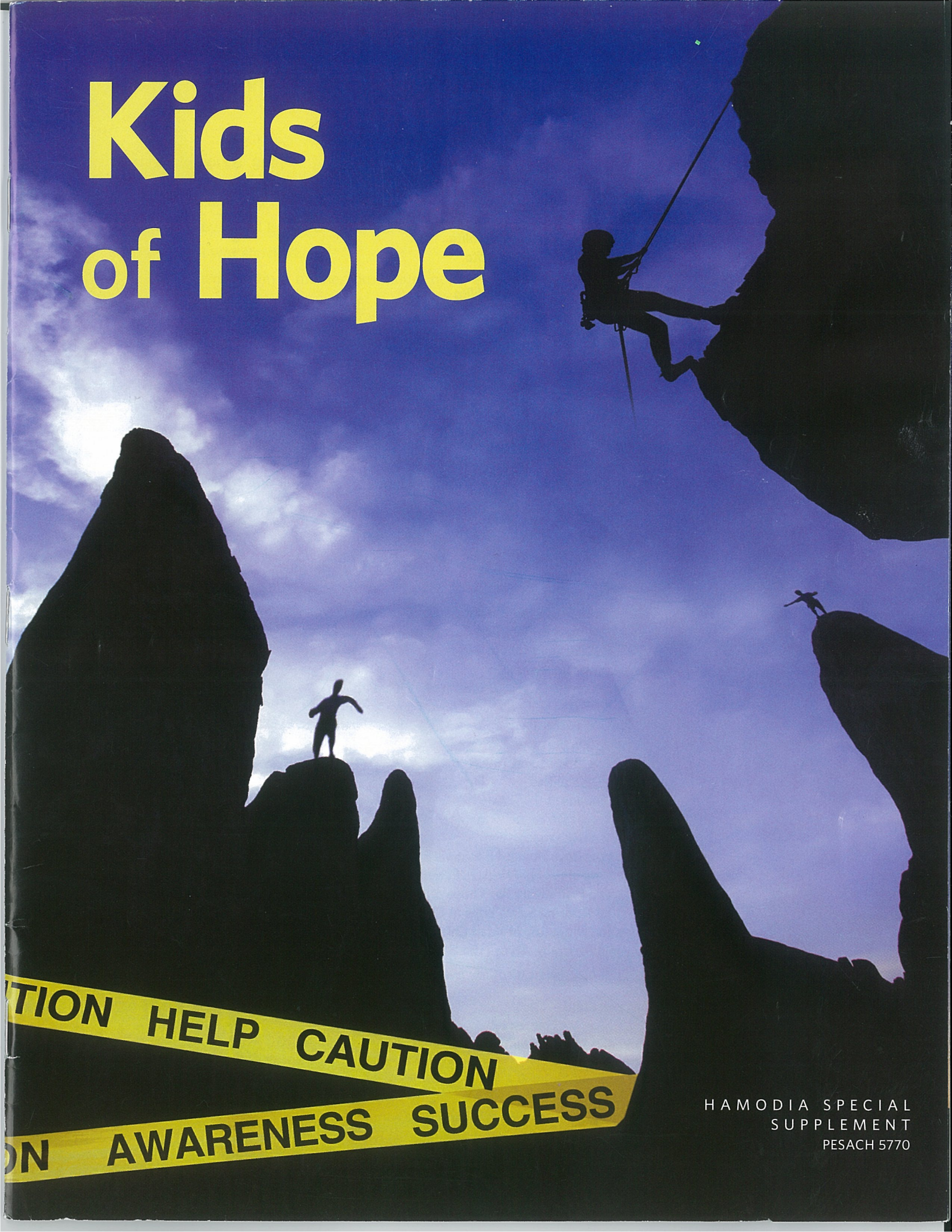


Kids of Hope



CAUTION HELP CAUTION
ON AWARENESS SUCCESS

HAMODIA SPECIAL
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PESACH 5770

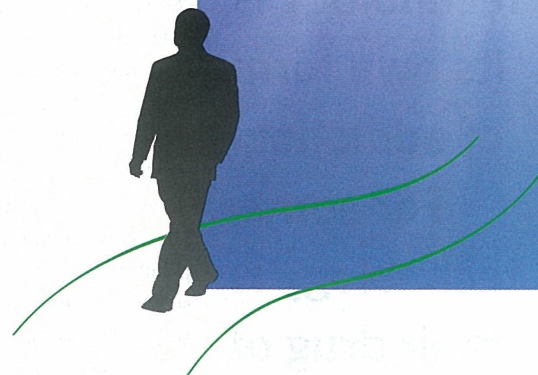
"If we would be living in the times of the *chachamim*, they'd be *gozer issur yichud* on the internet."

**Harav Mattisyahu Salomon, shlita,
Mashgiach, Beth Medrash Govoha**

By Yaakov Astor

Possible Causes and Factors

I. Internet Addiction



Mr. Philip Rosenthal began his career in computers and then entered law enforcement as an investigator into computer crime, known in the profession as computer forensics. After hearing Philip speak publicly on this topic for a Jewish audience, Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski encouraged him to pursue a mental health degree in order to help the Jewish community. He subsequently left law enforcement and went on to become a Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC). On his business card he describes himself as a Technology Addiction Consultant.

Technology Addiction

"Technology is its own form of addiction," he explains. "People are surprised to hear that, but for some people technology is their 'drug of choice.' All the newest gadgets have the ability to receive email. What used to be just a device to make a wireless phone call is now an entire office in your hand. It's a phone, calendar, GPS, email account, chat room, texting system, internet surfing device, Google, etc. — everything a computer has. The typical cell phone today has about a hundred times the computing power of the computers that NASA used to send the Apollo rockets to the moon in the 1960s." The instant gratification associated with carrying so much power in one's palm is very, very addictive, Mr. Rosenthal explains. When the technology addict feels the phone vibrate, his hormonal system releases serotonin, endorphins, and other hormones that excite the brain, telling it in effect, "Hey, you just got an email. You're important. You exist. You matter."

"That's true even if it's spam!" he says. (This suggests a modern-day variation of Descartes' famous dictum: "I spam, therefore I am.")

Red Flags

Thanks to modern technological devices, more and more people today are losing the ability to talk and relate to others. Rather than talk, they surf, text or email.

