

THE Jewish OBSERVER

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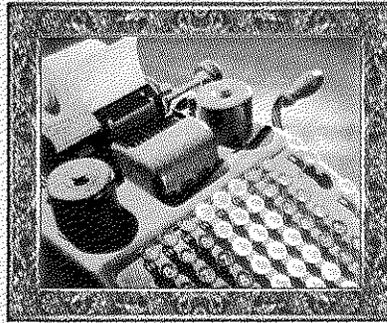
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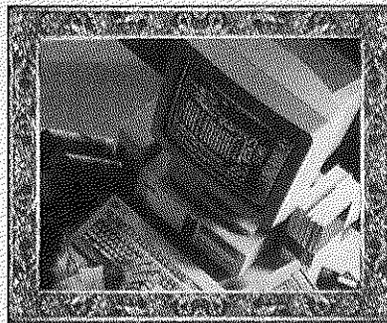


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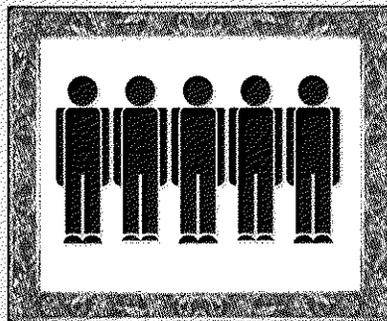
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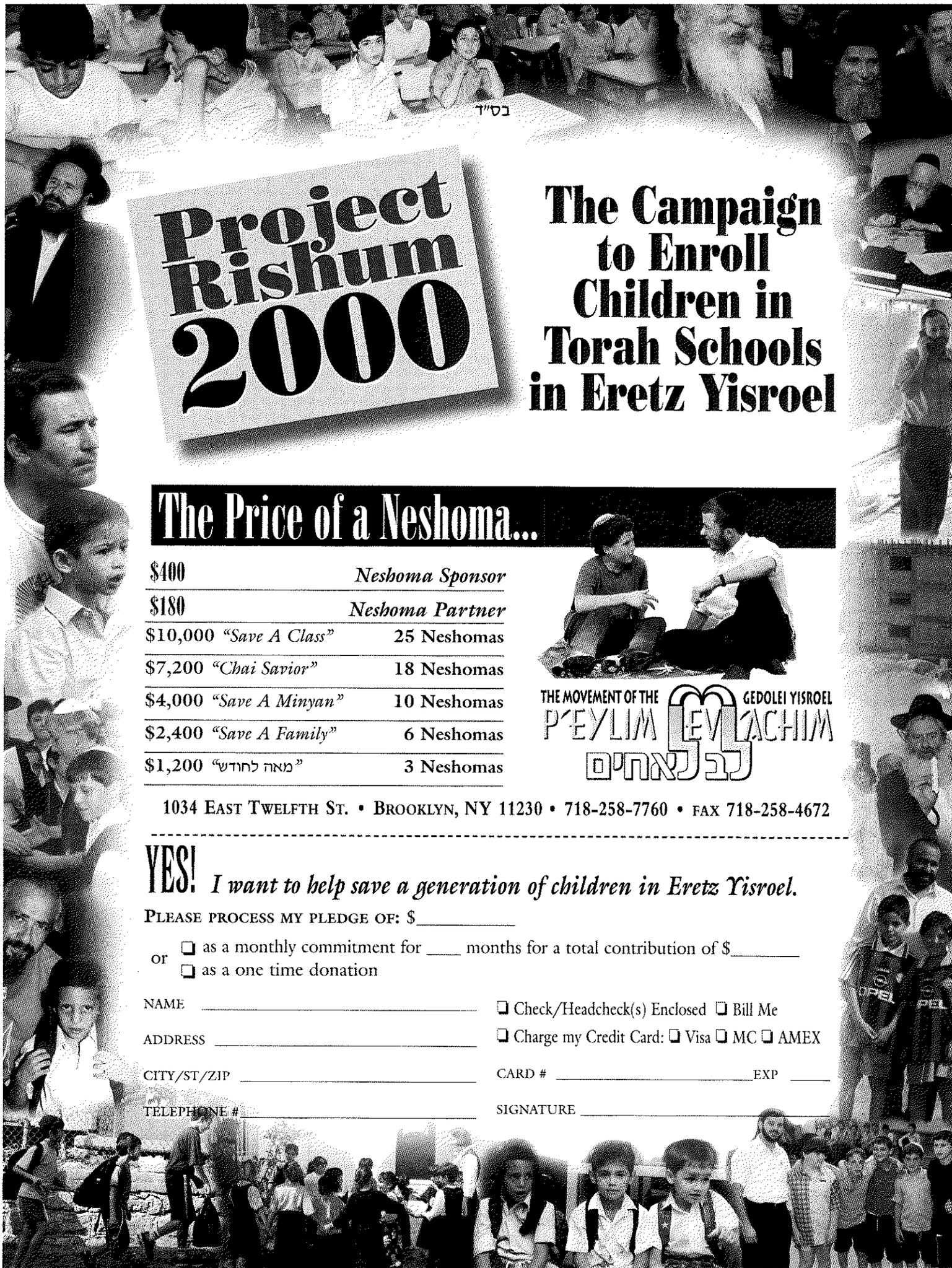
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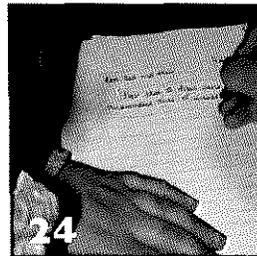
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On Religious – Secular Struggles in Israel

Responding to an Interview

Several months ago, Am Echad – the Agudath Israel-inspired educational outreach effort and media resource – arranged that I be interviewed by CBS-News on the issue of the polarization of the secular and religious populations of Israel. The interest of a national network in this topic would indicate that it is of utmost importance for the State of Israel, as well as for the network's 24 million viewers. I would add that this issue is also vital for the future of the Jewish people, as a whole.

The interviewer was a skilled journalist and his questions were on target. The discussion that follows is based on some of my responses to his questions.

I. BEHIND THE STRUGGLE

The first question he asked was: *What's behind the struggle over religion?*

My answer was that the source of it all is in difference in perspective as to what it means to be a Jew. To a religious Jew, in particular to a chareidi Jew, being Jewish is a source of pride. It means that we possess an unbelievably rich heritage – *Shabbos, YomTov, Torah and mitzvos*. It means that we have a meaningful

Rabbi Aharon Feldman, who was educated in American yeshivos, has been living in Israel for the past 38 years, where he serves as *Rosh Yeshivas Be'er Hatorah*, in Jerusalem. He is a member of the Rabbinical Council of Degel HaTorah and author of several books. The above article is based on an address delivered at the 77th Annual Convention of Agudath Israel of America, last November.

identity, which we transmit to our children, that we have the pride of being descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and that we have a glorious past and await an even more glorious future – in this world and in the world-to-come. The greatest reason for pride is that our lives have purpose, meaning, and nobility.

To a secular Israeli, on the other hand, Jewishness is something to be ashamed of. When I said this, the interviewer couldn't contain himself. "Israelis ashamed of being Jewish?" he interrupted me in amazement. "The Israelis I know are very proud of themselves!"

"Yes," was my answer. "They are proud that Israel has sports teams that compete internationally, that it has an army, a symphony orchestra, and universities – in short, they are proud that they have a country which is like all others. They are proud of being Israelis – but not of being Jews.

The historic and obvious definition of being Jewish is that we are a nation which received the Torah at *Har Sinai*, and that has lived by that Torah throughout the ages. Secular Israelis are ashamed of this. They deliberately hide it from their children. Schoolchildren are taught that Jews of Biblical times were unique not because they received the Torah but because of their military successes. Their history courses practically ignore the two thousand years of Diaspora – when we had no land or military conquests to be proud of – and skip from the Second Commonwealth to

what to them is the only merit-worthy event for the Jewish people since the destruction of the Temple: the founding of the State of Israel.

Why are they ashamed of the definition of Jewishness based on Torah? Because that is what separates Jews from the rest of the world, and what, in their opinion, makes the nations hate us. Torah means that we are a nation with a different vision of life, that we are born to serve G-d and that we must control our lusts for material success and physical pleasure. No nation has this vision of life, and therefore they feel that this definition of Jewishness is separatist – besides being old-fashioned and even backward. Thus true Jewishness, to the secular Israeli, is a problem. The solution that Zionism offered for the problem is to redefine what it means to be a Jew. Rather than the nation that received the Torah, Jews must be redefined as a nation like all other nations. In other words, a Jew is a Hebrew-speaking gentile.

The truth is that only a minority of Jews in Israel are ashamed of their Jewishness. The secular Sefardi Jews are not ashamed of it. Although their grandfathers and fathers were torn away from their heritage fifty years ago, their descendants have never lost their identity as Jews and they are proud of their Jewishness. This is why tens of thousands of them are now returning to Judaism, which is the main reason why the Shas party has 17 members in the Knesset. In addition, there are hundreds

of thousands of Ashkenazi Jews who are religious. Together, the Sefardim and the religious Ashkenazim make up a majority of the country. Thus the only ones that we can say are ashamed of their Jewishness are mainly the secular, Ashkenazi Jews – and they are a minority. Why should this worry us?

Because the secular Ashkenazi Jews, although a minority, control the State. They control the press, television and radio. They control the utilities, agriculture, the major industries, the labor unions. They control the schools and everything that is taught there; they control the judiciary and the police. They control the government, which owns 90% of the land in Israel and which has the power to tax or to support whatever they see fit. In short, nearly everything in Israel that matters is in the hands of this minority who are ashamed of their Jewishness.

II. "WHY DO THEY HATE YOU?"

If they would only be ashamed of their Judaism, this would be serious enough. What is worse is that this shame leads them to hate those who practice Torah and *mitzvos*, and to do everything they can to undermine religious life.

This is the second question my interviewer asked me: "*Tom Lapid, who ran a blatantly anti-religious campaign, received six seats in the Knesset. Obviously there are a lot of people out there who hate you. Why do they hate you?*"

My answer was that they hate us for several major reasons. First of all, we refuse to submit to their program of remaking the Jew. We reject everything they stand for. We do not accept their definition of Jewishness nor their definition of life itself. We do not approve of their society, which is based on the pursuit of lusts and material success. They interpret this rejection as meaning that we look down at them as inferior human beings. And this engenders hatred, just as anyone hates someone who looks down at him.

Second, they are terrified that our way of life may prevail in the country

and that we might someday interfere with the way they want to conduct their lives. They are especially terrified that their children might be influenced by us, as so many have already been, to return to Judaism. They are aware that their culture is empty, that they have no way of life to offer to their children. This is why tens of thousands of young Israelis flock to the Indian state of Goa every year searching for spiritual fulfillment. What would happen if they would begin flocking to Judaism instead and start keeping Torah and *mitzvos*? This would

In spite all of this, the religious community is flourishing. Why? Because we have responded to this problem the way Jews have always responded to threats to their survival. We have turned to Torah learning, to building *chadorim* and *yeshivos*.

mean the end of everything that Zionism stands for.

This would mean that they would have to return to being ashamed of their Jewishness. This terrifies them.

This is why the establishment has joined forces with the Reform movement and uses all its legal and financial power to see that Reform is recognized as an alternative to Torah Judaism. Reform Judaism is about to be recognized as full-fledged Judaism with the power to determine how money should be allocated for religious purposes. The secularists are preparing a safety net

for themselves. If some day Israelis do decide to turn to religion, it will at least be able to direct them to Reform, claiming that it – and not Orthodoxy – is authentic Judaism. Reform Judaism is not so "embarrassing." As a Reform Jew one can still be so-called "religious" and remain a Hebrew-speaking gentile.

A Third Reason Why They Hate Us

But there is a third reason why they hate us. They hate us because they are jealous of us. They know that their society is a failure. Zionism as an ideal is dead, and even religious Zionism is in the process of falling apart. Secular Israel has become a spiritual wasteland. Ben Gurion said that Israel would become "a light to the nations." Instead, according to a front-page report in *The New York Times*, Israel is the world's greatest exporter of prostitution. Another Israel export is the famous – or infamous – Israeli mafia. Israel's latest contribution to world culture is that it has become a center of "trance," a form of ear-shattering music which induces a trance-like state in its participants, especially for those who first get high on drugs. A recent performance in Tel Aviv of "trance" drew 50,000 youths even though it had not even been advertised.

Violence in the schools has reached such a level that it is a high-priority concern of the government. 50% of all teachers have had an experience of being threatened by a student. 15% of the students missed more than three days of school because of violence. The response of the government was a massive advertising campaign urging the public, "Battle Violence." What the schools have not been able to transmit in twelve years of education, they hoped to teach on billboards and in the fleeting moments that a message can be read from the side of a passing bus. The phenomenon of violence and the general level of low morality mean that secular Israel society is in serious social trouble.

On the other hand, the religious community is a viable, thriving society. It is a community whose members are filled

with concern for one another. It cares for its elderly and its poor. It has hundreds of *gemachim* (loan funds) and organizations to assist the needy and the sick. There is respect for elders. Father and mother, son and daughter can communicate with each other. There is a *Shabbos* and there are holidays when families get together to share conversation and experiences. There is no generation gap. Its youth is directed and purposeful - and, of course, free of violence. Ask a religious student if he recalls anyone ever having brought a weapon to yeshiva - or even having punched a fellow student - and he will burst out in laughter at the absurdity of the question. Why should secular Israelis not be jealous!

Discrimination, Without Apologies

This jealousy, coupled with the terror that we will influence their way of life, breeds hatred. The hatred breeds discrimination. There is police brutality towards religious Jews which often goes unpunished. The

press consistently vilifies religious Jews. When an Arab commits a crime, the media never identify him as an Arab - in order to protect his civil rights. But when a religious Jew is only suspected of a crime, the media immediately trumpet him as a "chareidi."

In a public speech a judge referred to religious Jews as lice, and the head of the supreme court who was present complimented him, saying, "Well done." The judge did not offer even an apology nor was there any reprimanding action taken against him. Recently, a man arrested for physically attacking a major rabbi in Tzefas was fined \$200. When someone deliberately spilled a cup of tepid coffee on Knesset Member Yael Dayan, he was sentenced to three years of prison.

The courts slowly whittle away at *Shabbos* as a day of rest. It is not too difficult to foresee a future when stores and factories will be open on *Shabbos*. When this happens, a *Shomer Shabbos* storekeeper or worker will find it hard to compete with *mecha'lelei Shabbos* for

customers or for employment. Already, the huge company, Intel, has been reported to be refusing to hire religious workers for its Israeli operation.

Just three months ago, the Education Ministry asked that 40% be cut from the allocations to religious education while, at the same time, it asked that funding for Arab education be increased by 257%. The rulings of the rabbinical courts (*batei din*) with respect to marriage, conversion, and *mamzeirus* have been overruled so many times by the secular courts that their power has been virtually eroded. The result is that we have no unequivocal source of knowledge in the state of Israel to determine if someone is an halachically permitted Jew.

Most frightening of all, there is a committee sitting right now trying to decide whether yeshiva students should be drafted. If such a law is passed, even if it is not enforced or even if the yeshiva students go to jail rather than obey it, this will be a tragedy of major proportions. *Yeshivos* will then be outside



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the law, with everything that this entails – ineligible for any rights, privileges and support.

In spite all of this, the religious community is flourishing. Why? Because we have responded to this problem the way Jews have always responded to threats to their survival. We have turned to Torah study, to building *chadorim* and *yeshivos*. This is how Jews have survived for thousands of years. This is how post-World War II Judaism in America was rebuilt. This is how the Torah community in Israel was rebuilt. Without Torah study, we are lost. With it, we survive and flourish.

This is not to say that the religious community in Israel is without faults. We have, as does Jewry in the U.S., a problem regarding dropouts. We are not self-critical enough and we place too much emphasis upon the welfare of our communities, even though this might be at the expense of *Klal Yisroel*.

III. "BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?"

But what about the future? This is the final question that my interviewer asked me: *Where will this polarization lead?*

My answer is that never in history has a lie been able to sustain itself indefinitely on a national level. Fascism was a lie that could not sustain itself. Communism after many years of existence disappeared practically overnight. The definition of a Jew as a Hebrew-speaking gentile is the same sort of lie.

Because of this lie, polarization will continue. The secular will become more secular while the religious will become more religious. The ruling minority that is ashamed of its Jewishness will push Israel more and more to abandon whatever Jewish identity it has left.

To a large extent, this is happening as the State slowly loses much of its inherent Jewish identity. There are 400,000 non-Jewish Russian immigrants, 250,000 non-Jewish foreign workers, and one-and-a-quarter million Arabs, whom the government is keen on making full-fledged members of the society. The government runs pro-

grams for Jewish-Arab youth groups where boys and girls mix, even though this is a clear encouragement of inter-marriage. There is already much talk in the Knesset and among intellectuals about Israel ceasing to be a Jewish state but merely a state of its citizens.

