



Awakening Jewish Youth and their Families to our Torah Heritage

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Articles

[Kiruv....And Then What?](#)

Imagine a new family moves onto the block. To be friendly, the next-door neighbor invites the family for a Shabbos lunch. Shabbos arrives, and as the guests walk through the door, the hostess gently says, "You know, it's customary to send a little gift along before Shabbos when you're invited out."

A while later, one of the guest's young children announces that he hates the gefilte fish. It doesn't taste like Mommy's. So the hostess helpfully informs the guest that her child has bad manners and should be taught how to refuse food politely. Then she instructs her own child not to learn from this young visitor. "Nothing personal, you know," she tells the guest. "We just don't want him to pick up any bad habits."

After the meal, the conversation flows in various directions. The father of the visiting family – an avid follower of local politics – brings up the recent school-board elections. The host interrupts quickly to enlighten the guest: "This isn't really an appropriate topic for the Shabbos table," he softly advises.

Welcome to the Family

If the guests pursued this relationship any further, it would be a remarkable testimony to the power of forgiveness. The scenario seems unthinkable. But putting oneself in the guests' place is instructive; it conveys the feeling that frequently rises in the heart of a newly religious person who is entering the religious world.

To its credit, the religious community has opened its eyes to the rolling wreckage of Jewish demographics. People are beginning to understand that assimilation is no longer the problem; disappearance is. There are thousands of gentile Cohens and Goldsteins out there. Thousands of people think they are "half-Jewish." Thousands born of gentile mothers think they're 100 percent Jewish. In one town, an effort by the Torah community to open a Hebrew school for public school children drew a class that was at least half non-Jewish according to halachah.

"The more Jewish the name, the less likely the kids were to actually be Jews," said one person involved in the effort. "If the father was Jewish and they had his name, chances were good that the mother was not Jewish."

Then of course, there are the thousands of halachically Jewish people with names that evoke the counties of Ireland, the provinces of Italy or the deck of the Mayflower. Kiruv, as everyone can clearly see, is now an emergency room procedure.

Efforts are underway across the country and around the world to stop the hemorrhage. While much obviously remains to be done, the Torah community is beginning to understand that it cannot just blithely watch its brethren drown in ignorance and fade from memory. Organizations, speakers, outreach programs, schools, websites, publications, seminars – they're all out there, drawing Jews back to Torah one by one.

But what happens then? What happens after someone decides, "Yes, this is what I want for my life"?

Often, he is the "guest at the table" depicted in the opening story. His life-long habits are suddenly wrong. His frame of reference is different from that of everyone else in his new world. He and his children, brought on American popular culture, are deemed bad influences who, "nothing personal," are not welcomed in many yeshivos and many communities.

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While this dynamic plays out in a way that is often uncomfortable and sometimes outright painful for a newly religious Jew, it flows from a source that is well supported throughout the Torah. Jews have an obligation to keep themselves apart from the culture and ways of the gentiles.

Throughout most of the Orthodox world, the term “religious” is at least partly measured by the degree to which a person shuns the styles, entertainment and lingo of the secular world. Most yeshivos discourage or prohibit television, secular music and movies, which are the bread-and-butter of secular culture. Families do their best to keep their children from absorbing the values that pervade American society – a world that holds up wealth and pleasure as the true indicators of a life well lived.

So what is the well-meaning observant Jew to do? If he lets secularly oriented children into his child’s school, he takes a chance on exposing the child – right there within the walls of the yeshiva – to exactly the influences he is trying to exclude. Yet if he doesn’t embrace the newly religious child, he is essentially sending the child back into the loving arms of the public school.

To say the child can come –but he had better not mention anything about television or hum any Disney soundtracks – demands of the child an exhausting level of vigilance and self-control. The child will probably also need to develop a tolerance for rejection; he can expect that some of his new classmates will not be allowed to come play at his house.

Once the kiruv world is finished applauding a person’s transformation (“He cut off his ponytail and put on a yarmulka...He took out his nose ring and threw out his television...She gave all her pants away to charity and put on a sheitel...”) the business of real life and its real complications begins.

And that is when unglamorous day-to-day work of kiruv begins. “You have to be there not just for Shabbos, but for erev Shabbos when you’re busy and someone needs to talk,” says a long-time volunteer for Oorah Kiruv Rechokim, Lakewood, New Jersey. “It’s not just the first day of yeshiva – it’s the middle of the school year when there’s a problem with the teacher and the parents don’t know what to do. You have to be a whole support system to people.”

The Balance

Welcoming baalei teshuvah into the Torah community and learning to value what they bring to the table is as important a challenge for the observant Jewish world as is kiruv itself. One cannot invite the guest for lunch only to point out the error of his ways, even if the goal is help him correct them.

