

Soul Sisters Sharing

#21

Between Worlds*Dr. Rivka Levron*

There I sat, feeling like I had just landed on another planet. I could recognize exactly three other people in the crowd of hundreds. There was no point looking for others; I had just arrived in Israel. The whole ceremony was in rapid Hebrew, of which I understood little. My new husband and father-in-law were sitting across the hall on the men's side. Next to me, my oldest stepdaughter, whom I had first met only a few weeks before, was my comfort. Our eyes were turned to the stage, as the boys were called one by one. Each one received a set of books, a reward for their part in completing Shas. We were waiting for one special boy.

As we waited, I remembered myself filing up on stage as a highschooler for an award ceremony. How many lifetimes ago was that? It seemed like an eternity. Was it only yesterday that my aliya flight had landed in Israel? And here I sat, surrounded by so many black-clothed Israeli Sefardi haredim... It was a point in time between worlds. I had left the past behind, and the future lay before me. I wasn't back there anymore, and mentally, I hadn't quite arrived here.

And then I saw him, smiling, confident. As he passed the bima, he looked toward his Saba and Abba with a wave. Yes, and now he'll come home with us for Shabbat. And tomorrow, I will do hafrashat challah, prepare the food of Shabbat, and light the candles.

Ah, those special moments of transition in life! The ones that come upon us so subtly, almost unawares, as we make our way through the myriad details of busy days. What would I have said, twenty years ago, had someone shown me a snapshot of myself at the *siyum haShas*? As I look back now, with more of that unfolding future now behind me, I reflect in wonder.

That special yeshiva boy is now a father. Our teenage daughter has grown into a supportive wife and mother. Doing *hafrashat challah* on Friday, lighting the Shabbos candles, coming home to hear Shalom Aleichem and settle everyone at the table – how natural it all seems now.

A few weeks ago, having spent a Shabbat with friends in another town, I passed a pair of sisters on the street taking a Friday night stroll. One is a coworker, and one a former student. What a feeling of belonging! I'm not a stranger here anymore.

If I could peek ahead again, what if someone would show me a snapshot of myself in another decade or two? What wondrous surprises await? I can only watch in wonder and gratitude to the One who guides the footsteps of each one.

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A Teacher of Gerim

Rabbi Chaim Coffman



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Why do I need to pick just one Rabbi?

And how should one go about deciding which Rabbi is the best for me?

There is an old expression, one rabbi and two opinions. When someone asks a rabbi a question and they don't like the answer, it is forbidden to go to another rabbi for a second opinion. It would only be permissible if the first rabbi made a glaring mistake or missed something obvious, but otherwise once the question was asked and answered, you are not allowed to rabbi shop so-to-speak!

There are people that ask different rabbis different questions. Some rabbis may be expert in the laws of kashrus or niddah and others in money matters. While shopping around for rabbinic opinions is forbidden, it is ok to ask different rabbis questions because they have expertise in that field.

It is also crucial to have one rabbi to go to for questions in *hashkafa* or to get advice from. The reason is when you have too many rabbis involved, there may be differing opinions as to what to do in that situation based upon their philosophical outlook.

While it is important to have one rabbi to ask all your *halachic* and *hashkafa* questions to, it is very rare to see someone today with that kind of encyclopedic knowledge of the entire breadth of Torah!

"Like You Shall Multiply in Israel"

The Gemara in Yevamos (16a) recounts the story of Rabi Yehoshua, Rabi Elazar ben Azaria, and Rabi Akiva, who came to visit Rabi Dosa ben Harkinus, who was extremely elderly in his generation. They came to clarify with him a point of heated controversy between Bais Shammai and Bais Hillel.

When Rabi Yehoshua entered, Rabi Dosa seated him on a seat of gold. Rabi Elazar ben Azaria was likewise seated on a seat of gold. When Rabi Akiva entered, Rabi Dosa asked who he was, and was told that he was Rabi Akiva, the son of Yosef.



Rabi Dosa then said in admiration, "You are Rabi Akiva, whose name is known from one end of the world to the other end of the world? Sit, my son, sit... [Those]

Like you, shall multiply in Israel!"

This is the source for the common expression used till this day, "Like you, shall multiply in Israel".

The Marhasha explains to us Rabi Dosa's reason why he was saying that people like Rabi Akiva should multiply specifically "in Israel": Rabi Akiva was a son of converts, and Rabi Dosa, being very impressed with his personality and character, therefore blessed him "Those like you should increase among Israel— not [just] among converts."

The impression Rabi Akiva made on Rabi Dosa was such a wonderful and amazing novelty, specifically BECAUSE his father was a convert. Which leads us to understand what Rabi Dosa longed for and therefore blessed him with: If only such personalities of honor could come from the "seed of Israel"—not just from converts, but from those who were already born into the Jewish people.

So... now, what's really hiding behind this blessing of Rabi Dosa? What difference does it make from where our leaders originate? In order to explain, we first need to understand a point of background information which is important to know:

The character and personality of Rabi Akiva was a phenomenon that was truly outstanding among the Jewish people. That generation which merited Rebbe Akiva's influence, was truly unique.

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Rav Shmuel Pollack, Haifa, Israel

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However, we have to understand that Rabi Akiva's impact on his generation was not so easy for the people of his time to readily accept. It required a great deal of fortitude on their part, to accept this amazing phenomenon that was Rebbe Akiva. Why?

I'll give an example: Imagine that you're someone who is part of a very old, established Jewish community—such as, one of the old, traditional Chassidic courts, headed by a venerable Rebbe who is a link in the chain of a mesorah (tradition) reaching all the way back to the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezritch (founders of the Chassidic movement).

Here in this group, there's a feeling of absolute certainty—there's no doubt at all— that the leadership and traditions will continue to be passed on from generation to generation, without the change of even one tiny bit of their customs. Their traditional way of conduct, their prayers, their version of the siddur, their way of dress—everything— is maintained exactly according to their holy forefathers, without any change whatsoever.

Now, imagine that this community of Jews has been running this way for hundreds of years when suddenly, out of the blue, some fresh baal teshuva appears— someone who, just a couple of years ago, was herding a flock of sheep. We're talking about a Jew without any background, without any special ancestry, without any form of tradition...

And, suddenly, he appears on the scene like an incoming storm, and within a short period of time, he makes his way to the heart of the leadership, starts to express his opinions. He mixes in, and starts to change even the most closely guarded traditions! He makes changes in the text of the siddur, he tries to change the order of the prayers, and everything else that's holy and has been accepted all this time throughout the previous generations.

Tell me: What would we do with this baal teshuvah? How would we relate to him? Would we simply "show him the door"? Would we say, "Excuse me, my dear sir, but you're new here! Who do you think you are? We're here by the Rebbe's pure table— our Rebbe who continues in the path of our holy forefathers, leading all the way back to the Baal Shem Tov! Rashi, even... And, suddenly, you come and introduce your new melodies and change our customs?!"

And this is exactly what happened with Rebbi Akiva. But look... this “baal teshuvah” really seems to know what he’s talking about! We just stand by in shock and disbelief before his surprising knowledge of Torah, and we all understand that here, standing before us, is a personality who has attained incredible heights in Divine inspiration— no less than the Rebbe himself, and the holy forefathers!

Ahhhh... just think what would happen! This would really upset this Chassidic community’s whole infrastructure. Here’s someone completely new, and in an instant, he has already started to rock all of the foundations that have been passed down from the previous generations. Imagine, if you can, that this was the same story with Rebbe Akiva.