The time is not far off when Israelis will be faced with the decision: do they want to be Jews or not. As the *pasuk* tells us, *Ve'af gam zos... lo me'astim ke'hafer berisi itam*: I believe that the *bris Avos*, the covenant that the Almighty made with our forefathers, will always ensure that the bulk of the Jewish people will refuse to abandon their Jewishness. This means that when faced with the decision whether to remain Jews or not, the secular Israeli will start searching for his roots. This is already happening to a remarkable degree, as an enormous, unprecedented interest in spiritual values has become a powerful force on the Israeli scene today.

We Must Prepare Ourselves

In order to make way for this massive acceptance of Judaism, we have to be ready to accept the secular Israeli back into the fold. In particular, we have to prepare our communities and our yeshiva *bachurim* to be able to reach out to them. We have to be able to cogently explain why secular Judaism

makes no sense and why the only definition of the prototype Jew is someone who keeps Torah and *mitzvos*. More important, we have to learn to treat secular Israelis with understanding and to relate to them with pity and compassion – not with hatred, anger and triumphalism, which are so common now. We have to begin viewing the average Israeli as he is: a misguided Jew misled by self-styled visionaries who, in their folly, believed that turning Jews into gentiles would solve all Jewish problems, but who instead led the nation to a moral, social and political dead end. The country is ready for a massive return to Judaism; a change in our attitude will help accelerate the process.

In Yerushalyim, there is a famous Chassidic Rebbe to whom people come from all over for his prayers and blessings. For some reason, his Rebbetzin has a special love for baalei teshuva (secular Jews who return to their heritage and become observant of Torah and mitzvos), and goes to enormous lengths to help them in any way she can. No one knew why she developed this affinity, until recently my wife attended a Sheva Berachos celebration which the Rebbetzin, despite her advanced age, insisted on holding for a newly married baal teshuva couple. At that celebration, the Rebbetzin told the guests her family's story.

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Her father was a grandson of the Bnei Yissas'char, one of the great exponents of Chassidus, and a great teacher and saint. However, when he was young, he was caught up in the Zionist frenzy of those times, and left the fold to join a Shomer Hatzair group. This group went up to the Land of Israel where he went to work building roads and took up life on a kibbutz. The

young man knew that his grandfather had been a great Jew, and even felt himself, at least on one occasion, being pulled to return to Judaism, but he ignored these feelings.

One day on the kibbutz, he saw a fellow kibbutznik sitting before a pile of tefillin, tearing them apart and throwing the parshios (scrolls contained within the tefillin) into a garbage can.

He couldn't contain himself. "Are you crazy? What are you doing?" he cried out. "Those scrolls have the noblest ideas in all of human literature!"

His friend merely looked at him quizzically and kept on pulling the tefillin apart, as if to say, "So what?"

The Bnei Yissas'char's grandson was so shocked that he got up and left the kibbutz. He travelled into Yerushalayim and wandered the streets in his shorts and sandals, not knowing where he was going. Finally someone invited him into a beis midrash (synagogue) and began studying Torah with him. For the next two years, he kept on returning to that beis midrash, and became not only a religious Jew but a learned one. He ended up marrying the daughter of a well-known Chassidic rebbe and together they gave birth to a daughter who ultimately became the Rebbetzin with the special love for baalei teshuva.

We have a similar situation before us in our times. There are kibbutznikim tearing apart our tefillin and throwing the parshios into garbage cans. But the Jewish soul cannot abide this. Jews will some day realize that they possess a Torah, which elevates them above all the nations of the world. They will recognize that nothing equals the wisdom of our sages, and no society lives by the noble values by which the religious Jews live. Some day they too will all walk away from their kibbutzim, but we have to be there to invite them in and to teach them.

May that day come soon and may all of Klal Yisroel return to Avihem shebaShamayim (their Father in Heaven). May we see the time when the recognition of G-d fills the world, and Klal Yisroel and all of mankind will recognize that the purpose of creation is the service of Hakadosh Baruch Hu through Torah and mitzvos.

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Twenty-four years after leaving the height of the Israeli entertainment world, Rabbi Uri Zohar remains the most popular celebrity in Israel. Former star of stage and screen – best known for his antics on his long running television talk-show – he abandoned the glamor of fame and fortune for a Torah-observant lifestyle, resulting in his becoming the highest profile Ba'al Teshuva in the State of Israel. The details of his return are recounted in his autobiography, *Waking Up Jewish*.

After years of total immersion in Torah study, he has emerged once again in the public eye – this time, as a leading spokesman for the Teshuva Movement.

Israel's Children: BATTLEGROUND FOR THE FUTURE

BIRTH PANGS OF REB URI'S NESHAMA

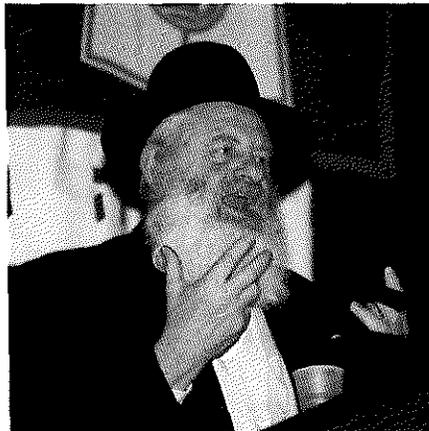
As you probably know, I am a *ba'al teshuva*. I met the savior of my life, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchak Silberman, at a party. I had come from the Shomer HaTzair – they inculcated us with all the depravities of the world, and I learned well. I was nothing at all. They virtually abducted us from Torah, costing me 40 years of my life. For this I do not forgive them.

At this party, Rabbi Silberman uttered one sentence to me that saved my life: "I can prove to you that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* gave the Torah on *Har Sinai*, and this is the Torah that we have now."

I said, "What did you say? You said 'prove'?" For me, religious faith was something that humans had invented. "What do you mean 'prove'?"

I arranged an appointment with him, and he set out to prove his claim to me. After three sessions, I came home convinced. But I could not imagine myself doing even one *mitzva*. I just put a *yarmulke* on my head, and looked in the mirror, *va'ani choshech be'ainayim*,

This article is based on Rabbi Uri Zohar's presentation at the Keynote Session of the recent 77th National Convention of Agudath Israel of America.



I was stunned. Where do I begin? *Shabbos*? How can I keep *Shabbos*? But the thought of my children kept me at it. Why should they be destined to *Gehinnom*?

So what should I do? Then *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* gave me an opening, *pis'chuli pesach shel machat* – the proverbial eye of the needle that expands. I don't know how I thought of it, but I felt that if I take one step, I will become open and I will change. I will do something, and then *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* will help me progress further. I was not aware of what *Chazal* say about *na'aseh venishma*, "I will do and [then] I will listen, and understand," but instinctively I felt that this was the course to pursue.

I decided to begin with the smallest *mitzva*. I was wrestling with this quandary for three days, because I realized that whatever I accepted would be for all my life. Everybody can make a change. We only have to make a commitment. You begin with five minutes

a day: "I will learn five more minutes." After a year, you've conquered worlds... if you keep your commitment. Somehow I understood this then. I thought, what's the easiest *mitzva* to perform? I accepted upon myself to light two candles in honor of *Shabbos*, every *erev Shabbos*, with a *beracha*. Is there a smaller *pesach shel machat*? This was the opening. Because I accepted it seriously, earnestly, I knew I would keep it. I even said to myself, *Even if you are going to regret it a second later, you keep it!* And this is what I kept.

A week later, I asked Rabbi Silberman, "Is there a minimum of *mitzvos*? I don't want the maximum. I just want to get out of *Gehinnom* and sneak into the back row in Gan Eden, not the first row."

He said to me, "Yes. There is a minimum. Five things. *Shabbos*, *tahara*, *kashrus*, *tefillin* and *berachos*. This is it."

"This is it?" I asked for details: "What do you mean, *Shacharis*?"

"You want the minimum? *Birchos Kriyas Shema*, *Kriyas Shema*, and *Tefilla*."

"How long does it take?"

"Ten minutes."

"Ten minutes? That's all? Okay."

I began slowly. My wife, nothing. She didn't want to keep anything. A month,

two months. There was no other choice. What did the future hold for us?... We would have to break up our family. It was a tragedy.

TRICKLE-UP INSPIRATION

Then a miracle happened. The children saw me putting on *tefillin*, saying *Kriyas Shema* – my oldest son was then ten years old. He said to me, “Father, why do you put your hands on your eyes when you say *Kriyas Shema*?”

I explained everything I knew to him. After two months, he said to me, “I want to learn Torah.”

My wife didn’t say anything. I took him into the car. “*Baruch Hashem*,” I said. I drove him to the nearest Talmud Torah, and enrolled him there. There wasn’t even

one Talmud Torah in Tel Aviv. Today there are tens of Talmud Torah schools. After two days, his manner of speech was different. The look in his eyes was different. He was a happy boy.

Then, one day, our daughter – she was still in the *chiloni* school – came home and she began to talk to her mother about her friend, who did this and that.... Our son, Ephraim, said, “*Ima*, this is *lashon hara* (evil speech – i.e. slander).” She asked, “What do you mean, ‘*lashon hara*’? It’s true. What we are saying is true.”

“This is what the Torah says.” He explained to her the differences between *lashon hara*, *motzi shem ra*, and *rechilus*, as well as some related subjects and their implications.

Then I saw something happening to her. The *Yiddishe* sparks in her heart were stirred. There was hope.

One day, I came into the kitchen, and Ephraim was doing homework. He stood up. I went out, he stood up again. I went in, he stood up. I said to him, “Sit still! Why are you getting up every minute? Are you a human yo-yo?”

He said to me, “*Abba*, *kibbud av* (respect for one’s father).”

I stopped, frozen... like a stone. I almost cried. For the first time in my life, my son was giving me *kavod*! More than that, he started to bring Torah into our home. He began to talk Torah. He discussed *parshas hashavua* at the *Shabbos* table. I didn’t know what to say.

I did not know how to read *Rashi*, but he did; they taught him *Rashi* in Talmud Torah. I did not know anything. I felt that I had to become worthy of his *kavod*. That’s why I began to study Torah.

Learning Torah, I felt the sweetness, and the wisdom of our heritage. I was stunned: “How did they rob us of this treasure?” Because of the child, I began to learn Torah.

This is what is happening today. We can create a revolution. This is not fantasy. Because of the terrible situ-

ation in the media and in the streets, parents yearn for the stability and security of a Torah education. A father can fool himself. He can convince himself of the veracity of all sorts of spurious ideologies. But when parents see their children involved in drugs or promiscuity, and the child is only 12 or 13 years old... when they witness children cursing their father and mother – and he is that father, she is that mother – they become desperate in their search for decency and integrity. And they realize that they will only find it in Torah.

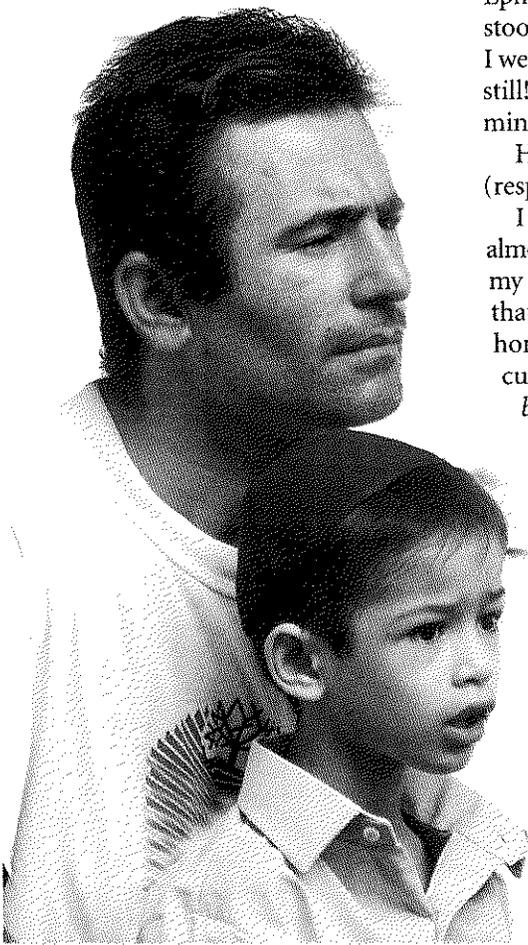
BIRTH OF OUR NATION’S SPIRIT

Israel today is a tortured place, full of pain. And this is the place from where *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* will appear in His full glory – speedily, in our days – because we know the *hanhaga* of *Hashem Yisbarach*, the pattern of Divine conduct of affairs. There is an interior and an exterior to Jewry, a *guf* and a *neshama*. And *Yerushalayim-Tzion* is the place of the *neshama* of us all. We must all help in the birth of this *neshama*.

Baruch Hashem, I was *zocheh* to hear the Philadelphia *Rosh Yeshiva*, Rabbi Elya Svei שליט"א, when he recounted the words of the Vilna *Gaon*: The final stages of our extended *Galus* are similar to labor pains, and the last seventy years of this *Galus* are represented by the seventy words of Chapter 20 in *Tehillim*: “*Ya’ancha*... May *Hashem* answer you on the day of distress.” During these penultimate days, the pain intensifies.

This woman in labor is likened to the *ayelet hashachar* – the hind whose birth canal is constricted; and she emits a series of seventy cries. *Hashem* then dispatches a snake who bites the *ayala*. The venom enters her bloodstream, her womb expands, and she gives birth. So, too, in our current situation of pain, we anticipate the imminent *ge’ulah*, when *Am Yisroel* must give birth to its *Neshama*.

It is not simple. The baby cannot emerge. It is contained by powerful forces that press against it from all sides. We in *Eretz Yisroel* are at the core of this critical situation. We see the snake. It



With the historic success of the Lev L’Achim enrollment effort, secular parents are registering their children in Yeshivos as a first step on their own journey to *teshuva*.

wants to bite – to kill everybody. You do not feel it here, in the United States, but we feel it there. They are fighting against Torah with all their might.

I must confess that I was incredulous when I heard that Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik זצ"ל had said that people are under the erroneous assumption that establishing the *Medina* was the goal of the secular Zionists, and that in order to achieve this goal, they must on occasion fight against Torah. This is incorrect. In truth (he said), their primary goal is to negate Torah. Creating the State is only an excuse. Unfortunately, the events of the past decades bear him out. For that reason, we need help, especially now that the birth process has begun.

A GRASSROOTS REVOLUTION

I have assumed a role among the army of volunteers on behalf of P'eylim/Lev L'Achim. I travel the Israeli countryside and I talk to the people. Something revolutionary has happened these past few years. Several leaders in *kiruv* asked me to talk publicly on a large scale. I was reluctant, but the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Elazar Schach שליט"א, urged me to do so. I joined a group of articulate, dynamic *Rabbanim* on a speaking tour, and we witnessed a miracle. Thousands of people came to hear us. We needed a police presence in some places to preserve order. And then we saw a revolution erupt.

Acting on the directives of the *Gedolei Torah* of *Eretz Yisroel*, with the encouragement of *Gedolei Torah* of America, Lev L'Achim launched an operation dispatching *bonei Torah* volunteers across the countryside. In effect, every *ben Torah* was asked to devote at least one night per week to going out and knocking on doors, and talking to the uncommitted. And miraculously, thousands of families began to come home to Torah. But with a family, it goes slowly. It takes months and months. Then, a year and a half ago, Rabbi Aharon Leib Steinman שליט"א called a meeting of the administration of P'eylim/Lev L'Achim and said to us, "Go

for the children." We couldn't understand this approach. It is not in our hands to send children to a Torah school if their parents haven't made a commitment to *teshuva*. Nonetheless, he said, "Go for the children!"

So we went for the children, and we saw a miracle. The *sitra achra* – the Forces of Evil – actually strengthened the impact of our efforts, and contributed to the parents' becoming *ba'alei teshuva*. Whatever the social and cultural deterioration in other countries, in Israel it is much worse. Because it is a place of *kedusha* (intense sanctity), as a by-product, *rishus* and *achzariyus* – wickedness and brutality – are also more extreme here. Children accost their parents with violence – both verbal and physical. The parents are confronting a disastrous situation. They see their children become addicted to drugs, promiscuity – I dare not detail the terrible things they are involved in... Television channels in Israel broadcast things that no one would dare to show anywhere else in the world. America is a puritan country by comparison. The people in control of the media have lost their minds.

Am Yisroel without Torah loses everything. We are by nature the most daring of the nations. If we ignore the limits imposed by the Torah, then we are liable to commit the most terrible things. So parents seek to shelter their children from this horrible onslaught. And they respond to the Lev L'Achim efforts.

