

The Untold Story of OUR PLACE

By Rabbi Yochanon Donn

Yossi Milgrom's* problems started when he was very young. He smoked his first cigarette when he was barely nine years old, but Yossi traces his troubles back to even earlier times: the trauma he experienced when he was abused by various adults in his life starting from the age of five.

Smoking was just the first step in his experimentation with addictive substances and his dependence on them grew stronger by the day. Yossi lost the will — and ability — to accomplish anything in life. He was flipped from one yeshivah to the next — four in all. And that was in the span of just one year.

The article you are about to read contains some shocking and discomfiting insights and information, based primarily on the voices of the boys and girls who call Our Place their home.

The worst thing for a parent to watch is a son or daughter slipping off the way of life on which they were nurtured, passed down from generation to generation all the way back to Har Sinai. *Bachurim* or girls who leave the familiar world behind and begin consuming alcohol, taking drugs — or worse — is a painful nightmare for any parent.

What is less understood is that it is a nightmare for the youths as well.

There are very few who really get to see the depths of the souls of these youths. The ones who do come to know them are able to do so because they approach these youths in a non-judgmental way. Without condoning their actions, they offer these youths a haven of acceptance.

These organizations operate away from the limelight. They do not do fundraising, don't engage in publicity and, until now, have not been spotlighted in the media.

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Yossi overcame any feelings of guilt that might have troubled him by escaping from reality and trying out the next-generation drugs, going from one to the next. He graduated from experimenting with them to becoming a steady user and, as he found out one evening, an addicted overuser. He came home one night after trying out a new narcotic feeling woozy. He plopped down on his mother's empty bed and told his father, "Ta, I feel like I'm going to die."

His father, suspecting nothing untoward, called Hatzolah. Yossi was taken to the hospital, diagnosed as having ingested rat poison, and released. He hadn't realized that the new drug was laced with rat poison.

That incident did not stop Yossi from continuing to pursue his downward spiral into the world of addiction which kept his mind in a haze and prevented him from sinking into a sea of despair. His hardships in school, his stifling relationship with his parents, and his personal confusion over the abuse that went untreated, all contributed to

his current situation.

Word got back to Yossi's parents that their son was smoking — a thing they sensed was not done by yeshivah boys. Yossi's father was a frightening figure even in normal times, and to him these were not normal times; his son was doing something that other boys were not. Yossi's mother fretted and shared her anxiety with her friends and neighbors.

By the time Yossi was thirteen, neighbors were whispering about his addictions, his choice of clothes, friends and language, and his apparent inability to remain in a yeshivah. They told his parents, and fireworks erupted. Yossi's father exploded with rage and his mother panicked. He was bundled off to a drug rehabilitation center in Switzerland for three months, where he was initiated into the depths of the underworld.

Cut off from *Yiddishkeit* during that period, Yossi did not go back to keeping *halachah* when he returned to the United States. Instead, he re-emerged on the face of Brooklyn's sultry streets a new person, one



for whom life mattered so little that he was ready to forfeit his own for the sake of a little, momentary pleasure.

Such thoughts were going through Yossi's mind as he was standing and smoking outside a nursing home owned by his uncle, when he met Tzvi Glancz, the man who saved him from that fate.



On a recent visit to the unpretentious nerve center of Our Place on Avenue M in Flatbush, I met the staff behind Our Place's reputation as "the last line of defense before they go off *Yiddishkeit*," as it was described to me.

Ordinarily, Our Place, established fifteen years ago by Rabbi Yitzchok Mitnick — who has since left to establish his own yeshivah — and Rabbi Tzvi Glancz, is off-limits to the public. Even kids who have left yeshivah but are deemed by Our Place's Rabbanim to be in danger of becoming worse from the environment there are not allowed to step

into the building.

The furtiveness surrounding Our Place's operation extends to the exterior of the building that is its main venue. The signs on the door offer no clue as to what really takes place in the vast bowels of its interior. A placard outside the building invites visitors who need help with matters ranging from their immigration status to health-care and schooling.

But someone who is authorized to enter its doors and go into its basement should be prepared to encounter anything.

