depression back then, so although I spent all day incapacitated, no one thought to step in.



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# The Human Experience

I had plans to be in England for the second month, so I said goodbye to my sister, got on the plane and left. Meanwhile, my anxiety was like laundry, I was trying to ignore it, but it kept piling up. The pressure was building and building. It had to erupt eventually, and in England, it did.

I was in England to work as a counselor with a friend I had met in seminary, who knew me only as bright and bubbly Bashie. But the Bashie who stepped off the plane was dull and lackluster. She had shadows in her eyes and spoke almost in a monotone. My friend must have been thrown off. How had I become someone else?

But I felt even worse. Why couldn't I hold on to the happy version of myself? Why couldn't I be normal? My thoughts spiraled downward again, and I lost myself in the process.

I went to camp, but I barely ate and didn't shower as often as I should have. Then the anxiety got worse, and I couldn't get myself to camp either. I shut down completely.

My friend's mother noticed and picked up the phone. "You need to come help your daughter," she told my mother.

My mother arrived the next day. I saw her and melted. I felt like such a failure. I wasn't even in school anymore; why did I need my mother to come take care of me? And again, why couldn't I be like everyone else?

Before we flew home, my mother took me to some British tourist attractions. We went to watch the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, but I could barely look up to see the guards marching in their bright red uniforms. We went for a ride on the Underground, but I was living inside myself, in a dark, frightening place.

By the time my mother and I flew home, I was practically nonverbal. My anxiety and depression were so intense that I couldn't get a word out. My family came to check on me to see what they could do. I heard them discussing what was going on and trying to understand it. "What caused this?" they were asking.

I wanted to explain and say, "It's the result of a slow buildup over the years. The pressure kept increasing. Now I can't take

it anymore, and it's all seeping out." But I couldn't respond. I was in so much pain that I couldn't interact with the outside world.

## Sem Beis

In September, seminary started again. By then I was feeling a bit better, so my parents enrolled me for another year. On the first day I came late, and class had already started. I looked through the window of the classroom and saw my friends sitting at their desks. Then I turned around and ran out of the building. I did not go back.

How could I? Even if I managed to drag myself out of bed... These girls knew me from a different lifetime. Would they see how much I had changed? Would they judge me for it?

I stayed home for several more months, during which time I started bingeing on all the junk food I could find. I was chasing anything that could erase the deep ache, even if it was only for the five minutes it took to finish a cheese Danish.

My parents were beside themselves. In my room at night, I could hear them crying at the dining room table. They were also lost; they didn't know what was going on or how to help, and they desperately wanted to. Eventually, they booked me an appointment with a psychiatrist. I wanted help just as much as my parents wanted to help me.

When I walked into his office and saw someone in the waiting room wearing a yarmulke, I immediately felt Hashem's presence. The fact that I wasn't the only *frum* person going through this was a comfort. It felt as if Hashem was telling me, "You've been doing this alone for so long, but you don't have to anymore. I'm sending you *My shalitch*."

During my first session, the psychiatrist mentioned the idea of medication.

"Absolutely not," I said. "I don't want to take poison."

Growing up, my mother had opted for herbs and remedies over drugs. I couldn't imagine putting what I considered poison in my body. But it was my mother who convinced me to give antidepressants a try. "You can't continue this way, and maybe

medication will help."

It did. Only a few days later, the change in me was already remarkable. For the first time in months, I could join my family when they hung out on the couches in the living room—and actually contribute more than a few words to the conversation. I was showering again, as well as eating and sleeping and doing all the other things I'd neglected for so long. I was stepping back into the light.

With my family's support, I returned to seminary and finished out the year. I did it with the help of my medication, which no one knew about. But of course, this only made me feel different again. *I'm the only one in the world taking medication. See? I'm so strange. Why can't I get my act together?*

I felt like everyone was judging me. Years later, when I mentioned this to my therapist, she corrected me. "No, you always judged yourself." She was right. No one in the world was ever as judgmental and harsh as I was. My friends and family love Bashie as she is. I'm the only one on a mission to change her.