For all the baal teshuva’s gaps in learning and basic Torah concepts, he has one attribute that should stir awe in the heart of any “frum-from-birth” Jew. He has the merit of being able to say “na’aseh v’nishma” right here, right now, in this world. He’s not accepting the Torah because he was raised with it and cannot conceive of any other life. He is choosing it, as did every Jew at Sinai, committing to a way of life he only vaguely understands. He may not be on the educated religious Jew’s “level,” but as the Talmud points out, he stands in a place where even a tzadik cannot stand.

The possibility that he may negatively influence those who are raised in a religious environment is certainly a factor that needs to be considered, but it need not be a wall-to-wall principle that determines the community’s level of tolerance and acceptance. The fact is that most people who are on the road upward are trying to grow, not drag others down. They want to learn, not corrupt.

Rav Aaron Schechter once advised a young man who had taken up residence in Dallas to learn in the kollel there. The man was worried that his child’s new friendships would influence him for the worse.

Rav Schechter told the father to observe the dynamics between the children and see who was influencing whom. Most likely, a child brought up in a positive Torah environment will exert influence on the child with a weaker background, rather than vice versa.

"There's nothing gained without giving up something," said the Oorah volunteer. "What are we giving up? Maybe we can't be as exclusive as people would like to be. But look at the gain for Klal Yisrael. You're saving people who would otherwise be lost. And each of these people is the root of a new generation. From one baal teshuvah today, you might have 50 grandchildren who will all go on to start families of their own."

Even educating the children brought up in Torah involves some "loss." The rebbe who spends his time preparing and delivering a shiur for 20-year-olds is losing time from his own higher-level learning. Even more intellectual growth is sacrificed by the rebbe who spends his time teaching alef-beis. Yet the gain for Klal Yisrael is unquestionable.

Good Advice

This doesn't mean that a person should throw all caution to the winds. There are families in which some members may be more vulnerable to outside influences. There are people exploring Torah Judaism who, for a variety of reasons, have the potential to do spiritual harm. The only way to know with certainty if an individual Jew should be welcomed into one's school or home is to discuss the situation with a Rav who knows the people involved and can make an informed judgment. A wall-to-wall "yes" is no healthier for Klal Yisrael than a wall-to-wall "no."

Three Tales

The director of a kiruv program told of one rebbe who consistently dismissed social pressure in order to do what he felt needed to be done for a fellow Jew. The rebbe made a practice of taking troubled children into his home. Some were physically disabled and others had mental deficiencies.

His married daughter, who was expecting at the time, was warned by neighbors in this very insular community not to enter her father's house. The neighbors believed that her unborn child might be affected by the presence of the disabled children.

"I told my father that people were telling me not to go inside. He said, 'Not only will your baby not be harmed, but I'll tell you this. In the merit of helping these children, I'll have 300 grandchildren, and every one of them will be healthy. There will be no deformities and no miscarriages in our family.'"

The count, including great grandchildren, currently stands at about 250. No miscarriages, no deformities.

The same rebbe owned some property, which he rented to tenants. As fuel and electric rates rose, most landlords in the community raised their rents. They pressured the rebbe to raise his rent as well, but he would not. He knew that any additional expense would put stress on the tenant's already tight budget, and he determined that he could better afford to absorb the costs.

But his community was full of well-meaning advisers who called him "crazy" for his self-sacrifice. "I may be losing a little now," the rebbe said. "But my children and grandchildren will never have to worry about a roof over their heads."

And indeed, all the branches of his sprawling family are well provided for.

A third story demonstrates how this rebbe's attitude of taking risks on behalf of his fellow Jew was passed down to his children. The daughter who told the stories recalled that she had run a playgroup for a number of years. One year, a child enrolled in her school who was

from a background that was different from the rest of the community. Other parents began pulling their children out. She went to her father for advice. Should she ask the child's parents to place him elsewhere?

"Keep him," the father said. "And you'll never have any more money problems." And she didn't.

A Personal Guide

To solidify the gains made in kiruv, it's essential to get the observant Jewish world thinking about the message it sends out to those who enthusiastically change their lives to join its ranks. On the other side of the equation, those in kiruv must be prepared to do what it takes to help their fellow Jews through the snags and pitfalls they will inevitably meet.

To be sure, this comprehensive involvement in kiruv is not something most individuals can undertake. But every individual can and does help to create the climate that envelops a returning Jew as he moves forward in his new life. Each individual helps determine whether that climate is warm and nurturing or cold and forbidding.