In those days, Rabban Gamliel was the leader of the Jewish people; a direct descendent of Hillel, the Elder, and of Dovid haMelech. There was also Rabi Elazar ben Azaria, who was a direct descendent of Ezra the scribe. (He also was the gilgul of the prophet, Shmuel.) And Rabi Yehoshuah ben Chananyah was also living then – an aged scholar, who himself had been among the Leviim who sang in the Bais haMikdash!

We would all just tremble before these giants, who were responsible for ensuring that the Torah would be transmitted throughout all generations, all the way down to us— preserved just as it was when it was given to Moshe at Har Sinai.

Against this backdrop of amazing Sages, suddenly there appears a new figure on the scene. His name is Akiva ben Yosef... a greenhorn, “fresh off the boat” so to speak, without any backing or approbations. He is the son of converts, lacking any trace of Jewish lineage. Just a few years before, he was but a simple shepherd, knowing nothing at all of Torah—in fact, he didn’t even know the Alef Bais!

Suddenly this newcomer Akiva is expounding in public on the multitudes of halachos that can be learned from the points on the crowns of each letter “yud”. Now, if it happened that what he was saying didn’t make sense—if he didn’t sound like he knew what he was talking about—we would simply show him the door. But what can we do – he really knows what he’s saying! You can’t ignore his amazing presence! Whether you like it or not, his name has spread throughout the entire world... because... he is the holy Rabi Akiva!! We’re talking about the Giant of the Giants, about the incredible level which Rebbe Akiva has attained.

However, on the other hand, some people still might be saying, “Who are you, Rabi Akiva? You don’t have any tradition, any transmission from previous generations. Right here before us is Rabban Gamliel, who received the Mesorah from

The previous generations all the way back to the prophets Chagai, Zachariah, and Malachi. And you Rabi Akiva? You’re here in the Torah world only nine, or at most, ten years. That being the case, what right do you have to mix in with your opinions, on the same platform where the prophets Chagi, Zachariah, and Malachi once sat?

Imagine how the system would react to a talmid chocham the likes of Rabi Akiva, keeping in mind that until now, the Torah was transmitted in an unbroken chain from Moshe Rebbainu. In contrast, Rabi Akiva had no tradition standing behind him. Everything with him was new.

So, this was just the type of confusion that Rabi Akiva’s generation had to deal with, over the sudden appearance of this tremendous Torah giant who was the son of converts.

—But... really, what was Rabi Akiva’s secret? How exactly did he, without any lineage or background, merit such greatness? And how was it that it was he, specifically, that became the one who would ensure that both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah would be transmitted down to us, in our generation?

And within the question itself, lies the answer. How is this?

Both the written Torah and the Oral Torah came to us from Hashem. However, unlike with the Written Torah, the Sages who interpreted the laws of the Oral Torah had to work very hard, using their own intellect—and based on their perfect understanding of the Written Torah—in order to grasp how the Halacha should be understood.

[Ed. Note: This ability to interpret the law was something that was granted only to those Sages in their generations, and not something that we, in our generation, are able or permitted to do.]

For this reason, it is stated about the Oral Torah, “It is not in Heaven”—but rather, it’s based on the hard work and wisdom of the Sages, people here in this world, who were steeped in true understanding of the Written Torah.

Therefore, it’s fitting that it was specifically Rabi Akiva who was the one to ensure the continuation of the Torah’s transmission—because he was a son of converts, and lacked any personal background. All of his wisdom and insights came solely from his striving to understand the Written Torah, which he accomplished by his own efforts—not because he was descended from a long line of Rabbis who preceded him. Everything originated with him, and specifically from his unique viewpoint, he merited to understand things that others hadn’t been able to understand from within their framework. Thus, all of his understandings in Torah

came from “below”, from earthly strivings— through which he merited to become a great beacon of Light and forefather of the Oral Torah.

But now, back to the blessing that Rabi Dosa was giving Rabi Akiva. Rabi Dosa was standing before Rebbe Akiva’s impressive personality, and saying: If only there could be more like you from the people of Israel... Why does it take a son of converts to reach your achievements? I long and pray that, from within the Jewish nation—the ordinary Jews from the villages—that even such Jews “from within” should also reach such heights!

In Yiddish there are two expressions: A gevarener, and a geboiener. A Geboiener (in other words, an FFB) is someone born within the system, implanted there from the day he was born. On the one hand, he’s “one of us”—but there’s something in him that’s “set” and “systematic”. In short, he didn’t come to Yiddishkeit from himself, he didn’t choose this way of life. A Gevarener (or BT, ba’al teshuvah) in contrast, is someone who came to the Torah way of life on his own accord I don’t have to tell you about the massive difference between a “born-Breslover” and a someone who came close to Breslov chassidus from the outside.

The gevarener that has come close to Breslov- it’s like he’s “on fire”! He’s original, he understands very, very well what’s written in the sefarim, what it’s all about, and what we are trying to accomplish with our service to Hashem.

The geboiener, on the other hand, is mostly busy with boundaries. He’s a zealot when it comes to the tradition, and he’s extremely sensitive to any changes—and it’s good that way. These two— the gevarener and the geboiener—are two essential parts in the service of the Creator.

One thing’s for sure- the synergy between the geboiener and the gevarener is a pivotal point— the point of the whole creation! Usually, the two ways to serve Hashem aren’t found together, because there are spiritual levels where only someone who achieved them by his own efforts, can be understood.

And on this Rabi Dosa cried, or more correct, wished and prayed for: “Like you, should increase from within the Jewish people!” If only the geboieners that were born within the Jewish people, could succeed to reach the “gevarener” achievements of Rabi Akiva... if only!!!

I merited to know Rav Ezriel Tauber, and he spoke like a ger zedek. When he would introduce the simplest fundamentals of Judaism, he would speak with such an

enthusiasm and life, as if he himself had discovered these principles – in spite of the fact that personally, he was part of the Hungarian Jewish tradition—a real geboiener. To the best of my knowledge, it was he who invented the concept that it’s possible to “choose to be a Jew”, even someone who was born Jewish!

This was his core topic: “Stop being ‘stuck’ in Judaism—you must ‘choose to be Jewish!’” So what, if you were born to a frum family. So what, if you were born with all of Judaism’s treasure houses in your pocket. So what? Is that why you walk around as if it’s “decreed” that you wear a depressed look, and that you not understand how fortunate we are, and fortunate is our portion, and how pleasant is our lot, to be a Jew?

These words, “How fortunate is our portion, how pleasant is our lot” said in a positive way by a baal teshuvah or a convert, are very inspiring and strengthening. And it’s very good for anyone just starting out on his journey to Judaism, to hear them.

All of us have heard the song “Hakadosh Baruch Hu, anachnu ohavim otchah!” (The Holy One, Blessed be He, we love You!) Most often, who sings this song with all his heart? Just the gevareners... only those that just this minute donned a kippah and tzitzits, as they dance and sing this song with enthusiasm.

But wait a second—the geboieners... those that were born frum... we don’t have the merit to love Hashem? As absurd that it sounds, no! We don’t have this. We hardly encounter such an idea as “loving Hashem”...

For this Rabi Dosa longed and prayed about Rebbe Akiva: There should increase like you, in the Jewish people—I pray that also the geboiener... even he should be able to reach, from “within the system”, the unbelievable microcosm that Rabi Akiva found in the Torah.

Chazal tell us that Rabi Akiva would recite Shir haShirim with tears flowing from his eyes. Of course—Shir haShirim tells of the great longing and love between a wife and her beloved husband, which represents the love between Hashem and the Jewish people.

The question is: what are the odds that there will be more like Rabi Akiva?

Is there a chance that I, not being a son of converts ... and I didn’t remain an ignoramus until the age of 40 ... and Baruch Hashem, the bais medresh smiles towards me, as I’m firmly planted deep within the system —Is there a chance that even I will choose Judaism and learn to appreciate that I “won the lottery”?