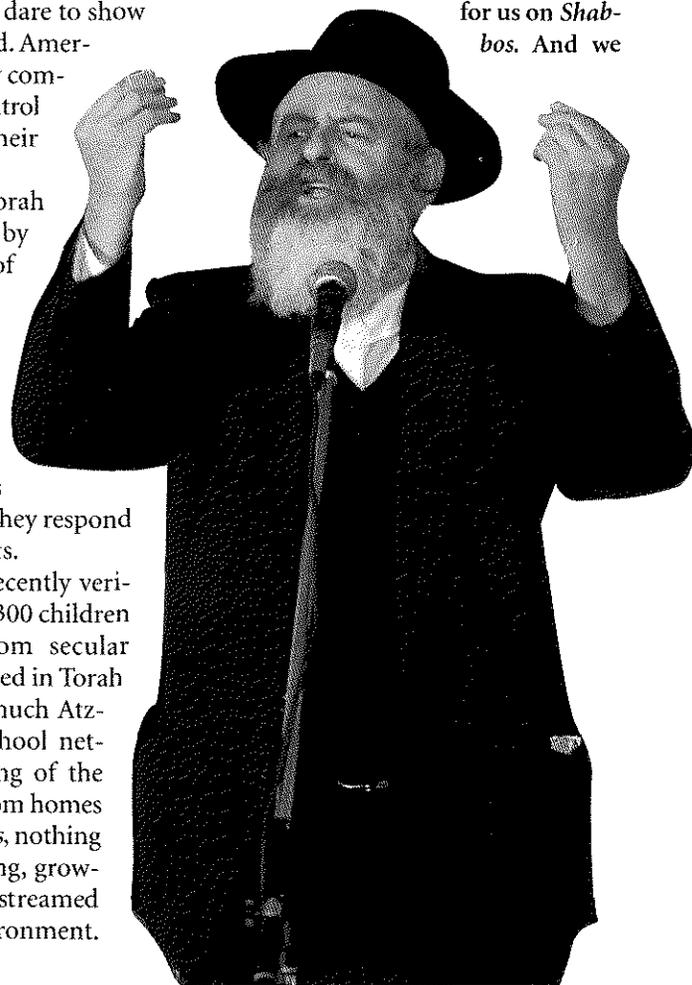
Lev L'Achim offices recently verified every name of the 7,300 children that were recruited from secular homes and newly registered in Torah schools – including Chinuch Atzmai, Shas, and other school networks – in the beginning of the year. Of these children from homes that did not keep *Shabbos*, nothing at all, 5,736 were adapting, growing and becoming mainstreamed in their new Torah environment.

Lev L'Achim accomplished this with 3,000 volunteers and 500 professionals, including 250 who were hired especially for the *Rishum-Enrollment Campaign*.

This process is the birth of *Klal Yisroel's neshama*, for as we save thousands and thousands of children, they, in turn, change their homes. It is not fantasy. It is fact. Just as it happened in my own house.

Notes From the Revolution

Two women from Afula called me on my radio talk show. They said, "We are children of Moroccan families in Afula from 25, 30 years ago. There was a Shomer HaTzair club there, where they enrolled us and taught us not to obey our parents. 'They are primitive, and they don't know anything,' they told us. 'We will make you liberal and modern!' They convened *kumsitzen* and made bonfires for us on *Shabbos*. And we





Peylim/Lev L'Achim mentors provide encouragement and direction to thousands

stopped keeping *Shabbos*.

"Two years ago, this clubhouse was vacant. The movement is bankrupt. They don't have anything to sell anymore. All their ideologies empty, depleted. Now Lev L'Achim took over the clubhouse, and turned it into a Torah school." This was done with funding provided by the foundation established by *Gedolei Yisroel* – Keren Nesivos Moshe (*al shem* Rabbi Moshe Sherer זצ"ל.)

These two women brought their children there, and as they announced on the radio program, "We are the

happiest women in the world. In the place where Shomer Ha'Tzair had taught us to defy our parents, they are now teaching our children to obey their parents."

This is in Afula.

Lev L'Achim received a request to open a school near Tzoran – an upscale exclusive suburb of Netanya – where wealthy people are now building villas. We could not find a suitable place, so – again with funding from the Keren Nesivos Moshe, our partners in the revolution – we purchased a house in Tzoran. As soon as we opened the school, the community began organizing demonstrations, which they kept up for months. They came every day, making a racket to disturb the classes. They came with dogs to frighten the children. They scribbled obscene messages on the walls of the building. They kept up these disrupting activities for months. As a result, the original enrollment of twenty children was depleted by five. Fifteen children remained, sitting and learning Torah in Tzoran, to the accompaniment of barking dogs, whistles and shouts from the outside. After a few months, the demonstrators went away, and the school continued.

In the meantime, parents in the neighborhood began to take note of the children – of how they come to school, how they leave, how they talk, how they dress, how they make *mesibot* for Succot, for Shabbat – and they heard the songs. To make a long story short, 96 children are currently enrolled in this school. That is a growth of 650% in one year. Do you own any hot, high-tech stock that has grown similarly?

This past November, two parents in the school who had been among the demonstrators against its establishment, approached Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin, the Director General of *P'eylim/Lev L'Achim*. While as a matter of principle the school has separate classes for boys and girls, the second grade is an exception. It has only sixteen children in it, and if they were to be divided – 8 boys, 8 girls – neither

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would be large enough to justify a class. The second graders are only six years old, so it was felt that they could be kept together. These two erstwhile demonstrators now were demanding separate classes for the boys and girls. He told them, "Wait a bit. In a month or two, we'll have more children, and we'll separate them."

They asked him, "Would you send you child to such a class?"

"No."

"We also want separate classes."

BATTLE TO THE FINISH

As the *Rosh Hayeshiva* said, our era is a time of national birth. The more the secularists see the Torah forces succeeding, the more they challenge us. We are not spreading the word of our triumphs. The Leftists are. They broadcast our successes in the media, spreading it all over the country. They are mobilizing to fight for every child. It is not incidental that they assigned the Ministry of Education to Yossi Sarid, the fiercest foe of the *Olam HaTorah*. He took charge of the education of Israel's children, and under his ministry, attempts were made to close the Shuvu schools in Nahariya and Natzeret Illit. They are fighting against the *Reshet HaChinuch HaTorani*; they are curtailing its funding. They are fighting with all their might, because they know that the future lies with our children. The children not only determine the future, they can change entire families... now.

There are scores of groups that are involved in reaching out to our non-religious brothers, *Baruch Hashem*, realizing great achievements. I am not involved in all of them. But I do know what is happening in Lev L'Achim, Arachim, Torah V'Emunah, Ohr Somayach... and many more. Our destiny as a people depends on the developments on these frontlines, because this is where the soul of our people will emerge. This is the basic, most challenging struggle of our time.

Rabbi Pinchas Scheinberg שליט"א is my *Mora D'Asra*. He spoke at a gathering, telling us that we are impeding *Hashem's*

agenda. He has demands from us, and we are resisting. There will be a time – quite imminent – when there will be no allowances or compromises. When the day arrived for *Am Yisroel* to leave Egypt, there was no postponement. They could not say, "Let's wait another day." According to *Chazal*, the Jews left Egypt: "Trusting in G-d and Moshe His servant." But only 20%, the dedicated few, responded. They left everything behind and went to the *midbar*, with children, little babies. *Where will food come from? How will we have water?* No questions were asked.

We are not requested to go to the *midbar*. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* knows that we are very frail. But we are expected to understand what is happening. It's a birth. The time has come. I feel it. I'm not the only one. The country is in agony. Help this birth. Help this soul to emerge, to be born, to come to life.

The children are our future. They can change the face of the whole country. They can change the face of the entire nation. But we must do our part. ■

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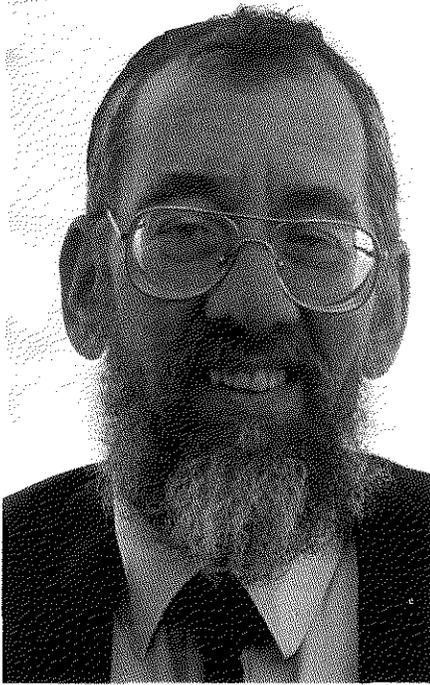
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A DAILY PRESENCE AT THE WALL

“Have you been Schusterized?” a woman asked a recent *baal teshuva*. She was referring, of course, to Rabbi Meir Schuster, who is responsible for a good percentage of admissions to the *ba’alei teshuva yeshivos* in Jerusalem, resulting in countless numbers of Jews becoming observant.

His tall figure, a daily presence at Jerusalem’s Western Wall, lends itself to the work he does. At 6’2” he towers over most people, all the better to size up his audience. His eyes coalesce like a zoom lens, searching for tourists most ripe to learn about the meaning of their Jewishness. It is the Western Wall he chooses because it is the Wall that brings out the *pintele Yid* in practically every Jew.

He views a backpack at the Wall as an open invitation to open worlds.

“Do you have the time?” he’ll ask.

It’s the oldest line in the world, but it usually works.

Zelda Cutler is a writer and photographer living in Spring Valley, NY, with her family. She has written and photographed extensively, on assignment, for national papers and magazines. This is her second appearance in *The Jewish Observer*.

“Working” the Wall wouldn’t be unusual except that Schuster has been doing it almost every day for twenty-seven years.

Why does he bother?

“Someone has to do it,” he told us in a private interview. “What the Nazis couldn’t do to us we’re doing to ourselves. We’re losing more Jews through assimilation and intermarriage than from pogroms and the Holocaust put together.”

So Meir Schuster goes to the Wall day in and day out, talking to all sorts of people – rich, poor, young and old.

The irony is that Schuster is shy. A former roommate of his at Yeshiva Ner Yisroel in Baltimore said that Schuster listened well but hardly ever initiated a conversation.

Yet Schuster defies his nature to do what he feels is his mission: selling Judaism to Jews. His target at the Wall is mostly single men and women, 20 to 30 years old. “It’s easier to work with this age group because they have less responsibility than others,” said Schuster. “They’re usually free to move about. They’re also more open to changing their lifestyles.”

His role has become more difficult over the nearly three decades he’s been

stationed at the Wall.

“I used to be able to pick out a Jewish kid right away just by looking at him,” said Schuster, “but now, due to intermarriage, Jews are no longer distinguishable.”

“In the 70’s, it was easier to get people to go to classes,” he added. “There was a fever in the air. It was a carryover from the hippie generation. Students were touring the world and searching for ‘truth.’ But this generation isn’t as open to going to a yeshiva as they used to be. Times have changed and so have mindsets. That’s where Heritage House comes in.”

SAFE, ACCEPTING... AND JEWISH

Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, executive director of Heritage House, said, “Meir Schuster has a direct approach when he meets secular tourists at the Wall. He asks them if they want to go to a yeshiva class or join a family for a *Shabbos* meal – but many people aren’t prepared to make quick decisions about these things. They sometimes feel intimidated by this ‘in your face’ method. That’s why Rabbi Schuster opened the Heritage House hostels.

“At Heritage House,” added Rabbi

Edelstein, "there's a warm, accepting environment where visitors don't feel overwhelmed with the 'rules' of religion. The atmosphere is Jewish and 'safe.' Over rugelach and coffee, visitors can be led into a discussion of why they came to Israel and what it means to be Jewish without having to make any decisions. In this relaxed atmosphere, the suggestion of going to a yeshiva class or joining a family for a *Shabbos* meal will often get a more receptive response."

It's because of this desire to instill Jewish consciousness in the young that Heritage House was born. Pained by the fact that Jewish tourists stayed in Christian and Arab hotels, Rabbi Schuster founded Heritage House in Jerusalem in 1984. Consisting of two hostels – one for men and one for women – Heritage House enables Jews to spend time in the Jewish quarter rather than the Moslem or Christian sections. And if Jews want to learn more about their Jewishness, all the better. No one can beat the price of Heritage House: sleeping quarters are absolutely free. In fact, the hostel offers a bonus – a *gratis* breakfast for anyone who'll attend a class at one of the *yeshivos* for *ba'alei teshuva*. And if one class turns into two or three, lunch will be thrown in, too, at the expense of the yeshiva.

A recent graduate from Harvard recalled his reactions to Heritage House. "We stopped in there one *Shabbos* for *shalosh seudos*," he said. "I was wearing shorts but no one seemed to mind. We all sang and talked. Some people asked questions about Judaism and the staff answered them without forcing ideas down anyone's throats. The atmosphere was friendly and relaxed. There was a nice energy in the room."

CAPACITY TO IDENTITY WITH SEARCHERS

Schuster can identify with young people searching for their roots since he himself was a relatively late starter. In fact, his Jewish identity was sparked at the age of 14, in his native Milwaukee. To catch up in his Hebrew studies, he learned privately with Rabbi

Abraham Yehoshua Twerski every day after school. He blossomed there. In 1958, Schuster went to Bais Medrash LaTorah in Skokie, Illinois, transferring two years later to Ner Israel, where he learned for seven years and subsequently received *semicha*. In late 1968, he and his new wife, the former Esther Garfinkle, made *aliya* to Israel.

Shortly after his arrival, he struck up a conversation with a tourist on Jaffa Street in Jerusalem. Rabbi Schuster asked the fellow, "How would you like to meet a holy man?" and introduced him to Rabbi Noach Weinberg, the *Rosh Yeshiva* of Aish HaTorah. The tourist was inspired to learn Torah. As for Rabbi Schuster, the incident launched what was to become a lifetime of dedication to *kiruv*. Galvanized by his success, he began many such conversations with young people.

I. Jonathan's Tale

One such person was Jonathan Bloom (not his real name), a computer specialist, residing in Monsey, N.Y., with his wife and five children. Back in 1975, he was at the Wall when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see a tall, thin, unassuming man who happened to be Rabbi Meir Schuster.

"First he asked me what time it was,

and then where I was from," said Mr. Bloom. "I told him I was working on Kibbutz Bar Am, up North. He asked if I'd go to a class about Judaism. I said no way.

"About two weeks later," Mr. Bloom added, "I got a letter from Rabbi Schuster saying it was a pleasure meeting me and he hoped I enjoyed my stay in Jerusalem. It was incredible – I hadn't given him my address, yet he tracked me down at the kibbutz. He wrote that Chanuka was approaching and perhaps I'd like to visit Jerusalem, that he'd find me a place to stay. I didn't commit myself since I wanted to see what the kibbutz was doing. When I asked a kibbutz member, he said, 'Chanuka? We don't do anything for Chanuka – we work!' I was on a Shomer HaTzair kibbutz – what did I expect?"

"I wrote Rabbi Schuster to accept his invitation," said Mr. Bloom. "I took some classes at Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem and learned about Chanuka during Chanuka. Interestingly enough, about a year later, when I was learning at Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, I wound up helping Rabbi Schuster with his work.

"He has this internal clock," said Mr. Bloom. "He knows the pace of the *Kosel*, when the buses arrive and when they leave. He's always at the right place at the right time. He knows the hidden message: 'You're here – you got to Israel ...

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to Jerusalem ... to the *Kosel*, the area of our ancient Temple.' He takes that and he runs with it. He's like the gatekeeper who takes you to the next level. It's his sincerity and tenacity that people respond to.

"When he spoke to me at the Wall," Mr. Bloom added, "I thought he was making small talk – only later did I realize it was part of a plan to make me a part of *Klal Yisroel*."

"He's a true salesman – without any of the Madison Avenue marketing. He's a seemingly unsophisticated man who is driven to give people a chance to change their lives – to help them fulfill what they're capable of becoming. He senses when people are in transition and open to change. He has a feel for who's approachable."

2. Beth Buckwald's Journey

Another such person was Beth Buckwald, of Lakewood, NJ. In 1987, Beth was picked up off the Wall, as the expression goes, by Meir Schuster. "He began a conversation with me at the Wall and then asked if I was Jewish," said Ms. Buckwald. "When I said Yes, he asked where I was staying, and when I told him I had checked into an Arab hotel in Jerusalem, he asked if I wouldn't rather stay at a Jewish place. I said Yes, but I didn't know there was one. He told me about a Jewish hostel

called Heritage House which was free. It sounded great, so I agreed. That night, his staff helped me move there. It was one of the best moves I ever made.

"He convinced me to go to classes at Neve Yerushalayim during the day, and at night I'd stay at Heritage House. One day when I sneaked out of class, I ran into him. He waved those large hands at me and said, 'Beth, where are you going? You're supposed to be in the yeshiva!'"

"Every time I headed for the Arab *shuk* to talk to the Palestinians, instead of going to class, Rabbi Schuster would bump into me. I think he had radar," she laughed. "I pointed to his walkie-talkie – they didn't have beepers then – and asked him, 'Do you have people listening to me and reporting back to you on this?'"

"I told him I was restless and wanted to go to Egypt. He asked, 'Didn't you read the Hagaddah? We left there over 3,000 years ago and you want to go back?'"

"In the end, I did go there," Ms. Buckwald added, "but I asked him to teach me something before I left. He taught me *Modeh Ani*. So in Egypt, I would prostrate myself like the Arabs five times a day, saying *Modeh Ani* – only I'd pray secretly so no one would see I was facing *Yerushalayim* and not Mecca.

