

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Sony Perlman, best known for his “Brainstorm” podcast, an ideas bank to make the world a better place, has been doing his share in that effort for the past 25 years, helping addicts move forward by filling their tanks with unconditional love and communal support. Because, he says, they do know what functional life looks like — they just don’t have the fuel to get there while running on empty

By **Barbara Bensoussan**

Photos **Jeff Zorabedian**



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On a country highway a mile or so past the Evergreen supermarket in Pomona sits an expansive house fronted by a large parking lot. Step inside, and you'll see a spacious dining room to the left, a simple lounge area off to the right, a wooden staircase leading upstairs to bedrooms, and a long kitchen that lines the back walls.

This is The Village — a sober living community designed for people with addictions who have just come out of rehab. None of the inhabitants are in sight this morning, as they all work at outside jobs during the day. But director Sony Perlman, best known to many as the host of his popular “Brainstorm with Sony Perlman” podcast, is his typical energetic self today as he bounds down the stairs.

I've watched a few Brainstorm episodes, where Sony usually appears in a T-shirt and jeans, with a short reddish beard, trademark white yarmulke and a gravelly voice like a movie cowboy, engaging in relaxed, casual conversation with all manner of guests.



But in the same way that shidduch pictures never fully convey the entirety of a person, Sony's podcast avatar fails to convey his one-on-one presence: his friendliness and warmth, the eyes full of kindness and empathy. If *The Village* is a success, it is surely due in large part to Sony's therapeutic persona and oversupply of *ahavas Yisrael*.

No Way Forward

When it comes to dealing with guys who are down and out, Sony knows how to relate to them, because he used to be that down and out guy.

No, he was never an addict, but he admits that he didn't have a happy childhood. Still, he gives his family credit for instilling in all his siblings an ethos of service to the community — his parents were affiliates with Sh'or Yoshuv in Far Rockaway — and making the world a better place. His mother, a therapist, always had a deep understanding of people, and family conversations would revolve around community issues.

"All the misfits of the neighborhood used to come to

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our house,” he says.

The fifth of eight children — most of whom today are also either therapists or married to therapists — Sony was assailed by a storm of bad school experiences and his parents’ divorce.

“As a kid I felt different, odd, hopeless,” he says. “I was sure I needed the most help out of all my siblings. I got kicked out of every yeshivah I went to and felt very unwanted.”

He was a rebel who couldn’t handle any perceived injustices, including sitting for long hours, and hated the system. “Maybe I had ADHD,” he muses. “My sister Avigail Gimpel, who’s an ADHD expert in Israel now, is convinced I did. But I’d start out every year optimistic that things would be better, but then it never worked out.”

Sony was a smart kid. He absorbed material quickly — and then would be bored. Once, to keep him quiet, his third-grade rebbi in the chassidic school he was attending gave him a math workbook. He powered through it, so the rebbi gave him the fourth-grade workbook. Sony sat in class working through every workbook through 12th grade.

He was sent to a slew of therapists, he knew he wanted to succeed, to do something with his life, but he didn’t see a way forward.

By the time he was 16, he was an angry young man who was done with school.

“I was a miserable teen, which still informs my approach to teenagers,” he says. “I work on the assumption that all teens are more susceptible to existential misery and feeling seen in that experience enables them to connect to me better. And it simply works.”

He announced to his mother that he was going to Eretz Yisrael, a place he’d come to love on family trips to visit his grandparents. He began in a sort of work-study program, dropped out and spent some time homeless, worked in a warehouse, led a free and wild life. And he says he was actually happy that everyone

“I just assume all teens are existentially miserable, and they connect to me because of that”

left him alone to find his own way.

“I needed freedom,” he avows. During those times, he got his first taste of what it was like to be the therapist in the conversation, sitting in bars with people, listening to their stories and troubles and becoming popular as the address for those needing to vent.

After about a year of living on the edge, he enrolled in the Neve program for challenged young men, and began getting back on track religiously and emotionally (although he admits that he has occasionally struggled with depression since his teenage years). At 19, he met his future wife, Yaelli. He wanted to get married, but had no means of support or stability.

“My mother told me, ‘You’ve never done anything for more than three months straight,’ ” he relates. “She said I should first show I’m able to commit to something for at least a year.”

Well, Sony was determined to marry his *bashert* — a decision he still counts among the very best of his life — and returned to the US.

He took a job as a residence manager for OHEL in Boro Park, which he stuck out for exactly one year, in order to fulfill his mother’s condition. It was tough, yet he learned more in that year than many people get in four years of a college degree.

