



Tell Her Parents

FELLER FAMILY ARCHIVES

In 5731*, a new *mosad* opened, the first of its kind. The fledgling Bais Chana Women's Institute in Minnesota was a place where women could learn more about Yiddishkeit. The warm and non-judgemental atmosphere fostered by its founders, Rabbi Moshe and Mindy Feller, and its dean, Rabbi Manis Friedman, meant that women of all backgrounds were welcomed. Many came from troubled homes, and some fought personal battles with addiction or emotional conditions.

In the very early years of the program, Sarah¹ walked in the doors of Bais Chana. She was in her 20s, hailed from a city in the Midwest, and was dealing with severe depression, compounded by alcoholism, which

had plagued her for eight years. She had resolved to explore her Judaism and quit drinking, and joined Bais Chana to accomplish this. She was welcomed by Mrs. Feller, who served as the house mother, providing care and support that for some of these women was not forthcoming in their own homes.

And for about a month, it worked. Then the withdrawal symptoms began. She would wake up in a cold sweat, her hands shaking. It wasn't long before she relapsed and made a visit to a local liquor store. When she returned to Bais Chana, she fell into depression. She asked herself why she didn't have more self-control. Her self-esteem plummeted again. She decided to end it all.

They found Sarah in a hallway, severely injured. She was rushed to the hospital. After emergency medical treatment, she was checked into the psychiatric ward, and Sarah's long road to physical and psychological recovery began.

With her immediate well-being assured, Bais Chana's directors were unsure how to proceed: should they encourage her to recuperate in Minnesota, or advise her to return home to her family. This was the first time anything of the sort had taken place in Bais Chana.

Rabbis Friedman and Feller wrote to the Rebbe to ask for a *bracha* and for guidance in this difficult situation. The Rebbe's response was brief and

succinct: "*Shayach l'hoireha*" —"This concerns her parents."

They took this to mean that they should send her home to her parents, and they went to the hospital and told her that they would buy her a ticket home, where her parents could ensure that she would have the care she needed.

They were shocked by her vehement protests. She refused to go home. She felt the shock and pain wouldn't be good for the health of her parents, who were elderly Holocaust survivors. They were unaware of their daughter's alcoholism, and the shock of finding out about her addiction would be too much for them to bear, she argued.

Rabbis Feller and Rabbi Friedman heard her out,

לע"נ
ר' מרדכי בן ר' מאיר יעקב ע"ה
גלב"ע ט"ו אייר ה'תשע"ט
ת"נ צ"ב ה'
נדפס ע"י משפחתו
משפחת פעלדמאן
פלארידא. טעקסאס.

but her words sounded exaggerated. They decided to contact a local shliach in her hometown and ask him to inform Sarah's parents of her situation. But the shliach, who knew her father, was concerned as well that the news of her alcoholism could affect his health. "His heart is weak," he said. "He won't be able to bear it."

At an impasse, they called Rabbi Hodakov, told him the whole story, and asked him to clarify with the Rebbe what they should do. As they spoke, they heard a voice. The Rebbe was on the line. "It's been eight years, and her father doesn't know?" the Rebbe asked.

Rabbi Feller clarified that she hadn't been living at home, and at best, was in touch with her parents by mail, and she wouldn't write to them about her addiction.

After a few more minutes of discussion, again the Rebbe's voice was heard on the line, "But it's been eight years and the father doesn't know?"

After this conversation, they were certain they had to send Sarah home. Rabbi Feller went to the hospital and told Sarah she had to

call her father and tell him she was coming home. "This is the right thing to do. It's what the Rebbe said to do, and it's what we have to do," he said. They walked to the payphone and Rabbi Feller waited as she made the call. When she finished, she looked like a new person.

She had called her father, and told him about her saddened state; about her alcoholism. Her father had simply said, "I know."

He had known for a long time about her addiction, but did nothing because he felt helpless. When she told him she was ready to come home, he said that he didn't see the benefit in doing so. What could he, her father, do to help if she came home? In Minnesota, on the other hand, there were such fine rabbis who had already rushed her to the hospital and ensured she was getting the best possible care. He advised her to stay there to continue recovering, and he would do what he could—he would pay the medical bills.

Hours-long sessions with a psychiatrist delved into the root of her condition: what had led her to alcoholism and depression? She told her story:

The first time she had gotten drunk was at a friend's house. She could barely walk straight, and her friends urged her to stay overnight. She was adamant that she had to go home, however, and that's what she did. Late at night, she slipped into her darkened home. Through the darkness and the drunken haze, she never saw the umbrella stand, and tripped and fell to the floor, umbrellas clattering everywhere. Her parents were awakened by the noise, but when they saw it was just her lying on the ground, they went straight back to sleep, never offering to help.

The feeling that her parents did not care about her situation never left her. It drove her to drink time and again.

But the psychiatrist saw deeper. "You saw those umbrellas," he told her. "You meant to make that noise. It was your call for help. You desperately wanted your parents to save you from your helpless drunken state." And when they didn't help her, she was lost. She felt unneeded. Her thoughts turned to self-hatred and self-harm.

The very fact that her father became involved in her recovery propelled her towards emotional stability and wellbeing. When her father told her that he knew, that he cared—that he wanted to help, but he didn't know how—that made all the difference. The rift that had existed between Sarah and her parents was soon healed, just as her physical wounds and psychological distress were.

Sarah returned to Bais Chana. She internalized the message of Torah and Yiddishkeit and became *frum*. She married, and today her husband is on the staff of a prominent Chabad House, their lives filled with happiness.

The Rebbe's words, "*Shayach l'hoireha*," didn't just mean that her parents should care for her now. They reached the very cause of her addiction and depression: that she thought her parents didn't know. And the Rebbe's second answer told her otherwise, that it was impossible that after eight years her father didn't know.

And that is what led to her recovery. **1**

1. Name changed to protect identity.