Every situation certainly has its own variables that must be examined, but those factors must be viewed under proper lighting – the light of Ahavas Yisrael. With the right illumination, the right answers will always emerge.

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Talking (Long Distance) About Jewish Education □

Imagine that you have in your neighborhood 300 Jewish children and you know, based on statistics, that a large percentage of them are going to wander away from their Jewish identity as they get older. So, you decide to do what the “Jewish continuity” experts recommend. You say to their parents, “How about sending your child to a Jewish day school?”

The parents are skeptical. “Why should we change what we’re doing?” they ask. You say to 300 sets of parents, “If you do this, your kids will grow up with a strong heritage. They’ll get a great secular education, a solid Jewish education and you’ll be giving them something they have a right to – a real knowledge of everything Judaism has to offer.”

The parents are convinced. Except for one thing: “Public school doesn’t cost us a penny,” they say. “Private school costs a pretty penny. How are we going to fit this into our budget?”

You make your jaw-dropping offer: “Don’t worry,” you tell all 300 families. “I’ll pay for it myself!”

Now you’re committed. It’s time to do the math. Three hundred children at an average of \$3,000 a child equals a lot of money. You could go around to philanthropists in the community and try to raise the money that way, but it would be hit or miss. Hit or miss doesn’t do the trick when tuition bills come monthly.

Supporting the Family

This is the story of an outreach organization that faced exactly this challenge, and came up with a creative solution. The name of the organization is Oorah. It began 23 years ago in Staten Island, with one dedicated rabbi plying the borough’s suburban streets, knocking on doors and asking families to consider sending their children to day school.

Hundreds of children have gone through day school under Oorah’s auspices since those humble beginnings. Over the years, hundreds of children have grown up with a firm Jewish identity because Oorah has given them a Jewish education. As these children marry and have children of their own, they pass their values and traditions – vivid and alive – down to the new generation.

In 1999, Oorah looked at its burgeoning operation and realized that it needed more than the standard fundraisers to keep the tuition pump primed. It took an unusual step for an organization that identified itself as a charitable enterprise dedicated to the welfare of its fellow Jews. Oorah launched a long distance telephone service whimsically named “Cucumber Communications.”

By purchasing time from long-distance carriers and reselling it to its own customers, Cucumber could provide monthly revenue to pay a substantial portion of Oorah’s costs. The strategy has some unique advantages that standard fund-raising cannot match.

- Cucumber opens new channels of funding from people who have no specific interest in Oorah or its activities.
- It allows Oorah’s supporters to contribute to the cause without spending an extra penny. They simply use their long-distance service, pay a very reasonable rate, and money flows into Oorah as a result.
- Once a customer signs on, his long-distance usage provides a regular monthly income to Oorah without the organization’s further solicitation. It’s a one-time “sell” that provides regular funding for as long as the customer remains with Cucumber.

Talk On

At a time when donations to non-profit organizations have plummeted, Cucumber provides a vital fundraising buffer. People may have stopped giving, but they never stop talking.

To be sure, Oorah conducts other more standard fundraising campaigns throughout the year. Door-to-door solicitations by costumed, singing and dancing young men bring in a fair share of tuition money each Purim. The organization's annual "Chinese Auction" is an international event that is promoted to 600,000 households throughout the U.S. and Israel. Other mailings and events also bring money into the organization's coffers, and every penny is quickly dispatched to a day school somewhere in the country where an Oorah child is learning.

But by far, the most consistent flow of revenue comes from Cucumber Communications. Its overhead is astoundingly low. The payroll consists of a small marketing department and enough customer service professionals to keep the clientele satisfied. The business is run by the same individual who oversees Oorah, Rabbi Eliyohu Mintz. He is the son of Oorah's founder, Rabbi Chaim Mintz.

The younger Rabbi Mintz grew up with his father's other "children," who were guests at the family's Sukkan, Shabbos table and home. Today, many of the children who went through day school courtesy of Oorah are still in touch with the man who helped make it possible. They are married with children of their own, yet they still call Rabbi Chaim Mintz for advice or a chat. "He's like a grandfather to my children," says one woman.

As more families respond to Oorah's urging to give their children a day school education, the yearly budget mounts. This is partly because no family is every "finished" as far as Oorah is concerned. Rabbi Mintz maintains his bond with a large percentage of the families by sending them handmade shmurah matzos on Pesach, a shalach manos basket on Purim and a lulav and esrog on Sukkos.

Without Cucumber, all of these activities would drain money from the primary goal of putting children into day school, and the support services that entails. For instance, many children moving from public school require some tutoring to bring them up to speed in religious studies. Some need after-school homework help. Oorah provides both. It also tries to insure that the children's recreational and social life is enriched with Jewish values and experiences. During holidays, it runs special trips and programs. During the summer, it helps pay for camp.