Yes, that same Akiva who plowed the way, and who, after years of solitude and discrimination, stood at the crossroads with longing eyes, and asked: “Tell me, O You Whom my soul loves: Where will You graze Your flock?” (Song of Songs 1:7, Artscroll). That same Rabi Akiva who, his whole life, chased after Hashem, and sacrificed himself for Hashem as the most trusted confidant.

After all of this, he was “found by the watchmen that were on patrol, who proceeded to hit and beat him” (ibid., 5:7). The same Rabi Akiva who suffered the staggering loss of 24,000 students and still remained Hashem’s trusted servant. “I adjure you, O nations destined to ascent to Jerusalem, when you see my Beloved on the future Day of Judgment, what will you tell Him?—What’s the single message that you should deliver to Him from me? “That I’m lovesick for Him!” (ibid., 5:8)

Is it any wonder that when Rabi Akiva would recite Shir haShirim, automatically his eyes began following with tears of emotion...Who else could understand the depth of meaning in Shir haShirim? He knew what trustworthiness there is between a wife and her husband, even when he’s at a distance ... Even when she’s left alone. That same Rebbe Akiva, who’s entire life was one accumulation of trust and giving of unconditional love to Hashem, without any feedback. (He said himself: “My whole life I was pained about this verse, ‘You shall love Hashem...’, when will I be able to keep this commandment?” Brachos 61a).

However, when the geboiener recites Shir haShirim, he doesn’t cry so much... because... because we don’t come to this idea so much. We know that Hashem loves us ...

The geboiener mainly recognizes the verse “I’m sleeping, and my heart is awake, the voice of my Beloved knocks, open for Me, my sister, my friend ... I’ve already doffed my robe; how can I don it? I’ve already washed my feet; how can I soil them?” (ibid., 5:2-3) ...

In other words, “I’m not in any rush to any particular place. I was ‘born here’ ... I was born charedi. I know, Hashem wants me to pray ... He wants me to keep the 613 commandments ... nu ... So He’s waiting a bit on the other side of the ‘door’” ...

For the geboiener it’s difficult to reach that level of complete trust that exists between a wife that was stuck for years in shidduchim and her zivug, when they finally meet. He has her complete trust, she values him, and is ready to sacrifice everything for him. Such levels like this, only a gevarener can understand. In order to understand how precious Judaism is, one must choose Judaism ... To appreciate what it means to pray in a shul ... We need to have the shuls closed for the whole month of Nisan (for those that remember, just two years ago ...)

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In order to recognize the merit it is to learn Torah, there needs to be the evil decree that anyone caught learning Torah shall be stabbed with a sword, as in Rabi Akiva’s times. If, under such conditions, you still hide in a cave, endangering your life, in order to learn Torah ... Only someone who chooses the Torah!!! Only someone who initiates a connection and fights for the worship of Hashem ...It’s specifically he who can understand what troves of treasure we’re sitting on ... this was Rabi Akiva!!!!

The answer is: Yes! Everything depends on me ... if you internalized the message properly, and with the right convictions to invest and refresh our Judaism, every time anew, it’s possible to achieve this. Even though by a gevarener this comes naturally, and for me it’s a bit less natural, but it’s still possible. It’s necessary from time to time to refresh the essence of Judaism, and to decide that I want to “convert anew”. The secular Jew needs to do teshuvah, but the charedi Jew needs to “convert”. No kidding ... it’s exactly that!

Everyone needs to convert, the Jew and non-Jew alike. Just, for the non-Jew, this starts with the conversion process, and only afterwards he accepts upon himself the yoke of mitzvos. For the one born Jewish, it starts with understanding the pleasantness of Torah and mitzvos.

And then, later, there come the moments of truth, those moments in life when suddenly things do not go as planned. Suddenly, one encounters a circumstance when it’s not so convenient to be a Jew. The Jews are a despised and downtrodden nation. Then he asks himself: Wait a second ... am I ready to be trustworthy to Hashem even when it doesn’t “pay”?? Even when the stories don’t end with “children and grandchildren toiling in Torah and mitzvos”?

This moment is the point of “conversion” for the “charedi from birth” ... There’s a lot of us who are charedi, and yet have never converted, never actively “chose” Judaism—never accepted those difficulties that every convert accepts ...

We should merit to be students of Rabi Akiva. “There should be more like him, but also from those born Jewish” ...

Kislev

Month of Chanukah

Rebbetzin Devora Fastag

Surprisingly, the names of the Hebrew months are actually not Hebrew at all. The Torah calls the months by numbers; the first month the second month, etc. The names we use now were brought back by the Jews from the Babylonian exile, and are actually Babylonian names. One of the reasons for this is that it needed to be clear to everyone that even though the land of Israel was being resettled and the Beis HaMikdash rebuilt, the real redemption had not yet arrived. There was no Jewish king from the house of David, and most of the Jews actually stayed where they were and did not return to the land of Israel.

Yet despite the non-Jewish origin of these names, they actually have hidden meanings in them for us. Hashem put it into the minds of the Babylonians to use the names He had in mind, names that would hold a message for us.

So now let's examine the name "Kislev", the month in which Chanukah falls out and see what it has to tell us.

The word Kislev is comprised of four Hebrew letters. The first two letters, KS – kaf samech, in Hebrew means to cover. The second two letters, LV –lamed vav - has the numerical value of 36. What is the message contained here?

When the world was first created there was a very special spiritual light that was beyond boundaries. With this light one could see from one end of the world to the other. One could also see beyond the limits of the present time. After Adam and Chava sinned Hashem hid this light and it is now called the Or Haganuz, the hidden away light.

This very special light is reserved for the tsaddikim in the future, but even now it is attainable to very great tsaddikim through the Torah. And it is attainable to some extent to all our neshamos in the candles of Chanukah, for hidden in the flames of the Chanukah candles is this Or Haganuz, this very special ethereal light of Hashem's Torah.

So now we know why the word "hidden" is hinted at in the name Kislev, but what is the connection here to the number 36?

When Adam and Chava (Eve) were first created they were privy to this special light. After they sinned by eating of the Tree of Knowledge this light was taken away from them – but not immediately. Hashem allowed it to remain for that whole first Shabbat, and removed it only when Shabbat ended. Then Hashem showed Adam how to make fire, which is why we saying a blessing over fire at havdalah, when Shabbat ends.

So the Or Haganuz was present for 36 hours, 12 hours on Friday and 24

hours on Shabbat (it was present at night as well). Then that light was taken from mankind and stored away for the future to come, after Moshiach comes and undoes the sin of Adam and Eve. Yet even now that light is not completely lost to us, because some part of it is hidden in the Chanukah lights.

On Chanukah we light altogether 36 candles (not counting the shamash).

The first night we light one candle, the second night we light two candles, the third night we light three etc. until the last night we light 8 candles, and so $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8 = 36$. These 36 Chanukah candles are parallel to those thirty six hours when humankind enjoyed the Ohr Haganuz, the spiritual light, because that ethereal light is inside light of the Chanukah

candles. And so on Chanukah we can once again connect to the Ohr Haganuz – the light hidden away for the future to come. And even though our material eyes can no longer see this light, our neshamos can. So make sure to peer into the Chanukah lights, and your soul will connect with the

Ohr Haganuz!

(Based on Bnei Yisaschar)

Rebbetzin, Speaker & Author

Devorah Fastag

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ENVELOPED BY THE INFINITE LIGHT

Esther Margaretten-Astruc

From Tzfat



Once, way back in Arizona, I used to be like anyone else on the street, not looking beyond the mask of reality in this physical world. I just went about my business as usual, as a nurse on the rehab floor of a hospital in Tucson. Life was fairly ordinary. Then one day, everything changed.

