**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Chaya sarah 5775**

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**It Once Happened**

**The Merchant and**

**The Old Teacher**

One of the loyal chasidim of Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, who was known as the Tzemach Tzedek, was a successful merchant in the city of Petersburg. Every year he would travel to the great fair which was held in Nizhni-Novgorod to make his purchases. He made it an annual practice to first visit Lubavitch to see the Rebbe.

While in Lubavitch he drank in the vibrant atmosphere of the Rebbe's court, and listened to words of Torah which would serve to enrich his spiritual life for the rest of the year. Then, he would make a detour and continue on to the town of Dobromishl. In that town lived the old rabbi who had been his teacher many years before. This old rabbi looked forward to the yearly visit of his former pupil, enjoying the lively company and the stories his guest brought from the Rebbe's court. It wasn't every day that he had guests, and it was a happy event in the old man's life.

**Forced to Postpone His Departure**

One year the merchant's plans for his yearly circuit through Lubavitch were disrupted. One of his biggest customers had trouble raising the money for his usual order, and the merchant was forced to postpone his departure. Finally, he received payment, and with his business now in order, he was able to set off. Even though the fair was well under way, the merchant couldn't imagine missing his yearly visit to the Rebbe, and he headed, as usual, to Lubavitch.

The merchant was invigorated by the time he spent with the Tzemach Tzedek, and after a few days he prepared to continue on his trip. By this time he was becoming concerned about the business days he had lost at the fair, and he wondered if perhaps he should skip his usual visit to his old teacher. He felt guilt about not seeing the old rabbi, but figured that would be the only way to save time.

When he was about to take his leave from the Rebbe he consulted him about his decision. The Tzemach Tzedek answered him, "Since it has always been your custom to visit your teacher it is not proper to change now."

**Headed Immediately to Dobromishl**

The merchant took his Rebbe's counsel to heart and headed immediately to Dobromishl where he was warmly received by his old teacher. The old man's joy couldn't be contained as he rushed about his tiny kitchen heating up his samovar and setting out a plate of warm bread and butter. The merchant begged his teacher not to bother, as he had to be on his way after the afternoon prayers, but the old man would not forego this pleasure.

As the merchant was completing his prayers, the sky darkened and soon the village was pelted with a fierce downpour. His desire to finally get to the Nizhni-Novgorod fair had become so intense that the merchant was prepared to continue his journey in spite of the weather. The old rabbi implored him to stay overnight, since the local roads became thick with mud after a heavy rain. With one look outside, the merchant realized that it would be impossible to continue and so, he reluctantly agreed to stay.

**Woke Up Feeling Very Ill**

A next day brought fair weather, but the merchant awoke feeling very ill. His head throbbed and he felt as if a fire burned in his eyes. A doctor was summoned from the nearby town of Orsha, and he diagnosed the illness to be typhus. The old rebbe sent a message to the merchant's family requesting help in caring for the sick man. And in addition, a letter was sent to the Rebbe in Lubavitch, asking that he pray for the merchant. The man lay ill in the old rabbi's house for close to two months before he recovered enough to leave for home.

But first he went to Lubavitch to present the Tzemach Tzedek with his grievance. With tears running from his eyes the merchant entered the Rebbe's study and in a voice choked with emotion asked why the Rebbe had advised him to go visit his old teacher. Why, if he hadn't gone there and exposed himself to the terrible rain storm and caught a chill, he wouldn't have become so dangerously ill. So why had the Rebbe given him such advice?

The Rebbe looked at his distraught chasid and replied: "There is a teaching in the Talmud which says that 'A man's legs may be depended upon to take him wherever he is called to be.' This means that a man's feet will carry him to that place where he is destined to die, no matter where that is. But this verse may also be interpreted to mean that a man's feet will carry him to a place where there is someone to pray for him. Be grateful and know that your very life was saved by the prayers of your old teacher who entreated G-d on your behalf. He was able to intercede for you and save your life."

*Reprinted from last week’s edition of “L’Chaim Weekly,” a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY.*

**How to Pay a Proper Shiva Call:**

**Proper Etiquette and Practical Advice**

**By**[**Rabbi Efrem Goldberg**](http://www.aish.com/authors/141405293.html)

*“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven…a time to keep silent and a time to speak.”*

The wisdom in this song is not for the Byrds, it comes from the wisest of all men, King Solomon. While the picture of many shiva homes today filled with people, food, and conversation is anything but silent, the Midrash interprets “the time for silence” as proscribing our behavior when comforting the bereaved. When Job, the very symbol of human suffering, experienced devastating loss, three of his friends came to comfort and console him: “They sat with him on the ground for a period of seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great” (Job, 2:13).