I make my way through the crowd of boys hanging out outside and head downstairs.

Blaring music emanates from one of the small side rooms, where Our Place's band practices. Boys are milling about watching TV — only sports, I am told — playing ping pong or pool, or just talking. Mounds of empty pizza boxes decorate one corner of the room, and there is a workout center on the right, occupying almost half the hall.

I walk toward the room from where the

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In an exclusive interview with *Hamodia*, one such organization, Our Place, lifted that veil ever so slightly for the sake of its financial survival.

There is more to this topic than meets the eye. This firsthand report of a visit to Our Place does not claim to answer many of the troubling questions the article raises, nor to address the problems and their roots from others' perspectives.

Hamodia has chosen to focus on this heartwrenching subject, which has often been swept under the proverbial rug, after extensive consultations with *Gedolim* as well as leading personalities intimately involved with straying youth.

This topic has been covered before; in the November 1999 issue of the *Jewish Observer*, the monthly journal of thought and opinion published by Agudath Israel of America, a cover feature on the phenomenon of kids-at-risk appeared. The lead article, titled "Children on the Fringe ... and Beyond," and other, similar articles in the same publication, still reverberate within our community, as they should.

majority of the noise is coming and find just two people inside. The drummer looks at me and smiles; he turns out to be one of the counselors. The other boy, totally absorbed in his guitar playing, ignores me.

I go back into the main area. The whole, giant room has a chilled out air about it. The cavernous walls are decorated with pictures of boys — and counselors, too, I suppose — in various poses.

But the equipment all looks state of the art. Moish Binik,, founder and proprietor of KRM Supermarket — known as the Kollel Store — in Boro Park, and a board member of Our Place, tells me that when they first opened, one *Gadol* advised them to invest in the best equipment.

“If you’re doing it already, do it right,” Mr. Binik quoted the *Gadol*. “We went out and got four [state of the art] pool tables.”

On the surface, it seems that the boys are having fun in Our Place. We then head into a tiny side room not much larger than a walk-in closet, which serves as the office, and a completely different picture emerges. Their staff tells me of depression gripping the boys, attempted suicides, and the feelings of despair that drive them to their present state.

In the room are Dovid Glancz, a mental health counselor; Rabbi Shimon Russel, the one in charge of the therapists there; Sony Perlman, Program Director; Moish Binik; Tzvi Glancz; Rabbi Dovid Silverman; and other staff members.

Dovid Glancz, who volunteers at Our Place, explains what attracts the boys to come here.

“The whole idea is acceptance and love,”



(L-R) Dovid Glancz, Sony Perlman, Dovid Silverman, and Moish Binik.



The nondescript entrance to Our Place.

said Dovid. “Accept them for who they are.”

Dovid says that the boys can tell if you really love them unconditionally, and eventually many of them open up to the staff to discuss their issues. “It takes them time to open up and tell us their problems,” he says.

And these boys all have problems, complex ones; often, their choices in life make them angry with themselves and others. The focus of their anger may be their parents, *rebbeim*, or Hashem — or they are simply apathetic; the life they now live is an escape, I am told. Deep down, they may want to leave their current existence behind and re-engage life anew. Coming to Our Place allows them an opportunity to re-enter society slowly, at their own pace, if and when they are really ready.

Dovid was asked by his brother, Tzvi, to join the staff three years ago, when he got his degree in mental health. However, while he is trained as a mental health counselor, his approach at Our Place is different from the way he would practice in other professional settings.

“A mentorship relationship is not regular therapy; we do not attempt to be objective,” he says. “We have no problem trying to convince someone to be more religious,” for example, as a means of rehabilitation — something he wouldn’t do in his regular practice.

Dovid says that not all the counselors are professionally trained. “Most of the staff are not trained — it’s just pure heart,” he says. “Training just gives you an added

dimension,” to help the boys.

Sony Perlman, the program director, says that when they talk to the boys about *Yiddishkeit* in a nonjudgmental way, they often respond. When the staff points out the true *hashkafah*, he says, the boys react positively.

“We tell them that we believe we have to raise *gashmius* to a higher level,” he says. And that is done by serving Hashem through all the struggles.

