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I started my first journal when I was ten years old. For many years, I have known the therapeutic effects of writing and had you asked me a month ago, I would have told you I knew everything there was to know about writing to heal. But that was before I had the opportunity to spend a morning with Yocheved Rottenberg.

Mrs. Rottenberg is the author of *Write Your Way Home: The Torah Guide to Therapeutic Writing*. For the last six years, she has been guiding women – both in her Jerusalem dining room and on Zoom – in therapeutic writing. But how did Yocheved Rottenberg end up in Therapeutic Writing? Did she invent this form of directed writing? “My classes are based on my education at the Therapeutic Writing Institute – an international school for writing therapists.”

“I was always a writer, and I had used therapeutic writing to deal with my own life struggles. Around nine years ago, I made the decision to move away from my then job and try something new. I attended Yehar Counseling School and received a two-year introductory therapy certificate. Then I began my four-year course training at the Therapeutic Writing Institute.”

“I am not a therapist. I am a facilitator. My goal is to give women the tools they need to be able to help themselves. I have learned many of the basic tools of therapy – and I encourage those that need therapy to go to a therapist concurrently with my classes. But the largest benefit of Therapeutic Writing is reflection.”

I am her calm, patient manner, Yocheved explained that writing in a structured exercise allows us to look back at what we read and reflect on the thoughts and feelings we are trying to come to terms with. “When we work with a therapist, we can get everything out, but we are unable to review it after. It’s spoken, then it’s gone. Therapeutic writing gives us that second crucial step to healing, where we can review what we expressed, process it and move forward.”

Yocheved and I sat together in her dining room, and she explained how in-person classes work. “The women sit around the table. I have refreshments set up over there,” she said gesturing to a small service cart in the corner.

At that point I was still skeptical. The immaculate surroundings and the comforting hum of traffic from *Yirmiyahu* street outside her window were certainly nice, but what made this writing better than my late-night scribbles in a diary?

“Every one of my classes and exercises is carefully designed to help a person connect with herself and deal with the pain or other emotions she is struggling with.”

Mrs. Rottenberg has helped dozens of women with issues ranging from the full gamut. Lack of self-confidence, abuse of all forms, chronic pain and illness. So how does she make sure that everyone is helped?

“My classes are not group therapy. Every participant is working on her own writing. The support that grows

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between the women in the groups is incredible, but not necessary. In some ways, this is why Zoom is such a great medium for my classes. With each woman writing individually, she is given more privacy to work through the personal aspects of the writing experience.”

Yocheved shared a success story with me. A woman, who had taken Yocheved’s class a number of years before, called her in distress. “I’m in the hospital and need your help,” the woman said, “what writing exercises can I do to help me come to terms with my situation right now?”

Reaching into her vast knowledge of exercises, Yocheved was able to assist the woman calmly face and pass through the situation in front of her. And this is what Yocheved’s classes are about.

“Each class begins with a short warm-up exercise of approximately five minutes. When we have finished, we go around the room and anyone that wants to share, may do so. No one is required to share. And many of my participants do not. I have women take my classes and I have no idea what is going on in their lives.”

The classes continue with two to three longer exercises that are meant to guide the class. Again, there is a time limit for all writing sessions. “The time limit is by design. We are tapping into very strong emotions,” Yocheved explained, “By placing a time limit on it, it remains contained and therefore much easier to handle.”

The goal of therapeutic writing is to connect with your inner self. It is the acceptance of the issues crowding our lives that helps us deal with them. “My hope is to give women the ability to find the strength within themselves to move beyond whatever is holding them back.”

One woman in her class was desperate to find a job but lacked the confidence to put herself out there. This woman had created a courage bookmark in one of her classes. When a friend of a friend recommended her for a job, this woman was able to take the steps to get the job because of that bookmark. “She clutched it when she made her first

phone call. She held it when she sent off her resume. And she brought it with her to the interview,” Yocheved told me, smiling at the memory.

Mrs. Rottenberg conducts classes in her home and online through her website. “Everyone begins with my introductory class, *Journal to the Self*, which introduces them to the concept of therapeutic writing and teaches the techniques required to get the most out of the process.” There are then more specialized classes that focus on different emotions or techniques for advanced students. Classes on relationships, making empowered choices, finding pleasure or re-writing your life story to name a few. She even has a class called Creative Journaling that combines writing and visual art techniques.

