

# Light in the Darkness

Torani psychological perspectives on  
**struggling with**  
**שמירת העיניים ושמירת הברית**  
(pornography and masturbation)

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# A guide for young men struggling with שמירת העיניים ושמירת הברית (pornography and masturbation)

## Introduction:

Many years ago I was on the staff of an American gap year yeshiva program. The yeshiva was designed for students with low-moderate learning motivation. As we reviewed student attendance at different *shiurim* and *chaburot*, we discovered that a young *chassidische* fellow teaching at night *seder* had a large following. We inquired as to his magic touch, and discovered that he was speaking with the guys about *shmirat habrit* or *hotzaat zera l'vatala*. These were the topics that were on every guy's mind, which nobody else was talking about directly.

Through my decades of private practice as a psychologist, I have discovered that this topic is the source of confusion and suffering for many serious frum young men. These years of “emerging adulthood” can be among the most exciting and productive of your life, but also sometimes the most challenging and painful. The goal of this booklet is to assist you in your journey through young adulthood. The issues surrounding sexuality are inherently challenging, but they are not intended to be torturous or destructive. In this spirit, Abaye interprets the verse in Mishlei (3:17): דרכיה דרכי נעם. The Torah often challenges us, but it never intends to hurt us. He even applies this halachically! He rejects several alternatives to date palms as candidates for the lulav because they are poisonous or thorny and could hurt the person performing the mitzvah (Sukkah 32 a,b).

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**This booklet is intended to guide you in your process, and is one of a number of ways to move forward productively.**

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1. I conducted research for this booklet over the course of years, reading through sefarim in the Herzog College library, one Sunday hour at a time. I have included rabbinic sources from many varied circles because we are all involved in a similar struggle, and can learn from one another. Additionally, it is my hope that guys/bochrim from across the religious spectrum will find sources here that are meaningful to them. There is a bibliography at the end, and I encourage you to pursue further reading in whatever sources speak to you.
2. We live in a world where countless rebbeim are cognizant of these issues. They are aware that this has always been a big challenge, and is significantly more challenging in our current generation. Many are open to discuss and guide without judgment.
3. For some people, it will be important to find peers for support and discussion. I will discuss some ways to do this later on.
4. For others it will be important to seek professional help to treat the addictive behaviors, the emotional causes and results, or both. The yeshiva in which you learn or learned probably has someone the staff can recommend. If not, my contact information is at the end as well. I am happy to try to make recommendations wherever you are.

**Q: Is it even appropriate to have public conversations about sexuality?**

**A:** Chazal urged us to speak *b'lashon nekiya*:

אמר ר' חנן בר רבא:

הכל יודעין כלה למה נכנסה לחופה אלא כל המנבל פיו...

Said R. Hanan:

Everyone knows to what end a kalla enters the huppa  
(the newly married couple will have sexual relations),

but one who speaks about it in vulgar tones...

[will be punished severely].

(Shabbat 33a)

Like discussing *lashon hara*, discussing sexuality is not a blanket prohibition. Sexuality in Judaism is a private affair, and not one intended to be blanketing the public sphere. It is a topic which requires one to think about the tone and need for public discussion. However, in our generation, rabbis across the spectrum have argued that it is imperative that we converse with all young men about these topics.

Rav Dr. Yehuda Brandes, Director of Herzog College, cites the *midrash* about Sarah Imeinu (*Al Pi Darko*). Upon Yitzchak's birth, the cynics were claiming that the baby couldn't have been born from 90 year old Sarah. The *midrash* quotes Avraham Avinu urging Sarah to nurse publicly.

אמנו שרה הייתה צנועה יותר מדי.

אמר לה אבינו אברהם:

'אין זו שעת הצניעות אלא גלי את דדיך.'

**Our mother Sarah was too modest.**

**Our father Avraham said:**

**'This isn't the time for modesty;**

**rather, bare your breasts (to nurse publicly)'**

(Yalkut Shimoni, Breishit 21:7)

This midrash describes a shocking violation of basic *tzniut* as important at that moment for a higher purpose.

Relating directly to our topic, an anonymously authored Litvish work entitled "וזאת בריתי" discusses masturbation extensively, and carries approbations from leading Israeli and American rabbanim. It states that the Steipler (Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, author of the Kehillot Yaakov) in Karyana D'Agarta, Pri Megadim, and R. Yisrael Salanter all supported writing on the topic in their generation (kal v'chomer to ours).



### **Q: Help! Why did Hashem give me these intense sexual drives??**

**A:** Rav Eli Sheinfeld, Ram (high school rebbe) at Yeshivat Horev in Jerusalem, has an excellent discussion of the issue of “drives” in his book “הלב, היצר, והאדם.” He explains that the wide array of human drives serves as the foundation of human society. The drive for power causes people to seek leadership positions, despite the innumerable annoyances that accompany them. The drive for honor causes people to take risks in building new projects. The drive to eat causes us to feed ourselves and provide ourselves with nutrition. Note that people who lose their appetite will have difficulty maintaining their health, and will often lose weight.

We are certainly encouraged to exercise our “lishma” intentions in building, leading, and eating. However, all of these activities are strongly supported by our “base” drives. The Gemara tells (Sota 5a) that one who is haughty is likened to an idolator, heretic, and to one who has illicit sexual relations. At the same time, Rav’s opinion in that Gemara is that a talmid chacham should have שמינית שבשמינית (an eighth of an eighth=1/64th) of “ga’ava.” That is, even the very problematic trait of haughtiness has its place in driving us to positive activity. Rav Wolbe writes in his Alei Shur (Volume 2, Gate 2, Chapter 10) that this is true in particular with regard to *ta’avot*. Bad *midot* such as anger can healthily be scaled back, while *ta’avot* are necessary for healthy living and need to be assessed and channeled.

In the Torah’s first chapter, we are told that mankind’s mission is to conquer the earth and to procreate. (See Rav Soloveitchik’s Lonely Man of Faith for a rich explication of this aspect of the religious personality). As parents can attest, having children is one of the biggest blessings one can hope for. However, in addition to its centrality, procreation is also fraught with complications. There are countless reasons why a person

would hesitate to attempt to create a child. Children cause us sleepless nights, frustrations, anxiety, headaches, and financial expenditure. Thus, Hashem provided us with a strong sexual drive to ensure that we would procreate. Chazal (Gittin 41b) cite a pasuk as the philosophical source of the need for procreation:

**לא תוהו בראה, לשבת יצרה**

**The world was not created to be desolate,  
but rather to be inhabited**

(Isaiah 45:18)

Most books on the topic of masturbation address the procreative reasons for the power of the sex drive. However, many omit discussion of the relational components of sexuality, presumably in an attempt to be *tzanua*. I believe, however, that it is critical in our era to speak frankly and fully (but not graphically) in order to help young men connect to the depth of Jewish sexuality. If it is only a means to procreate, then the recipient of our seed becomes a mere procreative receptacle. Worse, such a limited approach unintentionally contributes to seeing the pleasure of marital sexuality as basically permissible masturbation; one's wife becomes simply the target of a man's sexual release. That is, however, far from the full reality of Jewish marital relations.

The term "intimacy" is often used in place of sexuality because it communicates that this is a means of being intimate=close, vulnerable, and connected with our wives. In the 6th bracha at the wedding ceremony, we ask Hashem to bless the couple to be רעים האהובים. Chazal (Yoma 54b, according to Rashi's explanation) teach us that the *keruvim* in the Holy of Holies represent the intimacy of a loving couple, which in turn symbolizes our national relationship with Hashem. While the details of this discussion are indeed best addressed by a מדריך חתנים\מסדר קידושין, the headlines can be explained here.

