

# Eytan Kobre



**DIRTY LAUNDRY** It was only a matter of time. According to a piece in the *New York Times* by Ronda Kaysen, there's a thriving market for Internet videos with titles like "Clean with Me" or "Extreme Cleaning," which allow people to watch other people cleaning their homes. Really. As soothing music plays in the background, the videos feature youngish, stay-at-home mothers who over the course of a half-hour or so deep-clean a messy but well-appointed home.

Some of these videos attract more than three million views, in which a young, energetic mom "washes floors, scours sinks, dusts fixtures, and folds laundry. Occasionally, one of her three young children passes through the shot. But mostly, she's alone, scrubbing drain holes with a toothbrush or unloading the dishwasher as she offers tips and endorses cleaning products in a soothing voice-over."

What's the appeal of these productions? Ms. Kaysen writes that some viewers tell her that, as the "Clean with Me" name indicates, they watch them as "a sort of inspirational soundtrack so they feel less alone." But others, she says, "watch them while sitting on the sofa with a cup of coffee, hoping that the video might spur them to action, or at least make them feel less guilty about their own mess."

Apparently, "I love work. I can watch it all day," isn't just a laugh line.

The strategy seems to work, too. The article quotes one woman who's a regular watcher of the genre, favoring specific series with names like "The Secret Slob," because they feature more authentic-looking messes than some of the others. She says this is "the opposite of Instagram," because when she starts to feel anxious that her three-bedroom home doesn't look perfect, "I watch these videos to make myself feel better..."

For people who are feeling *really* bad about themselves, there are the "Complete Disaster" videos, in which "laundry, dirty dishes, grime and clutter have overwhelmed what would normally be an attractive house," until the video star comes on the scene, sometimes "condensing two or three days of cleaning into 45 minutes." Those, I suppose, are for women whose reading tastes tend toward science fiction.

There are, on the one hand, worthwhile aspects

to these shows. As Ms. Kaysen writes, "Cleaning a house is tedious, hard work that is often derided. It's usually left to women to shoulder in silence. These influencers validate and elevate the work that housekeepers do, reframing it as skilled physical labor that deserves respect. They dress for the occasion and offer techniques for how to, say, deftly clean out an overflow drain cover with a toothbrush." And to the extent they make people feel better about the shape their own homes are in, who can argue with that?

Still, there is a bit of an irony in this, too. The article quotes a woman who runs a group for people looking for advice and support and says that many of her members "feel like they're the only one that can't keep the kitchen clean, when 98 percent of us can't. To see that somebody that looks really great and has this great video following can't also keep their kitchen clean is so validating."

Well, yes, except that the people in the videos who "can't also keep their kitchen clean" are actually raking it in. One of the most popular producers of these videos is a single mother who launched her business in 2017 seeking to dispel the loneliness of a bad marriage. Four years later, she makes a six-figure salary working more than 40 hours a week filming and editing the videos, in addition to employing a business manager.

Another woman, who has close to 300,000 subscribers, runs her business with her husband out of a 3,600-square-foot house in Utah. She started her venture to cope with postpartum depression and her resulting loneliness, but in the process, she found there were lots of other women looking for someone to commiserate with about their messy kitchens and toy-strewn living rooms. Being a stay-at-home parent, she says, is "super rewarding, but it is also a pretty difficult job.... It's nice to know that you're not alone."

This is all a distinct improvement, of course, over the Instagram fantasy world. That's the one where people are making money by showcasing supposedly perfect-looking homes and dinner tables and children and much else that makes their viewers feel highly inadequate and anxious, and probably plays a role in marital discord and other problems. These new video producers, at least, have found a way to make money by making their viewers feel better about themselves.

Ultimately, however, this, too, is to a large extent in

the realm of the make-believe, as is most of what appears on screens large and small. For all the authentic-looking cluttered refrigerators and filthy stovetops, these people aren't spending 40 to 50 hours each week actually cleaning real-life messes.

Growing up, there was a smallish, black-and-white television in my house. I remember my father telling me that when the spine-tingling music comes on during some suspenseful drama, what's really

happening is this: There's an orchestra sitting off to the side, and when the villain makes his appearance or the hero seems in danger, the conductor tells them, "Okay, boys, cue up the scary music."

My father was trying to help me see the show for the pretend world it was — that it's okay to enjoy it for what it is, but don't get drawn into mistaking it for reality and allow it even to affect your mood, let alone anything else in the real world.

## UP FOR REVIEW

Several years ago, this magazine featured a cover story on the trail-blazing Gemara learning program for mesivta boys called Vhaarev Na. Founded and led by the indefatigable Rabbi Dovid Newman, it already then had spread around the country. By now, it has wrought a revolution.

Like some of the greatest innovators, Reb Dovid didn't really discover anything new, but rediscovered the tried and true. An experienced *mechanech*, he realized that the approach of trying to get boys to learn through external incentives, whether positive or negative, doesn't really work for many *talmidim*.

And so, he simply went back to the fundamentals of what can truly motivate a young man and enable him to taste the *geshmak* of Torah: success through mastery of whatever he learns. He decided to get rid of the distracting externals and stand back and allow the Torah itself to work its wonders, to have the incentive come from within the heart of the *talmid* rather than from without.

The program's motto says it all: "*Chazarah, chazara, chazarah. And then? Chazarah!*" In essence, Reb Dovid decided to take Chazal at their word when they say in too many places to count that only ongoing review of, and the resulting clarity in, one's learning brings success and enjoyment. He developed a system to excite rebbeim and *talmidim* alike with the concept, and with his trademark passion introduced it into countless *mesivtos* nationwide. Later on, he extended the idea to the world of *balabatim*, through a second successful program, called Kinyan Masechta.

But Reb Dovid has a problem: He doesn't really know what it means to rest. Several years ago, at a bar mitzvah in Monsey, New York, the boy's father (full disclosure: my brother-in-law) told the assembled guests about how much his son had gained when their neighbor Rabbi Newman motivated him to learn and review a *masechta* numerous times for his bar mitzvah. He suggested that they might want to speak to Reb Dovid about doing the same with their sons.

That Motzaei Shabbos, the phone didn't stop ringing in the Newman home — and thus was born Bonai Chavivai, a program modeled along the lines of Vhaarev Na, but designed for bar mitzvah-age boys who do their *chazarah* outside the regular school hours. Recently, I got to see what has become of this program in these few short years, joining my son-in-law and grandson who traveled from Ohio to Monsey to participate with many hundreds of fathers and sons in a Bonai Chavivai grand *siyum*.

And I got to see all over again what one individual can accomplish through passion and *siyata d'Shmaya*.

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