Tzvi Glancz described what he looks for in a volunteer for the organization. “There is no patting on the back,” he says forcefully. “There is no recognition in this world for your work.” In no uncertain terms he emphasizes that anyone who wants to work there for ulterior motives, “is out!”

The main thing is that the workers love and understand the youths who come there. This does not mean condoning their behavior, he hastens to add. He explains his methodology: “Just as I have my struggles, I understand their struggles.”

His approach, he says, is that while “we understand what you are going through, it is up to you to rectify it.

“Hashem cares about *chillul Shabbos* [and] does not condone it!” he explains passionately. “Whoever says that Hashem is a *vatran* (One Who looks away from sin) is plain wrong! Hashem cares about you doing the mitzvos, but He understands the struggles these kids go through.”

While the usual effort the staff puts forth for these boys involves talking to them, counseling, therapy, rehab and so on,

sometimes these efforts include more drama, such as bailing them out of prison, taking them to hospitals and — in rare cases — performing the ultimate *chessed*.

“I myself buried nine kids,” says Tzvi.



Moish Binik described his initial encounter with Tzvi.

“I was coming out of my store talking to him,” says Mr. Binik. “He was trying to convince me to get involved in ... Our Place, when I asked him to tell me who are the recipients of Our Place’s venture.

“He tells me, ‘You see those boys standing there?’ I looked and saw a group of teenagers half a block away hanging out. ‘They are our boys.’ I told him right away that I would join.”

Mr. Binik became, in addition to sitting on Our Place’s board, one of their “Big Brothers,” and also helps them out with loans.

“Most are from *hemishe* homes, from every school,” says Mr. Binik. “At some point they strayed. They’re not doing any drugs [while coming here]. We’re the last place before they get out of the Jewish community. They come here to schmooze, to connect with *Yiddishkeit*. They come here to be loved and not judged. And they get it here.”

“The only way you can get to these boys is by loving them,” he stresses.

Asked why he chose to team up with this organization, Mr. Binik replies simply. “I tell the boys who come here, ‘If I were your age I might be here (in Our Place) myself.’”

Mr. Binik stays behind as the others gradually drift out, telling me about the various activities Our Place has over the course of the year. He tells of the Shabbatons, the trips to Israel and elsewhere, the barbecues. I see pictures of Our Place boys on a trip to Israel, where the counselors act as rowdy as the boys.

“When is the next activity?” I ask. “Would I be able to come along and report on it?”

“I don’t know,” answers Mr. Binik. “The staff hasn’t been paid in eight weeks, and

we’ve taken out loans that are already overdue.”

The directors had made it clear to me that they only granted this interview since Our Places now faces a severe money crisis.

Our Place has a million-dollar budget, explains Glancz, its current director. Until now that budget was covered by a combination of government funding, private donations and volunteer work.

A significant part of the budget goes to pay for the varying forms of entertainment, but those are to be discontinued soon, warned one staff member ominously.

“I don’t know if there will be more [events],” said Moish Binik. “We don’t have the money to pay for it.”

No less worrisome is that therapy sessions were suspended — hopefully only for the next two or three months, when funding will resume.

“I can always find new therapists,” says Glancz, “but I cannot restart the place once it closes down.”

The main cause of this precipitous drop in funding is the economic crisis gripping state and city governments. Various city and state youth agencies provide up to ninety percent of Our Place’s budget, with the remainder coming from private donations.

That subsidy has been slashed to only 62 percent, as part of the city and state budget cuts. The missing \$250,000 makes all the difference in an organization such as Our Place, which has operated below the community’s radar since its inception.

These money woes did not seem to affect one weekly Our Place ritual. As we are talking I hear a huge roar emerge from the main hall outside. “That’s the Thursday night cholent,” explains Tzvi.

I step outside to watch a circle of boys surrounding a hot cholent pot. I go over to take a “before” picture of the full pot.

I don’t have to wait long to take the “after” picture.