I signed up to be a volunteer for the local Jewish Hospice, which means, helping people who are facing their last months, weeks, or days, in this world. (May Hashem protect us). I took off from my regular work to attend a week-long seminar to prepare us for assisting people facing a terminal situation. We attended classes about the emotional needs of terminal patients, and— in an unexpected development—two whole days were spent on the topic of Near Death Experiences. (I think most people have heard of this phenomenon, but for those who haven't, I will explain what this is.)

A near death experience (or NDE) is when someone (Heaven forbid) goes into cardiac and respiratory arrest due to a trauma, heart attack or other sudden change of condition, and experiences clinical death. Their soul, or consciousness, leaves their body, floating above it, and is able to look down upon what is happening below, while paramedics are working to resuscitate their body.

Then typically, they have the sensation of being drawn into a tunnel, and experience a great spiritual Light which envelopes them with an incredible feeling of unconditional love. Some experience a life review, some see their deceased relatives. Many times they are either asked if they wish to return to life, or are told they must return, because it's not their "time". Then they are somehow drawn back into their body and wake up again into life. They are never the same afterwards.

These experiences have been scientifically studied, and the conclusion of many doctors and investigators is that it's a valid phenomenon. The main validating point is that the experiencers are able to relate in great detail everything that was going on when they were looking down at the scene when they were being resuscitated. This shouldn't have been possible if their brain activity had ceased due to their being in a state of clinical death, and can't be explained by any other explanation except that the person's consciousness really was looking down and observing what transpired when they were "out of their body".

So— here I was, just a regular person off the street, and then suddenly out of the blue, I was being inundated with accounts of people's near death experiences— those we heard while watching the film "Life After Life" by Dr. Raymond Moody, as well as personal stories told to us by NDE experiencers who happened to be members of the Hospice staff. In an interesting twist, even when I returned back to work, I still wasn't "done" hearing about this topic of NDE's. When I told my head nurse about what we had learned in the seminar, she revealed that she herself had also experienced one!

Naturally all this information in such a short time, made a great impact on me, completely changing my life forever. I was never quite the same as I was before being exposed to accounts of people who had been "on the other side" and returned to tell about it. I almost felt as if I had gone through such an experience myself (without experiencing the dangerous situation, of course). Thus, I began an intense period in my life in which I made it my business to read almost everything I could find on the subject of NDE's.

The lessons of those who experienced a "life review" made the most impression on me. In these accounts, the person was shown how important it is to treat others with kindness, respect and empathy. Another important point I was impressed with was the changes that happened to these people's lives— the personalities that were transformed, becoming more empathetic, spiritual and giving. But it wasn't only their personalities that were changed, as I was soon to find out. Being enveloped by the infinite Light changed their whole lives in very real, concrete ways, often healing addictions and other harmful behaviors, that nothing had been able to fix before.

So basically, even though I was finished with the Hospice seminar and had gone back to my life, I found that the whole subject of NDE's was still following me. Not long afterwards, I transferred to the cardiac floor of our hospital, and started encountering patients who had experienced an NDE, on this unit. One man in particular, who had been resuscitated following a cardiac arrest, told me that he had experienced a full-blown NDE which had changed his life forever.

As he related to me— prior to his resuscitation, he had been an addict, and no amount of rehabilitation had been helping him. “But after being in that Light, feeling that tremendous unconditional love, everything turned around for me. My whole life changed, and I became a completely different person. I'm now 100% healed from the addiction I had had for years.” This corroborated what I had read— that experiencing being enveloped in that Light, radiating tremendous unconditional love, was able to turn people's lives around when nothing else was able to achieve this. What is it about this Light— which many NDE experiencers have identified as “being in the presence of G-d”—what is it that changes people so profoundly?

In an interesting side note, my daughter in law Ahava has also been very captivated by the phenomenon of NDE's for years, and kept up an ongoing process of trying to incorporate the lessons and experiences of these accounts into her life, and grow from them. Her interest was just now rekindled after she was recently saved from serious harm, Baruch Hashem, when huge flames coming from a fire started by the Shabbat candles on Chol Hamoed Sukkot, shot out away from her, instead of towards her. It was as if an invisible Hand was protecting her. She is of course immensely grateful for being saved from harm, and feels she was given a “second chance at life”. Because of this, she renewed her interest in reading accounts of NDE experiences, and has discovered that these accounts now affect her in a way that she hadn't previously felt before.

She says: “It's so amazing to read how people who have encountered this Light, that's radiating such infinite love— they come back much more loving, giving and empathetic towards others.” I agreed. I heard in a talk by Rabbi Lazer Brody, that in order to fulfill the mitzva of V'avavta l're'acha kamocho—loving one's fellow as oneself—one must first actually come to love oneself. Only then can one give love to others. And the way to do that is by contemplating on how much Hashem loves us, infinitely and unconditionally.

Ahava continued, “So somehow, through experiencing this amazing love from the great Light, this changes the person on a very deep level. If we could all take time every day to appreciate how much Hashem loves us— for instance, by imagining being bathed and enveloped by Hashem's infinite love—it could enhance our ability to develop true empathy and acceptance of others. Because when you imagine something, part of you is, in a way, really there”. This idea really speaks to me. When I was doing Hitbodedut yesterday (speaking to Hashem in my own words, telling Him everything that's going on in my life) I tried out this idea. I imagined that I was enveloped in Hashem's all-encompassing love— and I did indeed feel the power of this imagery to change oneself.

We are holding by the last little bit of time before the Geula. No one knows how long it will take— but we must prepare. It says that in Chevlei Mashiach, that we will be protected in the merit of Torah and Chesed we do for others. The Chafetz Chaim teaches that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed because of sinat chinam, baseless hatred, and will be rebuilt when Am Yisrael is united in peace and love. So I think that whatever will bring us to feel Hashem's love more, to appreciate how much He loves us, so that we can enhance our relationship with Him, as well as with our

fellow Jews, has got to be very important.

Let's bask in Hashem's love. See His kindness and mercy all around us, and radiate it outwards. May Hashem help everyone to achieve this, and may it bring the Geula very soon!

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Bullying Unraveled & The Ultimate Responders!

My sister and I burst through the door crying, “Momma, Momma—when we got off the bus, that big boy and girl told us they are going to hurt us...we didn’t do anything to them! Why don’t they like us? Why are they so mean to us??”

Listening thoughtfully, my mother responded, “In Proverbs, it says, ‘If your enemy does mean things to you, you should heap coals of fire on his head.’” * ... “So here is what I want you to do. Go find a gift from our toys to give to both of them.” To this day I remember the pleasant feeling as I selected a black and white Dalmatian pull-toy dog for the boy, smoothed up the scratches, and gently washed it. I felt the overwhelming feelings of fear and self-pity I had experienced just moments before, dissipating.

The next day, on exiting the yellow school bus, I quickly opened my lunch pail and said to the children who had threatened us the day before, “Come here, I have something for you!” and handed them a small bag of yellow-orange “corn candy”. Their eyes widened, seemingly stunned.

“...And we have presents for you too.” As we neared our house I ran in and brought back the wooden dog on wheels for the boy, and my sister brought a doll she had scrubbed up for the girl.

P.S.- They never bothered us again. I have lifelong gratitude to my mother for her wisdom in these types of human clashes!

But life goes on and not all of my encounters with the attackers of the world were so smooth. With a face full of glaring red pimples, and wearing longer skirts and sleeves than the rest of our school of four thousand students, I obviously “stood out” a bit more than the rest. As a defense

*[Note- What this means is, “do something so good to him, that it will show that you are a better person than him, and this will put him to shame”.]

mechanism, I sort of “withered into myself,” a self-made pit of isolation— and reasoned that it was best not to be noticed, but this didn’t always work.