“I took the job very seriously,” he relates. “I cared a lot about how the kids were being treated, and I couldn’t ignore behaviors by staff that were unethical. I held myself and others to a higher standard which led to real changes, including bringing in staff more aligned with the level of care the kids deserved.”

One of his cases transformed his outlook. There was a 14-year-old boy in the residence who was a pathological liar with severe psychological issues. He was intensely disliked by both staff and residents. At a loss, Sony went to his supervisor to ask for advice in handling the boy.

The supervisor, who was himself relatively new to the job, thought for a moment. Finally, he asked, “Are the stories he tells at least interesting? Maybe just listen to him.”

After that, every night after homework and before bed, Sony would sit next to this boy’s bed and ask him about his day. For half an hour, Sony would listen, interjecting questions from time to

time.

“The stories got wilder and wilder,” Sony relates. “Ten years later, I ran into his mother. She told me her son had been in and out of programs his entire life. But he once told her, ‘The only person who ever understood me is Sony Perlman.’ That taught me that you have to meet people where they’re at.”

You’re Part of Us

Sony finished the on-condition year at OHEL in 1998 and promptly got engaged. He enrolled at the New School for Social Research to become a Certified Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC); this was a time when only a handful of frum people had chosen that path. (His wife worked in special ed for many years, but more recently has opened a business called Wig Guru.)

He worked for a time at Priority One, a high school for at-risk teens, with Rabbi Shaya Cohen.

“Since I was so recently out of my own high school experiences, it gave me the edge to be especially effective with the kids,” he comments. He also worked for two years in the Five Towns at the Tova Program. Then he began running Our Place in Brooklyn, a drop-in center for troubled teens. There he dealt with 500-700 kids a year, getting dozens of calls every day.

“While the work was full and demanding – running a program, leading a team, and making constant decisions – eighty percent of it was something much more human: just being there for the guys, letting them know, ‘We love you and you’re part of us,’ ” he says. It made him understand the power of communal support.

“I can meet a person with certain symptoms and within minutes know if he’ll be fine,” he says. “Because a lot of success has to do with having genuinely

supportive people in your life.”

He thought about returning to Eretz Yisrael. By that point he had become close to Rabbi Shlomo Herbst *a”h*, a distinguished rav in Flatbush, and asked his advice. Rabbi Herbst told him, “Stay here unless there are other people who can take your place and do what you’re doing.”

Sony worked for 25 years as the clinical director of Our Place, which was becoming the quiet heart and lifeline for boys who didn’t have one. He became close to the boys, regularly hosting large crowds for Shabbos meals. In the meantime, he went back to school and in 2008 earned an MSW from the Wurzweiler School of Social Work. He worked at a Recovery Road center during those years as well and started seeing private clients.

The Village was originally conceived of to be an offshoot of Our Place (it was originally called Our Village). Funds were raised, and the first home opened up in November of 2019, filling up quickly.

A few months later, though, Covid hit the world hard. “Everyone was stuck at home,” Sony relates. “No one could go to work, we were operating with a skeleton staff, and the money we’d raised was dwindling. I had moments where I was ready to give up. We put ourselves on life support mode, slashing expenses and running a no-frills version of what we’d had in mind. There were no activities, the guys got their own food, people got counseling but not much else.”

A few key people offered him the emotional and financial support he needed to keep going. Once Covid restrictions eased, he was able to bring in more funding, and Our Village began to flourish and grow into multiple facilities – so much so that Sony ultimately had to separate it from Our Place, renaming it The Village.

The move to Monsey, though, created a shift not only in his professional life – he dropped his private practice, reasoning that he could accomplish much more on a community level than by seeing one individual at a time – but in his family life as well. In Brooklyn, the Perlman Shabbos table was always full, often with up to 40 people. But with his four children now older, his wife gently suggested, “It’s just as holy to be with your family as it is to save the world.”

In Monsey, living two miles from The Village, it became easier to erect boundaries. He’s also learned to set limits with his clients.

“I used to get all kinds of calls at three or four a.m.,” he says. “I don’t take them anymore. For real emergencies, there’s Hatzolah. In the end, every crisis is really part of a much bigger picture. And furthermore, we tend to make big mistakes in emergencies, like parents calling the cops on their kids. Drama is good for fundraising, but it’s not generally therapeutic.”

Even with boundaries in place, there’s a tremendous amount of burnout in addictions work.

“Lots of people have gone into this field, but few stick it out,”

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Sony says. “People are broken, and sometimes they die — I often go to funerals, rarely guys from this program, baruch Hashem, but even if I spend one hour with someone, I feel a connection to them, and it’s very painful. I’m very lucky to have a loving, supportive wife for the times I come home and cry.”