Sexual intimacy both gives expression to marital love and also helps to strengthen it. There are many ways in which it does so, and here are several. Experiencing the attraction that one's spouse has for him/her strengthens the feeling of being loved. Both the giving and receiving of pleasure heighten the feelings of love and wash away small frustrations and hurts. Moreover, the very experience of physical togetherness intensifies the spiritual and relational connection between the couple. R Shimon b. Halafta refers to the male organ as “משים שלום” (Shabbat 152a). Like the word shalom generally, this phrase represents both the absence of tension as well as the presence of connection. It is important that you understand that the strong drives you experience are not just acceptable, but a component of what will provide blessing and wellbeing in your future home.



**Q: But aren't there opinions that we should enjoy sexuality as little as possible?**

**A:** There are such opinions. Globally, there is a long standing debate regarding the merits of asceticism. Regarding the nazir, the gemara (Taanit 11a) cites the opinions of R Elazar who calls the nazir “*kadosh*,” and R Elazar Hakapar who calls the nazir “*choteh*.” Each bases his opinions on the text in parshat Naso. There is a parallel debate in the realm of sexuality. The gemara (Nedarim 20a) cites a debate between R. Yohanan b. Dahavai and R Yohanan, with the former advocating minimizing pleasure and the latter encouraging it.

The Orthodox Forum was a Yeshiva University-based annual think tank that addressed an issue of importance in the community each year. In the Orthodox Forum 2004, R Aharon Lichtenstein ( the late Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion- “Gush”) discusses this topic, and explains that the tradition that he received from R Soloveitchik was that we follow the “natural” approach (non-ascetic). The overwhelming majority of contemporary communities seems to follow this approach as well, with the isolated exception of several *Chassidische* groups. Rav Chaim Dov Stark (mashgiach ruchani at Aderes HaTorah (“Center’s”)) recently published a sefer entitled יסוד הבית . In a footnote, he cites the same “natural” approach in the writing of the Aruch Hashulchan (Even HaEzer Chapter 23), Ran (Shabbat 152A), Gra (Sifra D’Tzniuta Chapter 1), Ramban (Breishit 2,23). Similarly, the Yerushalmi at the end of Masechet Kiddushin states that a person will be held accountable in the world to come for every pleasure of this world of which he did not partake. As we generally embrace appreciating delicious delights in fulfillment of oneg Shabbos, we should equally embrace the “natural” approach when it comes to fulfillment of the mitzvah of Onah- our sexual obligation to our wives.

**Q: That's great for when I get married. Why did Hashem give me this urge at age 11 or 13, instead of at 22?**

**A:** That is a difficult question to answer and the question is better than the answer.

Rav Brandes framed it very well:

הדבר ברור: מדובר ביצר החזק ביותר של האדם, שמופיע בראשית גיל ההתבגרות ואינו ניתן לביטוי לגיטימי עד גיל הנישואים, בממוצע כעשר שנים מאוחר יותר. עשר שנים עם יצר ללא אפשרות לגיטימית לפורקן! מי הקדוש שיכול לעמוד בדרגתו של יעקב אבינו?

**The matter is clear: we are discussing the strongest drive that a man has, which first appears at puberty and has no legitimate expression until marriage, on average about ten or more years later. Ten years with this drive and no legitimate release! Who is the holy one that can stand at the level of Yaakov Avinu (who Chazal tell us never had *keri* before marriage) ("Al Pi Darko")**

That said, we have to keep in mind that biology was created for all generations. In early generations, people often married at much younger ages. Thus, the sexual drive was needed at these young ages. Indeed, Chazal encouraged marriage at a young age, contrary to today's trends. The mishna in Pirkei Avot recommends marriage at 18, a suggestion followed today only in *chassidische* circles. Rav Chisda explained that his marriage at 16 was critical in assisting his battle with the *yetzer* (Kiddushin 29b).

In the United States in 1950, the median age for men at first marriage was 23 and for women it was 20. In 2025, it was 30 for men and 28 for women (Pew Research Center). While sexual needs should certainly not be the

focal drive for marriage, it should be acknowledged that extended adult singlehood complicates this challenge greatly. There are many reasons why both Chazal and Jewish culture encourage early marriage.

All that said, it is also important to put the early development of the sexual drive and its challenges in context. (Harvard Mental Health Letter 2005) Testosterone increases ten-fold in adolescence and creates serious sexual challenges for teens. However, it also acts on the limbic system's regulation of mood and arousal, thus providing the drive for late Thursday night mishmar, for example. Similarly, the developing teen brain reacts differently to rewarding (pleasurable) experiences, due to the nature of the connection of the prefrontal cortex to the mid-brain reward system. Thus, there is a stronger drive for novel, exciting experiences, including sexual ones. The same mechanism also drives teens to strike out on their own and discover the world, including exploration of new spiritual and intellectual frontiers. In short, the onset of our sexual drive is a challenge, but is not just a curse. It is a blessing not only because we will need it in the future. It is also very important for our current growth that all of the brain changes, including sexual ones, begin as we enter our formative teen years.

Additionally, the teen struggle is not for naught. It is also practice for after marriage. Granted, the opportunity to fulfill sexual desires after marriage is a great blessing, release, and relief. However, Jewishly, sexuality is only a piece of the marital relationship. For a portion of each month, the couple interact with love and emotion, but without physical contact. Rav Aviner (Rosh Yeshiva of Ateret Yerushalayim/Cohanim) suggests that the teen years are a time of practice which prepares us for those times in marriage. In fact, the Gemara (Ketubot 57a) tells us that there used to be a year between אירוסין and נישואין. During that period there were preparations made for the wedding and marriage, but the couple were restricted from sexual activity. He also suggests that it was a time of building the non-sexual friendship component of the relationship.

**Q: Ok. But meanwhile I'm stuck with my urges. Chazal said extremely negative things about the dangers of masturbation?!**

**A:** They certainly did, as they did about many other drives, attitudes, and behaviors.

- שבת קה - דוגמאות שונות להבעות כעס שהן כאילו עובד עבודה זרה
- סנהדרין צב - ואמר רבי אלעזר כל המחליף בדיבורו כאילו עובד עבודה זרה
- כתובות קי - כל הדר בחוצה לארץ כאילו עובד עבודה זרה
- סוטה ד - אמר רבי יוחנן משום רשב"י כל אדם שיש בו גסות הרוח כאילו עובד עבודה זרה.
- בבא בתרא י - דתניא רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר כל המעלים עיניו מן הצדקה כאילו עובד עבודה זרה
- פסחים קיה - ואמר רב ששת משום רבי אלעזר בן עזריה כל המבזה את המועדות כאילו עובד עבודה זרה

- One who becomes angry is like an idol worshiper
- R Elazar says, whoever goes back on his word is like an idol worshiper
- Whoever lives outside of Israel is like an idol worshiper
- R Yohanan says in the name of Rashbi whoever is crude is like an idol worshiper
- R Yehoshua ben Korcha says whoever ignores requests of charity is like an idol worshiper
- R Sheshet says in the name of R Elazar ben Azarya whoever denigrates the holidays is like an idol worshiper

While the severity of Chazal's comments about any particular *aveira* presumably has a connection to the perceived gravity of the sin, that is not the only factor. The Rambam (Guide for the Perplexed 3:41) explains that the severity of punishment that the Torah gives for sins is also based on how enticing the sin is. The stronger the urge for it, the stronger the punishment; the harsh punishment functions as a deterrent. It is likely that, similarly, Chazal made strong comments about certain *aveirot*, including sexual ones, based partially on the strong pull that they have.