One day, when our class was watching the most boring math film, in a darkened theatre-type room, the kids behind me started pulling my hair out. I never winced or even turned around. They got a big kick out of this entertainment, and laughed every time someone pulled out yet more strands of my hair. After they tired of their game, one of them threw the whole ball of hair into my lap, accompanied by snickering. I was slightly shocked to see this big mass—but “being quiet” was the defensive path I had chosen. I had also felt I had passed a test, fulfilling the dictum that my Mother had drilled into us, of “Turning the other cheek”—of being passive and not fighting back.”

Kooties, kooties!” yelled the kids at a skinny girl with long, straight hair. “She has kooties!” Some would even reach out and touch her when the teacher was not around, shrieking, “Kooties!” and pretend to faint. Why? I guess she just fell into the category of “pickable”, not reacting to what they were doing, but just looking traumatized.

There seemed to be no lack of these, bully-type situations in the many schools I attended throughout the years. Unmercifully, the “uppers” downed the “lowers,” inflating their egos as they squashed the “inferiors” under their boots.

Not only was the social scene harsh, rejecting whoever was more conspicuous and didn’t fit their self-assigned definition of “normal”— but there were also certain “divisions within the hierarchy”, separating people into groups based on the color of one’s skin. On exiting our school cafeteria, were huge groups of boys. There were gangs of “whites”, “browns” and “blacks”, each group standing in their own circle, seeming like separate cakes with different colored frostings, but all made from the same batter.

Although this large group of boys were all standing not so far apart—and on the surface their proximity seemed akin to a unity of sorts— in reality, the divisions were very real. Under the surface simmered hatred each one for the “others”, and one “warring wink” signaled by a gang member, could be the “spark igniting the powder keg” into a furious gang battle. There was one exception to the rule of “separation according to skin color”. There was yet another division ... the white “Jew boy”.

The hazing and physical attacks on Alex Newman unsettled me the most. He was a small freckle-faced, curly-headed Jewish boy. His family, had fled the Holocaust as his mother, a top violinist, was secretly smuggled out of Germany. These were our neighbors. In Alex I saw such a Holocaust face, suffering seemed stamped eternally on his face. As we all stood waiting for the school bus, the twice-as tall goyish boys encircled him, heckling, kicking, and slapping his face, while Alex stood there bravely, day after day, helplessly outnumbered. Sometimes I would see a tear or two fall down his cheek. I couldn’t stand to watch their bullying—but there was nothing that could be done. Interference in these situations would only cause them to turn on the one who meddled.

One day, as a new high school freshman, they let us out early to go to a school rally. None of the girls I asked seemed to know what a “rally” was, and so curious, I went. It was to be my first and last time to go. Our school was slated to play a football game against another school, and our team were the “ferocious tigers”. So for an hour the “cheerleaders”, arrayed in the tiger colors of orange and black, whipped the crowd into a frenzy, shouting, “We’re going to whip, beat, kill the [other school’s] team!!! Yeah, yeah!!!”

Proud white American teens were being ego-boosted & inflamed, “We’re the greatest! Smash, pound, slaughter Creating an emotional agitation that no “Indian peace pipes” could calm, these agitated mind-sets often burst into physical violence. The lifelike sculpture of our tiger mascot received the butt of the anger of our enemy schools. Standing proudly at the front of our campus throughout the four years I attended, it greeted us many mornings with the latest violence: once, doused with multi-colored paint; another time, covered completely in neon green; and another time, its head had been lopped off.

There was no concept here of “keeping the peace”. “School spirit” in the sports arena as their football games was a “law-abiding” condoned practice of anger and hatred, provoking a level of aggression where these teens time and again ended up

injuring and incapacitating their peers for life—never facing an arrest or jail time, let alone a subpoena or even a fine! This was schooling-- an “education” in the ways of the human jungle!

As my experiences expanded beyond our high school campus, I discovered that these social abuses were only the tip of the iceberg in the history of mankind's violent and aggressive behavior. My vicarious “book travels” took me on journeys through which I learned about the injustices perpetrated by Man onto his fellow man, because of racial differences.

One book, “Black Cargo”, based on interviews of the last presumed living survivor of the “middle passage”. For centuries, millions of Africans were seized by their fellows, imprisoned, put onto ships under appalling human conditions, and —if they lived through the voyage—were sold to white slave traders upon arrival at their destination. Most were enslaved for life and came to work in the cotton fields of America’s South.

Later, I came across another sobering book, “Black Like Me” the journal of John Howard Griffin, who, with his skin temporarily darkened, hoboed around the “Deep South, witnessing and revealing the evils of the thoughtless inhumanity called racism.”

Sometimes our family drove to Watts, a suburb of LA, to visit a woman we knew called Frances. This big-hearted woman had taken into her care, her frail “Auntie” whom she so lovingly doted on. As the adults chatted, Frances urged us kids to delight in her delicious spread of crackers, cheeses, and dates. She had sung at our parent's wedding years ago, and so, the highlight of our visits to her home was when she would sing for us...shaking and dancing her piano, as she sang her soul out!

Years later, I came to live in the Deep South of America, & I witnessed up close this racial hot bed. After their Civil War, when the South lost the war, it was forced to set the slaves free—but the act of freeing their slaves didn’t change the way the southerners viewed the people who had just recently been under their dominion. Yes, a new law was forced upon them, but there had been no “change of heart” at all.

It seemed plantation owners who had previously owned many slaves, continued, after the war, with their “slave owner” mentality. Their simmering, seething hatred affecting a whole region—the vibes so thick you could almost “cut them with a knife”.

But even though I became a resident of the South, my resistance to this prejudice was firm. I never gave in to the beliefs this group spewed, and one of the reasons was because of my childhood encounters with the exceptional woman who was Frances, and her sweet “Auntie”.

The “browns”— the Mexicans, were generally thought of as migrant workers as they came up from Mexico to pick lemons in our local groves & worked at lower than minimum wages. Sometime as we visited into Mexico right across our border to Tijuana we would encounter the bull-fighting arena. We were disgusted by their sport of poking daggers into a living bulls! Other people down-graded these people as “lowly”, but not my folks. These “browns” were some of my parent's best friends. We children were sometimes allowed to stay overnight with their children, and it was fascinating for us to witness their close knit family culture. I was fascinated to watch the Mama's daily routine of flipping the flattened flour dough back and forth in her hands, tossing it on the grill and then, picking it up from the pan with just her bare fingers. A huge stack of tortillas soon towered up on the counter before my eyes!

After WWII, the soldiers of the “Pacific war” came back with their war brides. I remember my father telling us, on the way home after visiting cousins, that one cousin had bragged, “It's best to get a Japanese wife like I did, because they make the best wives...they are so submissive—really such docile people.” My father had just fought Japan for five years after they had violently attacked our nation for no reason.

(It really spoke to me when a Rav later told me, “Making generalities of a people is dangerous.)

But the lowest point in the history of mankind's insanity toward his fellow man was seen when encountering the mistreatment of the Jewish people. I first heard of the Holocaust when one day my mother quietly read to us children a lengthy story detailing this modern-day horror, —what a bombshell!!!

Strangely, there was never even one mention of the Holocaust in our California school history books, or any revealing comment from our teachers. Hearing from my mother about this catastrophic human event— which had just occurred just a few years before I was born—totally numbed me for weeks.