Time to Stay Clean

The house we’re visiting is actually one of a chain of Village sober centers: There are four more for men and one for women, all of them in the Monsey area. It’s a bit shocking that there is such a need, yet Sony says there’s demand for even more.

One thing you won’t see here are therapy slogans hung all around, as is typical in other places.

“We have some AA books here, but that’s it,” Sony says. “We want the place to feel as normal as possible.

The men here generally come straight from rehab and stay about five or six months. The home finds them jobs and transportation if needed, and provides regular counseling. When the resident is ready, he moves to step-up housing, another sober community that has fewer rules and no mandatory counseling.

While some sober living communities cater exclusively to a single type of addiction, such as alcohol or drugs, The Village also includes people with “process addictions” (gambling, Internet, etc.). Sony finds the mix works well; the guys learn from each other. But he avows that those with process addictions have a harder time getting better because of the shame associated with their behaviors.

“An alcoholic in recovery is like those people who become vegans,” he says. “They can’t wait to tell people about it, they’re proud of their newfound life. But if you can’t share your success because of the shame associated with the descent, it makes it harder to find support and community.”

The average success rate for addictions treatment, Sony says, ranges from two to 20 percent, while he maintains that The Village has 70 percent sobriety success. That’s at least partly because his approach veers from traditional addictions wisdom. Much of what he learned in his training as a CSAC and in social work school does not, in his experience, truly help addicts. Some programs encourage tough-love approaches, emphasizing a structured life with rules like making their beds in the morning and going to work on time.

“They target behavioral changes to teach them how to live a ‘normal’ life,” Sony says. “But everybody, addicts included, knows what a normal, functional life looks like. They don’t need to be taught, they just don’t have the strength to do it.”

What will heal them, Sony believes, has little to do with making beds and curfews.

It's a bit **shocking** that there is such a need, yet Sony says there's **demand for even more**



The Village offers a loving embrace meant to replace that illusion-infused happy place of addictions: “We’re going to love you till you love yourself”

Make it a conversation



about five years ago, Sony — egged on by his friends — had the inspiration to create a podcast. He had become a popular lecturer, and while he loved getting his ideas out into the world, he found the format a little canned: Here’s my idea, like it or don’t. Really what he wanted was an opportunity to flesh things out.

A podcast offered the chance to have long-form conversations that could go for a couple of hours if necessary. He welcomed the idea of introducing ideas that could make a difference, or asking

people to come present their rooftop yell to the world.

“Maybe there was a bit of shyness there, too,” he admits. “It allows me to hide in my basement and get ideas out from there. It’s my guilty pleasure.”

He chose the name “Brainstorm with Sony Perlman” because he hoped to use the podcast to brainstorm ideas about how to heal and help people, focusing on the process of creating solutions. It was also a way to vent the storm of ideas constantly running through his own brain.

His podcast room is downstairs at The Village, down the hall from his office. It looks impressively professional, even though his editor and tech engineer is his 17-year-old son, and his 26-year-old daughter is his videographer.



Sony has always been fascinated by people, and this is a great opportunity to learn their stories.

“I’m not so impressed by ‘Hashem’ miracles, although of course they happen,” he says. “But I am extremely impressed by human miracles: people who go above and beyond to accomplish incredible things. Talk to anyone, and you’re talking to a miracle. You’re witnessing the holiness of a human being who did something great.”

His podcasts have addressed issues in the Jewish community like *agunos* (his most controversial discussion), people going off the *derech*, and of course addictions (which he says are rarely discussed in depth). Divorce and bereavement are other perennial subjects.

He posts about once a week, and has a long list of people he’d like to speak to; his shows range from 1,500 views to over 10,000 when his guest is famous.

Sony has been well-known in his field for a long time. But ever since he launched Brainstorm, he says, he can’t walk into the nearby Evergreen without being accosted by someone who has watched an episode.

Some memorable interviewees include Rabbi Shais Taub, Rabbi YY Jacobson, Avi Fishoff, and Abie Rotenberg, and then there were Yossi and Rechie Glanz, a couple who travel the world. “That one hit me in an unexpected way,” he says. “It made me want to start traveling, too.”

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“Imagine you have a great car, but it has no gas,” Sony says. “The tank has holes that have to be patched before you can refill it. That’s an addict. Don’t tell him he needs a job. He knows that. But he has no gas in his tank, no sense of worthiness.”

The key, he says, is lots of communal support and unconditional love. But at what point does unconditional love equal a free pass to not being a contributing member of society?