A man is surfing away and his wife says, "*Come to the table. It's dinner time.*" "*Another minute or two.*" Ten or fifteen minutes pass

and she repeats herself, "*Are you coming? The food's getting cold.*" "*Yeah. Yeah. I'll be right there.*" Fifteen minutes later, the family has finished eating and has left the table. Yet, he is still sitting there because he cannot pull himself away from the computer.

A new phenomenon exclusive to the observant community is the person who feels his phone vibrate on *Shabbos* — and he is not even carrying it! Look around *shul* on *Shabbos* morning; all of a sudden someone will reach for his waist to turn off the vibrating cell phone that is not there! Yet another red flag is waved when a person sits down at a *shiur* and just two minutes into it says, "Oy, is this going to last forever?" Mr. Rosenthal once gave a lecture about the dangers of technology addiction. "For the entire hour of the lecture," he says, "there was a person in the front row holding his phone in both hands, texting away. He didn't hear a word I said. When I made a remark to the audience about the man in the front row texting away they all laughed — but he didn't even pick up his head. He just continued texting. He had no idea I was talking about him." Make no mistake: texting is a drug of choice. Those who are addicted are escaping into text messaging just the way the alcoholic escapes into alcohol or the drug addict into drugs."

One of the first things Mr. Philip Rosenthal asks people who come to see him is how often they text others. Based on the number they give him he can tell how addicted they are. "When it starts getting into the thousands per month," he says, "my next

question is: 'What's going on in your life that you need this escape?'"

Another classic red flag is observable in the case of the person who sits down to quickly Google something and who, all of a sudden, realizes that it is now two hours later. Casinos capitalize on the same phenomenon. They keep a person in front of the slot machine, pulling the handle, hour after hour. The addictive, repetitive action turns off a person's entire time-space awareness. All he can see is the machine. That is exactly what the casinos want. The computer does not want to let go of you either. There is always something more to surf. There is no end to it. The internet is infinite.