And later, when I encountered the Jewish people for the first time at about age forty, I finally learned from them another hidden crime of humanity—the true version of the story of the Crusaders. These were not “valiant heroes” as we were taught who just fought for the honor of their faith”— but rather, ruthless aggressors who inflamed men into murderous hysteria as they marched from town to town across Europe slaughtering

entire communities of Jews while on their way, these were the “Holy Crusades” to Jerusalem. The bloodthirsty frenzy that these evil ones were able to induce among their men, so that they acted like wild animals—wasn't so hard for me to understand, after having witnessed the group frenzy that could be generated at my high school's “cheerleader-sports-rallies”.

I became devoted to seeking out heroes, reading every biography I could find. From the South, there was the former slave Booker T. Washington. He was a humble genius and inventor who developed three hundred products from peanuts. He became a leader of his people, rising to make known to the US presidents, the oppression of the people of color.

And there was the famous Dorothea Dix, of the 1800s who led a movement to raise awareness and help for the mentally ill and prisoners. Up until that time, the mentally ill and mentally challenged had been chained to posts or lay most of their years in bed. It was thrilling to find that even one person or one group could make a monumental impact. And there was also Florence Nightingale, known as ‘The Angel of Crimea’ or the ‘Lady with the Lamp’, who rose to make “night rounds” to save those that otherwise would have been left to die. She led a movement of social advancement, bringing a new level of nursing care to the world!

So in history, there had been people who arose to protest man's inhumanity to man, but mostly these efforts didn't seem to change the hearts. These leaders arose, calling out to their fellows “peace, peace,” raising the sparks of hope that mankind's senseless hatred would somehow ignite into worldwide brotherly love. Ongoing brave souls had created a “global noise” as the United Nations, the Peace Corps and the Holocaust museums... But simultaneously, as I pondered the madness of the outer world, I was wrestling with my own inner conflicts. What sometimes seemed the most important to our religious circle then was, “keeping up the outer façade”. At school we must always “turn the other cheek” but at home— a different story.

As a child, I was exposed to what could be seen as harsh discipline methods. The result of all this was that at home, I became the “teenager that never smiled”. I glowered at everyone, and no one could penetrate my shell! Yes, I had “turned the other cheek” but I had developed a stony heart.

Once, my mother came to me and said, “You are hurting your father so much when you speak to him as you do.” At another time my father came to me and said, “Your mother doesn't stop crying and praying for you every night.” Oh my, in spite of my chosen path of, “I will be a concrete wall”,

those little trickles of compassion from my parents leaked around into the back door of my heart and pooled—but outside, to them, I still just scowled. Shamefully, as I many times babysat my younger nine brothers and sisters, I handle them with some of the same harshness that had been passed down to me.

But, if one heart of stone—mine—can be turned into a soul of tenderness, then there is hope for another, and another, and yet another... If I could have read the sign for this journey I was about to undertake for this transformation— the sign for this road would have pointed, “Suffering, this way”.

As I moved two thousand miles away to the other side of America, not seeing my family for many years, I was so homesick for them—especially the younger, little ones of whom I had such a big part in taking care of. But as I became a parent, the challenges of parenting gave me a new insight. I began to see that the harshness of my father was because of his unbearable childhood deprivation. He was orphaned of his mother at age seven, bouncing frequently between different “caretakers”. How wretched is the life of a shattered child who misses the kisses of his mother!

At seventeen, he endured four years of war and the horrors of mortally wounded buddies going down before his eyes... As I matured, I began to see him in a different light. He had so many deprivations to overcome, but arose from self-pity to parent us in the best way he knew. When I looked back and pondered his parenting, I realized he really had a deep love for me.

I remembered my mother’s words and began to receive them now. Right before she whipped me she would say, “It hurts me more to punish you, than the pain you will feel.” I came to realize a lot of their methods were just generational—the culture of their times. “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” “Children should be seen and not heard.” “Don’t talk back to me.” (I don’t want to hear your feelings). But much of these harsh “no communication” methods felt like anti-love.

Years later, as I came to the Jewish people, I was taught that honoring your parents—Kibud Av Aim—is finding the greatness of your parents. Today I am so thankful for the parents Hashem gave me. They were perfectly designed for the path I needed to take in life. They gave me rare giftsa strong belief in G-d, morality, following the laws of the Bible, seeking to help your fellow man... But even so, being raised with toughness actually seemed to be an asset for coping with harsh situations. I came away with a high tolerance to personal pain. But the flip side was I had little feelings or patience for those who suffered—and my attitude mostly was, “Bite the bullet” and “Keep marching like I do.”

But... after forty years of keeping it all inside, suddenly, “Boom, whooosh!” the balloon burst, unblocking the dam of pain, upon the death of my eleventh child and subsequent divorce. The next few years found me bursting into tears, almost non-stop. I surprised at how emotionally weak I really was. At the same time, I was just emerging from a secluded existence, coming out into the ever-advancing technological world after twenty years of living an isolated mountain life, somewhat like it must have been for the Jewish Choni HaMagal or, in the other world, the legendary Rip Van Winkle.

The world had advanced in modernization, and as I came out of my wilderness cave, I encountered a new level of sensitivity, of insight and acknowledgment of the inner world of emotions. There was therapy, there were psychologists, and lots of incredible books!

Coming at the same time to the Jewish world was also like a little ragged urchin coming for the first time to a city candy store. The eyes widen, the mouth gasps “Wow, wow, wow”! Mitzvah gems that had been dismissed as “done away with” by the religion I was raised in, were now “dusted off” and revealed in all of their shining splendor! As in, “be kind to the widow, the orphan and the convert”! These were not commandments dealing with superficial, external things, but with deep inward distresses. This was the Master of the Universe making one aware of silent, crying souls.

Who could take the place of a spouse with whom one kept up continuous ongoing conversation, whose face lit up when one walked into the room? Who can take the place of one’s entire family, with decades of close connections, that a convert must leave behind?! And who can take the place of a mother?

I found also within the Jewish people an even higher level of compassion to climb toward, beginning with the greatest examples of their people. In the other world, the characters of the Tanach were regarded as “archaic simple people”, and mostly overlooked. As I came to dwell among my newfound people, I came to discover that these personalities of the Tanach, such as the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, were spotlighted and held up as role models for everyone to follow. Avraham was such a leader in social justice in rescuing his nephew Lot from kidnapping by the Four Kings. Yaakov, constantly bullied by Lavan, only seems to react with questions never ever blowing up.

Thirty-six times in the Torah, it is commanded to “Love the convert!” I have experienced a multitude of kindnesses too numerous to list, when my family and I came to dwell among the Jewish people. Do Jews practice these precepts? Yes,

Yes, my family and I have found it to be true, in a multitude of ways!!

Just as it can be agonizing when a very ill person accidentally bumps into a bed; so too, in life, there are many situations that cause pain, especially to a sensitive person. I have experienced a few times of being at a full Shabbos table, when the challah is cut and passed around. Everyone is happily eating and the conversation resumes— and suddenly a small child, unable to speak yet, bursts into tears. No one noticed he was by-passed—everyone got challah but him, ai yai yai.

Just as bypassing that little child was purely unintentional, I am choosing to believe that even when there are seemingly insensitive words spoken among our people, they are likewise mostly unintentional. As Rebbetzin Gottlieb (Heller) says, "We are all so vulnerable."

Who at some time in life hasn't felt the emotional equivalent of a dart hurtling toward him— a snide remark, from being ignored, or made fun of?

Besides discrimination based on color of skin and against certain groups as the handicapped, the aged, the deformed, and those with birth marks and facial scars are singled out to be on the other side of "normalcy". "Your not normal," the childish holler! It's pointed out that a bully will even "take the truth and try to turn it into an insult". Any interesting detail—such as eating sardines for lunch, following a different religion practice, having red hair— anything that is different, interesting or even pretty can become a target." (How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies, Kate Cohen-Posey, M.S., LMHC, LMPT)

Is there anyone on the planet that hasn't at one time been the recipient of insensitivity? But are there ways to shield ourselves, thickening our skin and mentally preparing for thoughtless encounters.