“True, a thirty-five-year-old really shouldn’t be acting like a baby, so most therapy programs want to get him out there, to make him do something with his life. But the fact is that addicts actually have regressed to being emotional babies. It’s very easy to love a baby, but when I see a thirty-five-year-old acting like a baby, I just want to smack him in the head. To scream at him, ‘Get your act together, you have kids, you have a wife!’ But the thing you have to realize is that an addict is in a dependent state, so yes, he’s a baby.

“The secret is that everyone really wants to get out of that state. Babies want to grow up. We think, ‘If I keep treating him like a baby, he’ll stay a baby forever.’ But that’s not really true. It’s that his tank is empty, and you need to fill the tank in order for him to move.” (Sony has actually started writing a book provisionally titled *Addicts Are Big Babies*, based on the premise that addicts have adult minds with infantile emotions.)

Addicts, Sony says, have actually figured out a way to deal with the painful places of life. “They found some kind of solution that gets them to a place where they’re happier. Mostly, they’re just extreme versions of the rest of us. Everyone has some anxiety or depression, but it’s not a disorder until you can’t function without your drug of choice — but don’t all of us do things to



Some former clients at The Village are sure it was the love and acceptance they found there that turned their life around

soothe our distress?”

The Village offers a loving embrace meant to replace that illusion-infused happy place of addictions. Most addicts have a deep sense of unworthiness, and Sony’s approach is to hit them over the head with love from day one: “We’re going to love you till you love yourself.”

“Everything has always been about what’s wrong with them,” Sony says. “We focus more on what’s right. A few years back, a Jewish guy came to me wearing a cross. I said, ‘Why do you want to wear that?’ He said, ‘I went to this group where they told me their savior loves me just the way I am.’ Why couldn’t he feel that way in his own Jewish community?”

Communal validation, Sony believes, is the first step when it comes to healing.

“Our sense of community has become fractured,” he says. “When that happens, we’re no longer dependent on each other, and that actually makes us more emotionally vulnerable. Look at third world countries — they’re starving and disease-infested, but their happiness quotient is always high, because there’s a sense of community and mutual need, which builds a strong sense of resilience and worthiness.”

The first stage of getting better, Sony believes, isn’t on them, but on the community that surrounds them.

About 90 percent of The Village’s residents grew up in the frum community, but addiction caused many to abandon Yiddishkeit. Sony isn’t concerned. “As they heal, they reconnect to the community,” he says. “It happens naturally. In fact, Judaism is a very big focus here, because ancient Jewish wisdom generally holds the answers to our issues. Our goal is to create a warm, Yiddishe environment here. Shabbos and Yom Tov are important, and we encourage the guys to invite guests.”

Eli Erenthal, The Village's COO, notes that the conventional wisdom in the therapy world has been to prioritize mental health over religion: If a person has been traumatized within the religious community, it's better to let go of religion and hope that the client, once healed, will find his way back. Yet Sony doesn't believe that leaving religion is what will heal the trauma.

"The trauma came from the people, not the religion," he says. "Sony is an out-of-the-box thinker. He does what works, not what's popular. He's not afraid of uncomfortable conversations that lead people to shift their perspective, create a new paradigm for themselves, and take action to move forward."

(Eli, who began his career working in Lakewood with Minyan Shelanu, a drop-in center similar to Our Place, happily followed Sony to The Village even when it wasn't sure that funds were available for his salary. But he didn't care, because for him, it was a charge more than a job — what he calls, "The greatest blessing of my life.")

Yiddishkeit isn't pushed on those coming from secular rehabs. "It's offered, not imposed," Sony says. "But our religious teachings on healing and family are front and center here."

Sony uses the example of shivah to illustrate Judaism's boundless psychological wisdom with respect to trauma and emotional wounds. When we lose someone dear to us and are feeling devastated, broken, or traumatized, we are not allowed to work or go out. The idea of shivah is that when someone is in that broken state, it's not on them to get better. It's on the rest of us. The community comes out to surround us and hold us, even if we feel we'd rather hide in our room and pull the covers over our head. We let them know, "We're going to just sit here in silence until you decide to talk. You are not supposed to fix yourself now. Your support team is here to rally around you. We're going to bring you food, make you your coffee. You've been through a traumatic, harrowing experience, so now it's on us."

Judaism mandates that we allow ourselves a week just to process the trauma, and after that we reintroduce the mourner to regular life stage by stage. And that, Sony says, is the opposite of the traditional approach to addictions, where we throw people straight back into life without that community support and understanding.