Chazal emphasized the severity of masturbation by stating that it was the cause of the flood (Masechet Kalla) Again, perspective is critical. In the *Bavli*, there are five causes of the flood listed, and this is not one of them (Sanhedrin 108a). Additionally, Rav Stark suggests a creative interpretation of the flood comparison in place of the usual explanation that masturbation destroys the world. He writes that our *zera* is a source of *bracha* and creation in the world, as is water in the world of agriculture. While water at the right time is beneficial, at the wrong time it is harmful. The comparison of masturbation to the flood reminds us that this challenging part of our body is in essence a source of good and blessing.

In any case, you have probably noticed that people who frequently speak words of *lashon hara*, ignore a charity request, or live in *chutz l'aretz* do not usually find the issue overwhelming their psyche and causing them depression. The desired response is a recognition of the wrongdoing, finding motivation to try to improve, and finding steps to assist in doing so- regardless of what the sin is.

Finally, the Steipler notes the importance of discussing the great impact of successes in the struggle with masturbation.

וקיצרו לבאר צד השני,  
דהיינו אף על פי שכמה פעמים נכשל ר"ל,  
מכל מקום אם לעומת זה הרבה פעמים מנצח ומתגבר על התאוה,  
אז באותו פעם שמתגבר על התאוה הבוערת בו באופן נורא,  
הרי הוא ממשיך אור הקדושה על עצמו ועל העולמות  
באופן קדוש מאד מאד.

(קריינא דאגרתא 12)

And they (Chazal) spoke only briefly regarding the other side,  
that is even though a person falls a number of times, G-d forbid,  
nevertheless there may be many times that a person wins and  
overpowers the *taava*.

That time that he overpowers the *taava* which was burning horribly  
inside, he draws down a light of holiness on himself and the worlds  
in a very very holy way.



**Q: But my other drives feel more controllable than my sex drive. Can I control it?**

**A:** That is understandable. It was always understood that this drive is among the hardest to control. Chazal stated:

אמר רב עמרם אמר רב שלש עבירות אין אדם ניצול מהן בכל יום  
הרהור עבירה ועיון תפילה ולשון הרע

**There are 3 sins which people generally violate daily (i.e. are unavoidable).**

(Bava Batra 164b)

The first among them is illicit sexual thoughts. The Rishonim also took as a given that single guys have such thoughts and seminal emissions. The Maharil stated that they should not wear tefillin because of the inevitable thoughts. The Rashbatz, meanwhile, insisted that they can be called to the Torah despite their presumed status as *baalei keri*. In fact, Chazal shared stories of many Tannaim and Amoraim struggling with interpersonal sexual sins.

הנך שבוייתא דאתאי לנהרדעא. אסקינהו לבי רב עמרם חסידא. אשקולו דרגא  
מקמייהו. בהדי דקא חלפה חדא מנייהו נפל נהורא באיפומא. שקליה רב עמרם  
לדרגא דלא הוו יכלין בי עשרה לדליייה. דלייה לחודיה. סליק ואזיל. כי מטא לפלגא  
דרגא איפשה. רמא קלא נוראה בי עמרם!

**There were redeemed female captives who came to Nehardaa. They were brought to the home of R Amram the Pious. (In order to ensure *tzniut*, he placed them in the loft and removed the ladder. As one of them was walking across the loft, a light shone on her through the skylight and she caught the eye of R. Amram. He grabbed a ladder that usually 10 men could not move, and carried it himself. He began to climb the ladder (to attempt to engage with her sexually). As he reached half way up the ladder, he jammed his legs into the sides of the ladder and screamed "fire in the house of Amram."**

(Kiddushin 81a)

In a similar vein, Chazal communicated that nobody is immune to being overcome by the sexual urge in circumstances of intense challenge.

**אין אפוטרופוס לעריות**

**Nobody is fully trusted with regard to sexual self control.**

(Ketubot 13b)

We are not helpless, however, in the face of our sexual urges. There are many variables that make it harder or easier to maintain reasonable control. First, one has to find ways to limit visual sexual intake. Chazal made the obvious connection, stating that a person should not cause himself to ruminate sexually during the day.

**אמר ר' פנחס בן יאיר אל יהרהר אדם ביום ויבוא לידי טומאה בלילה**

**Pinchas ben Yair said:**

**A man should not think (sexual) thoughts during the day, such that he will bring himself to impurity at night.**

(Ketubot 46a)

It is unreasonable to expect ourselves to see arousing images on our phones during the day, and then restrain ourselves at night by sheer willpower. Each and every young man has to figure out the proper approach in his relationship with his phone (and laptop, ipad, etc). For those who are not sure where to start, there are organizations that assist with choosing the best filter for your needs.

Two important notes regarding filters. First, I once heard a Rosh Yeshiva state that he is generally not in favor of filters. He believes very strongly in self development and personal responsibility rather than crutches. While there is theoretical value to this stance, it is disconnected from the degree of challenge with which this generation struggles. A generation ago, a boy or young man had to exert effort in order to view pornography; nowadays, the same person needs to exert effort in order *not* to view

pornography. Filters will not stop any determined person under age 35 from finding what he wants. Filter installation is not an overriding of one's personal responsibility and decision making. On the contrary, it is enabling someone who wants to refrain to have a fair chance of succeeding.

Second, this process is not a one time decision. When a person finds himself slipping a number of times, he needs to revisit his previous decisions to decide whether he needs to recalibrate the level of filtering he has installed in order to assist himself in meeting his goals. While the simplest solution is disconnecting from smart phones and all other screens, the costs of doing that are often prohibitive. Each person needs to take responsibility for honestly figuring out his own balance.

In addition there is the power of habit, with which Chazal were very experienced

1. Good habits promote good behavior; bad habits promote bad behavior.

**מצוה גוררת מצוה, עבירה גוררת עבירה.**

**(Performance of) one mitzvah brings another mitzvah.**

**(Performance of) one aveirah brings another aveirah.**

(Avot 4:2)

2. Moreover, bad habits can make it feel very difficult to change course.

**אמר רב אסי:**

**יצר הרע בתחילה דומה לחוט של בוכי'א, ולבסוף דומה כעבותות העגלה.**

**At first the evil inclination is like a cobweb;**

**later like heavy ropes**

(Sukkah 52a)

3. After a period of time, one even begins to forget that there's a problem.

עולא אמר כדרב הונא דאמר רב הונא  
כיון שעבר אדם עבירה ושנה בה - הותרה לו.  
הותרה לו סלקא דעתך?  
אלא: נעשית לו כהיתר.

Ula said:

As Rav Huna stated that  
once a person has performed a sin and repeated it,  
it is permitted to him.

Could it be permitted to him?

Rather, it is experienced by him as permitted.

(Kiddushin 40a)

4. The challenge of habits is true in all realms, but more so in the realm of sexuality. The addictive quality of sexual pleasure can pull a person in deeper and deeper.

אבר קטן יש בו באדם.  
משביעו רעב, מרעיבו שבע.

Man has a small organ –  
when he satiates it, it is hungry;  
when he starves it, it is satiated

(Sanhedrin 107a)

The antidote to bad habits is not just willpower; it is building good habits. Steven Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Successful People* or his son Sean Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Successful Teens* are highly recommended.