## Shidduchim

The following year after seminary, right before I turned 20, I started dating. Things were going well but I was frightened. At the time, I didn't know a single other person on medication. I doubt that my date did either. When I told him, would he be scared? Would he end things?

On our third date, I broke the rules. "I need to talk to you about something," I said as we were driving somewhere. He pulled over and turned around to face me. Sitting on the side of the road, I told him everything. Elementary school, high school, seminary, my months-long panic attack, the medication... "I couldn't go into marriage without telling you," I explained.

*To be continued...*

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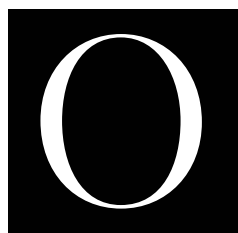
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## Part 2



AS TOLD TO SHTERNA LAZAROFF



“Okay,” he said. “Okay? That was it? You are who you are because of what you’ve been through. I’m okay with it.” “What did you do?” my mother asked me the next morning. She had just hung up with the *shadchan*, who called in a rage to say that I was ruining every-

thing. My mother was nervous. My father was worried.

“Ma, you always raised me to be honest,” I replied, standing my ground. “I can’t go into a marriage hiding such a huge part of myself.”

It took a little while to clean up the mess caused by my revelation, but eventually my husband and I stood under the *chuppah*. He chose to marry me with my struggles and my pain. I was loved and accepted.

### Marriage

I remember preparing for my wedding and thinking, “Now everything will finally be okay.” It was a recurring theme in my life; every time I went through a rough patch, I thought that the next big milestone would resolve it. When I go to high school, I’ll be okay. When I go to seminary, I’ll settle down. When I get married, everything will work out.

To some extent, it did. I learned how to hide my turmoil so that I could be a happy newlywed. I started this brand-new chapter with a big smile and a heart filled with hope.

### Motherhood

Almost before I knew it, I held my first child in my arms. She was precious and sweet, filled with such vibrancy. But as I held her, I felt anything but vibrant. Something was happening to me. Again.



I could feel that now-familiar sensation of my world growing dim—gray, then darker, then black. I had no idea what any of it meant. All I knew was that I had a beautiful new baby and that I was unable to appreciate her. I could barely get myself out of bed for her feedings. Showering and eating took more strength and willpower than I had. Sleep was an elusive dream, something I often thought about but couldn't reach. I was tired, so very tired. All the time.

By now, my family was used to the fact that I had highs and lows. They all stepped in to help my husband take care of the baby while I tried to come back, and eventually I did. I got through the dark patch and began to see the light of all my *brachos*—a wonderful husband, a supportive family and an adorable little baby.

After three more children, my husband and I made the decision to move from Florida, where we were on *shlichus*, to Montreal, my hometown.

It was a difficult time for us. My husband was dealing with issues of his own, and we needed countless hours of therapy. My husband and I chose to keep those issues private; it was a secret we held together. But secrets fester. They smolder and itch to escape, until they eventually explode.

After my fourth child, I couldn't continue anymore. I had four toddlers close in age and a secret weighing on my heart, and I wasn't getting enough sleep. I began screaming at my husband, unashamed to do so even in public. I became impulsive and reckless, and one evening I decided to run away. Leaving my tiny baby at home with my husband, I showed up at my friend's house and asked if I could stay the night. When my husband checked our bank account, he saw that I'd withdrawn thousands of dollars for no reason at all.

When my mother saw the changes in my behavior, she suggested that I go back to my psychiatrist.

"Absolutely not," I said. "I'm not crazy."

My mother sighed. Her eyes were filled with sadness and fear, but I couldn't see any of that. *If my family thinks I need help, I need to get away from them*, I reckoned.

Around a week later I took the car keys,

One evening I decided to run away. Leaving my tiny baby at home, I showed up at my friend's house and asked if I could stay the night.

pulled out of our driveway and just started driving. My plan was to cross the Canadian border and head into the United States.