"A commercial portrays a man who has not shaved in months, sitting in his pajamas," Mr. Rosenthal says. "He is surfing on the internet when all of a sudden a pop-up on the screen says, 'You have reached the end of the internet.' He looks into space and says with despair, 'What do I do now?'"

"Technology is its own form of addiction. For some, technology is their drug of choice."

Beyond Technology Addiction

Addiction comes in many forms: internet, Xbox, drinking, drugs, immoral conduct, domestic abuse, gambling and much more. Often they are all tied together.

"A person goes online to check out the news," Mr. Rosenthal explains. "He sees a link remotely related to the news story and follows it. While looking at that link, he sees another thing that is also sort of connected to it and so he clicks on that too. Suddenly, before he knows it, he is looking at improper images. It's a very slippery slope. Some statistics reveal that if a person looks at an inappropriate image for more than 2.5 seconds he is going to look at the next one... and the next one... and the next one..."

This pertains to men more than women. Whereas men tend to be naturally attracted to graphics and images, women tend to get into trouble through chat rooms, text messaging, and becoming caught up emotionally in an online relationship.

I had a case of a woman who waited every night for her husband to come home. He didn't come home until nine or ten o'clock. Dinner would be sitting on the table, cold. When he finally came home and started eating, she would try to start a conversation with him, but he would take his food and go into the living room.

"Why are you going into the other room? I waited all this time for you to come home to talk to you. You're my husband."

"I'm tired and don't feel like talking. I had a long day. I just want to eat and go to bed."

The next night the same thing happened. And then it happened again. And again and again.... Finally, he said to her, "You know what? You want to talk? I bought you a brand new computer."

"I don't even know how to turn it on."

"I'll teach you. I'll also teach you how to chat online."

She learned to chat... and before she knew it, she got herself into trouble and eventually divorced her husband. The internet was not the cause, but it abetted the situation.

What's Going on in Your Life?

Mr. Philip Rosenthal shares a heart-breaking story:

An 18-year-old girl got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. As she walked down the hall she noticed that the door to her father's office was open. She saw that he was online with a webcam, engaging in prohibited behavior. The daughter did not make her presence known, but she was devastated. She consulted me several times over the course of a year. After agonizing over the situation, she finally decided to ask her father to take her out for ice cream one night. She then asked him to pull the car over in order to read him a letter.

He saw that it was very hard for her to talk. She was crying and was unable to read the letter. "Would you prefer it if I just read it myself?" he asked.

"No," she insisted. "I have to say this. But I have to read it, because I can't articulate what I have to say clearly enough."

In the letter, the daughter shared with her father how she had witnessed his actions and told him that she had always thought of him as her hero — and now, she felt disillusioned. She wanted her father back, the man she had once respected.

"Here again, the internet was more the symptom than the cause. The family had experienced severe monetary issues. The father had lost a good job five years earlier and could find nothing but menial, low-paying work since then. His self-esteem was zero. He felt his wife's disappointment in him. He was not a drinker, a drug addict, or a gambler. But he had a computer. Before he knew it, he found an outlet.

"In my experience, a person will not seek counseling until he bottoms out. For an alcoholic or for a drug addict, that usually means getting into a terrible car accident or getting arrested. For a gambler it means being confronted with the question, 'Where is all our money?' For an internet addict it usually means getting caught."

Is There Hope?

A 27-year-old young man who grew up in a very frum and sheltered home came to Mr. Rosenthal because he was addicted to online material that was prohibited. He was married and had a young child.

When a person goes online, all of the usual societal inhibitions are thrown out the window. The temptation can be greater for those raised in an insular environment once they are exposed the first time. The rationale is that no one can see you and this is an anonymous way of finding out what the world is all about without the danger of being found out.

What is the definition of an addiction? According to Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, it is any activity that one is compelled to repeat, no matter what the consequence. This 27-year-old young

man became addicted to the point where he allowed his business to suffer rather than give up a chance to surf. He felt compelled to feed his addiction. Furthermore, he was emotionally estranged from his wife.