In this era, our smartphones (along with ipads, computers) are clearly a teen/young man's greatest challenge. As with all technological advances, there are wonderful benefits of smartphones, internet, and social media.

As a 16 year old visiting colleges on the East Coast, I received instructions from my parents before flying from the Midwest, and then I was on my own. While I did survive and just barely managed to avoid getting mugged in Penn Station New York, I had no access to parental assistance. My 17 year old son, traveling solo by plane and train for the first time in the US, was able to easily communicate with me to clarify questions about Amtrak and the like. Once upon a time, it was very complicated to get in touch with old friends. Now, after 2 minutes on Instagram, you're reconnected. Once, creating a fundraising campaign for an important cause was only possible for professionals. Now, countless teenagers have raised millions of dollars for worthy causes. While it can be tempting for those struggling with pornography to curse the day they got their phone, phones are not absolutely the enemy.

That said, there are young men who have bravely decided to forgo the benefits and utilize a dumb phone, or to open their phone only for limited hours. Implementing limits on one's phone use is, firstly, a test of utilizing one's free will. There is value in doing this. After all, one of our primary goals in life is to improve ourselves, including our ability to make the choices that we want to make. In fact, the Torah and Nach as well are predicated on the idea that we have free will. Hashem expects us to exercise it well, and there are consequences of failing to do so.

Our tradition, however, has long been aware of the limits of free will in the direct presence of temptation.

אמר ר' חייא בר אבא אמר ר' יוחנן:

משל לאדם שהיה לו בן, הרחיצו וסכו והאכילו והשקהו ותלו לו כיס על צווארו והושיבו על פתח של זונות, מה יעשה אותו הבן שלא יחטא.

R Hiya bar Abba said in the name of R. Yohanan:

**(The sin of the golden calf) can be compared to a man with a son. The father bathed him, anointed him, fed him, and gave him to drink. Then he hung a purse of coins on his neck, and sat him at the entrance to a house of prostitutes. How can that son not sin?**

(Brachot 32a)

In this Gemara, Moshe Rabbeinu blames Hashem for chet haegel! He states that Hashem gave the Jews so much gold at the Exodus and the Red Sea, that the temptation (in those days) to build an idol with it was huge. What are the chances he doesn't sin?! To be clear, overcoming is not impossible. Yosef succeeded in overcoming the persistent seduction of *eishet* Potiphar. However, he received the title "*hatzaddik*" for that incredibly difficult accomplishment.

Rav Aviner in טהרת הברית cites the ס"מ"ע who states that there are certain arenas which require an unusually high level of self protection because the temptation is so strong. In each of these, the source tells us to do something "מאוד מאוד." Rav Levitas tells us

**מאוד מאוד הוי שפל רוח**

**Be very very humble.**

(Pirkei Avot 4:4)

The need for intense distancing is because the temptation of arrogance is overpowering. Similarly, in the Laws of Judges, R Yosef Karo tells us

**מאוד מאוד צריך הדיין ליזהר שלא ליקח שוחד**

**A judge should be extremely cautious not to take a bribe.**

(Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 9:1)

Money is very tempting. Likewise, he tells men to

**להתרחק מהנשים מאד מאד**

**Distance oneself very much from women.**

(Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer 21:1)

Sexual temptation is so strong.

Since this is so, there is wisdom in utilizing outside controls to assist oneself in limiting one's phone usage. There are many options here.

1. **Self reflection** - Record your plan for when and what you are allowing yourself, and set aside a daily or weekly time to assess your success.
2. **Interpersonal reflection** - The story is told of Jews in 16th century Tzfat, as well as later *baalei mussar*, who would meet with a friend before Shabbat to discuss their successes and failures.
3. **Interpersonal tracking** - Covenant Eyes and lesser known apps accountable2you and everaccountable- There are websites and apps that allow you to designate someone as your partner/supervisor. This person will receive updates re all of the websites/apps that you access. The knowledge that this person will know what you are seeing can often be sufficient in a moment of challenge to help a person overcome temptation.
4. **Filters** - There are many filters that allow you to pre-program your access. You can limit time (e.g. no internet use past midnight) and content (e.g. no pornographic sites). Apps such as Netspark and Mobicip are widely used currently, but you should do your own brief research (online or consulting with friends or mentors) to see what is currently recommended and suits your needs.
5. **Settings** - There are many ways in which psychologists in Silicon Valley design our phones to encourage extensive usage. The Social Dilemma

is a high quality Netflix documentary that explains and details this thoroughly. Eitan Ziman has compiled a (Hebrew) list of suggestions of simple changes one can make in phone settings in order to counter these. In English, you can find similar tips on [healthyscreens.com/strategies](https://healthyscreens.com/strategies). Both are grounded in research.

6. **Support Groups** - Social support can assist with phone usage control for several reasons. First, the accountability gives one pause before clicking on something problematic (similar to #2 above). At the same time, it also normalizes the struggles which can assist in quieting harsh self critique and heavy guilt, which often contribute to one's remaining stuck in a loop of porn usage. In some yeshivas, there is a student or staff run support group for these purposes.
7. **Digital resources** - There are many apps and online sites offering a variety of types of assistance. Some, like Covenant Eyes, aim to help block you from opening porn sites. Others provide resources for self-monitoring and support- Fortify provides a self guided program. There is a Jewish website called Guard Your Eyes with groups in English, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Yet others are educational. On Reddit, there is a group called "No fap" of men of all stripes attempting to improve their quality of life by giving up masturbation. There are countless apps and websites nowadays. Each person should spend some time trying out a few options to see what works best for him.
8. **Books** - Other resources are educational. In psychotherapy, awareness and understanding are usually at least half the battle. In self help, educating yourself about the nature of addictive processes can help increase self-empathy and self-care and decrease confusion and judgement. These are important even for the majority of people whose struggle does not reach the level of an addiction. Gary Wilson's "Your Brain on Porn" provides much information about how internet

pornography can hijack your brain, and form addictive behaviors. Anna Lembke's "Dopamine Nation" explains how we all have become vulnerable. Marc Lewis presents an unorthodox model of addiction in "The Biology of Desire." Gabor Mate's "In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts" explains how emotional suffering and traumatic experiences can predispose us to become addicted.

As we will discuss below, there is tremendous energy released during the biological changes of puberty. Difficult circumstances can sometimes make that energy seem like pure evil. By way of comparison, I remember the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the spring of 1986. Shortly afterwards, a friend of my older brother had to argue the side in favor of the development of nuclear power in his senior debate. It was an impossible task because everyone was terrified of its destructive capacity. Two years later when I argued in favor of nuclear power at my senior debate, people were capable of seeing both the dangers and also the tremendous opportunity it afforded.

Similarly, one of the core issues at the heart of addressing pornography challenges and addictions is finding positive channels for the adolescent/young adult energy coursing through your body. We sometimes only focus on the *סור מרע* of internet filters and the like. However, the *עשה טוב* is equally critical to our success. In every *ספר* written on the topic of masturbation struggles, there is a section devoted to this topic.

In the anonymous Litvish work *וזאת בריתי*, the author proposes intensifying one's Torah study, citing many sources in Chazal. In the face of the *yetzer*, Torah is *סם החיים* (Kiddushin 30b); its light returns us to goodness (Eicha Raba); and we should push aside or give joy to the *yetzer* with exciting Torah (Bereishit Raba 22:6). While these sources do not explain how Torah learning helps, the Ramchal makes clear that it is a mystical reality. The Torah is described as the "*tavlin*" for the *yetzer*- it is the medicine that Hashem has prescribed.