Consolation can be provided with words, but it is communicated even more powerfully through silent companionship, no matter how awkward or uncomfortable it may feel for the visitor. The acknowledgement of pain and willingness to share it by simply being present is the essence of a shiva call, *nichum aveilim*. The Talmud in fact states in the name of Rav Pappa, “The reward that comes from visiting the house of a mourner is for one’s silence while there” (Berachos 6b).

In an article in Jewish Action in the Fall of 2000, Rabbi Edward Davis shares the story of the time he went to get a haircut while visiting London. As he sat down in the chair the barber asked, “Talk or no talk?” The barber was sensitive to Rabbi Davis’s preference and comfort and didn’t impose a conversation on someone who preferred to sit in silent contemplation.

**Must Wait till the Mourner Speaks First**

The Code of Jewish Law (y.d. 376:1) mandates that the visitors are not allowed to speak until the mourner speaks first. Essentially, the proper etiquette in a [shiva](http://www.aish.com/jl/l/dam/48965881.html) home is to sit with the mourner and through our patient silence offer him or her – talk or no talk?

It is natural to struggle with silence. Sitting silently is intimidating, awkward and uncomfortable. Well-intentioned people therefore sometimes fill the silence by saying things that are in fact insensitive, thoughtless or even hurtful. When people do things like tell the family members about treatments or doctors that may have healed their loved one, or say to someone who has lost a child that at least they have other healthy children, they mean well, but their words are unkind. A woman who lost her father reported a visitor asking her why her mother doesn’t look as perky as usual. An older person who lost his wife shared that someone told him “Speak to me after shiva, I have a great shidduch idea for you.”

As a community Rabbi I have spent significant time in shiva homes and many mourners have shared their observations following shiva. I share the following advice based on their feedback:

**The Shiva Home is Not a Social Scene**

A shiva home is not a social scene. The purpose of the visit is solely to interact with and comfort the mourner. Don’t congregate in other areas of the home or enter social conversations with others.

While it is not forbidden to eat in a shiva home, it is not the purpose of the visit and should not be the expectation.

Don’t visit at inconvenient times for the mourners, even if they may be convenient for you, such as meals times, early in the morning or late at night.

Keep the conversation with the mourner focused on their loved one. If you knew them, share stories, anecdotes, memories or the impression they left on you. If you didn’t know the deceased, ask questions like: Where was your mother or father born? How many siblings did they have? What kind of education did they receive?   What did they do professionally? What is your favorite memory of them? How would they want to be remembered?

Do not ask details about the deceased’s illness. Don’t say things like, “At least he or she had a long life.” Or, “At least they are not suffering any more.” These are things the mourners can say if they feel them, but they are inappropriate comments from visitors.

Don’t tell the mourners about your loss, illness in your family or the challenges you are experiencing unless it directly relates to providing comfort and support to them.

Don’t take out your cell phone while [paying a shiva call](http://www.aish.com/jl/l/dam/48970361.html). Answering a call or even looking at text messages is rude and distracting.

Shiva visits should never be unduly prolonged. Don’t create a burden on the mourners who feel obligated to play host.

May G-d indeed comfort those in mourning among the mourners of Tziyon and Yerushalayim and may we merit to see the day in which “death is no longer part of our experience” (Isaiah 25:8).

*Reprinted last week’s website of Aish.com*

**Meet the Woman Who Keeps Tootsie Rolls Kosher**

**By** [**Tova Ross**](http://www.tabletmag.com/author/tova-ross/)**|**



Phyllis Koegel

 If you keep kosher, and enjoy eating a handful of Tootsie Rolls or drinking a tall glass of Gatorade, you have Phyllis Koegel to thank. As marketing director of the Orthodox Union’s Kosher Division, Koegel is charged with convincing companies of the financial and commercial benefits of going kosher—and getting the OU symbol, the most widely recognized kosher-certification in the world, on their product.

 Koegel has been all over the world, from China and France to Germany and Italy, and most major cities throughout the United States, to make the case for OU kosher certification, which she’s helped secure for hundreds of products. The only female executive among the in-house OU Kosher staff of more than 55, she works out of a nondescript corner office on the 12th floor of the building at Greenwich Street and Broadway in Manhattan where OU Kosher is stationed.

 The kosher business is a pretty male-dominated field, and the males in it are mostly very observant rabbis. But if any of them have issues with Koegel—who is Modern Orthodox and favors stylish, brightly colored, but modest blouses and skirts in the workplace—working alongside them, no one shows it, she said. “When I was hired in 2006, I was, and remain, the first non-administrative staff member who’s not a rabbi,” she told me in a recent interview, “but I think it’s worked out well. Working in a religious environment means everyone is very respectful of one another, and furthermore, I feel I’ve earned my stripes. People view me as a true professional, so they treat me that way.”