Witness the wisdom of Rabi Akiva's wife Rochel. When Akiva decided to begin studying Torah at forty years of age, and had to begin by learning the Alef Bais, he was fearful of being laughed at, as a middle-aged man joining a cheder of little boys. So what did Rochel do? She took a donkey, planted flowers on its back, and insisted that Akiva take it to a market where people would laugh and poke fun at him. Gradually he would get used to the ridicule, and this would "thicken up his skin" to cope with the "flying arrows" ahead!

It is known that "Most bullies act the way they do because they have been teased, neglected or terribly wounded, maybe they were even bullied themselves. With the intense pain and anger bottled up inside, they lash out to attack someone they size up as weaker than themselves and for a short time feel superior." (*Ibid*)

The heroes of the world must truly be considered righteous gentiles. As Dorothea Dix fought for better treatment of the handicapped and mentally ill, and who can deny that great strides were made in the provisions for them. Yet the fact remains that many hearts are still closed to normal human compassion. Even twenty-five years ago, when I had a Down Syndrome child, the statistic was that nine out of ten women closed their hearts and aborted their own tiny ones. In America alone, sixty million plus women have chosen to throw away their unborn babies.

Yes, people with empathy have arisen to defend and improve the situations of the oppressed. They spend their lives wholeheartedly dedicated to their missions but is it enough?

There is a concept that was once sketched showing the men of the world climbing the "mountain of truth" amazingly, as they get to the top they find the ancient white-long-bearded of sages of Israel already sitting there. On their table are the "Holy books" they have studied for thousands of years. They received a "map of life" that by following this "prevention handbook" the Torah, one is saved from the ills of the world...

As it has become so "in vogue" —the masses have fought for women's rights to abortion but there is no such "trail of tears" for a woman in our world of Torah, which shows us the "preventive path". By one profound action, —we are enjoined to get married!

Thanks to Hashem, there are so many directives that were given in the Torah that have steered our people away from even starting down the path of violently enslaving another human being, kidnapping, torturing.

It is wonderful that in our modern world we now have a multitude of therapists that will spend years unraveling all of the details of a victim's trauma and bringing him toward healing— but millions of times greater are the ways of the religious Jewish families down through the ages who, with an iron grip, wholeheartedly believed and practiced a Torah life!

These living "family monuments", quietly hidden ornaments of Avraham's descendants are basking in ultimate living! Blissful Shabbos envelops a Jewish home each week, nurturing family members and guests. Inspiring and meaningful holidays come to us, reminding us of the tribulations of the Jewish people, as we relive moments of our nation's suffering: Purim, when Haman's decree almost annihilated us; Hanukkah, when we defeated those who sought to erase our Torah beliefs; Pesach, reminding us when we were slaves in Egypt. As the Jew suffers vicariously, again his compassion enlarges to another dimension.

Among the non-Jews, their holidays call for self-indulgence. Their dictum is: "Let's eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die". Many times their celebrations result in violence and depression.

On the other hand those of us who came from the dismays of the "other world" look on with wonder at such an incredible "state-of-the-art training" in sensitivity the Torah Jew practices & lives. A Jew will not even kill the tiniest gnat on Shabbos.

We know that Yocheved and Miriam, the dual midwife team, were given the tremendous rewards of royalty and priesthood for tending to the Jewish mothers and protecting them from Pharaoh's murderous plots. But Puah (Miriam) is singled out for one, it would seem the tiniest of ac-

tions, (Certainly would never make it to our newspaper headlines!) her noble action: she made the cooing gentle sounds that one makes to calm a crying infant. ("The Merit of the Righteous Women"-The Biala Rebbe, Shlita

I personally have talked to & witnessed, what must be the strongest families of the earth surely, the real pillars of our civilization! These parents grew up listening and watching the deeds of their fathers and mothers of the previous generation who followed also the mitzvot (the transmission of Jewish religious tradition) from their parents & zadies and bubbies. What a treasured gift these children have— concrete footprints to follow instead of marshy swamps.

As the daily lives of these children are filled with the ultimate of life directives & the kisses & nurturing of their mothers & Fathers a tiny flame is lit in the inward candle of their heart.

So beautifully balanced and warm are these homes, that some in their "golden years" have a multitude of descendants who are still walking in their ways. In most of these century old Avraham & Sara dynasties these children don't feel a need to learn the hard way by "dabbling" in the "ways of the outside world"

Those of us who didn't inherit the chain of Jewish lineage, lacking an unbroken link to the mesorah of previous generations— are at a disadvantage. We begin our parenting career when we come to the new world of Jewry similar to a doctor who practices medicine after having taken only a few courses and ends up killing his patients.

Newcomers to the Jewish world, "fresh off the boat", seem to sometimes "jump into the sea" even before it gets to shore, and burst excitedly into their new world. Not knowing exactly how highly the Torah lifestyle prizes interpersonal actions, and lacking the Jewish experience of knowing exactly how to balance "kindling the fire in the soul"—they, with their suitcases

of mitzvos and their little children in tow—become, sometimes instead, the soldier sergeant who barks orders: "Hup 1, 2, 3...", thus bullying others with mitzvos. This becomes a tragic "forsaken path" for to many of our offspring.

A case in point: I once met a woman who told me about her boys now in yeshiva, suffered a lot because they were forced, against their personal preferences, to wear a black hat. Even now, years later, it has remained such a "sore spot", that the black hats, now maybe permanently retired, lie collecting dust on top of their closets.

We also, probably would not have taken too kindly if, as we ourselves started keeping mitzvos, someone would have sent a "mitzvah police-man" to our homes to keep track of our observance and yell at us every time we "messed up". Such as:

"You need to get up now to say Shema!" Or,

"No that's not the way the Shulchan Aruch says to do it, you have to do it this other way"...

Or, "Did you daven with kavanah when you said that bracha?! All these, said with a glowering look, on the face. (This last remark, I actually overheard a "newcomer" asking her child.

Most adults aren't even on this level.) The tznius war with the teens is certainly not always easy, but some who are of the most immodest nowadays, were driven away by parents who declared war on them. In the hallway of one home was posted a large sign hanging from the ceiling, "No one past this point without socks!"

What unbelievable times we live in as we see with open eyes how the heart of the Jew pulsates into every corner of the world...

From the Chabad houses that have expanded to almost every city in the world...

Or has there ever been such a group in all of the world such as Hatzalah? At the "drop of a hat," these volunteers jump on their motorcycles, whizzing on sidewalks, and up steep mountain to save! Their ambition now in Israel is to be accessible to every crisis by arriving in one minute and a half. They are fighters for life!

What time, and where in the history of the world, have thousands gathered in colosseums—not to kill bulls or maiming people to caress a ball—but unified, rejoicing, dancing at something the eye can't even see at the Siyum HaShas! For seven years these leaders of the world have studied to access the greatest Mind of the Universe—the Creator Himself!!!

Get the Shield Ready... Deflect the Darts!

Ask a question- The four-year old can be taught to respond with a question as to her impish brother after he pulls her kookoo, she should say instead of shrieking ask, "Why did you did you pull my hair?"

Boomerang a small insensitivity with a compliment — The 10 year old can be taught to respond with a compliment upon hearing a critical remark, "You sure don't know how to match your clothes."

"Oh thank you for noticing the way I dress!" I could use some help, how would you suggest that I can be more color coordinated?