Many *bochrim*, indeed, describe that during their time in the *beit midrash*, they feel protected from their desires. Nonetheless, at night, many continue to struggle with the drive. This is partially because the bored or resting mind seeks entertainment and lands on this familiar source. However, porn viewing is often mistakenly viewed as triggered just by boredom or sexual arousal. However, like all addictive behaviors, the drive to view porn is more often driven by other (non-sexual) emotions and processes. Among these is a lack of groundedness in meaning. Many *rabbanim* have provided guidance to engage deeply in activities globally (not in the moment) in order to dissipate the drive. The reasoning is two-fold: first, the more busy one is, the less one seeks trouble. Second, this engagement provides ourselves with meaning and purpose, which calms the addictive urge to fill up an inner emptiness.

Rav Aviner suggests, in addition to Torah, that *bochrim* engage in *chesed*. He also suggests projects devoted to the strengthening of the settling of Eretz Yisrael.

עוון הוצאת זרע לבטלה נמחק על ידי הזיעה  
שמזיעים על עבודת אדמת ארץ ישראל.

**The sin of masturbation is erased by the sweat  
one expends in building the land of Israel.**

Rav Aviner presumably intends a mystical effect. In addition, there is a psychological benefit to an activity which engages the person's body positively.

Rav Yehoshua Shapira (the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Ramat Gan) in *אשיב ממצולות* adds that, while we shouldn't give up on Gemara, the *ikar* is to learn things that give us pleasure. While sexual drive is located in the brain, we often forget about the role of the body. R. Shapira also emphasizes the importance of redirecting and engaging the body with physical activity such as running (run a 2k!)

The common thread that runs through this wide variety of approaches is three fold.

**First**, boredom or large swaths of empty time are a threat. While there is value to being able to handle significant amounts of unstructured time, at this age and stage, it is better to fill one's schedule.

**Second**, containing large amounts of unchannelled energy puts a person at risk.

**Third**, a teenager or young adult with insufficient meaning-focus is also at risk.

All of the approaches recommend filling one's time, devoting passion to projects, and channeling one's energy to ideals.

Many *Chassidische Rebbeim* have related to the need for active, positive release of emotional energy.

1. The Kotzker was once quoted as saying, " I don't want *chassidim* who are able to overcome their *yetzer harah*. I want *chassidim* who are so busily engaged in Torah and *mitzvot* and *chessed* that they don't even have time to pay attention to the *yetzer harah*."
2. The Piasetzner Rebbe writes (Tzav v'Zeruz chapter 9) that just as there is a physical need for food and sleep, and withholding them can be harmful, so too there is a real "physical" need for emotional stimulation. If left unchanneled, a person will inevitably find himself doing things just to be able to "feel" something. And naturally, quick and easy dopamine hits are the easiest way to feel something; it's the "junk food" of emotional stimulation.
3. Rav Dr. Abraham J. Twerski (substance abuse expert and Chernobyler chassid) has often said that the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety, but connection.

### Q: So is willpower irrelevant?

**A:** Willpower is certainly not irrelevant. We always have free will, and both the gift and challenge to utilize it is immense. However, sayings such as אין דבר העומד בפני הרצון (Nothing can stand before our will) are often more harmful than helpful in this context. Rav Eliyahu Dessler (*mashgiach ruchani*, Yeshivat Ponevezh) has an essay entitled נקודת הבחירה in his collection of essays Michtav M'Eliyahu 1:113 (Strive for Truth in English). Rav Dessler's thesis is deeply important to the mental health of religious people. He explains that life is like a battlefield (a common *mussar* metaphor). In a battlefield, there are 3 zones. There is the zone behind me which is already conquered; the zone behind the enemy which is out of reach; and the zone between the armies which is currently contested.

Similarly, in our lives, there are areas which are conquered and thus "outside our free will." Most of us do not struggle with whether we should shoplift or whether we should curse G-d. On the other hand, there are areas that are beyond our current capacity, and thus "outside of our free will." At any given time, we are working on choices within the limited sphere that is currently our point of choice. In the realm of free will, it is often beyond the current capacity of a young man to encounter certain porn opportunities and make the decision to abstain. However, at the right level of filtering and boundaries, free will has the freedom and challenge of making the decisions that are in sync with your values and ideals. It is important not to exaggerate the capacity we have to exercise free will; it is equally important to utilize our free will and to note and celebrate the excitement of success in our choices.

**Q: But I've been trying so hard and it still consumes me?!**

**A:** There is a strange *pasuk* which teaches

**אל תהי צדיק הרבה.**

**Do not be too righteous**

(Kohelet 7:16)

Sometimes trying too hard can be self-defeating. R. Moshe Feinstein (Igrot Moshe, Even HaEzer 2:14) explains this with psychological astuteness in a discussion about incidental contact with women while riding on the bus. One must be “normal” and allow ourselves to not notice such things.

A story is told about R' Lichtenstein who walked past an immodestly dressed woman without taking off his glasses or turning to look away. A *frum* person, who saw him and who himself had a practice of looking away when passing immodestly dressed women, asked him why he isn't more careful. R Lichtenstein answered: “One can either look towards the wall and think of the woman, or walk past the woman and think of the wall...”

This is accomplished not by greater effort, but rather by giving ourselves permission to be imperfect and “normal.” Similarly, Rav Brandes writes:

**קשה לכולם, והמטרה היא לעבוד ולהשתפר כמיטב יכולתנו ולא להיות צדיק**

**גמור, כי זה שובר את האדם**

**It is difficult for everyone, and the goal is to work and improve to the best of one's ability, but not to strive to be a complete tzaddik.**

**Because that breaks a person. (Al Pi Darko)**

**Q: These are good ideas for the bigger picture, but what am I supposed to do in the minutes, hours, or days following masturbation? I feel guilty, dirty, disgusting.**

**A.** Before addressing what to do, it is important to address what people usually do:

1. Sit and wallow in guilt and depression.
2. Promise themselves they will never do it again
3. Collapse in exhaustion and frustration.

To a person struggling with masturbation, these seem perfectly reasonable and maybe unavoidable, each person with his specific direction. Feeling guilty, however, is not an inherent value in Judaism, but rather valuable for its role in facilitating *teshuva*. In psychological terminology, Dr. Marsha Linehan (founder of the DBT school of psychotherapy) says that each emotion carries an “action urge.” Our job is to figure out whether the emotion and its intensity “fit the facts,” and whether it is effective in creating positive change. Extensive interactions with young men struggling with masturbation has provided me with clear guidelines. Low levels of guilt, experienced for a brief or moderate amount of time can be helpful *vis a vis* masturbation. Higher intensity and duration guilt has a destructive effect. People who are absorbed in their guilt generally find themselves in a destructive loop of guilt creating negative self image, anger, or hopelessness, all of which drive further masturbation.

Rav Yuval Cherlow (Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Orot Shaul) says that there is a role for guilt in providing the initial shot of remorse that energizes and motivates movement. After that, productive *teshuva* must be accomplished with “light and joy.” One cannot attain inner redemption



**[Attacking yourself with guilt] gives the *yetzer hara* wonderful fuel, which causes a person to fall every time, since it crumbles his mood and self confidence. Don't give the *yetzer* [guilt] room to enter, even if it seems like a positive move.**

(Reshut Hayachid, pg 453)

Rav Shlomo Wolbe (author of Alei Shur) in זריעה ובנין discusses a father's obligation to discuss sexual matters with a son, upon his reaching puberty. He makes clear that the tone regarding masturbation is one of encouragement that he can succeed, not threatening or scaring his son.