At some point during the night, I pulled over to the side of the highway. *Bashie, you're exhausted. There's no way you'll make it to New York if you drive like this*. I don't know how I had the ability to think like that in such a manic state, but I did. It was only Hashem who kept me from driving further.

I still disagreed with my family, though. They thought I needed help; I needed to prove that I was fine.

### The Hospital

I got back on the road, got off at the next exit and turned around so that I could head back to Montreal. But when I arrived, I didn't go home; I drove to the nearest hospital. I wanted to be checked out just to prove to my entire family that I was fine.

However, I knew it wasn't true. I could feel myself unraveling. The tightly woven stitches that held me together were coming apart, and holes were now appearing.

I arrived at the hospital with the intention of staying only an hour or two. Instead, they admitted me to the psych ward and locked me up. Apparently, I was in the middle of a full-blown manic episode.

It was in the hospital that I received a diagnosis for the very first time.

All those times I had felt different, when I couldn't control my thoughts and emotions, when I felt like I was falling apart...apparently, there was a name for it: bipolar disorder. It's a mental health condition in which your moods fluctuate between extremes, from

the lows of depression to a state of intense energy known as mania. In my low state, my symptoms echoed classic depression. When I was manic, my brain was on fire. I ran on adrenaline, without food, drink, or sleep. My decisions were rash and my actions impetuous.

Like most mental illnesses, bipolar disorder can vary in severity. Some people experience it so intensely that they have a hard time living a functional life. Others, like me, go through the motions of a routine while the illness hovers in the background.

Once I was in the hospital, my condition worsened. It was as though I'd finally let go and allowed the mania to overtake me. I was completely and totally out of control—which is why I don't remember most of it.

I refused to let my family visit and didn't even acknowledge that we were related when they did. I ignored everything the doctors said and fought every one of their recommendations. There were times when the doctors considered me a danger to myself or others around me and locked me up. I was shepherded into a tiny room with a bolted door and only a small window. Most items were risky for me to have in my condition, so all I was allowed to keep with me was my *Chitas*, a *sefer* containing a *Chumash*, *Tehillim*, *Tanya* and a *siddur*.

The locked section of the psych ward had three security levels. When I was first admitted, I was in the level with the tightest security and the most restrictions; it was for people who needed the most supervision.

One Shabbos a few weeks later, a nurse knocked on my door. "I have good news," she said with a smile. Apparently, now that my mania was being managed with medication, they were going to transfer me to the intermediate ward. I took my *Chitas* and followed her out, excited to leave my prison.

When I stepped into the intermediate ward, it was like being redeemed. There were people walking around! They didn't have a nurse following them from their rooms to the bathroom and back! They were holding items other than books! Oh, the freedom!

I walked to the end of the big common room and looked out the window. I could



see familiar streets that I hadn't walked in months. In one direction was my parents' house; the other direction led to my family's *shul*. And if I walked straight—I could go home and see my children.

Most people can feel a strong emotion and then decide whether or not to act on it. But whenever I'm going through a manic episode, my emotions rule my life. That Shabbos, knowing how close—and yet how far—I was from my family, I was ruled by longing. I wanted to see my husband. I wanted to hug my children. I wanted to hold my baby, who had still been nursing when I was admitted.

I needed to see my kids. Wait! Maybe I could!

I went to the door at the entrance of the ward and looked around. There were no nurses watching at that moment, so I pushed against it—and it swung open. I stepped into the hallway and followed the signs to the exit. Every few feet, I turned around to see if someone was following me. No one was.

I walked out of the hospital, and for the first time in ages took a deep breath of fresh air. I looked up, felt the sunlight on my face for a moment, and then continued walking toward my parents' house, where I assumed my children would be.

I passed a police officer going in the opposite direction and jumped. Was he looking for me? But the cop continued on his way, and I continued on mine. With each step, there was a small voice in my head saying, *Bashie, don't do this. You're not ready to go home.*

Then I saw another cop and realized that even if I made it home, they would come to take me back. I didn't want my children to see me forcibly taken to the psych ward. They'd already been through enough. I couldn't put them through more.