"I stayed in Egypt for six months," said Ms. Buckwald, "and when I got back

to Jerusalem, I went right to Heritage House, which I considered my second home, and saw Rabbi Meir Schuster who was like my second father. I offered him a deal – I would learn Torah but I wanted his hat as a symbol of his *avoda*. He agreed on condition I'd learn at Neve Yerushalayim for six months. I said one month. He said five and I said two. We agreed upon three. In the end, I wound up learning at Neve for six and a half months and he gave me his hat. Funny, I had always thought it was grey, but one day I pulled down the band and saw it was black. He stands at the Wall for so many hours that the sun had turned the black to grey.

"I started calling Rabbi Schuster *abba*," Ms. Buckwald continued. "He developed a soft spot for me, but the truth is he has a soft spot for everybody. If you pass by a hungry person, how can you not feed him? How can Rav Schuster walk past a Jewish *neshama* and not save it? If you save one life, you save the whole world. He'll know a house is full of *Shabbos* guests and yet he'll knock on the door and ask, 'Can you take one more?' He's got holy chutzpah. And no one can refuse him because they know he's sincere."

Continued Ms. Buckwald, "He'll ask someone he doesn't know, 'Are you Jewish?' Who would want to answer that? But people aren't offended by him. What comes from the heart goes to the heart. It's hard for a person to change a way

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of life and to give up what he thinks is freedom. There are emotional blocks to changing a lifestyle. But Meir Schuster hits people between the eyes. He has *emmes* behind him. He helps people pull themselves up to a *madreiga* (status) they normally wouldn't reach.

"When you talk to people 10 years later, they're still *frum*. And not only that, there's a ripple effect. When Rav Schuster is *mekarev* (reaches out to) someone, that person is then *mekarev* others. These people get married and produce *frum* children who would have been totally lost to *Yiddishkeit*. Rabbi Schuster is like a shepherd; he watches over all his sheep, wherever they may be," added Ms. Buckwald. "He's accessible to us all. He doesn't forget us once we become *frum*. Meir Schuster is with us for the whole ride!"

3. Travels With Nechama

Residing with her husband and seven children in Flatbush, Nechama Fried works as an Early Headstart teacher for Yeled V'Yalda. She first met Rabbi Schuster while shopping at an Arab stall near the *Kosel* on the first day of her arrival to Israel in 1977. Recalling those days, Mrs. Fried said, "I was in short sleeves and jeans when I met Rabbi Schuster. He stopped me and asked what I was doing in Israel. I told him I wanted to learn more about my Jewish roots and that I was planning to go to a kibbutz *Ulpan* to learn Hebrew. When I mentioned the name of the place, he said, 'That kibbutz doesn't have kosher food.' I remember answering, 'They don't? But this is Israel!' We didn't keep kosher at home but I wanted to throw myself into the Jewish culture and naively thought that kosher food was part of the Israeli scene.

"He then said, 'I know a place for intelligent young women with little or no Jewish background where you can learn some Hebrew and also something about Judaism.' That appealed to me because I really wanted to learn about my Jewish heritage. So I went to Ohr Somayach," continued Mrs. Fried. [Ed. note: Ohr Somayach's women's division

merged with Neve in 1980.]

"On my second day at Ohr Somayach, the girls asked if I would stay for *Shabbos*. All I had with me were jeans, so I decided to get my skirts and dresses from my cousin's apartment in Tel Aviv. Rabbi Schuster explained that I'd have to take a bus to the Central Bus Station in Jerusalem, take another bus to Tel Aviv and still another bus to my destination. Suddenly he said, 'You know what? It's complicated - I'll take you there.' And he did. He took me door-to-door to Tel Aviv and back to Ohr Somay-

ach - and he didn't have a car. We took six buses!

"I thirsted for learning," Mrs. Fried recalled. "I stayed at Ohr Somayach for one-and-a-half years and then left for Emerson College in Boston. Rabbi Schuster kept in touch with me. Just before Rosh Hashana, I received a letter from him, asking how I was doing. He ended with a passage from *Shir Hashirim* - 'Ani l'dodi v'dodi li (I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me).' He pointed out that the *roshei teivos* (initial letters) of the words spelled *Ellul*, and

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he reminded me that even though I was in college and not learning about *Yiddishkeit*, I should know that *Hashem* was still close to me. It was a very non-judgmental letter. He was just making a connection. That's his sterling quality.

"I had heard that he wrote to people on *kibbutzim*, but this was a letter to me in America — after I had left Israel! It touched me. I'd say I'm grateful to him, but that sounds inadequate. He was the *shaliach* (emissary) who helped me become what I needed to become — my name is *Nechama* and that's just what I found — solace — and a life filled with Torah values, which I didn't have before.

"It's not that Rabbi Schuster has a line that he feeds to everybody," added Mrs. Fried. "To some people he suggests classes at a yeshiva and to others he suggests spending a *Shabbos* meal with a family. But what impresses me about Rav Schuster is that he seems to have an instinct for what each person needs. There was a girl in my class at Neve Yerushalayim whom he was *mekarev*. She was from England and carried around a picture of the queen — so he talked to her about the queen. My message was for me, and her message was for her. The amazing thing about Rabbi Schuster is his long list of accomplishments despite his incredible shyness. I'm convinced *Hashem* puts the words into his mouth."

4. From Tourist to Manager

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, a teacher at Aish HaTorah in Potomac, MD, wandered into Heritage House as a tourist in 1986 and wound up as a senior manager there nine years later. "Rabbi Schuster was a pleasure to work

for because of his incredible drive," he said. "It stems from his firm belief that assimilation is stealing the youth of Jewry."

Today, Heritage House has a staff of 65, including part- and full-time people. The organization promotes various *kiruv* projects, such as "Study With a Buddy," which provides one-to-one Torah learning, an outreach program at Israeli universities called *Dor Le'Dor* (Generation to Generation), a two-year *kiruv* seminar to train 20 *yeshiva kolleleit* for outreach abroad, programs for French-speaking tourists, and a weekly magazine on the Internet to spread Torah learning [their website is <http://www.Heritage.org.il>; their e-mail address is Heritage@netvision.net.il]. There's also a follow-up staff in three continents – North America, Europe and South Africa – to make *Shabbos* placements and recommend centers of Torah learning for those who leave Israel to return to their native countries.

"Five thousand people a year pass through Heritage House," Rabbi Schuster said proudly. "We feel that everyone who comes to us gains something, whether we refer them to a *yeshiva* class, rap with them, or set them up with a family for a *Shabbos* meal. Heritage House staff has a list of approximately 120 families in Jerusalem for anyone who might want to experience *Shabbos* in a warm, Jewish environment while away from home.

"If after spending time at our hostels, one decides not to marry out of the faith, we feel we're successful," added Schuster. Over the years, thousands of people have become *shomer Torah* and *mitzvos* after going through Heritage House. Some develop slowly. Someone recently came up to me and asked, 'Rabbi Schuster, do you remember me? Ten years ago you took me to a class at a *yeshiva*. I never saw you after that, but I became *frum*.' I get this type of comment often."

Schuster is not limiting himself to Jerusalem. Now underway is his plan to create two more hostels (one for men, one for women) on the beach in Eilat.

"So far, there is no Jewish hostel on this beach," said Schuster. "This is a must – Eilat is loaded with tourists. Besides, a hostel in Eilat should help combat the missionary influence there. There are missionaries in Jerusalem, too," he concedes, "but they have free reign in Eilat because there aren't many counterforces. In Jerusalem, there are *yeshivos* but Eilat is a spiritual desert. We'd like to change that.

"The truth is," added Schuster, "we all have the ability to effect some type of change. Every Jew has an obligation to do *kiruv*. There's so much that can be done – you can invite a neighbor or

someone from the office to spend *Shabbos* with you and your family. You can recommend a seminar to a friend or acquaintance. And if you can't do those things, then support people who work in *kiruv*."

Meanwhile, Meir Schuster is moving worlds by staying in one place: at the Wall.

"Tell us," we asked him. "Every day at the Wall for 27 years. Don't you ever get bored?"

He laughed as though he didn't believe the question.

"Bored?" he asked. "Sure. If no one shows up!"

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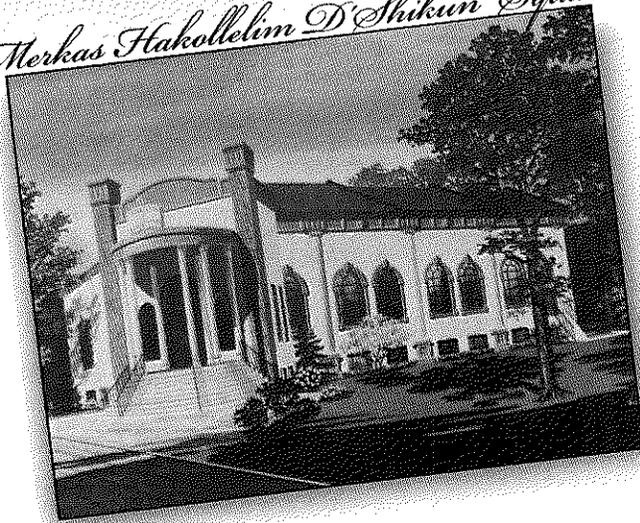
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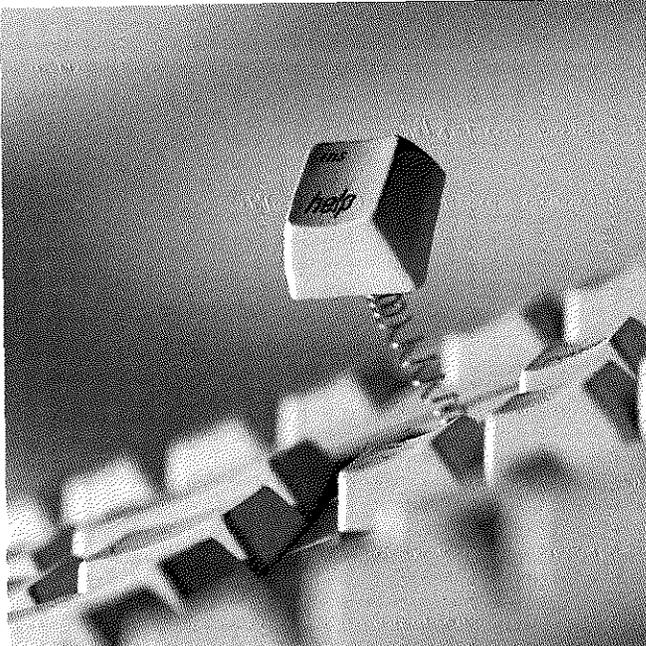
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Caveat Emptor: The Ubiquitous PC



Given the safety consciousness that pervades our society, we have become accustomed to lengthy instructions and warnings that accompany products. Stepladders have warnings not to stand on the top step and that they are not to be placed in front of a door that opens out. Electrical appliances come with warnings informing the user not to wet the wiring or the plug. And the list goes on. More recently, manufacturers have been charged with the responsibility of warning users about product misuses that constitute a danger to life and limb. Thus, auto manufacturers are required to warn consumers that infant seats should not be placed in the front seat of the car facing forward, and manufacturers of meat grinders are required to warn users not to utilize the grinder if the safety guard that protects against accidental engagement of the user's hand with the grinding mechanism is removed....

The products, in and of themselves, are harmless, but grave danger comes into being when put to uses that are improper. In that spirit, I suggest that every PC sold to a Torah-based home include the following warnings:

Attention: All parents who would refuse to allow a television set, a VCR or a videophone into their home, please be advised that the PC you have just purchased can be easily transformed into each of the aforementioned uses:

- A simple tuner card will furnish the PC with TV capability and a sixty-nine dollar video camera is all that is needed to make the computer into a videophone. PCs come equipped with the needed modems and sound cards, so the process of creating a videophone is LEGO-like in simplicity. A child can easily put in a video camera, use it extensively, and remove it before the parents come home and are none the wiser.

- Although it is an exaggeration to say that the PC can become a VCR, since no VCR tape will fit standard PC drives, with little effort, the PC can be adapted to serve as the functional equivalent of a VCR. A CD-ROM does fit the standard PC. Commercial outfits will convert VCRs to CD-ROMs at anyone's request. Nor is that needed. There are commercially available CD-ROMs which contain within their slim, silvered sides, the worst filth created since the beginning of time.

- Your ability to detect the presence of objectionable CD-ROMs is circumscribed. They can be carried in a slit in the cover of a *Gemora*. It is possible to put a *mesechta* on one part of a CD disk, and inappropriate material, password-protected, on another.

- Computer games are addictive. Children who spend many hours playing them become virtual zombies. And those whose addiction is only moderate may suffer significant decline in their studies. (And while we're at it, is there a Jewish community

without at least one family that is becoming dysfunctional because of a father who finds the computer screen more fascinating than his wife or children?)

It is not my intention to call for a ban of the PC. The PC is ubiquitous. It's here and not going away. But it is not a toy erector set or a sophisticated typewriter. Parents and teachers need to be aware that the PC can be misused and abused. When such product misuse take place, spiritual peril is likely to follow. Buyer beware. ■

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Making Things Better at Home

From a teen-age yeshiva boy in summer camp

July 1, 1999/17 Tammuz, 5759
Dear Dad and Mom,

Now that I have some rare, free, uncommitted time, I would like to discuss a matter that I have begun to think about: next year.

As a new year in the same yeshiva awaits me, what is going to be different? What is going to be improved in my development, hopefully, as some kind of *ben Torah*? For the most part, when I'm in yeshiva, in the dormitory, I'm a pretty good boy. I try to learn and I "do well." There is certainly plenty of room for improvement, but for the most part, there are no terrible problems.

When I come home for *Shabbos* or during the week, however, there is a totally different situation. I have wanted to discuss this for a while. It is just hard for me to do so in person. It is much easier in a letter. After a week of usually learning pretty well, going home is always a challenge. There are a few terrible distractions or *yeitzer haros* in yeshiva. At home, however, there are many. The fact that we have Internet access in our house is a constant *yeitzer hara* for me. Maybe I am different than all others, but I do not believe it is possible for *anyone* to go on-line and not

The above letter was sent by the author to his father, who then shared it with his son's *menahel*. He extended permission to *The Jewish Observer* to publish excerpts of the letter, with the understanding that certain changes be included, to protect the family's privacy.

see or do something he should not be seeing or doing. I can speak for myself: many times I have seen things on the Internet I certainly should not have, and every time it has been a step back in my growth. I have tried to stay away, and have been successful many times. And although I do not have any access to the Internet for a while already, *you* have a screen name which I know the password to, and it is therefore a constant battle when I am home. I simply go downstairs, and with a few touches of some keys, see things which we are supposed to stay far away from.

You are not responsible for my shortcomings regarding self-control, and I am certainly responsible for my actions. This past year, I have waged battle every time I was home, and for the most part have been successful. I know that it is wrong for me to allow myself to see such things, but I also know that it is normal – that if a person has access to such things, he will sometimes lose the battle with his *yeitzer hara*. I do not want to be *nichshal* in this test anymore. Even if it would have no effect on me and I would never turn it on, the mere presence of such a *yeitzer hara* in our home is a disruption.

I hope this is written without sounding disrespectful. It is my opinion that even the greatest of people, when such a *yeitzer hara* is literally at their fingertips, are bound to stumble time and

again. Chaim (my younger brother), as well, has been damaged by the fact that we have Internet. I know for a fact that he has seen damaging things on the web on quite a few occasions. Each time I "caught" him, I told him to cancel his screen name. I am asking on my own selfish behalf to get rid of our Internet access completely because it is a threat to me. However, the effect it has on Chaim (although perhaps it is not my place to decide) is an additional reason.

If we need e-mail, we can use Juno. I honestly believe that we do not need the web and America Online that badly. And even if you need it for work, it is still worth getting rid of for its outweighing negative effects. I hope you will see things from the same point of view now that I have expressed myself on the matter. I have not become a fanatic, this is basics.

Even disregarding the fact that we are *frum* Jews, any home that has any goals for itself and its children should view something like the Internet as a major roadblock. I therefore ask you – or rather, beg you – to get rid of our Internet access.

Although it is not nearly as bad as the Internet, television is also damaging. I cannot speak for you, but I can speak for myself and say that it certainly is a constant "growth-stunter" for me. Whenever I'm home, I say to myself that I will not turn on the TV; but many times, I do. I

have not been brainwashed. I see on my own, clearly, that it is bad for me. Suri and Chaim would be so much better off if we had no TV. For you, maybe TV is not damaging. But I know that there has not been even one occasion in my life in which I have watched TV and not seen something I should not have. I am thoroughly convinced that the difference between a home with a TV and one without, is extreme.

What I am telling you is all my own thinking and observations over a period of time, and nothing has taken hold

of me. I feel as strongly about this as anything I have ever felt. Even if it is meant for you (the TV), and it is not bad for you, the fact is that we all have access to the TV. I guarantee you that by getting rid of the TV, you will see a major change in myself, as well as your other children.

I hope you have read this letter, keeping in mind that this is all coming from my heart and mind, not anyone else's. I do not feel that I have organized my thoughts as convincingly as I would have liked, but please consider it so. I also

hope I do not sound like I am being self-righteous, telling you, my father, what his home should look like. Quite the contrary, it is my lack of righteousness which causes this to be necessary.