As we sit in a private office off Our Place’s workout center, a smiling twenty-year-old walks in. He

doesn’t appear to fit in with the scene there. With his small beard, curly *peyos* behind his ears and conversation interspersed with “*baruch Hashem*,” he looks nothing like the others at the center.

Yossi Milgrom has come to meet with us.

In short, clipped sentences Yossi describes his former life — from his going to Eretz Yisrael to learn in Neve Yaakov, his sordid adventures there, his days and weeks spent out cold, unfeeling, as he took one drug and then another.

“At age twelve I was smoking,” he says. “At age twelve I was out of yeshivah — all at age twelve.”

Yossi did not care back then that he was losing his best years; he sought nothing in life. He relates a conversation he had with someone who attempted to convince him of the dangers of drug use.

“‘You’re going to die,’ he tells me,” Yossi repeated contemptuously. “The thing I hated the most was when people would tell me that I was going to die. I wanted to die; I didn’t care if I would live or not.”

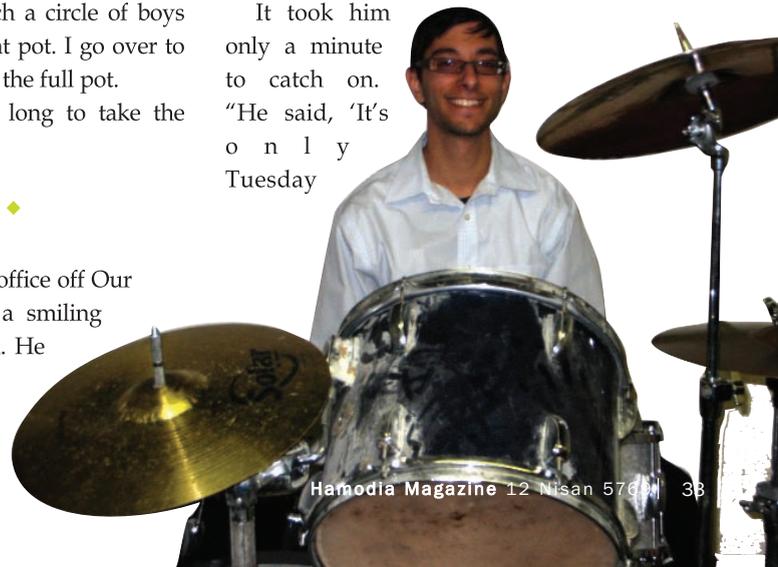
Drug use takes away the ability to feel any emotion, said Yossi.

“Someone would tell me that someone just died, and it was like, ‘Oh, wow’ ... I told one person that we’re all going to die, but I would have fun before then.”

When he was in Eretz Yisrael, said Yossi, his life was so bewildering and gray that he once thought Shabbos was on a Tuesday — together with all his friends. He only discovered it was not Shabbos when the *mashgiach* came in to their room and they hurriedly extinguished their cigarettes.

“Why aren’t you smoking?” the *mashgiach*, who knew his charges, asked dryly. “What’s going on?”

It took him only a minute to catch on. “He said, ‘It’s o n l y Tuesday



An Our Place counselor at the drums in the music room.



Dovid Glancz and Moish Binik in the workout room.

generation?"

Yossi answers unhesitatingly, in a long, emotional outburst that calls forth his deepest feelings on society's foibles.

"When I was in Eretz Yisrael," he says, "I used to go to families of *baalei teshuvah*, people who became religious because they believed in it. I started realizing that *Yiddishkeit* was true at their house. I saw how the wives would dress up at home, not only in the street. I saw how [the spouses] treated each other."

Yossi says that today he leads a fulfilling life — although he agrees that it is still full of hardships.

"[People] look at me now," he says optimistically. "*Baruch Hashem*, I'm married, I'm *frum*, I have a beard and *peyos* — I still have a hard life; it's not easy ... you have good times, unlike the other life, that you never have good times."

Yossi wants to help others who are in the situation he was in, to pull themselves out. It is a theme heard over and over again by Our Place graduates.

Some are already doing that — like Moishy Raab.*



Moishy Raab, a 24-year-old who passed through Our Place a few years back and today works there as a volunteer, glossed over the downward drift he had as a young teenager, focusing mainly on his connection with Tzvi Glancz.