"Then he bottomed out," Philip says. "The rent was due, but he had no money to pay it. He called me up and cried his heart out to me over the telephone. I started seeing him, helping him to realize what his triggers were."

A trigger may be the result of feelings of boredom, or stress because of the loss of a big client, or panic due to unpaid bills. Sometimes, a reward can also become a trigger. For example, a person may say to himself, "I just finished a big job successfully. I deserve to congratulate myself, so I'm going to go online and make myself feel good."

Mr. Rosenthal continues the story:

I worked with him for a little over a year and we were making good progress. He slipped a couple of times, which is totally normal. But when he got to the point where he felt he was about to slip again, he would call me and we'd work through it. Eventually, he got to the point where he did not have to call me. Then, this past year, on Erev Pesach, he called me and said he had to see me that day.

"It's Erev Pesach," I reminded him.

"I don't care. I have to see you."

It was two o'clock in the afternoon and he had to drive from Brooklyn to Monsey. When he arrived he said to me, "I have to be honest with you." I cringed. What was he going to say next?

Then he said: "I'm doing extremely well. I haven't slipped. I know my triggers. I'm dealing with them. But I have to show you some hakoras hatov."

At that point he pulled out a magnificent, leather-bound Haggadah for me.

"You came running to Monsey to give me this?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I had to do it for myself, not just for you." And off he went back to Brooklyn.

That night, I came home after davening and opened the new Haggadah for the first time. There, inside the front cover, he had written: "Thank you for getting me out of my Mitzrayim."

Rabbi Viener Assesses the Danger

Rabbi Yosef Viener is a *posek*, *Halachah* columnist for *Hamodia* and Rav of *Kehillas Shaar Shamayim* in Monsey, New York. As the first address for a community's questions and concerns, every Rav is privy to things the average person has little or no idea about. Rabbi Viener not only fields *shailos* and hears about people's problems within his immediate community, but from callers throughout the Jewish world.

He is far from being an alarmist, so it is really uncharacteristic of him to make the following statement with such unusual conviction, but make it he does — for good reason: "There is no single problem facing the individual and the community at large that is greater than this. Nothing even comes close." He illustrates what he means:

A first-year beis midrash yeshiva bachur I had never met called me

up. He had been home for bein hazmanim and was about to go back to yeshiva. He asked me if he could come to see me. I agreed. He came into my study, sat in a chair, and proceeded to cry for the next 25 minutes. I couldn't even hear what he was saying.

He told me that six months earlier, his parents had gone away for the weekend. The family had no video, TV, or magazines. They were very careful not to keep any bad influences around the home. However, the father was a businessman who had a computer at home with internet access.

This bachur had been a star student, but while his parents were away he could not resist temptation and he had logged on to his father's computer and viewed inappropriate things. Over the next eight or nine weeks he completely lost his ability to concentrate. He did teshuvah, he told me, and tried to move on, but the images were still floating around in his head.

I told him that the worst thing he could do was get depressed over it. That was the yetzer hara at work. First it gets you to sin. Then it makes you depressed about the sin, often causing far more damage than the original transgression. I told him that he was, unfortunately, not the first bachur who had come to me with such an issue.

I've had tens of cases like this, involving young people with tremendous potential. In no time, they had lost almost everything because their parents were not smart enough to recognize the problem, or were too proud to admit that this type of crisis was even a possibility.

Filters and Report Software

Among the many *shiurim* Rabbi Viener gives is one on the dangers of the internet and he presents a system for combating the problem. Aaron Tessler, of Brooklyn, NY, attended the lecture concerning the risks of the internet, and, grasping the dangers facing every family, generously sponsored a mass duplication of the *shiur*. To date, thousands of copies have been distributed free to all those who are interested in protecting themselves and their families.

The system for combating the problem is two-tiered: it employs filters and reporting software. A filter blocks sites that are deemed problematic. A reporting system tracks the internet sites visited and reports to another person, such as a parent, friend or Rav.