Once again, I guarantee you that just removing these two items from our home will bear great fruits and results. You have no idea how a small move like this can literally change our lives. I hope you have heard my side objectively, and I really believe you agree with me on this, deep inside. Please reply.

Thank you. Your loving son...

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Great Gift

I.

Hashem created the world as a means of revealing that which He chose to reveal to mankind. There are the overt revelations, such as *Krias Yam Suf* (splitting the Red Sea), and the Divine communication at Sinai, which shook the world and imposed an awareness of Hashem in everyone. Then there are subtle miracles, divined by the few. And, as we burrow deeper and deeper, we come to "Divine Secrets"; Divine revelations for but the very select few. When we have struck the core of these secrets, we are at the "*sod ha'ibbur*," the deepest, most intimate secret in the universe, which only the greatest of *chachmei Yisroel* have access to.

Thus, "I have administered an oath, O' daughter of Jerusalem..." R' Zeira said that these six oaths are that... Israel not reveal the "secret" to the nations of the world (*Kesubos* 111).

What is this secret that Israel is enjoined not to reveal to anyone?

Rashi states: Some take this to mean the *sod ha'ibbur*, some assume this to mean the hidden aspects of the Torah.

Tosafos states: This refers to the *sod ha'ibbur*, as it says (*Shabbos* 75a), "For this is your wisdom," meaning the *sod ha'ibbur*.

II.

What is this *sod ha'ibbur*? There seem to be two very divergent meanings to the words "*sod ha'ibbur*." The *Gemora* in *Shabbos* (75a), which *Tosafos* quotes, says it explicitly refers to the formula for reckoning the years – leap years, equinoxes etc. In addition, in *Rosh Hashana* 6b, we have a statement concerning the timing of the new moon, which the *Gemora* quotes as having been taught in *sod ha'ibbur*. *Rashi* explains that this "*sod ha'ibbur*" is a *Bereisa*, which was transmitted in a veiled form.

Most explicit about *sod ha'ibbur*

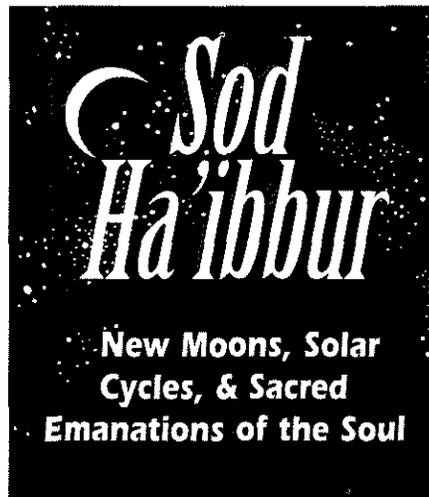
Rabbi Lopiansky, author of *Time Pieces*, a collection of essays on the Festivals, serves as a contributing editor to *The Jewish Observer*. He is *Rosh Beis Midrash* in the Yeshiva of Greater Washington.

being the reckoning of the months is the passage in *Pirkei d'Rabbi Elazar* (Ch. 8), which states, "On the twenty-eighth of *Ellul*, sun and moon were created... And Hashem was calculating leap years... He then gave this over to *Adam Harishon*... who transmitted this to *Chanoch*, who then became privy to the *sod ha'ibbur*..."

Pirkei d'Rabbi Elazar then traces this chain of tradition as it was passed on to *Noach*, then to *Avraham*... until it was transmitted to the *Sanhedrin*.

It is quite clear from all these sources that *sod ha'ibbur* refers to calculations needed to determine the Jewish calendar.

Yet this is vexing. While predicting *kiddush hachodesh* (convening the new month) involves a complex formula, it



is hardly the greatest wisdom known to mankind. Even in the times of the *Gemora*, the nations of the world had advanced knowledge in astronomy. Secondly, now that the formula is known to everyone, does that mean that it is no longer a secret? Or perhaps there is another, more precise formula hidden from us?

But the truly puzzling point is that it does not seem that the ultimate secret of creation should be a dry astronomical calculation, apparently lacking any substantive content.

III.

On the other hand, we find many *Rishonim*, especially the *Ramban* and *Rabbeinu*

Bachaya, who refer to a profound kabbalistic secret when using the term *sod ha'ibbur*. In fact, the *Ramban* alludes to the concept of *sod ha'ibbur* in such a context many times. Thus in *Bereishis* 38,8, when explaining the episode of *Yehuda* and *Tamar*, the *Ramban* declares that the events unfolding were in accordance with the *sod ha'ibbur*. This expression is also associated with an understanding of *yibbum*. (See also the *Ramban*, *Bereishis* 46,12 and *Shemos* 21, 10.) In all these references, it appears that *sod ha'ibbur* alludes to something in *kabbalistic* realms, relating to the souls that are born or reborn into this world. *Ibbur* thereby means pregnancy or conception, for it deals with souls coming into this world, perhaps as a *gilgul*.

Similarly, *Rabbeinu Bechaya's* commentary in both *Parshas Bo* and *Emor*, when dealing with topics that relate to *kiddush hachodesh*, refers to *sod ha'ibbur* as the process of reckoning the *kiddush hachodesh* by a formula. On the other hand, in many other places (such as *Devarim* 3, 26,), he explains *sod ha'ibbur* as the process of *gilgul* (an explanation given in the *Zohar R. M. Bamidbar* 21b a).

The *Ohr HaChaim* makes a similar point in *Vayikra* 25, that *sod ha'ibbur* is a process whereby part of a *neshama* participates in another person's *mitzva* activity.

IV.

Let us sum up the opinions and the problems: In the *Gemora* and *Midrash*, it appears that *sod ha'ibbur* is the arithmetic calculation of when a new month or leap year should occur. This raises the following issues: a) Is it not already revealed? b) Did not the secular world possess this, as well? c) Of what significance could this be?

On the other hand, if it is a deep kabbalistic secret, why do the above mentioned *Chazal* refer to it as the mechanism of *ibbur hachodesh*? Why do the *Rishonim* coningle these two terms?

V.

In order to understand the *sod* of *sod ha'ibbur*, we will try to analyze it on three different levels, which in concert will give us a fuller picture of this extraordinary *sod*. The three levels of explanation will deal with a) the technical formulae, b) the conceptual implication of the formulae, c) and the esoteric meaning behind this.

Let us turn to the formula itself. We are accustomed to having formulae for a wide range of natural phenomena. There are formulae for gravity, planetary orbits, and many other astronomic phenomena. It does not seem at all strange to us that there should be a formula for *ibbur hachodesh* as well. But there is a difference concerning *ibbur hachodesh* that does not make it at all likely that there would be a formula; we are dealing with two phenomena that have no real intrinsic correlation. We will explain.

It is fairly simple to produce a formula for any planet's theoretical orbit, which depends mainly on its mass and

its relationship to the sun. This is a straightforward one-to-one relationship, which can always be expressed as a formula (excluding the effect of other planets on it). If we take two planets that orbit the sun, then the relationship between their respective orbits can also be expressed in a clear equation, for they possess a common denominator. We can even go a step further, and make a formula connecting the use of fuel on earth and the earth's rotation around the sun. The reason is that they are directly related; when the sun is not shining on the earth, there is an increase in the use of fuel for heating and lighting. But there is no formula to correlate the price of fish in Los Angeles with the price of potatoes in Moscow. For even though every business has its tidal flow of peaks and ebbs, and a good businessman can pick up on it and intuitively predict its future fluctuations, there is no way that he can correlate two completely different functions. (Witness the regularly reported cute correlations between the wine of

the year and the styles of the year, with the winner of the presidential race. As many times as it may "work," it is never taken seriously.)

This actually is one of the great problems that vexed the creators of the secular calendar. For the year is based on the revolution of the earth around the sun, while the day is determined by the rotation of the earth on its own axis. They are not intrinsically related to each other, and therefore there is no clear system – let alone formula – for creating systematic years out of days. What evolved was an increasing patchwork of makeup days and leap years that give a convenient method, though not a real formula, for organizing such years.

It is much more complex to create a system that converts a solar phenomenon (days) into a lunar phenomenon (a month), when the two are completely unrelated. The challenge is even more staggering when we add a third, completely unrelated phenomenon – the solar year – and mesh them together. True, we can create a complex ad-hoc

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Many of their close friends and relatives have helped them throughout, however, this is too much of a burden for a few individuals. There is no choice but to turn to Klal Yisroel for help so that this fine and distinguished family does not suffer the embarrassment of not being able to meet even such minimum obligations.

In the z'chus of this mitzvah, may you see much nachas and happiness from your family.

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calendar, but a relatively simple system that keeps repeating itself, and is good for thousands of years, is extraordinary.

(There is still a greater complexity to the Jewish calendar, in that we factor in the visual lunar month, the religious needs of Yom Kippur and Hoshana Rabba, and the consequences of one year's calendar on the subsequent year.)

Anyone who is in charge of setting up a meeting knows the challenge of coordinating unrelated calendars. For example, a CEO sets up a company work schedule so that Fridays are open for

meetings for everyone. That is fairly easy. However, when company A has to set up a meeting with company B, so that lawyer C and accounting firm D are present, there is a major headache. But imagine evolving a system so that one can meet any company's representative, with any given lawyer and any given accountant at any time! Mind boggling, no? It would simply be done on an *ad-hoc* basis. This is the technical wonder of the *ibbur shanim* and *molad*: A complexity of unrelated events governed by a relatively simple system.

VI.

There is a second and deeper level of *sod* in the *sod ha'ibbur*, which we named the conceptual level; this is based on the *Maharal's* explanation in *Be'er Hagola*.

Science develops formulae in two ways. The first is from the observational to the causative; the other is in the reverse.

For instance, an unknowledgeable person would never imagine that the moon has any effect on earthbound phenomena. Yet, month by month, he would observe the tide rise and ebb as the different phases of the moon came and went. He would still have no clue as to the *reason* for this apparent cause and effect, but the phenomenon would be an undeniable fact. He can therefore create a calendar predicting the tidal flow.

We have a similar system of research today, where if a compound is proven effective against a disease, we will try hundreds of similar compounds, despite the fact that we do not understand the mechanism behind their effect. This is the mode of science that goes from the observational to the causative.

Then there is the reverse mode. For example: we have become convinced that gravity is a universal constant. We then assume the movement of heavenly bodies to be the result of gravity. Next we predict the orbit of any given body in relationship to other bodies. If we find the orbit of a planet that does not agree with our predictions, we then assume the presence of yet another body, and are willing to predict its existence and position with consummate certainty.

This is the difference between the way in which other nations determine this formula, and the way in which *Klal Yisrael* attains it. The nations of the world may be able to come up with a similar formulation to produce the practical applications of the system. But it is a mere curiosity for them, for they do not perceive the presence of an intrinsic reason for this phenomenon. Not so *Klal Yisrael*. We understand that the entire complex web of the movements of the sun and the moon was created for the purpose of the *kedushas haz'man*—the sanctity inherent



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in time. Their relationship is intrinsic to their being, for they are not two separate entities that happen to simultaneously affect the earth, but rather they are two elements of one entity of *kedushas haz'man* – the sanctity inherent to time. Other nations perceive the relationship; we understand the relationship. That is why it is our wisdom in the eyes of the gentiles, explains the *Maharal*. But what is this intrinsic relationship?

VII.

We then come to the third level of the *sod ha'ibbur*, which is the deeper meaning attributed to it by the *sifrei Kabbala*. It is beyond our capacity to understand the great secrets locked therein, but let us understand the guiding principles behind it. (These points are alluded to in the *Avodas Hakodesh* 4, 2, of Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbai – the *Maharal's* “*rebbe*” in *kabbala* – in the *Ramchal's* *Kinas Hashem Tzevakos*), and others.

When we deal with issues of *emuna*, we are able to understand many issues with varying degrees of depth and certainty. There is one issue, however, which the *Rambam* leaves as an unanswerable question, and that is the concept of *yedi'a* (Divine omniscience) versus *bechira* (man's free will). The *Rambam* (*Hilchos Teshuva* 5) says that these two factors co-exist fully, yet the human being is not capable of comprehending it in a truly fundamental way.

If we were to re-word the *Rambam*, we would call it the determinist component of the universe, which is predicated from G-d's omniscience, versus the voluntary component, which is predicated from our free will.

Both these components are reflected in a physical embodiment in our universe: the sun and the moon. About the sun, it is written, “*Ein kol chadash tachas hashemesh*” (*Kohelles* I), there is nothing new “under” the sun; concerning the moon we say “*mechadesh chadoshim*,” *Hashem* makes new months. About the sun it states, “*Shemesh yodda me'vo'o*” (*Tehillim* 104, 14), emphasizing the regularity of the sun's appearance; about the

moon it states, “*Ittim ba'a be'aruka ve'itim be'katzor*” – the moon's path is unpredictable (*Rosh Hashana* 25a). The word “*shana*” (referring to the solar year) also means to repeat itself; the word “*chadash*” (lunar month) means new. The sun shines in the day, where it is sole ruler, unopposed by any force, representing an uncontested determination; the moon struggles against a backdrop of darkness, representing the tug-of-war of free will.

These two axes of determinism and free will, when taken *separately*, lead to

kefira. If we just assume a Divinely determined world, where men's/ actions have been totally precast, then *avoda* (mortal effort in Divine service) and reward-and-punishment become meaningless. Any effort to do good is meaningless, and thus wasted.

On the other hand, if we assume total free will without an overriding Divine Providence, we then have curtailed Divine omnipresence and omniscience, and that is *kefira* (see also *Ramchal Da'as Teyunos*) regarding the “Fifth Form of *Kefira*” – that G-d is bound by our free will.

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VIII.

The other nations of the world have gravitated to one or the other of these two axes – each defining its particular, respective *kefira*. Eisav gravitated to the sun, and in his mind the element of the *kefira* of determinism rose to dominance. Eisav was born red and hairy, and followed that lifestyle (whilst the *Gemora* in *Shabbos* shows that even one born with a red *mazal* may use free will). He told Yaakov, “*Hinnei anochi holech lamus* – Behold, I am going to die,” so there is no use in exercising free will. There was only one *beracha* to be given, and if Yaakov would receive it, he – Eisav – would not. (And, indeed, Yitzchak told him that his acquisition of the *beracha* would eternally depend on how Yaakov would exercise his free will.)

Yishmael, on the other hand, lacked in his belief in *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*’s overriding providence. He is the son of a maidservant (i.e. free will, which is

meant to merely serve as a steppingstone to *Hashem*’s total rule) who wants to take the place of the primary wife’s son. Yishmael submitted to circumcision as an act of free will; Yitzchak had it imposed on him, as an act of acceptance of *Hashem*’s overriding providence. Yishmael was a man of the desert, which is *hefker* – not controlled, not owned, not ruled by anyone. Eisav is the man of the field; a field is owned, worked and harnessed for the needs of the farmer.

The nations over the centuries have vacillated from a vision of a totally unstructured world, ruled by a thousand whimsical gods, where anything goes, to one directed by a rigorous scientific bent of mind, which accepts a strict cause-and-effect approach, leaving little room for free will.

IX.

Klal *Yisroel* alone amongst the nations has the vision and scope that combines the two axes,

which gives us the true picture of the world – a world where man has total free will to do right or wrong; and yet *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* has the total ability to override and direct this man’s destiny. We recognize our guilt for doing wrong, and we recognize that *Hashem* can override our wrongdoings and forgive us.

This is the deeper understanding of the *sod ha’ibbur*, describing the extraordinary *yichud* (unity of G-d), as the *Ramchal* explains it. (There is a yet deeper point concerning *gilgul* and *ibbur*, which is the personal variation of this point. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to explore it further, but it contains the essence of what we have described in a more global way.) The understanding that bridges and unifies the seemingly absolute divide between Man, as a free-willed being, and G-d, as the all-encouraging force and providence of the universe.

X.

What an awesome *sod*! It is breathtaking in its technical expression; it is immeasurably deep in the understanding of the cause and effect of that expression; and it touches the heart of the most profound issue of G-d and man on its deepest level!

XI.

Let us conclude with one more point. *Shabbos* is a day that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* imposes on us. It is determined by *Hashem* and teaches us that He is Supreme Creator.

Yom Tov, on the other hand, is called *Mo’ed*, which can refer to two people getting together. A meeting of two people takes place only when their lives intersect. Thus, to have a “meeting” between *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, the Omnipotent, and *Klal Yisroel*, whose essence is free will, we must pick a time when the calendars of sun and moon mesh. Thus every *Yom Tov* is set so that the *chodesh* of the moon and *tekufa* – the solar season – are properly synchronized, and ever the twain shall meet.

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Of Coats and Fires

An Erstwhile Reform Jew's Challenge

I. WHERE WE'RE COMING FROM

Lasting Impressions... Through Disinformation

Many of us have opinions on a host of issues, from Bosnia to the Brooklyn Museum. How do we formulate them? The same way everyone does: through the media and sometimes from our elected leaders.