"I was angry," Moishy says, clearly uncomfortable in reliving his old life. "I was upset at ... my yeshivah and upset at Hashem."

Moishy had questions about *Yiddishkeit*,

which he declined to reveal, to which he was not given answers. His anger grew until he decided that he could not take what he considered to be hypocrisy any longer.

"I decided one night that I'm running away from my house," Moishy stated matter-of-factly.

Easier said than done, he soon found out. He met up with a group of friends and enjoyed their company. They spent hours under the train tracks drinking and whiling away their time.

At his initial encounter with the new group he noticed an energetic, tall man with a black beard who seemed to know everybody there. He was schmoozing with the group under the tracks in a surreal fashion, as if it were normal to converse in the middle of the night using the MTA as a roof.

The man recognized a new face in the crowd and came over to ask him his name.

"Do you need any money?" he asked.

Funny how he had a knack for asking just the right question.

But Moishy was angry at "the system" and reacted coolly to the stranger's advances.

"Do you need anything?" the man persisted.

"Yes," answered Moishy cynically, "I need a *chavrusa*."

Just as promptly, the man answered, "When do you want to learn?"

"I wanted to test him," Moishy tells me, "so I said I wanted to learn with him the hardest time of the week I could think of — Shabbos afternoon."

Moishy was surprised when his challenge was immediately accepted. He was in the man's house that Shabbos afternoon where he talked, learned and ate with the man's family. To make the challenge even more real, Moishy dressed as provocatively as possible. "I didn't look very *Shabbosdik*," he said, in a tone suggesting it was an understatement.

Glancz even took Moishy with him to his shul, a Boro Park environment where people looked askance at him for bringing such a guest. Glancz just ignored them.

Moishy continued going to Glancz's house every Shabbos afternoon, dressed

more confrontationally by the week. It took many weeks of coming before he finally showed up in a traditional Shabbos suit — and many years of weekly study for the education-deprived Moishy to finish *maseches Chagigah*. They have since started a new *masechta*.

Today Moishy looks like a typical yeshivah *bachur*, except that his past gives him a unique perspective on life others will never have.



The money woes facing Our Place today were not always an issue. Several years ago Our Place had enough funding for its program, so the staff launched Our Place for girls. Much smaller than the boys' division, it is run by Shifra Glancz, Tzvi's wife. One strict rule they instituted almost immediately, said Tzvi, is that "only men work in the boys' place and only women in the girls' place."

Girls were obviously not interested in pool and workouts, so their place was designed differently. Art and baking classes are given, there are dancing lessons available, but it mostly is a social place where the girls come to talk with each other.

Esti Rosenheim* grew up in what she called "a *chassidische* home." The now-twenty-year-old felt like she was "in a box," she said, and her questions to her parents, teachers and adult figures about why she must dress and act in certain ways while other *frum* Jewish families did not have to went unanswered. She was pushed into a lifestyle she didn't understand or believe in.

"Why can't we dress like other Jews?" she recalled asking in frustration. "Why do we have to live like this?"

After going through a tortuous few years, Esti today understands the reason.

"It might be a great thing, because it keeps you away from the crazy outside world," she said in a telephone interview with *Hamodia*. "It just wasn't explained to me."

By the time she was fourteen Esti had had enough. No longer could she live a life she considered hypocritical.

Esti felt she could not just live by rules she did not understand. So she gradually gave up *Yiddishkeit*. First she lowered her



The pool room.

kashrus standards, eventually dropping all standards entirely. Shabbos was next, followed closely by everything else.

By the time she turned seventeen, Esti confessed, “I was living like a *goy*.”

She moved in with some non-Jews. “I just didn’t want any Jews around to tell me what to do,” she said. She cut off all contact with her parents, along with any reminder of her former life.

Esti got drawn into drugs from her new non-Jewish friends.

“I didn’t know who I was,” she confessed. “I had no hope for myself. I thought that some people are just not meant to be Jewish.”

When Esti turned nineteen she finally felt she was ready to start coming back.

“I felt emptiness,” she said. “I just didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to live like a monster [anymore].”