So even though it broke my heart, I turned around and went back to the hospital. I could have just sneaked back in and no one would have known, but that was the coward's way out. I wanted to heal and be there for my family, so I went to the emergency room and announced, "I'm a psych patient who just ran away, but now I've come

back."

When my nurses came down to greet me, they gave me the worst news of all. I knew it was coming, but that didn't make it any easier to hear. "Bashie, we need to take you back to the locked ward."

I was in the locked ward for another week. But it was there that I connected to Hashem for the first time in my life.

Growing up, all I'd wanted was to do everything right. If I had a question, I didn't ask it. If something confused me, I stuffed it under the rug. I was too scared to rock the boat.

Then I was locked in a psych ward, my own version of *gehinnom* on earth. I was angry, and for the very first time I had a serious conversation with Hashem, expressing what was really on my mind.

I had reached rock bottom and felt powerless. "What are You doing to me?" I cried. I told Hashem how upset I was that He was keeping my children from me. I screamed at the blank walls.

And somewhere during those lengthy conversations, there was a shift. I went from feeling hurt and distanced to longing for closeness.

Sitting alone in that tiny room, I realized there was truly no one other than Him. I was starting to recognize just how completely Hashem runs the show. He was going to have to be the One to get me out.

A few weeks later, He did. First my mother was allowed to visit, and she brought my sweet little baby with her. Having missed more of her life than I'd been present for, I held my child and soaked in her smell. A few weeks after that, just before Rosh Hashanah, my doctor handed me a small bottle of pills and gave me the best news of all: I was free to go home.

Little did I know that my story, and my hospitalizations, were far from over. ●

*To be continued...*

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AS TOLD TO SHTERNA LAZAROFF

**I**t was summer when I went into the psych ward. The leaves were green, and the grass was supple. When I left months later, the ground was covered with the dried-up orange and yellow leaves of fall.

At the time, my illness was hush-hush. While I was in the hospital, my family stepped in for me. My mother took care of my newborn, and my in-laws and siblings looked after the rest of the kids, who really missed their mommy. Bikur Cholim sent my family hot meals every day. But no one really knew what we were going through. If they had known, they would have judged us, we thought.

At some point, my child's preschool teacher caught on to the fact that I'd been on "vacation" for months and sent the social worker to call on us. "Everything's fine," my family told her. We put on a good show, and they left us alone.

After I was finally discharged, I would put on my lipstick and sunglasses and pick up my kids from carpool with a big smile on my face. Then I'd come home and fall apart. I was well enough to leave the psych ward, but I still had a long distance to go in my recovery. "You have to help me," I'd beg Hashem. "I need Your support. I want to be able to hold it together. I want to be able to be there for my kids."

A few weeks after I came home, I was scrolling through Chabad.org and came

across an article about emotional wellness that mentioned a group called Emotions Anonymous. Was that a 12-step program? I was familiar with those from my husband's addiction journey. I clicked on the link and was redirected to another website, where there was a long checklist.

Have you ever felt different? *Yes.*

Have you ever felt down and you don't know why? *Yes.*

Have you ever been depressed? *Yes.*

On and on the list went. I answered yes to almost every question. *How do they know what's going on inside me?* I wondered.

After consulting with my *rav*, I signed up for the program.

What is Emotions Anonymous? It is a 12-step program that's based on the clas-



sic 12-step program used by Alcoholics Anonymous. It helps people understand their emotions better and find the tools to build a meaningful life.

### Emotions Anonymous

When I got to there, the meeting had not yet started. A few people were milling around chatting. I stood to the side, watching and wondering where I would fit in. I was a *frum* woman surrounded by young men with tattoos, older women with wispy white hair, and every type in between.

But as soon as the first person got up to speak, I knew that I was right where I needed to be. I watched him talk with no shame that there were tears pooling in the corners of his eyes. He shared his name, what had brought him to Emotions Anonymous, and what he was struggling with that day.