Cucumber's profits are rolled over into an investment that has proven to have a very high rate of return. Rabbi Eliyohu Mintz reports that Oorah's "success rate," measured by children who grow up, marry and raise their own Jewish family, is nearly 80 percent.

There are now tens of thousands of Cucumber customers scattered throughout the U.S., and each time they dial long distance, Jewish continuity scores a point. Can one man send 300 children to day school? For Rabbi Mintz, there was a will, and therefore, there had to be a way.

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Oorah: Knocking on Doors and Changing Lives □

There's a knock on the door. It's a rabbi in a black hat and jacket, wearing a friendly smile and carrying a gift for the Kahn family. "OK," says Mrs. Kahn. "I'll take the gift. Now what?"

Now the rabbi wants to talk to the Kahns about their children's education. Where do they go to school? What are they learning? Are the parents happy with the values they're picking up? Are the children getting a good foundation in Judaism?

They ponder the questions and begin to see some flaws in their children's public school education. By now, the rabbi is sitting at their dining room table and Kahn children are enjoying the candies that

have materialized from his pockets. He offers to send the children to a Jewish day school. He'll find them a good school, he promises. And he'll pay for it, too.

This extraordinary scenario has repeated itself hundreds of times in the past 28 years throughout Brooklyn, Staten Island and New Jersey. Volunteers for Oorah Kiruv Rechokim simply knock on doors and talk sense to the families inside. The result of this cold calling has been the restoration of hundreds of Jewish families to their heritage. That means hundreds of children growing up with Judaism implanted firmly in their hearts -- hundreds of children starting their own families with the Torah as their foundation.

Knowing that learning is the key to a meaningful Jewish life, Oorah focuses on getting the children into day schools and yeshivot. Then, it offers a complete support system -- tutoring, summer camps, Shabbatons, chol hamoed trips, learning in Israel, parent education, ritual objects, and an endless supply of support and guidance.

Here are some stories of people who responded to the "knock on the door."

Liora Mizrachi*

"My family wasn't shomer Shabbat, but Oorah got my sister and me into a religious girls' school and helped us with the tuition," Liora Mizrachi recounts. "They were very easy-going about it. They just stated the facts to my parents and made a good case for sending us."

But a child's heart is not won in the classroom alone. Mrs. Mizrachi fondly recalls the Oorah Shabbatons that highlighted her school years, the chol hamoed trips, the Sukkot gatherings and Purim parties, the friends and excitement of the religious life Oorah opened up for her and her sister.

Even today, Oorah doesn't see her and her family as a finished project to be filed away. "Rabbi Mintz is like an uncle to my children," she says. "They love to visit him and go with him on the chol hamoed trips. He was at my son's bris, and he was there for his Bar Mitzvah. We couldn't think of having the Bar Mitzvah without him."

Racheli Rabinowitz*

As a 12-year-old girl, Racheli Rabinowitz came to the U.S. from Israel to live with her married sister. The sister, with children of her own, felt there was no option but to place the girl in public school. If that plan had been followed, Racheli Rabinowitz's life would be very different now. Her future was altered when Oorah offered to pay her tuition in yeshiva.

That was the beginning of the transformation in this extended family's life. With Oorah's help, Mrs. Rabinowitz went through elementary school and high school in a Torah environment. Now married with two children and a third on the way, Mrs. Rabinowitz has a daughter in a Bais Yaakov school and a son in a Brooklyn yeshivah pre-school. The boy recently had his upscheren, and Rabbi Mintz was asked to take the first snip.

Marave Silber

Marave Silber had just graduated from high school in 1997 and was deciding what to do next. Her friends were all going to colleges in the New York area. But Miss Silber, an all-American child of Israeli parents, felt a pull to Israel. She began investigating a program at Bar Ilan University that combined academic studies with some religious courses. She decided that this was where she wanted to go, but how?

Her mother had a friend who had a friend. That friend was a volunteer for Oorah. "He said Oorah would pay for the program," Miss Silber recalled.

When she came home from Bar Ilan, she called her friend at Oorah,

"just to say hello." From that point on – it's been six years now – she has been receiving shmurah matzah each Pesach and shalach manot each Purim from Oorah. "I always know that Oorah is there and that they care about me."

Now, after earning a degree at the State University of New York in Binghamton, Miss Silber is ready to delve deeper. This summer planned to join Aish HaTorah's Jewel program. After that...maybe Neve...maybe a different program. She's discussing it with her friend at Oorah.

* Names changed for privacy

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