Just two years ago, I was a liberal Jew, active in the Reform movement. I served as my temple's vice-president and as a member of a Reform regional board; I sat as well on a National UAHC Commission.

What did I think of the Orthodox?

Self-absorbed. Uncaring of the rest of Jewry. Addicted to power in Israel. Self-righteous. Never questioning anything. Leading dull, boring lives, and adhering to the minutia of ritual, all the while considering "ethics" as at most "extra credit." Their women, of course, are second class citizens – and the poor kids, brainwashed and, on Shabbat, live in a prison, unable even to play games or watch TV.

Where did I get this information? The same way everyone else does: from the media. And, in my case, Reform leaders as well.

Although I grew up in New Jersey and have spent much of my subsequent life to date in a suburb of Washington, D.C., I never once spoke to an Orthodox Jew until I was in my late 30s. When, though, my wife and I finally did meet Orthodox Jews in person, we had our perceptions thoroughly shattered. And we were put on a path that

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led, in just a few years, to my wife's *halachic geirus*, our becoming *shomer Shabbos* and our move to a nascent observant community.

What my wife and I discovered was that the overwhelming bulk of what we had thought about the Orthodox was simply untrue. More important, we came to realize that Orthodox Jews truly care about how they treat their neighbors, how they speak to one another and the ethical dimension of daily life. Simply seeing the beauty of Orthodox family life, and *Shabbos*, and the attention to ethical detail with which Orthodox live, made all the difference.

Orthodoxy: An Improbable Portal to Ethics and Concern

I had been a good religious school student through Reform Sunday and Hebrew school, even after my Confirmation. I paid attention in class, and my teachers loved me. We learned a lot about ethics and morality, but nothing in a particularly Jewish context.

Imagine my surprise when, sometime during my 30's, I first happened upon the concept of *lashon hara*. Why hadn't I heard about the idea earlier? If ever there were a *mitzva* that was at once relevant, ethical, and impervious from the charge of being "old fashioned ritual," I thought, this was it! And it made me think: if the Reform philosophy, despite its rejection of so many *mitzvos*, considers those ethical in nature still binding, why have most Reform Jews never even heard of *lashon hara*? Why can so few name a positive ethical *mitzvah* beyond those in the *Asseres Hadibros* and "Love your neighbor"?

Reform leaders exhort the movement's adherents to help the poor, and, to their credit, many do. But writing a check to a charity is a good deal easier

than maintaining exemplary character traits day in and day out. Volunteering on occasion at the local homeless shelter is easier than treating one's co-workers with respect day after day after day.

I find it ironic and telling that my wife and I, politically and religiously liberal Jews, were attracted to Orthodoxy in substantial part because of its attention to ethics.

Another example of Orthodox attention to ethics that we came to not only witness but experience is hospitality. I can't count the number of times I was implored by an Orthodox acquaintance (sometimes someone I had just met, or only "met" through e-mail) to please come spend *Shabbos* with them. In fact, the first time I took up someone on such an offer, I received three more invitations before *Shabbos* had ended. Someone even asked if my family wouldn't mind splitting up, because he didn't have any guests that particular *Shabbos* and desperately wanted some. Another time, while visiting Crown Heights for *Shabbos*, our host noted to her son that there were still a few empty seats, and would he mind bringing home a few *bachurim* from *shul* after *Ma'ariv*. He came home with eight hungry young men. The host's reaction: she was delighted! There was room, and plenty of food.

When we moved, because of the timing of our selling and buying, it looked for a while as if our family might be homeless for a few weeks. Not a problem. Two families in our new neighborhood told us we could stay with them. These offers came from both men and women who didn't even consult their spouses (because they knew the answer would be yes). One of them came from a family in a small house with two children; another came from a family with four children. A third family told us that if we needed storage, he

would park his car on the street so that we could store things in his garage "for as long as you need."

We found that personal ethical ideals (like being nice to neighbors, not gossiping, engaging in acts of hospitality and so forth) were actually being lived in Orthodox communities all around.

I recall my first visit to a charedi neighborhood. *Shabbos* morning, we found ourselves in this huge *shul* filled with black-hatted "ultra-Orthodox."

My host had raved about what a brilliant man the rabbi was, and I was curious to see what his sermon would be like. Would he rail against the larger society? Deliver a learned discourse that would soar over my head?

As it turned out, it was indeed a learned discourse, but perfectly comprehensible. It was *parshas Mishpatim*, and the *rav's* address, on the Jewish view of human servitude, culminated in an exhortation to the congregants to redouble their efforts to be more pleasant people, to "respect cleaning ladies, garbage men, and others who work for us." I was struck that this was the kind of thing I heard in second grade but not very much since, one of those obvious things that everyone learns but all too few actually practice. And here a learned rabbi was reminding Torah-knowledgeable adults about the importance of ethics in everyday life. And those

adults had come to shul to hear it, to review it, to internalize it anew! As a somewhat jaded Reform friend of mine put it: "For Reform, being a good person is a good idea; for the Orthodox, it's also the law."

We also discovered what *Shabbos* was like. From the outside, it seemed like a host of ridiculous restrictions. It takes experiencing a few tastes of *olam habba* to realize that *Shabbos* is really about freedom from the mundane. One can no more understand *Shabbos* from a lecture than understand love from a book.

We learned as well what a *kehilla* is, what it means to be part of a Jewish community, united in Torah-values and *ahavas Yisroel*. A *frum* community, we learned, is one where neighbors not only share values but regularly share meals, borrow freezer space, keep an eye on each other's children, lend a hand and just drop in to say Good *Shabbos*. That lesson opened our eyes.

Another important thing we came to realize was that strict observance wasn't an indication of mental imbalance. After our first *Shabbos* with a *frum* family, my wife and I both remarked, "Everyone seemed so normal." Now please stop a moment and consider the implication of that statement. If that observation was a pleasant surprise to us, just imagine what the average Reform Jew thinks about the Orthodox.

"How can a reasonable person be anything but repelled by the need of so many Orthodox and Chassidic Jews to out-pietize each other?" Rabbi Simeon Maslin, then-president of the CCAR (the Reform Rabbinic organization) asked in a cover story of *Reform Judaism Magazine*. In the same piece, which incidentally won an award from the American Jewish Press Association, he refers to chareidi "tribal exclusivism... obsession with the punctilios of ritual... contempt for *Klal Yisroel*... manner of dress... romanticization of the past, and, yes... fanaticism...." He questions as well the authenticity of any group whose members "relegate women to inferior status."

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II. BRINGING OTHERS HOME

How is a Reform Jew able to hear the other side of the story?

Since we have become *shomer Shabbos*, we have tried to do all we can to expose our non-observant friends to our way of life. Approximately once every six weeks, we host a *Shabbos* dinner at our home for thirty or so of our non-observant friends – and not the same 30 each time! Some have expressed interest in (and have shown up at) *Shabbos* services, some are taking a *taharas hamishpacha* class from the local *rebbeztin* – but all of them have now experienced *Shabbos* with someone who is *shomer Shabbos* and still "normal."

Experiencing something firsthand is powerful – indeed, it can outweigh much media negativity. Understanding begins with experience.

So how can non-observant Jews more effectively be helped to experience?

Consider the obstacles that must be overcome. Not only must the "media/perception" problem, but also the fact that Reform and Orthodox pray

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in different places, live in different neighborhoods, eat in different restaurants, go to different summer camps, read different publications and go to different schools.

One Orthodox Jew once confided to me that, in his opinion, "the lack of adequate concern for *kiruv* by *frum* Jews is a combination of a hopeless attitude that most American Jews are a lost cause and a fear that interacting with non-*frum* will pollute them or their families." He didn't condone either stance but suggested that they may be the roots of the problem.

I am writing this to tell *The Jewish Observer's* readers that many Reform Jews care deeply about Judaism, and that none of them should be regarded as "a lost cause."

Just as there is misinformation in the minds of Reform Jews about the Orthodox, I'm afraid that the converse is also true. What do Orthodox Jews think of Reform Jews who want to hear a state-ly organ during Yom Kippur services, or of Reform women who wrap themselves in a *tallis* to *daven*? Derision or revulsion, perhaps? A thought that they are hypocrites for daring to call themselves "serious Jews"?

Well, many are Jews who are only trying to grasp onto the few tangible symbols of Judaism that they have come to know. To most *Jewish Observer* readers, Judaism is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week occupation. On any day of the year, they know what time the sun will set and when the next new moon will take place – because they live Judaism. Every time an observant Jew wakes up in the morning, or takes a bite of food, or goes to the bathroom, he knows he is Jewish, because there is a specifically Jewish way to act at those times. Judaism permeates an observant Jew's life.

For most Reform Jews, though, Judaism is a "Friday night and holiday" kind of thing. There aren't many physical trappings of Jewish observance that a Reform Jew can easily grasp. And so, many a woman wrapped in a *tallis* is really trying to envelop herself in her Jewish heritage, giving perhaps odd but

determined expression to that *pintele Yid* within. The Jew who wants to hear the organ on Yom Kippur wants to be uplifted by the sounds – because he can't be uplifted by the prayer service, which is in a language he doesn't know, follows a *tefilla*-structure he doesn't recognize, and expresses themes he doesn't understand.

Is that a rejection of traditional Judaism? Of course not. You can't reject something you don't know. Why do so many Jews spend such large sums of money to belong to temples – especially when they only show up two days a year? The expenditure – and the two days, for that matter – come from that *pintele Yid*. Many of them care deeply about being Jewish; they just don't know how. They are serious Jews, working without information or role models.

In my experience, the younger generation of Reform Jews is particularly receptive to learning more about Judaism and becoming more observant. I believe that Reform's recent formula-

tion of somewhat traditional "Ten Principles" was not the result of the Reform leadership trying to lead the movement, but rather of its attempt to "catch up" to where many active Reform Jews already are.

And those active Reform Jews are, in the truest sense of the phrase, the "*tinokot shenishbu*" of the Talmud. And only the *frum* community can "redeem" them.

Will kiruv pollute your families?

I can't answer that question other than to wonder if anyone can really imagine that helping a Jewish *neshama* express itself could be spiritually dangerous. And those who can, might benefit from talking with any of the many *frum* Jews who have successfully helped other Jews return to their heritage; that conversation might well help other, happier, things become imaginable, like actually being a catalyst for other Jews' spiritual growth.



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Every *frum* Jew needs to confront *Chazal's* statement that "*kol Yisroel areivim zeh bazeh*" – "All Jews are intertwined with and responsible for each other," and decide whether to treat it as a mere cliché or as a solemn mandate. When a generation or two down the line, we look back at the toll that raging assimilation took on 21st century American Jewry, what will we tell our grandchildren we did to stem it? And what will we tell the *beis din shel ma'ala* after 120 years?

At the very least, we must all be ready to engage anyone who expresses even the slightest curiosity about our Judaism – and never, ever, say or do anything that could confirm other Jews' negative suspicions about us. Every outwardly look-

ing Jew is a role model for other Jews, whether they like it or not.

I can't tell you how often I've heard the entire Orthodox movement characterized on the basis of a single comment that someone's wife's second-cousin reportedly made ten years earlier, something like "He said that we weren't real Jews."

Furthermore, the Orthodox response to this "not real Jews" slur – "of course they are real Jews; if your mother was a Jew, so are you" – is woefully inadequate, and displays an insensitivity to the deeper underlying problem. It is unresponsive because the comment ("You aren't real Jews") is made in the same sense someone might try to insult a male by saying "You aren't a real man." Of course, the person isn't speaking biologically in the latter case, and not halachically in the former case. The comment is made to denigrate the Jewish expressions of Reform Jews.

Such speech is a direct cause of why so many Reform Jews hold Orthodoxy in such low regard. The Chofetz Chaim teaches that continuing violations of *lashon hara* is the reason we are still in exile – *sinas chinam* being its direct result. Do intelligent people make snide comments about the lack of knowledge of first graders? Would we ever criticize or penalize them for their merely rudimentary knowledge of geography or mathematics? A Jew who is completely unobservant all year except that he attends a first-night *seider* and eats some *matza* is a Jew who is still trying to connect to his past. Instead of focusing on the fact that the glass is 98% empty, we have to realize that the 2% that *is* there consists of a precious Jewish soul determined to connect in some small way with his religious heritage.

But there are also pro-active opportunities galore, beyond Shabbos invitations.

An observant Jew who lives in a large metropolitan area, as so many do, and commutes to work probably meets a hundred non-observant Jews a day. All one has to do to make a positive impression for Jewish observance is to be conscious of the fact

that his actions reflect on the way his religious commitment is regarded. And all one has to do to make a bigger difference is to be sensitive when a less-observant Jew "reaches out" by indicating that he or she is Jewish too (which can happen in myriad ways), and take advantage of the overture by making friendly conversation. Such "teaching opportunities" abound, in supermarkets, bank lines and offices. And each one ignored is a powerful chance to act on *ahavas Yisroel* squandered.

Indeed, having rebuilt itself from the ashes of the Holocaust and succeeded in raising children and grandchildren committed and faithful to the Torah, Orthodox Jews now face a new challenge: the rescue of as many Jews who are drowning in secular culture as possible. Some know that they are drowning and seek a lifeboat; others may not yet have seen the tidal wave, but all are open to being helped to safety.

I know a couple in a pleasant New Jersey community. They are both intelligent, friendly, easygoing and tolerant. One summer day, sitting in their backyard, I noticed a group of teenage girls in the driveway of the house across the street. They were all wearing long dresses with long sleeves. "Do you have an Orthodox family living across the street from you?" I asked. "Yes," was the answer. I posed a second question: "Have you ever met them?"

The answer: "No."

I was disturbed – and astounded – to know that an Orthodox family could live across the street from another Jewish family (one that was identifiably Jewish, if for nothing else than the menoras in their window on Chanuka) and never have met them.

There is a Chassidic story about a wealthy person who needed to warm himself in winter. Instead of building a fire, warming everyone else in the room, he opted to don a warm coat.

Most of you who are reading this are extraordinarily wealthy – you have Torah, the key to our glorious tradition. But do you use it as a blanket or, as *Chazal* indeed characterize it, as a fire? ■



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Speaking of Stunning Accidents

*For the Kosovars Lacking
Homes, Not Enough Aid*

*Nixon Russia Opens Fire on Islamic Rebels
Quit 25 Years Ago, But the Tapes Play On*

As the middle eastern sun moves across the corner table in this downtown Jerusalem café, I survey the August 9 headlines of the *International Herald Tribune*, making my way leisurely from one to the other, and through the hill of whipped cream atop my cappuccino. All things being equal, nothing in this coffee shop, nor in the Ben Yehuda Plaza out the window down below, nor even in the tragedies that I will unfold, re-fold, and leave on the table when I go, are apt to shake me from the pleasant mindlessness that is the hallmark of my daily newspaper and coffee ritual.

One paragraph does jar me slightly, though, and I linger. In a piece entitled, "A Stunning Show by Sun and Moon," about the total eclipse due to occur on August 11, Dana Sobel of the *Washington Post* writes: "Only Earth and the moon – and no other planets or satellites in the solar system – can figure in the ceremony of totality. By a stunning accident of cosmic gravity and geometry, these two bodies alone possess the precise size and distance relationships to periodically extinguish the central fire

Sarah Shapiro of Jerusalem is a frequent contributor to these pages, most recently with "Rabbi Scheinberg's Laughter" (Dec. '98).

of the sun. the puny moon, only one-four-hundredths the sun's diameter, lies four hundred times closer to Earth..."

Glancing out the window to take this in, I find that the central fire is shining right in my eyes and therefore embark upon the elaborate business of moving to the other side of the table – rearranging purse, water glass, newspaper, narrow ceramic vase with its wilting pink rose, the now empty coffee cup, and then myself.

Resume reading: "The puny moon, only one-four-hundredths the sun's diameter, lies 400 times closer to Earth. Thus the moon exactly matches the sun in apparent size in our skies, as though they were two halves of the same grapefruit..."

Did they ever tell us that in science class? All I remember is Mrs. Warren in third grade, announcing ominously: "If the Earth were one inch closer to the sun, in one instant it would have burned to a crisp."

The waiter, familiar with my routine, comes by to ask if I'd like another cup and I lose my place, then find it again: "...as though they were two halves of the same grapefruit. When the new moon dogs the sun across the daytime sky, it can sometimes step in front of that big-

ger, brighter heavenly body and obliterate it from our view. To some believers, this coincidence serves as proof as the existence of G-d."

I lean back in my chair.

...by stunning accident... this coincidence...

I look down upon the plaza – all the people sipping cappuccinos at their tables, each table with its flower; each customer with his newspaper, and water glass. They, too, are leaning back. Leaning forward in conversation, skimming the headlines. The Israeli men survey the passers-by. Under the umbrellas they sit, protected from morning's growing heat, and in the cool shade of a few potted trees, slender and young, in the full leaf of mid-summer.

Am I imagining things, or isn't that 400: 1/400 ratio a little over the top? But according to the reporter, who must know what she's talking about, it was one of the conditions essential to the emergence of life on this planet.

A lucky fluke, as well, I suppose, that there's such a thing as roses, and humans who for unknown reasons like having them on the table.