Most of what he said sounded like another language. I was somewhat familiar with the 12 steps but not enough to follow every idea. Terms like “higher power” and “rock bottom” took on new meaning for me. I found it fascinating that belief in G-d was imperative to the 12-step form of healing, and I learned that rock bottom isn’t a bad thing; it’s the foundation you use to build a strong life moving forward.

Eventually, I stopped going to in-person meetings and switched to an online Emotions Anonymous group instead. The group was lifesaving for me. At first, it was just about meeting others who understood. I got to speak to people who, like me, had been hospitalized and were on medication. After a while, I actually started working on the 12 steps. I got a sponsor and learned how to apply the lessons to my life.

A huge part of the program is acceptance. I had to accept who I was. I had a hard time doing that. Throughout my life, there had always been a whisper in my head: *If people know the real me, they’ll run.* I remember the first time I shared my story at a 12-step program. I bared my soul in front of a crowd, telling them all of

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the deepest, darkest thoughts I’d ever had. And when I was done, I looked up—and they were all still sitting there! *Hadn’t they heard what I had just said? Why weren’t they fleeing as far away from me as possible?*

Instead, many people came over to tell me how proud they were of how far I had come. If they could accept Bashie, I should probably accept Bashie too, I realized. So I did. I started to recognize that I was human and that I had flaws. But being human, I also had strengths. My specific makeup included bipolar disorder, but that didn’t make me less worthy.

It’s impossible to apply the steps of the program without believing in a higher power. As a *frum* Jew, that meant learning to understand Hashem in a new way. Although I had forged a relationship with Him in the psych ward, it was based on fear, the idea that Hashem is all-powerful and that I needed to comply with His will so that He would be on my side. Now I started to see Hashem as the ultimate source of compassion.

I realized that He had been with me throughout everything—when I was a lonely teenager, a struggling new wife, a faltering adult and a patient in the psych ward. Hashem had been holding me

tightly the entire time, and He would never let go. If I woke up with a challenge, it was because Hashem was sending it. And just as He was the One to send it, He was going to be the One to help me through it.

The meetings began with: “Hashem, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Hashem chose this life for me. Although I cannot control the challenges He has given me, I can control my attitude. Even if my first thought is fear, anger, or anything of the sort, I have the ability to bounce back. I can choose to be happy and grateful. I can change what I want my second thought to be.

When an emotion feels like too much and I think it’s going to overwhelm me, I apply another 12-step idea. First, I remind myself that sometimes things are bigger than I am: “I can’t.” Then I remember Who is in charge: “Hashem, *You* can.” Then I surrender and trust that He will take care of me: “I’m going to let You.”

Mantras like these became my lifeline on hard days. If I ever felt that I was near the edge, I’d stop and remind myself: *I can’t, You can, I’m going to let You. I can’t, You can, I’m going to let You.*

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski once said that if he’d met the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, he would have sued them for plagiarizing the Torah. The entire program is based on belief in G-d and aligns directly with our values as Torah *Yidden*. It helped me develop an authentic relationship with Hashem.

It’s a relationship I’ve built with a lot of tears and heartache. For every moment of closeness, there was one of anger and resentment. For every few steps forward, I also took one step back. But today, eight years after joining Emotions Anonymous, I know, trust and believe that Hashem is with me every moment of my day. I feel it.

### Back Again

I was first hospitalized when my daughter was only a few weeks old. As my recovery progressed, she turned one, then two

and then three. I would take her to play in the park and see other moms pushing newborns in strollers—and I was jealous.

I wasn't in a place where I could take care of more children, and knowing that made me feel like a failure. Why couldn't I be like other women who can take care of child after another? Why couldn't I be typical?

My husband was in the same place. Watching your wife go through a manic episode, having her admitted to a psych ward, and raising your children alone while she's away—it's all traumatic. We had a lot of healing to do.

Although I was attending weekly online meetings, working the steps with my sponsor and slowly recovering, I still felt alone and alienated from my community. *I'm probably the only frum woman going through this*, I thought.