Rav Hutner, (Rosh Yeshiva of Chaim Berlin) writes in one of his more quoted letters to a *talmid* struggling with these issues):

**If your letter had told me about your *mitzvot* and good deeds, I would have said I received from you a "good letter." Now that your letter details the ups and downs and struggles, I say that I received a "very good letter"... and at the time that you feel in yourself the storm of the *yetzer*, know that you are more similar to the *gedolim* than at a time that you are experiencing the "מנוחה שלימה," which you desire.**

(פחד יצחק, אגרות וכתבים 128)

If we look at the Torah's ultimate model for success in addressing sexual struggle, the Gemara (Sotah 36) states that while Yosef didn't actually sin with *eishet* Potiphar, a discharge still occurred. In other words, while Yosef restrained himself from adultery, he failed in *hotzaat zera!* That didn't deter him or cause him to spiral into a sense of hopelessness. Yosef received the title "*hatzaddik*" for that accomplishment. Adopting the gemara's version of events, the title "*tzaddik*" isn't received despite falling, but rather because he fell, and picked himself up in the face of failure. (See R' Hutner's Pachad Yitzchak, Igrot U'Ktavim, Pages 217-219 for further elaboration on this idea).

### **Q: But it's fake, I've tried to stop 50 times!**

**A.** Rav Shapira suggests an original and critically important perspective on the matter. Every person has an important mission in the world. That mission entails both actions that impact the world, as well as working on oneself. Regarding the latter, we tend to think only of growth in which we move past challenges. Once upon a time, it was difficult for me to get up for minyan and now it's not. Once, I easily got swept into gossip conversations, and now I don't feel the pull any more. Rav Dessler beautifully describes this growth process in his essay "נקודת הבחירה" in *מכתב מאליהו*, cited above. However, there are some challenges which may never go away *entirely*. There are people with a sweet tooth who will struggle forever with their eating habits. There are people for whom the struggle not to speak *lashon hara* will accompany them to the grave. Similarly, while many people will be able to move fully past the intense struggles with masturbation (as we'll discuss later), others may continue to struggle. This, he emphasizes, is not cause for *yeush*. Rather, he says, those people are in G-d's special commando unit. That is, putting up the good fight day in day out as best you can is a fulfillment of your *tafkid*. Indeed, Rav Cherlow similarly states that לפום צערא אגרא. (Avot 5,23)

**In accord with the pain and investment that you have put your soul through, you will merit the same internal, deep reward that is destined for the greatest [spiritual] heroes.**

This approach of Rav Shapira is important and appropriate for people who see themselves on a path of improvement, but are frustrated with the continued slips along that path. Additionally, it is appropriate for guys with some struggles that are not improving, but are stable at a level which you/your friends/your rebbeim feel is not extreme.

### **Q: How do I know whether I need to be seeking professional help?**

**A:** There are two circumstances in which you need to work with a professional, and I will detail them both. The first is a situation in which you are masturbating daily, perhaps multiple times, and/or you spend significant time planning how and when you will engage in it. While there are unusual instances in which a person needs help with addictive masturbation alone, generally speaking, addictive sexual behaviors nowadays entail an overwhelming struggle with pornography viewing. The second circumstance is when a person's behavior is not addictive, but his emotional state surrounding sexual struggles entails moderate to severe anxiety, guilt, or depression.

Regarding pornography addiction, there has long been debate in the field as to whether it qualifies as an actual addiction. While interesting to ponder, this is not the place for its discussion. To those who work clinically, and not in the hallowed halls of research and diagnostics, it is clear that countless clients involved with pornography are struggling with the same symptoms and manifestations as those who are addicted to process addictions such as gambling. In some cases, there are even signs of physiological addiction, similar to those of alcohol and drug addicts.

In the case of those struggling with an addiction, it is important to seek out a professional with expertise in addiction who will work with you both behaviorally and emotionally on the problem. The clinician will assist you in figuring out whether your porn addiction warrants a higher level of care such as a detox program, or whether outpatient psychotherapy with or without a 12 step group is needed.

In the case of those without an addiction who are moderately to severely emotionally disturbed by sexual issues, it is important to seek out a

professional who specializes in working with young adults and has familiarity with the world of addictions.

There have been discussions amongst *poskim* and *frum* mental health professionals about whether it is important or necessary to go to a religious therapist. (See Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah 2:57; Dr. Michelle Friedman in Jewish Action Fall 2003). Globally, there are many cases in which I would recommend someone see a non-Orthodox or non-Jewish therapist, if that person is the most qualified/appropriate. However, in the realm of sexuality, since the gap between the *frum* world and the greater society is so significant, it is most likely that the best person to help you address your issues is a religious therapist.

We live in a generation in which the stigma of therapy has declined vastly. That said, there are still many reasons some young men will hesitate to go to psychotherapy.

1. **“I don’t think I’m crazy!”** People who seek help from a physician, a physical therapist, or a speech therapist when they have a problem are not crazy. If anything, it is people who refuse to go for help who are “crazy.” The same can be said for psychotherapy.
2. **“Talking about this is so embarrassing!”** As I have discussed, this is a very widespread struggle in our community, and your therapist has discussed these topics with clients tens if not hundreds of times. He will care about helping you, but he will not blink when you share your struggles.
3. **“I should be able to figure this out on my own.”** You have apparently tried and not succeeded yet. If you truly believe that giving yourself one or two more months is likely to bring you to a better place, then go for it! Otherwise, congratulate yourself for your efforts, and accept that you now need some assistance.

**Q: I'm a normal, good guy. How in the world did I become an addict?**

**A:** There are countless good people around the world struggling with all kinds of addictions. Pornography addiction is particularly easy to fall into. It helps to have a basic understanding of what's happened in your brain.

From a brain science perspective, pornography can become addictive because it strongly activates the same reward systems involved in learning, motivation, and habit formation.

At the center of this process is dopamine, a neurotransmitter that helps your brain decide what's important and worth repeating. Dopamine isn't just about pleasure — it's about *anticipation*. When your brain predicts something rewarding, dopamine spikes and says, "Remember this. Do it again."

Pornography is especially powerful because it delivers novelty on demand. Your brain is designed to pay attention to new potential mates, so when you see constant new images or videos, dopamine keeps firing. Unlike real-world relationships, there's no effort, rejection, or waiting. The brain learns that a quick click leads to an immediate reward.

Over time, this repeated dopamine surge can cause neuroadaptation. The brain tries to keep balance by reducing dopamine sensitivity. This means the same content feels less exciting, leading some people to seek more intense or more frequent stimulation just to feel "normal." This isn't a moral failure—it's the brain adjusting to overstimulation.

Another key system involved is the habit loop, which connects cues, behaviors, and rewards. Boredom, stress, loneliness, or late-night screen time can become cues. The behavior (watching porn) temporarily reduces discomfort, which reinforces the habit. Eventually, the urge can feel automatic, even when the person no longer enjoys it.

During adolescence and young adulthood, this effect can be stronger because the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for impulse control and long-term decision-making—is still developing. That makes it harder to pause, reflect, and resist urges once a habit forms.

In short, pornography can become addictive not because someone is weak, but because it taps directly into powerful brain systems designed for survival, learning, and motivation—systems that weren't built for unlimited, high-intensity stimulation.



