ב'סד

TOPIC: THE BATTLE OF THE INTERNET: A call to action for computer professionals.

THESIS: The first battle of the Internet is over – we must now focus on winning the war by using our balebatim as soldiers.

For many years the leaders of Klal Yisroel have waged a battle against the uncontrolled usage of the Internet. Rally after rally, article after article, speech after speech, case history after case history, decimated family after decimated family, the battle raged. It has been a battle to push aside *tumah* and guard the homes and *neshamos* of our people.

Well, I have a news dispatch from the front lines of the battle, and the message is not good: The battle is over. And we lost. The Internet is more pervasive than ever and has penetrated deep into the homes of the Jewish nation.

Our own lack of understanding combined with the powerful forces of modern society have conquered us and put us in a position where our front doors are wide open to electronic dangers that we do not even understand.

With the battle over, we now must do what a good tactician does after losing a battle – and that is to learn from the loss, regroup, and focus on winning the larger war.

It may sound extreme to say we lost the battle against the spread of the Internet. After all , we sent our best warriors – our *talmidei chachamim*, our *tzaddikim*, our *roshei yeshiva* -- into the battle. How can the battle be lost already? Didn't it just start?

Stop and look around you. How many businessmen are more careful now never to be alone with a computer connected to the Internet? Not too many. How many parents attended lectures on warning signs that might appear in their children? Not too many. How many computer consultants have reported an increase in calls from families wanting information about Internet safeguards? Not too many. And how many homes that have Internet can guarantee you that they know what their children have or have not done on the Internet in the last week? Again, not too many.

You have to believe it – the battle over the Internet is lost. So let's learn from the loss if we can. Let's start by asking "Why did we lose?" We lost for two significant reasons. And the hardest part to accept is that the first of the two reasons is probably our own fault.

We allowed insufficient and inaccurate information to result in warnings about the Internet that can only be called hyperbole – and thus people did not listen. According to the dictionary, hyperbole means "an extravagant statement or figure of speech not intended to be taken literally, as 'to wait forever.'". In a recent edition of the Jewish Observer, there was a penetrating and insightful article which discussed the dangers of hyperbole. The author warned that hyperbole can lead to the opposite of what you intend. A Rebbi who says "this is the worse test I have ever seen" wants the talmid to achieve more next time – but the talmid will just react negatively to the obviously exaggerated statement. Hyperbole does not have to be criticism. A well meaning Rebbi who tells a child "that is the best picture I have ever seen" is guilty of hyperbole. Deep down, the child knows there are better pictures. The child dismisses the Rebbi's praise as meaningless. People tend to ignore or be adversely affected when spoken to with such exaggerations. Better "We can definitely improve this test score next time" and "I love that picture – it means a lot to me."

We have been guilty of hyperbole and exaggeration. Oh come on, you say, is it really hyperbole to warn people of the destructive power of the Internet? Is it really exaggeration to sound an alarm about something that destroys Jewish homes? Skeptical, perhaps, of my claim? Then you may want to sit down and hold on to something while you read what I have to say next. Ready? Here it is: the Internet is completely harmless, and computer literate people know it.

I think I hear an uproar right about now, but stay with me for a minute. That was no typo. You read correctly. The Internet itself is actually quite harmless. A simple conversation I had recently with a local Rebbi will illustrate the point. Aware I was involved with computers for my *parnassah*, he asked for advice on selecting a computer graphics program he could use to make illustrations and print them in color as visual aids for his *talmidim*.

A few weeks later, he saw me and thanked me. The school was able to obtain the software I recommended inexpensively, and the students were already benefiting from the new visual aids. It was a tribute to his *middos* that he thought to thank me for what was no real effort on my part. It was also *hashgacha pratis*, for it gave me an unexpected opportunity to explain about the Internet. After thanking me, the Rebbi mentioned that he could do more except for the effort of driving so far each night to the school office to use the software and print the color sheets. To buy another copy of the software for his house, along with a color printer, was expensive and not practical. Innocently, I asked why he simply did not connect from his house to the school's computer over the Internet at night, and he could work remotely on the school's computer and do all his printing right from his house. (For those unfamiliar, this is called "remote access", and is the standard way in which businessmen access information that is stored at their office without actually driving to the office.) "Arrgh,", he said. "I do not want to have the Internet in my house!"