“After going through all that,” she added, “I wanted to go back but needed people who wouldn’t judge me for what I [had] lived through. I wanted to be Jewish but [I wanted to] know the full meaning of it.”

She was living in Brooklyn with a friend who was attending *Ohr Naava* – a program for girls started by Rabbi Zecharia Wallerstein, offering lectures, classes and courses. Esti started going there and eventually was referred to Our Place.

At Our Place she felt emotionally safe and loved by the staff members.

“They communicated to me that ‘you’re okay the way you are,’” she said.

“They have social workers to help. Right now I am religious in all ways, although I am not *chassidish*. I give [Our Place] most of the credit.”

While the boys’ division is open every

night, the girls’ is open only twice a week. An average night sees fifteen to twenty girls taking hip-hop dancing classes or just sitting together discussing their lives.

“It’s like a family,” Esti says. “I feel like I’m at home there. The stuff we do just gives us the confidence to go on.”

While she says that it can sometimes be a struggle not to return to her old life “just for a party,” Esti can now discuss it with a social worker at Our Place.

“Sometimes I feel like going back,” she admits, “but the volunteers explain to me who you were and who you are now.”

The staff members had described the Living Room, their place for recovering drug addicts, alcoholics and people “addicted to the streets,” as they delicately described it.

At Our Place Esti had the courage to give up her drug and alcohol addictions. The staff was always on call for any problem she wanted to discuss. She even reinitiated contact with her family.

“I talk with them all the time now,” she said. “I go to visit.”

Esti now has a good job, which she plans to keep. She plans a regular *frum* lifestyle for herself – though not on her parents’ standards. And she, like Yossi and Moishy, wants to help out others who are now in the same circumstance she was in previously.

“I see myself with a family of kids,” Esti replies when asked about her future. “I would want to help out people who went through the kind of life I went through.”

After all, she says, Our Place is what helped her get to where she is now.



Avi Weissberg* explained how his connection to Our Place helped him.

“Our Place is for a guy like me – a guy who likes to hang around at night,” the gangly seventeen-year-old said when he dropped in at the *Hamodia* office.

Indeed, Tzvi Glancz confirmed that only boys who are on a certain level were allowed through the doors of Our Place.

“It saves a lot of people,” added Avi. “A lot of people are against it; they say that’s where you get your drug connection. The thing is, you can get your drug connection

anywhere down the block.”

Avi comes from a modern Orthodox family in Flatbush. He had a difficult time when he was in tenth grade. By the end of the year he had dropped out of yeshivah and ended up on the streets. Bad company followed almost immediately.

Avi’s parents could not accept him. Sometimes, he was thrown out of his house.

“It’s like a second home,” he says, referring to Our Place. “A lot of times [when] I was kicked out of my house and I didn’t have anything to eat, I went to Our Place. I was standing on the street and I was cold – I went to Our Place ... thank G-d for Our Place. It’s a place where you could go eat, it’s a place where you could go relax.”

“You know what,” says Avi suddenly, “its like a homeless shelter in a way ... like a homeless guy – he’s starving, he’ll go to a homeless shelter. If you take a teenage guy, he’s bored, G-d knows what he’ll do. At Our Place you always have something to do.”

Avi sums up his feelings about Our Place at the end of our discussion. “I think if there would be no Our Place, I wouldn’t be religious today,” he says with conviction. “...I always said, thank G-d there’s Our Place.”

Avi, like others at Our Place, is not fully committed to the *frum* lifestyle. He observes *mitzvos* when he is up to it, but also acknowledges frequent lapses.

Avi tries to formulate his thoughts when asked what he feels the repercussions would be for the community if Our Place were to close its doors.

“I really think that it’s the worst idea for the whole community if Our Place shuts down – even for the kids learning in yeshivah. I wish I had more words to describe it – but I think it’s the worst thing if it shuts down.”

The staff at Our Place understands that not everyone who enters their doors will be helped to heal and return to their roots. They share their triumphs as well as their trials. And they know they can continue to help change worlds, one at a time, if the community helps them survive. ■



* Names have been changed to protect privacy