Why do you need both? The Rav explains. "Since no filter is perfect, everyone needs the deterrent of possible embarrassment in order to restrict his viewing to what is *kosher*. Reporting software reports every website that is visited. That report is then sent, either daily or weekly, to somebody one would be uncomfortable with if he found out you had engaged in behavior unbecoming a ben-Torah. Maybe a *chavrusa*, a Rabbi, or Rav.

"If you do not have that, the filter will probably not work for too

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long,” Rabbi Viener explains. “But if you have a filter *and* a reporting system you have half a chance. It is still not perfect. Perfect means getting internet out of your house.

“I want to be very clear about this. If you do not have internet, *do not get it*. And if you have it and it is not *absolutely necessary, get rid of it*. All the advice in the world is not as good as not having the temptation around in the first place. The first

thing you have to ask yourself is, ‘Is it really necessary or am I fooling myself?’ If you really need it in your house, then these two protections have to be in place. They are either free or require just a small monthly charge. Most are downloadable and easy to set up on your own.”

Rabbi Viener shares another story:

A very successful businessman came to me and told me he was addicted to the internet. He attended Daf Yomi regularly and sent his kids to the best yeshivos. What prompted him to come to me now? His wife had recently found out about his addiction and his marriage was shaky. He had managed to hide it from her because he usually worked long hours in his office. Little had she known that, especially since the recession, he had

usually completed work by four in the afternoon. When she found out about his addiction, she insisted that he come and speak to me.

Now I get a report [of all his computer activity] every week. About three weeks ago the report came with a warning: “This report needs close review.” And then it listed the websites he had been to. And, boy, did it need close review. We spoke; he told me he was embarrassed, and the last few reports have been excellent. Does that mean he will never fall in? No, but if he does, he knows he has to explain it to me.

See the sidebar for information about obtaining filter and reporting software.

Kedushah

These days many people are worried about the economy, their jobs, and the recession. There are many reasons why people may be struggling financially. However, the single most important ingredient for success, materially and spiritually, is the presence of the *Shechinah* in one’s life. And, explains Rabbi Viener, the key to inviting the *Shechinah* into your life and your family’s life is the *kedushah* in the house.

“People seem to need *parnassah* more than ever nowadays. Protecting the *kedushah* of the home is the key to greater *siyatta diShmaya* in everything, including *parnassah*. Perhaps if you get the *Shechinah* back in your life you will have more *hatzlachah*.”

Either way, *kedushah* is its own reward and the very essence of what a Jew is put on this earth for. The challenges of this generation are enormous. Surely, the devastating and penetrating

influence of something like the internet is the *yetzer hara’s* last gasp to trip up people before the advent of Mashiach, Rabbi Viener emphasizes.

The challenges are great, but the rewards are greater. There are tools to stand up to this challenge. People just have to take advantage of them. ■

Mr. Philip Rosenthal can be reached by phone at 800-425-7919 and through email at pmr972@gmail.com. He highly recommends the website: www.guardyoureyes.org

To obtain Rabbi Viener’s free CD on the dangers of the internet contact: info@TorahStream.org.

A sampling of the many filter and reporting programs available.

Note: The internet is a source of danger, as we have been told repeatedly by our Gedolim. A filter is only a protective device that is not foolproof.

JNET – filter for computer, blackberry and other mobile devices: www.thejnet.com

EBlaster – very thorough reporting system: www.eBlaster.com

Open DNS – www.opendns.com

Net Nanny - www.NetNanny.com

WebChaver: www.webchaver.org

Accountable2you (free): www.accountable2you.com

WebSense: www.websense.com

(This is an enterprise level product if you run a medium size business or larger.)

For a rundown on these and other filter programs, see: internet-filter-review.Toptenreviews.com

It is crucial to have filtration and accountability

The accountability reports can go to more than one person.

If you would like Rabbi Viener to be your accountability partner, his e-mail address is: info@TorahStream.org.

Technology Awareness Checklist

Use this checklist to make sure that you are doing everything possible to protect your family.

- No computers in bedrooms (only in public places with supervision).
- Install filters.
- Be careful of content on game devices (also internet access).
- If you feel your child must have a cell phone, use a voice-only cell phone.
- Reach out for professional help as appropriate.