Sigh. I explained to him what I have explained many, many times before: the Internet is not a problem. You see, the Internet is nothing but a huge set of cables connecting various points around the world. The Internet has existed for over 45 years. The Web? Email? Chat? Blogs? Those are things that plug into the Internet, like a radio plugs into electricity. Let me say it again – the Internet is just like electricity. Just a big set of wires that sit and wait for something to be plugged in. We are against televisions and movies, but we are not against electricity. You can plug a television into electricity, or you can plug in electric lights that illuminate the night. The Internet, I explained for what seemed like the millionth time, is just electricity that is available for various electronic systems to speak to one another.

He was shocked for a moment. Then he understood. He asked if he could just get the Internet "electricity" part to help in his Rebbi position? Of course, I said.

Never heard this idea before? I am not surprised. We used hyperbole and threw everything into one big Internet chullent pot. I told a local Rav this idea -- that hyperbole is not productive -- and suggested he be more specific when he speaks about the Internet. It would help him better reach his audience of computer users. He simply did not believe me that the standard Internet warnings – the ones being ignored -- are hyperbole. Nobody had ever explained to him how the Internet is like electricity. I finally had to tell him that after a shmooze he gave cautioning against the Internet, a number of listeners were scoffing and laughing. They joked that maybe they should pull out the phones in their houses because the phones operate by being plugged into – I think you see where I am going here – the Internet.

These listeners were B'nai Torah one and all.   Rather than scoff, they could have explained the Internet to the Rav. But the yetzer hora loves hyperbole. "Come on," says the yetzer hora, "the plain old Internet is that bad? Just a bunch of wires? Isn't electricity also a bunch of wires? Is electricity bad? . . ."

Our own lack of understanding and hyperbole contributed to the battle being lost and Jewish homes being in danger from all kinds of devices that plug into the Internet.

The second reason we lost the battle is more depressing, for it is external and probably beyond our control. The Internet has become an integral part of society. The fear expressed in a recent edition of the JO was that society around us was forcing us to interact with a variety of technologies that we might prefer to avoid. That fear is not only justified, it has come true.

The modern world has decided they want everything to plug into the Internet. They want it to be the electricity of our century. Sound too fantastic to be true? Perhaps, you are thinking, I am engaging in some hyperbole of my own? If you live in New York City, the telephone company is spending billions of dollars to replace all the phone lines coming from the street to your home. These old lines are being replaced with

something called fiber optic cables, which are being laid underground. Why are they doing this? So that all phone conversations can be carried over a new and cheap system – the Internet. Already a large percentage of JO readers talk over the Internet every day without realizing it. I recently walked into Chase Bank in Manhattan and was speaking with a bank employee while waiting in line. He told me all the bank phones work by being plugged into the Internet. He said in the entire bank there was not one "real" phone line.

The 911 system works by plugging into the Internet. Gas and electric companies are converting their meters to report via the Internet. Government agencies require all educational institutions to file reports by plugging into the Internet. Public schools require research reports to be done on the Internet. Universities archive all their research and publications by plugging them into the Internet. Governments want to adopt the ENUM standard which would connect every phone number in the U.S. with a unique identity number – an Internet number. Hospitals are connecting medical records by plugging them into the Internet. Research into medical cures would grind to a halt without the Internet. All banks clear checks via the Internet. The military uses the Internet.

The Internet is considered so crucial to the U.S. that a major component of research into the Internet's future is ensuring that all connections are decentralized – so an enemy bomb attack on one Internet connection would not cripple the entire country. Think about that. This electricity-type-invention called the Internet is considered one of the top priorities in the national defense of the world's superpower. There is clearly more to it than sending email or surfing the Web!

So the initial battle did not go well for us. Jewish homes have the Internet and they are not listening to our leaders. The Internet, like it or not, is here to stay.

So we analyzed our loss and saw the danger of hyperbole. We also saw that the world wants the Internet everywhere. What should we do now? As tacticians we know that one battle does not mean the war is lost. And continue the war we must. An all out war, for the enemy is brutal, unforgiving, and bent on total victory. There are things that can be plugged into the Internet, such as the "Web", that pose dangers to our neshamos unparalled in our times and unimagined by our grandparents.