"Because when we keep pushing," he says, "they keep relapsing over and over again. That's why, when a guy walks into my program and asks, 'Okay, so what am I supposed to do?' I tell him, 'Nothing. If you can't feel the love and support from us, then you won't get better. We're here for you. Your job is to open your heart and believe that we love you, and then we're going to push our way in and give you so much love and make you so full that you'll just want to move on and do your own work.'"

Mendy Shusterman, who was a client at The Village four years ago, says it was the love and acceptance he found there that turned his life around.

"I felt loved and accepted for who I am," he says. But showering clients with love doesn't mean Sony shies away from telling them the hard truth. "Sony understands people deeply and sometimes even brutally, but he can give it to people straight in a way that they can receive it, and come away feeling like he's their best friend and loving father."

Mendy is now completing an MSW and working as a special programs director at The Village.

Unconditional

"You have to meet people where they're at and connect to them," Sony says. "For example, many addicts lie. I decided never to call them out on a lie, even though by now I have a

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good radar for their lying. A lie tells me a lot about them, what their priorities are, what they're trying to say. As they recover, they'll generally come clean."

He knows they'll test him. They'll try to burn bridges on purpose, make him want to drop them, check to see if there is really unconditional love.

"Sometime these grown men will do something so stupid and dysfunctional that it can drive you crazy," Sony says. "It could be ignoring the rules and not making his bed, or it could be the guy who takes ten sandwich cookies out of the box and breaks each one in half until he gets the perfect amount of cream, leaving a pile of broken cookies behind him. So, are you going to scream, 'You idiot, why are you breaking all the cookies?!' or will you let him know, 'You are still worthy?'"

Of course, Sony and his staff will discuss problematic behavior, but without assigning punishments or consequences. Instead, they ask themselves why so-and-so is not making his bed or going to work. Sometimes it's simply a way of testing the staff: *If I'm not compliant, will you still accept me?*

Sony has created what he calls the "tea intervention" for those who can't seem to move forward.

"So I'll have a guy who's in bed for five months, says he can't move. In other programs, they'll force him out. But I have a different system. If a guy doesn't get out of bed, he's all depressed, I go to the kitchen and make two steaming hot mugs of tea, go back to his room, give him one of the mugs and sit on the other bed with the other. I tell him, 'Look, I know this is rough, I've been there, sometimes you just can't get out of bed. If you need to be in bed, you can be in bed as long as you want, I just want to let you know that I care about you, that I love you, that you're good.'

"I do this every day; I keep bringing him tea. And a week later, he's back at work. Because no one really wants to stay in that baby state. In their *nefesh*, everyone wants to move forward. And



really, addicts have been treated like babies their whole life but in a bad way — punished, *potched* — and no one really wants to be there."

Recovery, Sony explains, runs through three phases: First, the addict's emotional "gas tank" has to be filled and the holes in the tank patched up. Next, they need to become independent, finding meaningful goals for themselves. Once they're stable and settled, the third phase involves giving back to the community, moving from independence to interdependence (such as AA recruiting recovered alcoholics to become sponsors of struggling ones).

Whatever Helps

Sony doesn't particularly like the term "social worker." He prefers to call himself a "helper."

"Psychotherapy is just one piece of larger puzzle," he says. "A helper tries to see the big picture. He thinks about all the issues a parent would think of. Does the client have insurance? Does he have friends? Does he need a job? Or, is he in the right job?"

Imagine, he says, a homeless person who is sent to a top-tier psychologist for \$800 an hour. But one or two sessions will not succeed in making him better. "If your whole life is toxic, one hour a week, even two or three hours a week, is not enough. In our community, everyone here is as important as a therapist and an integral part of the healing process. The community is what heals. While many professionals like to be saviors, the person's entire environment has to be part of the change."

But it's not just addicts who have a deep need for community and connection.

"Addicts are simply the canary in the coal mine," he says. "You shouldn't have to be an addict to get support and community. The answer to so many problems is in small, close communities. I started a group for men called Mevakshim Anonymous — we get together to help each other get through hard stuff and be there for each other. Last year, twelve young men from my program got married. They live near each other, and set up their own support group to help navigate their new lives."

Sony's humility means he's willing to try any approach that helps his guys. "Breath work, acupuncture, alternative medicine — I keep trying different methods to see what helps," he says. "I serve on a lot of boards; I help with a lot of programs. I'm an idealist; I want everyone to work together, and I love anyone who wants to help. In the end, I think the method per se that we use is not as important as the *makom*, the entire surrounding situation. *Makom* is also a name of Hashem, as when we tell a mourner *haMakom yenachem eschem*. Because Hashem is always in that place together with you." ●