**Fielding Calls from a Variety of Clients**

 While I spoke with Koegel in her office, she was fielding calls from a variety of clients. Her virtual Rolodex has everyone from the highest-ranking executives at renowned brands like Coca-Cola and Hershey and others at equally large but lesser-known food-processing conglomerates like Archer Daniels Midland and Bunge, to representatives of one-man manufacturing companies and niche and private labels.

 Research and outreach are Koegel’s first steps in discovering which food products are not yet kosher and then finding the right executive—which varies at different companies from CEO to vice president of marketing to someone in the R&D department—to argue for why they should be kosher. “Getting to the right person is usually the hardest part of the process,” said Koegel. “People are always curious to learn more about kosher, and even those who know they’re going to say no to me at the end of the phone call will often still ask for information and an application review for when the time might be right.”

**Meeting Potential Clients and**

**Solidifying Existing Relationships**

 The real meat of Koegel’s job is traveling to 10-12 major food trade shows during the year across North America and Europe, where she meets and mingles with potential new clients and solidifies her existing relationships with established clients. “I’ll go anywhere where there’s opportunity for growth in kosher food,” she said.

 Recently, Koegel spent the week leading up to the Natural Products Expo in Baltimore by emailing an introduction and short blurb about going kosher to the hundreds of companies who would attend the show. She arrived at the show with 14 personal meetings scheduled in a single day and, periodically refueling with samples from the booths hawking fair-trade organic coffee, met with dozens of other manufacturers curious about becoming kosher-certified.

 I’ve seen Koegel in action at the annual two-day [Kosherfest](http://www.kosherfest.com/) at the Meadowlands in Secaucus, N.J., which this year takes place November 11-12. To watch her is to observe a true professional at work: easy kibitzing and effortless small talk, backed by professional in-depth explanations of the kosher-certification process. She’ll speak with anyone from a Hasidic rabbi to the stunned-looking Italian meat vendor who’s experiencing his first kosher expo—with hundreds of Jews who see him as the only thing standing in their way of free samples of smoked brisket. So, it was with a raised eyebrow that I met her admission that she had always been a little shy.

**Overcoming the Fear of Rejection**

 “I developed this kind of outgoing personality over time, and I love meeting people and engaging with them today, but it was challenging and remains tough at times,” Koegel said. “When you sell anything, whether it’s insurance or cars or the concept of kosher, you have to really steel yourself to be unafraid of rejection, and that doesn’t come natural to me. I’ve worked on accounts for months and then won’t hear back until two or three years later.”

 But that usually doesn’t happen. A company that’s receptive to Koegel’s outreach can become certified kosher in as little as six weeks, though more often it takes up to three months.

 Koegel’s most compelling case for getting companies to go kosher is simple economics, she said: “The more added value a product has, the better and easier it is to get it into a store. Products compete for limited shelf space, so naturally a manufacturer wants something that’s going to appeal to as broad a range of customers as possible, including those who keep kosher.”

**A Perception that Kosher is Healthier**

Besides, she continued, the customers are asking for it. “As people turn more and more to health-oriented lifestyles, there’s this lingering perception that kosher is healthier,” she said. (Somewhere, a hefty carnivore chowing down at [Subsational](http://www.subsational.net/) in Brooklyn is giggling.) “It’s also quality control: The rabbis offer another set of eyes checking to see that everything is, well, kosher. Companies see a kosher symbol as a marketing tool, and it’s all about the bottom line for them. Their return on investment is generally so much greater than the actual cost of becoming kosher.”

 There’s a very broad range of what going kosher costs, explained Rabbi Moshe Elefant, OU Kosher’s COO, though he sidestepped offering any specific figures, per company policy.

 Koegel points out that there’s a much larger universe of kosher consumers than just Orthodox Jews—other religious adherents, such as Muslims and Seventh Day Adventists, often have dietary rituals that dovetail with kashrut’s stringencies. And people who are lactose intolerant can check for the word “pareve” more easily than sorting through a dense listing of obscure ingredients. “Some people just see a kosher symbol as a sort of Good Housekeeping seal of approval,” said Koegel. “The buyers know there was another set of eyes watching that product like a hawk, and they feel better about its quality control.”

**Advises Consumers to Call the Company Directly**

 Koegel also fields phone calls from irate consumers calling—sometimes from supermarket aisles—to demand why a certain product isn’t kosher yet, despite the fact that there is a separate 24-hour hotline meant for those kind of calls. “A lot of times, I tell these people to call the company itself instead,” she said. “If enough people call a company and ask for kosher, it makes my jobs easier because a company will either reach out to me or be more receptive when I call them.”