And that in summer when the trees are full, they serve as shade for the tables on the plaza.

One afternoon, my daughter Yehudit and a friend had gone after school for frozen yogurt. They were heading up Ben Yehuda, which is a pedestrian shopping area off-limits to traffic, when Shiri suddenly said she wanted to go home. "What do you mean?" said Yehudit. This was so uncharacteristic of her friend. "You're joking."

"No, I really want to go."

"How come? We just got here!"

"I'm just feeling so tired."

"But I don't want to be here by myself. Can't you stay a few more minutes?"

"I'm really sorry, Yehudit, I just have to go."

So Shiri went to her bus-stop, and Yehudit, disappointed, was about to set off towards home, too, when she passed a bookstore and stepped inside to browse.

Then came the explosion.

She told us later that it was so deafening, it rocked the world.

Then there was silence.

The world had frozen. People were like statues. Somewhere, a baby was crying

Then all at once, chaos and screaming and Yehudit found herself running outside. Before her stood a teenage girl, with a long silver nail sticking out of her face.

Then there was another explosion.

People were running in all directions. Yehudit ran, not knowing which way to run, then she was back where she and Shiri had been, and at her feet lay a body. Suddenly, from within all the screaming, a certain sound was being screamed, something familiar.

"Yehudit! Yehudit!" Shiri was running at her, they were falling into each other's arms. "I've been looking all over for you!" They were sobbing. "I heard it and came back! I couldn't find you anywhere!"

In that double suicide bombing, four people were killed. Some of the injured are still undergoing rehabilitation, such as the son of a woman I met last week at a *bris*. Someone else I know told me that of the four who died, one was her doctor's fourteen year-old daughter, who had been seated at one of the outdoor cafés.

So if I were that girl's mother, would I say, If G-d is there, why couldn't He make her sit one table over? Why not! Why couldn't she have gotten up to leave a few minutes early! Why!

One inch closer... one inch farther away.... Can't you stay a few more minutes?

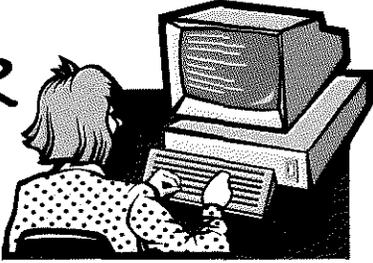
Of cosmic gravity and geometry, these two bodies...

A stunning accident, too, naturally (though in this case, of course, one of those unexplicably lucky ones) that next winter when the trees are bare, the people at the tables won't need shade – all leaves and coolness – but instead, the sun.

In any case, G-d made the front page of the *International Herald Tribune*. That's surely proof of His existence. ■

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Tuesdays With Morrie – on Saturday

Professor Morrie Schwartz, the hero of bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie*, is told by his doctor that he has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), Lou Gehrig's disease. It is, in author Mitch Albom's phrase, "a brutal, unforgiving illness of the neurological system." There is no known cure. It is terminal.

Stunned, walking out of the doctor's office, Professor Schwartz's mood is described by Albom:

"... the sun was shining and people were going about their business. A woman ran to put money in the parking meter. Another carried groceries. Charlotte (Professor Schwartz's wife) had a million thoughts running through her mind: *How much time do we have left? How will we manage? How will we pay the bills?*

"My old professor, meanwhile, was stunned by the normalcy of the day around him. *Shouldn't the world stop? Don't they know what has happened to me?*"

No, they don't know.

The world does not stop.

The professor, given a death sentence, lives in a totally different world now.

The veil has fallen.

A wall.

Professor Schwartz is completely removed from "normal" life.

From everyone.

From everything.

His life is qualitatively different.

Unexplainable.

Only he understands.

He is alone.

Absolutely alone.

There are many such walls.

Life changes, often in an instant. You

see the change, but others do not. Or, if they do, they only mouth the words, but do not understand.

If they do understand, it is only because they remember when the same shattering experience happened to them.

But now, it is not happening to them.

Only to you.

Only you live it.

They do not.

Many such walls:

One is death.

Life is fine, or it might even be very troubled, filled with a loved one's suffering. But there is life.

Suddenly, there is death.

A wall descends.

A veil.

You are the world: in two different worlds.

"*Don't they know what has happened to me?*"

No, they don't.

Many such walls.

Physical disability, for example. One can walk. Suddenly, one cannot walk. Everybody else is walking, running, exercising, even limping. But you – you cannot walk.

Your life and theirs: a wall, absolutely impermeable, divides between you and the world.

Or poverty. Others eat. They even overeat. Their world is how to lose weight.

A wall: you have no food. Life is hunger. Life is torture. Some people around you may remember this, but it is not happening to them. It is happening only to you.

A wall.

Another example: depression. Others function. With ups and downs, perhaps. The full flux of life rolls over them, but within a clear, defined frame of normalcy. With clinical depression, a veil descends. A film divides. There is every-

thing and everyone out there, then there is you. A murky film. Impermeable. Between you and the world.

It is not a question of failing a test or losing in the stock market and getting "depressed" – which is curable by passing the next test, or making a better investment. Being upset, or sad, or defeated, or frustrated, is not usually clinical depression. With depression, there's a distance, an invisible divide. Nothing can pierce it, at least for now.

The wall has fallen.

One is left to cope alone.

Another example: sin. To be in the grip of a desire or habit that you know is religiously wrong is absolutely isolating. Guilt before G-d can foster an enveloping solitude.

These experiences multiply: infertility, absolute power, addiction, imprisonment – any experience that erects a partition around my life. There is me; then the normalcy of the day around me.

Two totally different lives.

Guess what. One such experience is actually positive. Blessed, in fact.

Yes, a wall descends; but it does not divide me from others. It unites me with others, with nature too.

A veil descends.

A film.

Pick you metaphor.

This experience unites me even with myself.

Even with G-d.

This is not death.

This wall keeps me from the pains of depression, poverty, disability, divorce. It is even higher than happiness.

A wall.

Between life and life.

Between life as it is, and life as it should be.

And can be.

Shabbos.

Rabbi Hillel Goldberg is executive editor of Denver's *Intermountain Jewish News* and active in a wide variety of outreach efforts, including the *mikveh team* of Torah Community Project. A frequent contributor to these pages, he was represented by the book review on *Reb Elyah: The Life and Accomplishments of Rabbi Elyah Lopian* (Jan. '99).

Kav L'Kav,

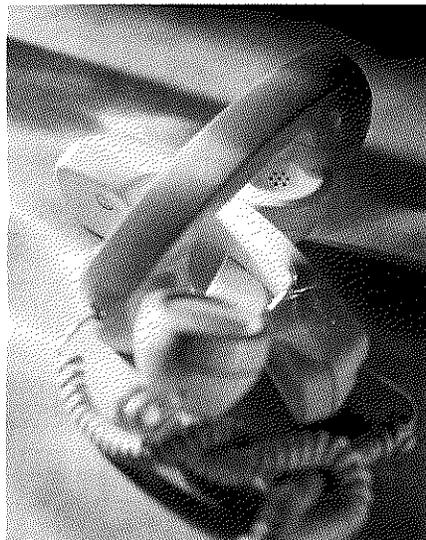
Opening Lines of Communication

The virulently anti-religious news and entertainment has created a situation where any sort of genuine communication with observant Jewry is seen by many as "consorting with the enemy." (See Yonason Rosenblum's "Media Darlings" in last month's *JO*.) Those from Western and European backgrounds view the situation as a kind of "gang warfare" where any sort of recognition of religion is like a "loss of turf." Instead of wishing listeners or viewers a "*Shabbat Shalom*" at the end of the week, the media opts for "*Sof shavua na'ima*," "Have a nice weekend."

In this climate, the simple dialogue that is needed to break stereotypes hardly has a chance to begin. The media promulgate the concept that we chareidim are either threatening or just plain primitive. Outreach efforts, of course, do make some inroads. But for the group that views itself as the intellectual elite of Israeli society, talking with the observant is something that "is just not done." So what can be done?

One very successful opening is pro-

vided by the organization Kav L'Kav. Kav L'Kav, an outreach effort organized by the Karlin-Stolin Chassidic community, is uniquely placed to interact with secular Israelis on a daily basis. They have a three-story building right off of Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street, the heart of secular Israeli culture. Many years ago, this building served the religious community of the area. As the neighborhood changed character and the religious Jews moved away, the building fell into disuse. Twelve years ago, it was given to Kav



L'Kav to try to make an impact in the spiritual wasteland of Dizengoff. Quietly, in a way that would not raise objections from those who stream to the area, they have built up a solid record of getting through to the most secular of Israelis. Shattering stereotypes, diffusing anti-religious sentiments, Kav L'Kav shows them that Judaism is not the "antiquated relic" it is portrayed to be. That Judaism is alive and vibrant. That it can speak to them at the highest intellectual level and that it can help them improve the quality of their lives.

Kav L'Kav specializes in providing

Jewish contact for this self-anointed intellectual elite. Lecture themes are carefully chosen so as not to sound overly religious, but somewhat "intellectually spiritual," and they pull a surprisingly high turnout.

The presenters are drawing from the ranks of Israel's observant scientist, educators, and professional speakers to give their audiences an eye-opening glimpse of Judaism that offers them how intellectually rigorous Judaism can be. Audiences are stunned. Here they have a highly intelligent person – who is clearly observant – displaying mastery over complicated intellectual and philosophical topics. Israelis are not known to be shy when it comes to challenging lecturers, or asking difficult – if not openly hostile – questions. Yet, to their surprise, the presenters deftly handle the questions with a degree of aplomb that amazes.

After the event, a highly experienced team of follow-up workers mingles with the crowd to help fan the first few sparks of Judaism that have been ignited in the evening's talk. Over pastries and refreshments, the lingerers may talk long into the night about real Judaism and how it just might find a place in the life of these busy Israelis.

Kav L'Kav is having an appreciable impact on Israeli society and creating change. The people they reach would not normally attend a lecture on Judaism – or be particularly interested in entering into discourse with an observant Jew about the deeper issues of life. Yet, Kav L'Kav provides a comfortable venue on their "home turf" of Dizengoff.

Audiences come in convinced that Judaism is something relegated to yesterday, and leave with the profound realization that there is wealth, power, and beauty in Judaism that they had never even imagined. ■

Digest of Meforshim

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Beyond the Letter of the Law

When seeking guidance in halachic matters, we are sometimes so concerned with the "letter of the law," e.g. the final decision of a *poseik* (authority in Jewish Law), that we overlook the "spirit of the law," i.e. a possible lesson from a ruling in a given situation. Consider the following:

In the summer of 1987, my wife and I were visiting *Eretz Yisroel*. One evening, we were aboard an Egged bus returning from Efrat, where my wife's uncle lives, to Jerusalem. Since that time, a road inaccessible to the Arabs has been constructed between these two points, which reduces this trip to seven minutes. At that time, however, the Hebron-Jerusalem artery was the only route.

I was sitting on the "window seat," with my wife next to me, when suddenly, some kind of commotion originated from outside the bus. Whatever it was, it seemed to be a portent of something ominous. A soldier, of whose presence I only now became aware, flew down the aisle from the back, grasping his rifle, dashed out the door, and started shooting into the darkness. Almost everyone hastily exited the bus, but my wife and I were too frightened to move.

A young Israeli, sensing our discomfort, came over to reassure us. Only then did we find out what had happened. He picked up a small boulder that had smashed through the window directly behind me and was now sitting on a seat that had fortunately been vacant. The rock was courtesy of some Arabs. I asked the Israeli, "Does this happen often?"

He replied nonchalantly, "Only about once a month." Then added, somewhat taken aback, eyeing the large rock, "But Rabbi Gesser presently resides in Mexico City, where he learns part-time in a *kollel*. A writer whose articles have appeared in various publications, he has assisted in the production of many published Torah works in English. His essay, "Directives From Washington," was featured in *JO* Feb. '99.

"I've never seen one so big!" I shuddered, realizing how I had been spared what might have been a serious calamity.

Some time later, in view of what had transpired, I asked a *she'eila* as to whether I was required to "*bentch gomef*" (recite the thanksgiving blessing for deliverance from peril) in *shul*. I phoned one of Israel's foremost *poskim*, Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, שליט"א, venerable Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Torah Ore and *mora hora'a* (recognized rabbinical authority) of Kiryat Mattersdorf, and related the pertinent details of what had taken place. I expected the *rav's* reply to be brief – either Yes, I was required to say the blessing; or No, I was not.

"Do you realize the tremendous *chessed* that *Hashem* performed for you? He saved you in a most incredible way!" The Rosh Yeshiva was quite moved by my account and continued in this vein for another minute or so. He then ruled that in this particular situation I was not required to recite the *beracha*. This incident had occurred during the Nine Days period prior to *Tisha B'Av* (when *Klal Yisroel's mazal* is at a low). And, the Rosh Yeshiva added, he was aware of similar incidents that took place during this period. He always cautioned people to avoid any risky activity during this time.

Besides answering the question I had posed, Rabbi Scheinberg made me realize the significance of what had taken place. In effect, he had provided me with a concise but fundamental lesson, namely, the importance of appreciating the numerous *chassadim* (kindnesses) that *Hashem* constantly performs for us. These *chassadim* are evident in all aspects of our lives, but we

¹ An entire chapter therein, "*Sha'ar HaBechina*," elaborates on this topic, offering reasons for this peculiarity.

are not in the habit of recognizing them for what they are, and thus often fail to detect them.

I subsequently came across an insight from one of the Chassidic masters, the author of the classic *Bnei Yissas'char*, which gave me insight into the partic-



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ular set of circumstances in which my wife and I had found ourselves. In *Hallel*, we recite, "Praise *Hashem*, all nations, extol them, all peoples. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and *Hashem's* truth is forever. Praise G-d!" (*Tehillim* 117). The *Bnei Yissas'char* questions a seeming incongruity here. The first verse calls upon the nations to praise *Hashem*. Yet, in the context of the second verse, we, the Jewish people, are referred to as beneficiaries of His kindness. Why should the nations sing praise to *Hashem* for the kindness

which He conferred upon Israel?

The answer to this perplexity involves a parable of a blind man, and a ruffian who sinisterly places an obstacle in his path. For some reason, before the blind man reaches the obstruction, he decides to alter his course somewhat, and astonishingly walks around it, continuing on his way unharmed.

The sightless man knows nothing of this great miracle in which *Hashem* shielded him from harm. His adversary, whose plan was foiled, is only too aware of it, and is dumbfounded by

what happened.

The ruffian of the story represents those nations that viciously plot to entrap the Jews, who, similar to the blind man, know nothing of the evil designs that are pending. When these fail, the nations become prime witnesses to how *Hashem* bestows kindness on His people by not allowing these plans to come to fruition. This chapter in *Hallel* underscores this by stressing that our enemies – would-be perpetrators who have seen firsthand how their evil designs have been thwarted – are in the most ideal position to understand the necessity to laud *Hashem*, Who has rained down His beneficence upon us in a most extraordinary manner.

This compelling insight pertains to those acts of Divine compassion of which we are not cognizant. But the conviction that they exist makes it even more incumbent on us to offer thanks for the countless examples of which we are aware. Interestingly, one of the pre-eminent *mussar* works, *Chovos HaLevovos*, offers this same example of a blind man to illustrate how most of humanity fail to recognize even those benefits that are clearly visible to all! They include the smooth operation of our bodily functions, the availability of the food and drink we consume and the clothing we wear, the mountains, lakes, and other natural phenomena that delight our senses, the numerous products and services that make our lives more productive and satisfying; in short, all of the myriad benefits that are constantly accruing to us by the grace of the One Above. Of course, we dutifully *bentch gomel* and recite other appropriate *berachos* upon experiencing manifestations of *Hashem's* kindness when they are called for. Logic dictates that, in addition, we should attempt to establish the attitude in which we actively internalize their message and make it part of our lives.

When issues of Jewish law and custom arise, in addition to conscientiously following the ruling of a competent authority, we should be open to absorbing any underlying messages that resonate from the circumstances. ■

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Project Esther

AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME, AND WILL COME AGAIN
... YEAR AFTER YEAR.

May I use your columns to share an idea with your readers – in response, one might say, to the inspiring articles you've been featuring on the World of the *Ba'al Teshuva*, as well as to other topics featured in *JO*...

Project Esther is such a good idea that I wish I had thought of it. In fact, I thought I *had* thought of it... but it turns out that the Shalom Torah Academies in New Jersey, together with an energetic young *askan* from NYC named Steve Eisenberg, beat me to it!

A year and a half ago, Yonason Rosenblum of Jerusalem and Gary Torgow of Detroit shared the podium at a *Shabbos* afternoon session of the National Torah Umesorah Convention. Their subject was countering the dreadfully negative public perception of Orthodox Judaism in the secular/Reform/Conservative Jewish world. Rabbi Rosenblum gave us many of the facts needed to refute the flood of disinformation being spread about Torah observance. Mr. Torgow followed with examples of things that we as individuals could do to help foster a more accurate, positive image of halachic Jews. One point he made was: "If, of the 200 or so *shalach manos* packages you prepare, twenty would be set aside for your non-*frum* neighbors, friends and relatives, think of the impact it could have!"