How do we fight this new and bigger war? Our new strategy is we need to draft more soldiers. We need businessmen and those with computer expertise to step up and realize that this war is not just the fight of the *gedolei yisroel*, but the fight of every Jew. And the weapon we with computer expertise have is our knowledge and experience.

We who have computer experience must speak to anyone who will listen and say the following:

Fine, Reb Yid, perhaps we did speak in an exagerated or inexact manner. We were worried about our people. So now you are listening to the yetzer hora rather than the words of the *chachamim*.? The *yetzer hora* has convinced you it's all exaggeration. Isn't the Internet everywhere anyway? Isn't it just like electricity? You think you do not need to listen to these fantastic tales of Internet woe.

But Reb Yid, do stop and listen to somebody who has worked with computers since the first PC computers over 25 years ago. You cannot get away with splitting hairs with me, my friend. These devices that plug into the Internet create a swirling vortex of evil and temptation. You cannot ignore it, you cannot control it, you cannot fight it, and you cannot rationalize why you are different. You cannot be scrupulous about avoiding yichud with the babysitter and yet be in yichud with the Internet. The ancient idol worshippers did not break down your door and throw pictures of idols at you. The Greeks could not force their society through the front door of your home. The Inquisition could not penetrate the Jewish fortress of faith in Spanish homes, and even Hitler *y'mach sh'mo* could never hope to destroy the Jewish *neshama*. The Internet – yes, OK, the devices that connect to the Internet – can do all that and more in less time than it took Matisyahu HaKohen to raise his sword and declare all who are for the Torah should follow him.

Reb Yid, if your child's school has Web access in the office, are the doors to the room it is in physically locked each night? Can students ever enter that room? Who watches while they are there? You should know the answers to these questions!

If you have the Web or other dangerous plug-in's that connect to the Internet and do not have professionally installed safeguards, then please be consistent. Since safety is apparently not important to you, remove every baby and child safety device from your house. Then throw away your infant car seats. Now dismantle all your seat belts. While you are at it, ask the local grocer to stock every non-Jewish magazine he can find.

And if you have the Web and have safeguards, all is well, right? Safeguards prevent anything inappropriate from entering the computer, right? But if I might ask out of love and concern, Reb Yid, who installed and configured these safeguards? And when was the last time they were checked? Mezuzahs, please check professionally twice in seven years. Internet safeguards, please check professionally once a month.

Ahah, you answer me, but what if the only thing I plug into my Internet is basic email? I have no Web, no Chat, no Blog, nothing – just plain, safe email. I can even use it to do *mitzvahs*! I can email the grandparents, I can check lists of *cholim*, I can leave the office earlier. No problem, right? Perfect!

Well, Reb Yid, we new soldiers applaud your attitude and admire your desire to do the right thing by limiting your exposure to the Internet to just a basic email system. Unfortunately, you cannot feel satisfied just yet. If you have any kind of email, it is very

likely that you are running software on your computer that is distributing tumah across the world. You could be helping hide the products of sick minds, and you would never know it. The software sneaks itself onto your computer and onto the computer of every person to whom you send an email. Yes, every email. When did you last have your computer checked for viruses? Worms? Trojan attacks? Rootkit threats? What, you say, you do not even know what a rootkit threat is? Well, maybe you do not have to worry quite as much. After all, it is possible that the hidden software is not transmitting any tumah. Instead it often transmits money laundering instructions for Al Queda and other terrorists! Really. And you would never know. This is not some theoretical danger warning. This is the real thing. It is happening right now. Jewish computers are transmitting information that would sicken the computer owner. This is not something I have read about. This is not something I have heard about. This is something I and my fellow newly drafted computer soldiers have personally seen many times.

It is a new war now. A war that must be fought by citizen-soldiers as well as generals. It is time to sign up the volunteer soldiers to fight the first battle of the new war.

If you have computer knowledge, we want you for this new army. Donate your time and experience to help ensure that those who are going to have the Internet have the safeguards and tools they need. In Chicago, for example, the umbrella organization for Jewish day schools coordinates a volunteer drive. The volunteers are computer professionals who donate their time and expertise. Some volunteer to speak and give training classes on proper and safe computer usage. Other volunteers make themselves available on a rotating schedule for house calls – free visits to families reluctant or unable to pay the costs normally associated with an onsite visit by a computer consultant.