**Q: But who am I? This wasn't who I was supposed to be?**

**A:** For most teenagers, life is a highway stretching straight and smooth across the plains to the distant horizon. As we encounter life's traumas and challenges, we grow and begin to develop a more mature version of ourselves, which incorporates the understanding that life's highway twists and turns and sometimes has cracks and potholes.

Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson explained that in our late teens and 20's we are in the life stage of identity formation. Healthy human beings are growing, changing and figuring out who they are. The adult product is often not quite what we expected at age 15.

It is true that traumatic jolts to our psyche and to our developing identity are painful and difficult, but they do not need to hurt or destroy us. My psychology rebbe/mentor Dr. David Pelcovitz (renowned psychology professor and trauma expert) often tells a story about growth from trauma. There was once a great king who owned a prized diamond. It was his pride and joy, and each morning his "modeh ani" was to gaze at his gorgeous gem, which gave him the energy to begin his day. One morning, to his dismay, he noticed that the diamond had somehow developed a long crack down one side. The king fell into despair. His advisors encouraged him that surely it could be repaired. So the king invited artisans from across the kingdom to his palace, and promised riches beyond imagination to the one who would succeed in fixing the diamond. One after another, each artisan looked, shook his head and explained that this crack couldn't be properly sealed. Finally, a little old Chasid came up, and looked the stone up and down. "I can do it," he said. The artisans looked at each other in shock, and assured each other that the Jew would lose his head after he further messed up the diamond. After hours of work in the corner, the Chasid presented the diamond to the king. He looked at the diamond with surprise, and suddenly a huge smile lit up his face. He raised the diamond and turned it to the audience revealing the Jew's work. He had turned the long crack into the stem of a gorgeous rose carved into the diamond. Life struggles change us, and they also allow us to grow into a new fuller person and Ben Torah.

**Q: I picked up a Breslav pamphlet on the topic of "שמירת הברית" which I thought would give me a lift, but it depressed me further?!**

**A:** I felt the same way when I first encountered Breslav literature on the topic. While there may be some Breslav writings that have nuance, those that I have seen on this subject are extreme. It may be that for some hard core Breslavers, this approach works. However, for anyone else, I recommend staying far away. There are many problems in the Breslav masturbation literature that I have encountered:

1. Fake news - writings about all the physiological maladies incurred by those who masturbate.
2. Referring to masturbation as adultery. In Chazal's use of the term "ניאוף ביד", the tenor is that one is similarly utilizing your organ in an inappropriate manner. In Breslav, the tenor is that the act is morally akin to adultery. Unfair and untrue.
3. There is reference to this sin only being relevant to those who have been brought up poorly under the influence of the outside world. I can attest that this is patently false, having worked with clients from a wide array of very insular backgrounds. Additionally, this claim contributes to the reader's feeling like his masturbation is a manifestation of his not being a Ben Torah, which is false and damaging.
4. The presented solution to the problem is assassinating this lowly drive, with which those of stature supposedly do not struggle. As previously discussed, the gemara is full of stories of Amoraim who struggled with sexual temptation. Additionally, the significant majority of *frum* communities nowadays concur with the non-ascetic approach- that sexuality should be channeled rather than strangled.

For those with a bit of a Breslev bent, who want something of a more *chassidische*/spiritual flavor than this pamphlet, try a pamphlet named “The Battle of our Generation” by Hillel S. You can find it online and order it or download a free copy. I haven’t read it carefully, so I can’t vouch for everything there. However, it generally seems to take a positive, encouraging approach.



**Q: I grew up with rebbeim who got into my head that I just have to use my willpower to stop unless I want to burn in Hell?!**

**A:** The Steipler has stellar yeshivish credibility. Here's his list of recommendations for those who struggle with masturbation (א:טו קריינא (דאיגרתא).

1. Remind yourself that whoever succeeds in restraining himself from a prohibited pleasure will be rewarded with enjoying that pleasure in permissible circumstances in the future.
2. As you succeed in overcoming, it becomes easier in the future.
3. Don't be hopeless. הבא ליטהר מסייעין אותו
4. Don't be sad- sadness causes sin.
5. Don't worry
6. Study Torah- this assists naturally (by distracting/engaging attention) and spiritually.
7. When you are truly overcome, remember future punishment.

These are empathic tips; some will help you more than others. The most important thing is realizing that the Steipler understood the severity of the challenge (even in his generation, when the challenge was much smaller).



**Q: But doesn't the Shulchan Aruch say that masturbation has no *teshuva*?!**

**A:** Yes. He does, based on the Zohar. However, countless Achronim reinterpret or argue with him regarding this point. The Shla HaKadosh (Shnei Luchot HaBrit) states that the Mechaber's comment is destructive, as it brings a person to hopelessness and therefore sin. More importantly, he says that it is not accurate. The Zohar, he says, never intended that *teshuva* doesn't work, but rather that masturbation requires a special *teshuva*.

**כי אין דבר בעולם שלא יתוקן בתשובה, אפילו מי שכפר בעיקר.**

**Because there is nothing in the world that cannot be fixed through *Teshuva*, even one who has rejected G-d's existence.**

The Shla notes that the evil king Menashe was allowed to return, and the greatest sinners were invited to return although they refused. Both Yeravam and the flood generation (which sources tell us were deeply involved with masturbation among many other sins) would not have been rejected had they sincerely repented as did Menashe. Rav Yaakov Emden (Mitpachat Sefarim) responds even more strongly to the Zohar's comment: How can it be that the three cardinal sins do not prevent *teshuva*, while this does?! Similarly, the severe sins that entail *karet* or capital punishment allow for *teshuva*. While the Talmud makes clear that this is a serious sin, we do not see any source suggesting that there is no *teshuva*.

אפילו אם היה אפשר ח"ו שאמרה השם יתברך עצמו,  
אין לקבל גוזמא זו, כמו שכתבו הראשונים דרך הלצה  
כל מה שיאמר לך בעל הבית עשה חוץ מצא ממחיצתו...  
אלא "שובו בנים שובבים".

Even if it were possible that G-d Himself had said this,  
we could not accept such an exaggeration.

As the Rishonim wrote wittily, [borrowing the Talmudic  
comment regarding guidelines for a guest]: Everything the host  
tells you, you should comply, unless he says "leave!"

Nothing will cause us to leave our relationship with Hashem.

Rather, "return wayward sons."

(Yirmiyahu 3:22)

The Chofetz Chaim was quoted by his son, R Aryeh Leib, as explaining that *teshuva* is possible even for Elisha Ben Abuya. The gemara explains that he was not invited to return; however, if he were to return, he would be accepted! Moreover, the Steipler explained that one who does *teshuva* from masturbation is "like Yosef HaTzaddik." The Steipler's son, Rav Chaim Kanievsky, who always spoke concisely, expressed the bottom line: "Of course there is *teshuva*."



**Q: But even when I'm good about controlling myself, I can't stop myself from *hirhurim*?? How can I possibly control those?**

**A:** First, let's put the importance of our thoughts in perspective. In my psychology training, I had a patient on the inpatient ward at North Shore hospital with crippling anxiety. She was from a devout Catholic background, and couldn't stop herself from thinking blasphemous thoughts about God. She believed and felt herself to be evil. Chazal, on the other hand, tell us that הרהור לאו כדבור דמי. Thoughts are not in the same category as actual speech, and have limited halachic meaning. When Chazal address הרהורים in a sexual context, they tell us that a person should not gaze at inappropriately arousing sights, which then bring a person to further sexual thoughts and then to שכבת זרע. We are enjoined to work on directing our eyes rather than on controlling our minds.