Well, that *did* get me thinking. After thirty years in *chinuch*, and a dozen years collecting the best and the brightest teacher-made curricular materials for the Torah Umesorah Creative Learning Pavilion, I could not recall a single les-

Mrs. Kramer, is director of Torah Umesorah's Creative Learning Pavilion in Los Angeles, which serves as a resource of teacher-made learning materials.

son plan, project or learning aid which had as its goal teaching our *talmidim* that they have an *achrayos* toward their assimilated fellow Jews. The recent passing of two giants of our generation – Rabbi Moshe Sherer of Agudath Israel and Rabbi Dr. Joseph Kaminetsky of Torah Umesorah, both of whom dedicated their lives to the benefit of their fellow *Yidden* – helped to give the thought even more urgency.

What would happen if, as a part of our Purim preparations, every *Rebbe* and *Morah* at every yeshiva/day-school would teach about our responsibility to *Klal Yisroel*? What if every teacher said to the students that when school resumes after Purim we will be writing a poem or composition/doing art projects/sharing the story about the *shalach manos* parcel that each of us (teachers included) gave to someone who might otherwise not have gotten any Purim package at all? What if each school provided the teachers with some printed enclosures for the *shalach manos* packages that told the story of Purim and the Jewish tradition of gift-giving and *achdus* that it teaches? Perhaps modeled on the touching and inspiring Am Echad advertisements that were Rabbi Sherer's last great gift to *Klal Yisroel*?

Think of it – younger grades could focus some of their pre-Purim arts and crafts toward decorating a particularly special *shalach manos* basket – special because this basket might be the recipient's only *shalach manos* – maybe their first! Older children could work on writing their own special explanation of the *Megilla* to enclose with their gift package. And everyone could benefit from thinking about and planning how to expand the joy of Purim while performing a *kid-dush Hashem* of enormous magnitude.

Well – the dedicated *mechanchim*

traveling from Lakewood to the Shalom Torah Academies of Central New Jersey did think about it... and *did* something about it! For the past two years, helped by the generosity of Steve Eisenberg, the children of Shalom have been preparing and distributing "Project Esther" *shalach manos* packages to enormous effect. Students, teachers, parents and the community at large have all benefited.

Years ago, Shalom pioneered the concept of "Partners in Torah." Torah Umesorah has since developed it into a national network of *chavrusa* pairings between Torah literate Jews and beginners. Perhaps now is the time to expand Shalom's Project Esther concept to schools across the country.

There have been highly successful ventures in *kiruv rechokim*, such as *Shabbat Across America*, that capitalize on the enthusiasm and excitement that comes from great numbers of people participating in the same *mitzva* at the same time. Closer to home, think of the Daf Yomi *Siyum HaShas* or the Tisha B'Av gatherings organized by the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation. The thrill of participating in a massive joint effort greatly enhances its impact.

The beauty of Project Esther is that we don't have to choose a day or create an arbitrary event that can be shared by all of our *talmidim*. That day was established thousands of years ago for us by Mordechai and Esther specifically to foster *rei'us* – camaraderie – among *all* of *Klal Yisroel*. Perhaps this is the year to bring Project Esther to *your* school and community! ■

If you are interested in bringing Project Esther to your school, your principal can contact Shalom Torah Centers at (732) 363-5700 or Mrs. Shana Kramer at (323)936-0814 to discuss details.

IMMORALITY & VIOLENCE

THE TORAH'S VIEWPOINT

In his very timely and insightful article, "Freedom Vs. Limits" (Jan, '00), Rabbi Brafman writes that *Chazal* see a definite connection between immorality and violence: "The *Gemora* at the end of *Nedarim* says that an adulterer would resort to murder if necessary to continue his illicit affair, based on the *pasuk*, 'Ki ni'eifu vedam biyedehem...'" The implication is that the adulterer would resort to violence if that is what is needed to satisfy his lusts. In fact, an immoral person's tendency towards violence goes far beyond that. The Slonimer *Rebbe*, שליט"א, Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, cites the episodes of the *Mabul* (Deluge) and the destruction of Sodom to illustrate this point (*Nesivos Shalom*, volume I, p. 115).

Regarding the *Mabul*, writes *Nesivos Shalom*, immorality was the primary cause of the world's destruction. But what degree of immorality was necessary for mankind to lose its privilege to exist? It had to reach a point where man's deprav-

Rabbi Shimon Finkelman, a *rebbe* in Yeshiva Darchei Torah, Far Rockaway, NY, is a frequent contributor to these pages, including "Windows of Heaven," in Mar. '98. He is the author of several biographies published by Artscroll Mesorah Publications, as well as a recent book on the significance and celebration of Lag B'Omer.

ity had caused him to lose sight of basic social mores, a point where the world became filled with robbery. This is what *Rashi* means when he states that "their decree was sealed only on account of robbery." Rampant robbery had defined the depths of man's immorality.

Similarly, the sins of Sodom began with immoral behavior, as implied in the verse, "And the people of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful to G-d" (*Bereishis* 13, 13; see *Rashi* there and also on verse 13, 10; see also *Bamidbar Rabba* 20, 22). Their immorality went unchecked to the point that the entire populace saw nothing wrong with engaging in behavior described in the Torah as an abomination. And this is what produced a land known as a seat of cruelty and violence.

Nesivos Shalom explains:

Immorality is a sin deeply rooted in the thought process. Therefore, it causes the sinner to become "mentally deranged" in a spiritual sense. He adopts a way of thinking that is antithetical to truth, so that in his mind, robbery and cruelty are proper and acceptable. This is how cruelty became the "official culture" of Sodom and Amora.

To what can this be likened? To someone who is mentally ill and perceives everything exactly the opposite of someone who is mentally sound. Similarly, these sins, which bring a person to spiritual derangement, brought the generation of the *Mabul* and the people of Sodom to a pitifully low level.

Thus, an immoral person is liable to act violently – not merely to satisfy his passions, but because immorality *breeds* violence.

It is not coincidental that the "New Morality" of the 1960's coincided with a sharp increase in violence across America. How unfortunate that American society fails to see the connection!

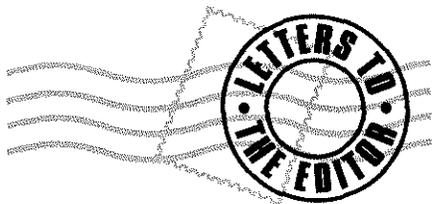
But the lesson should not be lost on our community. As *Nesivos Shalom* notes, *Yoseif HaTzaddik*, who epitomized *kedusha* and *tahara*, sanctity and purity, was also known for his compassion. "And Yosef, he was the ruler over the land, he was the provider to all the people..." (*Bereishis* 42, 6). As viceroy of Egypt, Yosef was certainly in a position to delegate authority and have others handle the distribution of food during the hunger years. But being a man of enormous compassion, he insisted on acting as "provider" to ensure that every starving individual was cared for. (This interpretation is attributed to the *Shach*). Yosef's levels of purity and compassion were, says the Slonimer *Rebbe*, interrelated.

Thus, as one strives to enhance his levels of *kedusha* and *tzenius*, he is further developing within himself the attributes of *chesed* and *rachmimim*. ■

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WHEN EVERY JEW COUNTS

To the Editor:

We are indeed fortunate to have amongst us Yonason Rosenblum, who is such a talented and articulate spokesman for Torah Judaism.

I would like to correct a bit of misinformation mentioned in the lead to his article ("Media Darlings," Jan. '00). Orthodox Jews, who keep *Shabbos* and *kashrus*, have *Besiyata DiShmaya* grown far beyond the number of 1.2 million worldwide, קט"ה.

The present, accurate estimate for Orthodox Jews in *Eretz Yisroel* is between 900 thousand and one million; in North America, between 550-650 thousand; and in the rest of the world, between 120-150 thousand = a total of between 1.67 - 1.8 million!!

For the readers' information, an accurate *count* [census under Torah guidelines] of first graders [from Orthodox homes] worldwide has been taken, and the num-

ber is 45,000 [27,000, Israel - 15,000, N. America - 3,000, rest of world] which translates into 3/4 of a million Orthodox Jews from birth until twenty years of age, קט"ה.

Every single *frum Yid* is an *olam malei* (complete world), and it would be wrong to dismiss hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Jews, as if they did not exist.

MENACHEM BERGER
Monsey, NY

NEED FOR APPROPRIATE SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS: A GRATIFYING RESPONSE

To the Editor:

Over a year ago, I wrote a letter to *The Jewish Observer*, discussing the need for a secular curriculum suitable for *yeshivos* and Bais Yaakov schools. At that time, I expressed my concern that in the fields of literature, science and history, textbooks and materials currently available were not proper for us to use.

After that letter was published, I was contacted by many educators from different institutions across the country who shared the same sentiments. They felt that the time had come for us to provide our schools with appropriate learning materials. Therefore, I was elated to receive Cleveland's Mosdos Ohr HaTorah's publication,

Mosdos Press Literature, a junior high school English Literature textbook, edited by Mrs. Judith Factor.

In reviewing this book, it was obvious how much time and effort were invested in choosing text material that would not only meet or exceed any standards set forth by the Boards of Education, but most important of all, a textbook that any *ben Torah* could feel confident about, without concern that the book have any inappropriate material. It is gratifying to know that we can now offer secular reading material while using our Torah as our moral standard, and still keep within the required educational framework.

In speaking with the educators involved with the publication of these textbooks, I was excited when they informed me that an entire series of English Literature would be available on a high school level very shortly, and that other subjects, such as Science and History, will be forthcoming at a later date. This added project involves a lot of planning and cost, and I think that we should all be very grateful to Mosdos Press for undertaking such an important project.

Since my opinion may not be enough to encourage all educators and principals to follow up on this matter, may I point out that Rabbi Elya Svei שליט"ה has given his highest recommendation to Mosdos Press and Rabbi Aharon Dovid Goldberg שליט"ה, who are spearheading this project.

I look forward to the success of this project and thank all those involved.

RABBI ELIEZER GROSS
ROSH HAYESHIVA
YESHIVA GEDOLAH OF LOS ANGELES

MORE APPRECIATION FOR RABBI ROGOW זצ"ל

To the Editor:

I would like to comment on Rabbi Ben-Zion Rand's magnificent article on Rabbi Mordechai Rogow זצ"ל (Dec. '98).

I believe that Rabbi Rogow, affectionately known to his students as *Rebbe*, demonstrated a unique combination of traits through which he was able to serve as an exemplary model of a *Rosh Yeshiva* to our contemporary American community.

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We learn the characteristics of an ideal *Rav* from the description in *Malachi* I. Among these are “*Torah y’vakshu mipihu* (they will seek Torah from his mouth), *rabbim heishiv me’avon* (he turned back many from sin), *ki malach Hashem Tzivakos hu* (for he [virtually] is an angel of Hashem)...” The question arises: if a teacher is so far removed from the mundane pursuit of *olam hazeh* (this world), how can he serve as a powerful influence on his students? How can they relate to him, seek Torah from him, and be influenced by him to turn away from

sins? Don’t *talmidim* need someone who “speaks their language,” understands their values, and appreciates their needs to build a close relationship? How can a true *malach* succeed in saving this (or any) *dor* from sin?

Because Rabbi Rogow synthesized this unique combination of *middos* to such an extent, he was able to successfully teach, influence, direct, and attract his *talmidim* in accordance with the teachings of *Chazal* based on *Malachi*.

Let me give a few examples:

- *Rebbe* was someone who hardly

noticed this-worldly features, if at all. He walked with a slow, measured gait, his eyes invariably fixed on the ground, always preoccupied in learning, hardly paying attention to the goings-on around him. I recall when the yeshiva (Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois) completed a new classroom building on its campus, and the *shiur* room was moved next door to the new building, *Rebbe* for several weeks thereafter would continue to arrive at the old *shiur* room where he would wait a few minutes for the *bachurim* before remembering that his classroom had been changed!

- *Bechinos* (examinations) were a useful tool to encourage review of the class material... *Rebbe* took it very personally if his *talmidim* did not do well on the *bechina* for he felt that it was surely his fault, and not theirs. He was seen to sit quietly crying in the *shiur* room when the class did poorly (like the angel that he was). The students knew this, and did their utmost to avoid causing pain to their beloved *Rebbe*. The *bachurim* would stay up ‘til all hours of the morning reviewing their learning so as to do well and provide satisfaction to their *Rebbe*.

- Even though *HaRav* Rogow was somewhat distant from us, he was also very close. He knew what to say and when to say it... always encouraging and full of words of *chizuk*.

When he would meet with members of the Board of Directors who were sometimes of culturally different backgrounds, they were always won over by his humility, honesty, and desire for their welfare.

- During the heavy snow of typical Chicago winters, when *Rebbe’s* normal transportation arrangements were suspended, special substitute drivers were pressed into service, among them my father, *עיר*. *Rebbe* would always try to find some topic of conversation in common with his driver to demonstrate that they were co-travelers, not that he was being chauffeured.

- At a luncheon remembering the 40th anniversary of the yeshiva, *Rebbe* spoke, mentioning the *midrash* that if non-Jews only knew the protection *korbanos* offered on their behalf in the *Beis Hamikdash*, they would form a guard around the Temple



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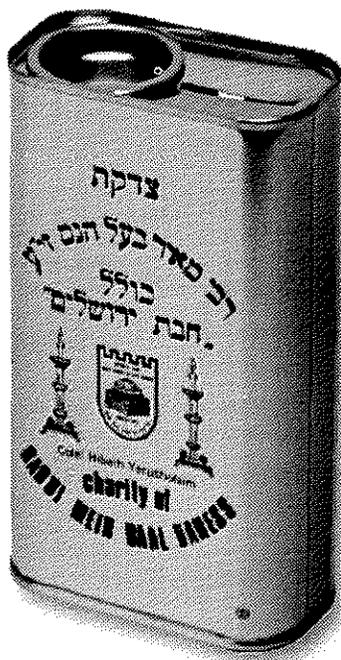
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to protect them. Similarly, if they only realized what profound protection was provided to the world by the learning of Torah by the *bachurim* in yeshiva, they would demonstrate corresponding appreciation. This was to help us understand the true significance of our learning endeavors.

• The *Rebbe* could create the exact mood needed for the moment: At the yeshiva's *hesped* for Rav Aaron Kotler זצ"ל, the *Beis Midrash* was packed with *talmidim* and hundreds of *baalei battim* from the Chicago community. When *Rebbe* got up to speak, there was a hush. Before he began to speak, he requested from all those assembled to arise from their chairs and join him in sitting on the floor for several minutes as a demonstration of our mourning for the terrible loss to *Klal Yisroel*. The experience of that scene of an entire congregation sitting on the floor in *aveilus* remained with me long after I forgot the details of the *hespedim*.

• *Rebbe* always encouraged us to maximize our Torah learning as much as possible. When asked where it was better to learn at night, in a *beis midrash* or at home, *Rebbe* answered that one should learn where he learns the best. When it was pointed out that when the voice of learning is heard in a person's home at night it provides *shemira* (protection) to his home, *Rebbe* asked, "Who says that when someone learns in *shul*, that is not considered as having the voice of Torah in *his home*?"

• His *talmidim* were drawn close to him through strong bonds. *Talmidim* would walk the five miles from the yeshiva in Skokie to *Rebbe's* house in Chicago's Albany Park section on the second day of *Shavuos* to be *m'kablei p'nei Horav* (greet and spend time with the *Rav*), often in Chicago's famous sweltering summer heat and humidity.

• Perhaps the unusual synthesis which we have discussed can be exemplified in the manner by which *Rebbe* delivered his talks. When *Rebbe* began to speak, he did so very quietly. One had to strain to hear his soft-spoken words. Everyone immediately became still so as not to miss a word. Gradually there was a development of a central idea, and a buildup to the main theme. It was at this point that the *Rebbe* spoke so very loudly, almost screamed,

repeating his main point over and over, accenting the idea in-between by waving his hand in the air, and slapping it on the table. "How can one not put all his strength in serving *Hashem*? How can one be *mivatel* (waste) even one minute from learning Torah? How can one *daven* without full *kavana*? How can one not learn from the *Avos* the ways to serve *Hashem* properly? How can one not do complete *teshuva* to cleanse his *neshama* before *Hashem*?" Thus the aloof soft-spoken "angel" could powerfully turn the hearts of his *talmidim* back to *Hashem*.

It was through my years of learning with *Rebbe* that I came to understand that it is possible to combine together the *pesukim* of *Malachi*.

SHABSAI SLAE
Brooklyn, NY

CLARIFICATION

The article "Making My Way Homeward," which appeared in the January issue of *The Jewish Observer*, wrote about the sacrifices many *ba'alei teshuva* make on their journey back to their roots. While some people may have thought they recognized the characters, the profiles of "Elizabeth Goldner" and "Jennifer" and "Larry Winters" were actually composites of various people sharing a common struggle. In each case, the story's main artery reflects the true drama of a *mevakesh ha'emes*, a seeker of truth; yet much personal data was altered. The author, Debbie Maimon, apologizes for any embarrassment that may have resulted from cases of "mistaken identity."

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