Perhaps you have computer knowledge but you are not comfortable as a front line soldier. Then maybe your expertise can better be put to use as guerrila warfare. "What," you say, "hold on just a minute! Me an expert? Who says I am an expert? I only work in a small area of the computer field, designing data warehousing report structures. When did I become an expert?" Whether you realize it or not, if you are involved in the computer field, your less-computer-expert friends and neighbors regard you as something of an expert. Nobody is asking you to design the specifications for the next generation of TCP/IP networking protocols. All you have to do is be brave. Be brave, stand up and say with confidence to anyone you can: you know, I work in computers, and this stuff really *is* as dangerous as they say.

We new soldiers need to avoid the temptation to look away when somebody snickers over "how bad can it be." We should turn around and say "Pretty bad." We must be willing to rise up when we hear a bachur say he downloaded something, and march over to the boy's parents. Let them know we work in computers, and while it may sound innocent, their son is on a course that should be avoided at all costs. We new soldiers in this war , as the expression goes , have "been there and done that." And we know of

what we speak. There is no legitimate reason whatsoever why any student would need to know anything about downloading – or any other Internet related word. Period. No rebuttal possible and no answer acceptable.

When parents smile and say "Oh, my kids seem to know all about computers and files, but I really don't understand all that stuff . . .", we need to stop smiling and let them know it is not cute nor quaint nor correct nor amusing nor safe for them not to understand what their children are doing. Explain it with a *moshal*. Just change a few words and see what they think! Ask them if they would say "Oh, my kids seem to know all about watching TV and going to movies, but I really don't understand all that stuff . . ." Then, as they realize the situation, offer to explain to them just a few basics. One does not have to be a cinematographer or video editor or movie director to know the basic idea of how and why we avoid movie theaters. But one does have to know what a movie is. One does not have to be a computer programmer or network administrator to know the dangers of today's connected world, but one does have to know what a download is. It is up to us to help them learn enough to be able to supervise their children and watch for warning signs.

We new soldiers need to explain that computers are a business tool, not a toy nor a recreational activity. "Computer games" is a contradiction in terms. If a student wants computer access, the parent should ask "for what purpose?" If it is to write reports that are more legible, than tell them they must learn the tools for writing reports – Word, Powerpoint. If the computer is for writing chidushei Torah, tell them they must learn how to type in Hebrew. Most families own at least some type of power tools for home repair. We keep them in the basement until we need them, and then we use them safely. We don't tell our children "Chaim, I see you are bored. Go play with the buzz saw in the garage and see what you can cut." A computer is a tool, not a toy and not a babysitter. Just like you would not let your child use the power saw unless he had proper training and wore safety goggles, so too there is no need to let your child use a computer unless they are doing something specific and productive. A computer that is a tool rather than a toy presents slightly less of a temptation for the yetzer hora.

It takes more strength to permit something than to prohibit it. As strong newly drafted soldiers, we have to also be willing to help when something should be permitted. A yeshiva administrator needs a certain type of connection to raise money effectively. The Rebbi in my earlier example should not have to come home tired late at night from driving to the school to finish visual aids. A Rebbi has an obligation to be fresh and well rested for his talmidim. We need to say "Let us help you. Let us give you some Internet electricity in a safe manner. No, don't worry about paying me for the help. If we need a professional, I have a list I keep with me of professional *yirei shamayim* people who know these things . . . . " And have that list ready. The yetzer hora has a long list of favorite excuses, but some of his best is "it's so complicated" and "it will take so much time" and "I am so busy." "No problem," we need to say, "I'll call Reb Ploni and ask him

to stop by and help you. His fees are pretty reasonable, and I'll follow up with him and you and make sure everything is OK."

How can we computer knowledgeable people continue to sit back and let *gedolei yisroel* fight this war alone? No more and no longer. We must say to the generals in this war , "Rebbi, we have heard you, and we are sorry that we were not there for the first battle. But we see the danger, we are here now, and we are willing to enlist to fight this war." With that effort, perhaps we will have the *siata d'shamaya* we need to fight this yetzer hora and save our people's *neshamos.*