But what about a non-writer? For me, writing comes naturally, but for so many women, writing can be stressful. “I have women in my classes that tell me they hated writing and English class in high school. But they love my classes.”

And part of the reason is found in her class rules. “Nothing you write is wrong or bad... Please leave all spelling, punctuation and grammar rules at the front door. In this room we write from our heart and not our head.” And again, further in the list, “This is not a professional writing group, all writing is acceptable. We are here to learn about the process of the writing and not to create publishable pieces of writing.”

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“People can write in whatever language they feel safest in. I have women join my classes from all over the world. They write in English, Russian, French, Hebrew or any other language they feel most comfortable in. Since we spend most of our time talking about the emotions of the writing and not the writing itself, it doesn’t matter how you write. You don’t have to be a good writer. You just have to be honest.”

LIFE WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS, IN TEN WORDS OR LESS

[A conglomeration of reader submissions. Send in yours to inbox@endurancemagazine.org]

Life is good this way, too.

Can I hibernate until I'm cured?

It's not funny. It never was.

Caring for myself. Horizontal and proud.

Yes, I've tried ginger.

Just leave me alone for now.

I want; my body doesn't.

Don't make me prove I can't.

I need a self-cleaning house.

Ketchup counts as a vegetable, right?

Body error. Please reboot.

Immensely grateful to family and friends.

If only you knew...

Even a bath is work.

I'm not antisocial. I'm in pain.

Not a figment of my imagination.

My doctor knows what he's doing.

Life takes us to unknown places.

Exhaustion doesn't mean I haven't slept.

If I'd look the way I feel, I'd scare you.

It's all part of Hashem's plan.

Looks are seriously deceiving.

Finally got 8 hours of sleep; it took 4 days...

We're all different. Same condition. Disparate reality.

More care. Less judgement.

For now I keep going. One day I'll understand.

I'm doing more than you think.

"Your writing – how you write – says a lot about you. When you read over the words in your own handwriting, it can be more meaningful."



The conversation turned to her book. Each section begins with an introduction from the writer, Chaya Hinda Allen. There is then an explanation of the process and a collection of exercises to help us work through potential points of stress. Divided into sections based on common emotions, the book reads more like a *musser sefer* than a self-help book. "I love incorporating Torah into my work. With the help of a *Talmid Chacham*, I painstakingly reviewed all the quotes in my book to ensure their accuracy."

In addition to the Torah portions to her book, she also injects Torah sources into her classes. "I teach special Zoom classes before the *Yomim Tovim* for my participants. And I have a weekly *parsha* class."

In addition to her group classes, Yocheved also provides one on one therapeutic writing sessions for those that want to dig deeper into their issues. If someone is struggling with a specific and personal problem, Yocheved recommends private sessions so that together they can really get to the root of the issue. So much of therapeutic writing is based on being honest with yourself and for some situations, the group setting is not enough. Honesty and putting pen to paper are the key.

"Pen and paper, specifically?" I asked. Struggling with arthritis that cramps my fingers when I write by hand for long periods of time, I questioned the need to abandon the computer. "Your writing – how you write – says a lot about you. When you read over the words in your own handwriting, it can be more meaningful," Yocheved said.

But it isn't everything and she went on to explain that although there are studies that say writing by hand allows for stronger emotional connection to the writing, it is not universally accepted. Especially for someone like me, computer writing has been proven to be very helpful as well.

Armed with a copy of her book and a new understanding of therapeutic writing, I bid Yocheved the best of luck in her work. In her classes, she inspires women to keep moving forward, and my morning with her helped inspire me to do the same. ●

Is therapeutic writing able to help you? After speaking to Mrs. Rottenberg, I am confident that anyone can benefit from the techniques taught in her classes. Yocheved was kind enough to provide us with an exercise tailor-made for the unique issues of a person struggling with chronic illness.

This is a five-minutes writing exercise. Be sure to set a timer. The goal for the full five minutes is to write without correcting, filtering or editing your work.

Close your eyes. Now focus on a place where you currently have pain coming from. Ask the pain, "What are you trying to tell me?" Now open your eyes and write your pain's answer.

Keep in mind there is no wrong answer to this exercise. When five minutes are up, go back and reread what you wrote. What do you feel about your writing? What have you learned about yourself and your pain?