This is critical on the psychological plane. When we try to overpower or control unwanted thoughts, they usually push back or become stronger. This is what happens with people struggling with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and at a lower level, to all of us when we fight our thoughts. When we have unwanted thoughts, there are a few concrete steps that we need to take.

1. Accept that I do not have full control over what goes through my head. There's a reason that Hashem didn't create us with a forehead screen with running digital text of the thoughts going through our heads.
2. Label the thoughts as unwanted without fighting them.
3. Decide to redirect yourself to another activity- talking with a friend, learning a *sefer*, doing something on your phone.

4. Repeat if needed.

These steps are usually sufficient to make some improvement, but it is critical to approach the thoughts with an attitude of acceptance that you'll do your best and accept whatever lingers. If the thoughts are intense and consistent, you should get some help with learning CBT and mindfulness techniques that will assist you.



### **Q: Can I date and get married with this problem? Will marriage solve the problem?**

**A:** BeH you will get married *b'shaah tova*. The question is timing. There are two interconnected problems that we are discussing here- masturbation and pornography. Regarding masturbation, the overwhelming majority of Jewish men in the last century have masturbated. I am not relating to the halachic prohibition, but to the realia and their psychological and relationship implications. About twenty years ago I attended a conference of the Nefesh organization for Orthodox mental health professionals. There was a panel discussing sexuality that included both psychologists and rabbis. One of the rabbis, a Haredi rebbe in a yeshiva, shared a conversation he had with a Haredi *mashgiach ruchani* in Bnei Brak. The *mashgiach* reported that, in conversations with *bochrim*, 90% of the boys admitted to masturbating. He added, "the other 10% are lying." Almost every woman is marrying a man who has masturbated to varying degrees. Usually, sexual activity with a live woman (one's spouse) whom one is presumably attracted to, is more arousing than masturbation and will render it unnecessary. Even if one masturbates from time to time after marriage when one's wife is a *nida* or during parts of pregnancy or post-partum when sex is not frequent, this need not cause marital difficulties.

However, nowadays the vast majority of masturbation seems to be accompanied by pornography viewing. I will discuss light pornography use below. Marrying while engaging in extensive pornography viewing is problematic for multiple reasons. First, you face a decision of sharing your viewing or maintaining it as a secret. Neither option is tenable. If you choose to share, very few (*frum* Jewish) women will be comfortable in the relationship with you. If you do not share, you will be keeping a significant secret from your fiancée/spouse, which is deeply unhealthy in the relationship. Second, the question is whether you are prepared to engage in healthy sexuality with your wife. The answer is almost

definitely “no.” Men who are deeply engaged with pornography will often be insufficiently sexually aroused by the sexual activity offered by their spouse. Almost nobody’s wife looks like a model and certainly not like a porn actress. Almost nobody’s wife behaves like a porn actress, whose sexual engagement is not about love and connection, but rather providing the viewer with as much cheap arousal as possible.

On the other hand, zero porn use should certainly not be the requirement for entering the world of dating and relationships. To paraphrase the aforementioned *mashgiach*, there are very few men like that in the world of internet, smart phones, and social media. How does one determine the level of pornography use that should not stop someone from dating? There is no simple, clear answer to that question, but I will attempt to provide guidelines. If one viewed pornography in the past, but has not done so in the last year or two, there should be a green light. If one is currently viewing, but it is something that happens once in a while, perhaps every couple of weeks, there should be a green light. If use is more frequent, I recommend you see the section above on addressing pornography use. BeH with some months of work, you’ll be able to enter marriage prepared for all aspects of the relationship, including the sexual ones.

Beyond these ways of assessing one’s readiness for marriage, Rav Stark suggests that there is an underlying psychological factor. The Torah’s marital guideline is for a husband to be focused on and connected to his wife. In parshat Ki Teitzei, the Sefer HaChinuch has a beautiful discussion of the soldier’s dispensation during *shana rishona* as intended to set the foundations for deep connection in the marital relationship. Part of what enables this state of focused connection is the Torah’s command ולא תתורו עיניכם אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם. This *mitzvah* entails both a practical behavioral prohibition, but also a mindset. In the contemporary Western mindset, healthy sexuality entails the freedom to explore. The Torah teaches us that healthy sexuality is in the framework of healthy connection. In order to marry, a guy needs to be prepared to enjoy the gift of sexual relations with his wife, and allow the urge to explore and compare to dissipate.

**Q: I'm currently good with my struggles, but I feel horrible about what I've done in the past!**

**A:**

גדולה תשובה שמקרבת את האדם לשכינה  
שנאמר שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך.  
ונאמר ולא שבתם עדי נאם ה'.  
ונאמר אם תשוב ישראל נאם ה' אלי תשוב.  
כלומר אם תחזור בתשובה בי תדבק.  
התשובה מקרבת את הרחוקים.  
אמש היה זה שנאוי לפני המקום משוקץ ומרוחק ותועבה.  
והיום הוא אהוב ונחמד קרוב וידיד.

**Teshuva is great in that it brings one close to the shechina...**

**Teshuva brings close those who are distant.**

**Yesterday, he was hated before G-d,  
disgusting, distant, and abominable.**

**Today he is beloved, loved, close, and befriended.**

(Rambam, Teshuva 7:6)

As I wrote above, there are plenty of stories of holy rabbis struggling in this area. And those who have taken steps to progress from these struggles have a special place in their relationship with Hashem.

ואל ידמה אדם בעל תשובה שהוא מרוחק ממעלת הצדיקים מפני העונות והחטאות שעשה. אין הדבר כן אלא אהוב ונחמד הוא לפני הבורא כאילו לא חטא מעולם. ולא עוד אלא ששכרו הרבה שהרי טעם טעם החטא ופירש ממנו וכבש יצרו. אמרו חכמים מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין אין צדיקים גמורין יכולין לעמוד בו. כלומר מעלתן גדולה ממעלת אלו שלא חטאו מעולם

מפני שהן כובשים יצרם יותר מהם:

And a person who has done *teshuva* should not imagine that he is distant from the level of *tzaddikim* because of the sins he has done. That is not the case. Rather he is beloved and loved as if he had not done any of those sins. Moreover, his reward is greater because he has tasted the taste of sin and separated himself from it. And the Rabbis have said that in the place where *baalei teshuva* stand complete *tzaddikim* cannot stand. This means that their spiritual level is higher because they have worked on controlling their drives more than those [who have not struggled]

(Rambam, Teshuva 7:4)



## Final Thoughts

To close, here are a few points to take with you. If your primary feeling with regard to your sexuality is depression, something is wrong. That is not what Hashem wants, and you need to find the right channel for help. Second, you are not alone! It was always the case that there were many young men struggling with masturbation. That is why the authors of *sefarim* felt the need to discuss it. However, in our day, it is the norm rather than the exception. Let's help you figure out a way to make your teen/young adult years what they are supposed to be- not a constant struggle or living hell, but rather a time of opportunities, challenges, excitement, and discovery.

L'chaim!

Dan Jacobson



## Biography:

Dr. Dan Jacobson is a clinical psychologist and a musmach of RIETS, Yeshiva University. He has been working with young men for over 25 years in private practice and in yeshivas. He also coordinates the hadrachat chatanim program at the Eden Center, Jerusalem.

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