Once again, I sent a little *bakashah* to Hashem. Then I opened WhatsApp to catch up on my messages and saw something brave a woman had posted in a group chat: "I've been struggling with postpartum depression and would love to connect with other women who get it," she wrote. I immediately dialed her number before I lost my courage.

"Hi, my name is Bashie Naparstek," I

said when she answered. "I saw your message and wanted to tell you I've also been depressed."

She said that she wanted to start a support group but didn't have any idea how to run one. "This is perfect!" I told her. "I have a format for a support group, but I didn't have anyone to start it with."

Soon after that call, the first all-women's Emotions Anonymous group met in Montreal.

I want every woman who joins to know what I learned the hard way: You are not alone. You're not alone because others have been through it. You're not alone because you have a family. And you're not alone because Hashem is with you every step of the way.

\* \* \*

When my baby was five, almost five years after I was hospitalized and diagnosed, my husband and I welcomed our fourth child. In the years since, Hashem has *bentched* us with more.

In January 2021, when we were expecting our seventh child, my parents called me with some news. My mother had pancreatic cancer—and only a few months left to live.

My mother had always been my rock. Now it was my turn to be there for her. Up

until the day I gave birth, I was by her side, making medical arrangements, running household errands, and doing whatever my parents needed me to do.

Then I had my baby, and days later I was up and about again. How could I rest and recover when my mother needed me—when she was dying?

Looking back, my husband and I should have seen the pattern—I was postpartum and running myself ragged. There was no way it could end well. And it didn't.

In August, when my baby was three months old, we got an update from the doctors; my mother was terminal. For an entire week I stayed awake. At night, I tossed and turned waiting for the call. As soon as I saw the sunlight and knew that another day was dawning, I'd run over to my parents' house to sit by my mother's bedside and hold her hand. The only reason I survived was that mania, fueled by adrenaline, was kicking in.

My mother passed away in August. When my family and I came home from the *levayah*, I turned to my husband and said, "I don't want to go to the hospital."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I just don't want to," I reiterated. Inside, I could feel it happening again, that slow unraveling of the shimmering threads that



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**THE LEADER IN  
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## The Human Experience

kept me together. With all of that happening inside, I sat down on a low chair and began *shivah*.

I survived for the first day and the second. Then the third, fourth and fifth. By the sixth day, I could barely hold on anymore. By the seventh, I was back in the hospital.

Like the first time, I was the one to check myself in. Unlike the first time, I knew exactly what I was locking myself in for—months of loneliness and hard work. But I didn't have a choice.

My kids were older now. During my first manic episode, they'd had no idea what was happening. Now my daughter was old enough to see my irrational behavior. She'd seen me screaming at my siblings and berating someone who had come to be *menachem aveil*. I needed to do better for her and for the rest of my kids.

Right before I left for the hospital, my father got up from his *aveilus* seat and took my hand in his. "Bashie, you're going to be okay," he said. It's one of the only moments I remember from that time. The rest is a blur, because once again, I wasn't Bashie anymore. Bipolar disorder had taken over my life and my memories.

I spent the last day of *shivah* in the emergency room, but instead of crying, I got up on the bed and danced. It made no sense to be so joyous when my mother had just died, but nothing needs to make sense when it's the illness talking.

Again, I was locked away. Again, I pushed my family out of my life. Again, I spent hours crying in my room and wondering, *Why can't I just be like everyone else?* A few months later I was released. I needed to regain my footing—but this time I didn't need to put on that mask, the one that made it seem to the outside world as if everything was okay while inside I was battling a serious mental health condition.

This time, people knew why I'd been away. The community noticed my absence and reached out to my family. When neighbors asked if everything was okay, we

were honest and accepted their help.

One day during a visit to the psych ward, my husband showed me a message he'd received from a community member. "How should I answer this?" he asked. We decided to open up and allow people to come visit me, whether it was having a Shabbos meal with friends, having a *kum-sitz* on a Shabbos afternoon or hosting an EA meeting.