Use Humor- Rabbi Porter, of Baltimore once suggested to a person constantly bombarded with deeming remarks should, "Think up a humorous retort."

Prepare a snappy answer- Rebb. Esther Hochstadter, a teacher of converts, advises her students, maybe in a situation where someone doesn't want to answer a personal question—"Prepare a 'snappy answer'".

Wait just a moment he's a "Tzelem Elohim" (Created in the image of G-d) - Rabbi Avraham Stern of Beitar advised us just a few weeks ago, "Each day spend at least one time to concentrate on one person and say, "He is a Tzelem Elohim" created in the image of G-d.

It's just a little bee sting- Another defense is to prepare ourselves not to be so sensitive. As a widow & convert I can strengthen myself not to take it inside because Oy va voy I don't want someone to suffer because I over reacted.

Propitious Opportunity- But the "Olympian Gold" metal that can be seized when a receiver of an insult instead of answering back, forgives on the spot, and asks Hashem for a favor as, a child, a zivig (match) for his sister, healing for a sick one....

Today with their hardened hearts and hot tongues, "the world" is madly obsessed with character assassination, slander, anti-semitism...

Not so in the low-keyed eloquence of Yiddishe villages where thousands of men, women, and children study each day to guard their tongues against hurting their fellow man by even "one word."

The "giving" of the Jewish people is unsurpassed! The chessed of their communities, from top to the bottom is consistently and widely performed.

Even the "least" among us the young children are seen racing on our the streets delivering pots and pans of food to a family member sick in bed, or a neighbor, taking a smaller sibling to the doctor or bank, loving to share a treat with their baby sister, saying brachas with enthusiasm ...If all of the angelic actions of the Jewish people could be listed each day it would probably fill more than the thickest New York phone book!

If the passive retreat of one man, Noach, from the evil around him caught the eye of the One Above, and He saved the whole world, we cannot even we can only try to imagine the impact the family of Israel is making at this time!!!

As the angels looked down and saw for the first time, the family of Yakov coming home to their land—they were so amazed at such a family! (Pentateuch).

Yes, our most illustrious ones were not perfect in their personal interactions, but, but, but, the Torah cites them as Tzadikim... Yes, we make mistakes and also our fellow Jews but, but, but....

As I got out this morning to run a few errands & I saw a man violently kick a car with a man inside two times. I'm sure whoever he is, today he feels like a loser, holds a lot of pain and frustration at the way his life is holding. There is a lot of "road rage" today but at least this man only kicked a car, BH!

But I also saw this morning another one of these "giants of our land". There is here in Tzfat a little computer store one of those "little hole in the walls" shops that needs no name or advertisement. Seemingly always there are a line of customers standing in line at the counter as "Shimon" seems to have five hands— one needs a phone fixed, another setting up a printer, another needs an mp3 for a child....I watched as he held the phone in one hand this morning then dashed to grab three items out of some shelves for a couple who just walked in. How did he remember and know exactly what this couple needed and where it was located? Constantly customers wander in and out asking him a multitude of questions, which he patiently answers.

I have probably been in his shop at least ten times in the past few months... I've never seen him get frustrated, such incredible patience, let alone angry! A few weeks ago a few like business men waited behind his counter, maybe from Tel Aviv. As we were conversing on his exceptionality one of them said, "I've been coming here for years just to watch him!"

A few weeks ago my son came home for the first time in eight years. I dialed the phone for him to call his brothers and listened as, with much love, my sons reconnected.

On his first day home, the two of us journeyed on many buses and trains down through Jerusalem. It seemed to be a new world for him. For these many years he had denuded in the farthest of Northern Israel. Coming back after so long away he was seeing as if, a new world: the new train in Jerusalem...skyscrapers in Tel Aviv...a pocket of Chareidim in Beit Shemesh...

This sixth son had descended into a deep hole of negative emotions for years. The aftermath of among many negative experiences, one of which was bullying, he cut off from all of us his family. We were left with no contact information, not even a phone number... A "chance encounter" a few years ago convinced him to seek a higher road of forgiveness. With lots of therapy and support groups & hours of listening to soft music, he slowly is healing and came to realize that there is no one who can take the place of family. Gradually he has re-connected with his family mostly with phone calls. A few weeks ago previous to his homecoming, as I visited him in his northern home, there came a quiet knock on the door. Four IDF soldiers standing on his porch are smiling... one hands him a homemade sprinkled chocolate cupcake wrapped in cellophane and tied with a note which he translated for me...

"Something sweet for you for a sweet day...Just like you always are here for us...we give you from the school of good deeds in the Galilee." —signed, *Army school of the Galilee*.

"No one has ever done anything like this for me before" he kept saying. I kept wondering if they had any idea how greatly received this little one act of kindness had been...lighting one little flame in the deep darkness of a Yiddishe soul. We concurred that not even a truckload of gifts would have had as much meaning.

On the second day of my son's homecoming I took him out for breakfast in the Mehadrin restaurant on Rechov Yerushalayim in Tzfat. Basking in the sun streaming in the windows I savor this "Hodu Hashem" moment...a most magnificent view, eating the "biggest breakfast" he said, "I ever had". We laughed as he was delivered a tiny toy cup of "The Espresso"—of the bitterest coffee he had ever tasted, what a face! And I held up my large whipped cream-topped Cappuccino smiling back!

We called a brother and set up a date on Hanukkah for him to come to the town where his brothers live with their families. We shmoozed about how excited not only his brothers but the many nephews and nieces he has never seen will be. I told him this will be a real "Ani Yosef" story.

Later, musing over this incredible happening before my eyes, "Who would have believed?" These Hanukkah parshas are running parallel to what is presently taking place in our family. I had almost given up but I always continued to daven, these sounds so familiar... I open the Tanach and my eyes fall on the place where it says in Parsaha Mikeitz of the brother's reunion... "Yosef fell on Benjamin's neck and they wept on each other's shoulders...and the brothers conversed."

Hodu LaHashem—"He is The Compassionate One" who so perfectly designs our lives! I feel the warm tears. I'm already singing *shehecheyanu*. My son Binyamin is coming home!

Always, always as I look back at the incredible path of my life I am so grateful for every step & stone of the way. Years ago in a little shack in the mountains of Georgia on this night the first night of Hanukah we lit our first "menorah"—such an auspicious beginning, bent hanger wires were our candle holders. And now as I think about the past that other world, the goyisher world Hashem jolted me out of—a new song is welling up again—how good it is to be a Jew!

The Jew hurls, re-hurls and re-hurls again, with his body, soul, and mind to perfect his thoughts, words, and actions—becoming a towering global giant. He rejoices at the grand privilege to be a Yid! At many simchas & holidays throughout the year he will join hands with his kindred souls of every corner and color dancing ecstatically— one heart of our people—so inflamed, so grateful and passionately in love with our Creator!

"Baruch Hashem, we know with 100% certainty that very soon earthquakes will obsolete the Richter scale, volcanoes will erupt past the earth's gravity spilling hot lava over the whole earth. The last shell will be broken, the dictators, abusers, the seventy bullying wolf nations will slink away with their tails between their legs and the lamb-like Jewish nation unfettered will arise to their full potential, revealing the glory of the Jewish people and the everlasting smile of our G-d & bringing justice & favor to the whole earth!

"Homecoming"!

An International Forum for
Gerim & Ba'alei Teshuva



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Lilui nishmas
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Please join us for a shiur in honour of Chanuka

*Gazing at our Chanuka
candles with the eyes of
Jerusalem*

Monday Dec. 19/ 25 Kislev

Eretz Israel - 3:00 pm
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Portugal - 1:00 pm
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Singapore - 9:00 pm

Rebbetzni
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