Bikur Cholim sent some young girls to visit with Jewish patients. When the hospital chaplain heard about it, he asked me if I wanted them to come by. My first reaction was to say no. Then I thought a moment longer. If I were hospitalized for physical symptoms, I'd have no shame in allowing them in. Just because my illness was emotional, did that mean I needed to hide?

When you keep something secret, you lose out. You don't get support, and you don't get to support others. After years of hiding my disorder, I was ready to share my burden. I wanted to accept everyone's love and care. We didn't have to do it alone. The idea of going public began to percolate, but it took more time before we were ready.

Out of everyone we told, my children were the hardest to convince. For them, it wasn't the story of some random woman. It was the story of their mother, their parents and their lives. When my daughter called during my hospitalization and asked, "Mommy, where are you?" I told her I was in something called a psych ward. I explained that it's a place where people go when they need a break from their emotions.

"Okay," she said. "Can I come visit?"

She did—and she saw that it looked like any other hospital ward. After that, she was okay. My husband and I didn't attach any stigma to my condition, and because of that, neither did she.

Although I have been diagnosed with various forms of emotional illness, I don't define myself by those diagnoses. I live a productive and fulfilling life despite—and

in many ways because of—my weaknesses. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that the best response to darkness is to transform it into light. Each time I share my experience, hope and strength with others, I do exactly that.

### Being There for Others

When people ask me how to support a family or friend with mental illness, I tell them about a conversation I had with my doctor after my last hospitalization.

When I'm experiencing a manic episode, my personality does a complete about-face. My character is the opposite of who I usually am. I scream at the doctor, refuse to listen to anything he suggests, and more or less make his life difficult. "I'm so sorry for what I put you through," I told him after the medication had kicked in and my mania was again under control.

The doctor looked up from his chart and gave me a kind smile. "Bashie, it wasn't you—it was your illness." This was the kindest thing someone had ever said to me in all those years. He didn't view me as a case of bipolar disorder but as Bashie, a person who happened to have bipolar disorder.

If you want to treat someone with understanding and compassion, take a moment to separate him from his illness. He's a person first. Hashem has given him a certain challenge, but the diagnosis isn't who he is.

\* \* \*

If I had been given the choice, I wouldn't have chosen this path. It's dark and difficult. But I wasn't given a choice. The only thing I can choose is what I will do with the darkness.

That is why I made a conscious decision to turn it into light. I want to share my story so I can be there for others, even if that means that only one person feels slightly less alone.

Nowadays, when people ask how I'm doing, I'm honest. I don't tell them that I was gone for a while because I was on

vacation. Instead I say, "I had a hard time during my mother's *shivah* and had to be hospitalized. *Baruch Hashem*, I'm doing a lot better now."

And I am.

It starts the moment I wake up in the morning and say *Modeh Ani*. As *Yidden*, our first words are ones of gratitude. And it's not by happenstance that the "*modeh*—grateful" precedes the "*ani*—I am." It's an *avodah* of recognizing that appreciation and thanks to G-d come first. Before any "I" enters the picture, I need to accept that Hashem is running my world and that He's filling it with so much good.

After that comes the "*lefanecha*," surrendering myself to Hashem's will. I'm only here because Hashem, the *Melech Chai V'kayam*, wants me to be. He's returned my soul for a reason, and my job is to fulfill that mission. Hashem gave me this day, this life and this diagnosis because He trusts that I'm going to make the most of it.

As with any relationship, my connection to Hashem will always be a work in progress. There are still times when I struggle, but they are less frequent, and my bond with Hashem is strong enough to withstand it. Instead of striving for perfection, let's celebrate each victory, big and small. Hashem wants our *avodah*. He wants us to wake up every morning and say, "Today I am going to try."

These days, I open my eyes in the morning with a prayer on my lips and say, "Hashem, today I'm going to give You my best." ●

*Bashie Naparstek can be contacted through Ami Magazine.*

*To submit your story for this column or to have your story featured here, please send an email to [editorial@amimagazine.org](mailto:editorial@amimagazine.org) or call 718-534-8800, ext. 202. Your story and/or submission will be kept confidential.*



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