 Case in point: Jelly Belly, makers of the famous jelly beans, once had what Koegel called a “substandard” kosher certification—that is, it was certified kosher but not by an Orthodox agency, so Orthodox Jews wouldn’t trust it. Hearing over the years from customers who asked for a more widely accepted kosher symbol, Jelly Belly contacted the OU and worked with Koegel and others to replace some of the questionable additives in its jelly beans. “The company had to make a real monetary investment in refining the recipe and certain aspects of their factories, but it paid off,” said Koegel. “There were huge sales increases in certain regions that are Jewish strongholds: the Northeast, South Florida, and California.”

**Kosher Industry Has Grown by Leaps and Bounds**

 Koegel’s job is easier now than it would have been in, say, the early ’90s. The kosher industry has grown by leaps and bounds since then, and Menachem Lubinsky, president of Lubicom Marketing and the founder of Kosherfest, is its godfather. He was also Koegel’s first boss: After he turned a small Jewish expo show into a trade show for industry professionals that only featured kosher food in 1988, he needed someone to run it, and he hired Koegel, who had just earned her MBA from Pace University. “Phyllis instantly took charge and was a real professional,” said Lubinsky. “She’s a people person, and she doesn’t get frazzled easily. That’s important when you’re dealing with hundreds of exhibitors and each one’s issues and logistics. It was a huge challenge, which she handled very well.”

 Koegel vividly remembers the demands of pulling the whole show together, especially as it grew from a small event with fewer than 70 booths and 500 visitors into a two-day mega-event with over 400 exhibitors and 7,000 visitors from 21 countries and 30 states. “I thrived on the pressure, and it was a real education for me understanding how to recruit the companies and the buyers for markets and just learning who’s who in the whole industry,” she said.

 When Lubinsky brought in Portland, Maine-based Diversified Business Communications to run the show in 2002, he wanted to find something else for Koegel, who, in the meantime, had gone on to work at Sabra Foods and helped grow it from a $7 million business to the mammoth Pepsi-owned corporation that it is today. When he heard in 2006 that the OU was looking for someone to do public relations, he knew it wasn’t another rabbi they needed, but Koegel.

**Why the Necessity to Drum Up New Business?**

 With the OU’s considerable stature in the kosher certification field, though, why is it necessary to have someone on staff to drum up new business? “In the past, we rarely did marketing, and it was almost a matter of pride for us,” explained Rabbi Menachem Genack, the soft-spoken CEO of OU Kosher who chatted with me as he checked his daily barrage of emails, many of which are from rabbinic field representatives—the *mashgichim*, or the foot soldiers around the globe ensuring each kosher-certified company is adhering to OU standards. “But while it’s true most companies who know about kosher also know about the OU symbol, there’s also a finite number of companies who know about kosher itself.”

 Elefant added: “Some executives think they know about the concept and say, ‘Kosher, sure: Gimme two of them,’ ” as if “kosher” was a thing they could order. Despite its increasing prevalence in the world today, kosher still remains a vague, perplexing notion to many, especially outside major metropolitan areas where there are concentrated Jewish populations.

**Many Think that Kosher Only**

**Entails a Blessing from the Rabbi**

 Some still believe in the antiquated canard, perpetuated by white supremacist groups and other anti-Semites, that those mysterious kosher symbols funnel extra taxes into the hands of greedy Zionist [Jews](http://www.snopes.com/racial/business/kosher.asp) , and Koegel reports that many people she speaks with ask when the rabbi can visit and bless their products—isn’t that, they inquire, what being kosher entails? “I think it really helps that we have Phyllis to interface with some executives who know so little about kosher that they think rabbis have to do some kind of voodoo magic,” said Elefant. “The fact that we have Phyllis, who can go in to meet with them and be very personable and friendly, is very welcoming for them.”

 Recently, Koegel has been working with various trade commissions from European countries to arrange for trade missions of U.S. food buyers to attend food trade events abroad, which she attends to market the potential of kosher certification. If a trade commission is convinced of the feasibility of certification, it will connect its country’s food production and manufacturing companies to Koegel so she can have direct access to markets she might not have been able to previously reach. A spring trip to Italy with the trade mission introduced Italian food manufacturers to the opportunities for export to the United States, which Koegel convinced them would be noticeably enhanced by obtaining OU kosher certification.

**The Revenue Funds a Variety of**

**Social and Communal Initiatives**

 The money brought in by OU Kosher helps fund a variety of social and communal initiatives: NCSY, the national youth organization; public advocacy work, much of it addressing the exorbitant cost of Jewish day school; and Yachad, which assists those in the Jewish community with developmental disabilities. “I’m proud that my strengths can help so many,” Koegel said. But few know that it’s the OU’s kashrut division that funds those programs, and others. And even fewer people know of Koegel’s behind-the-scenes role.

 But a few years ago, on a trip to Las Vegas with a friend, she spent a Shabbos meal with a rabbi who worked for NCSY’s West Coast Region, to which Las Vegas belongs. “When he found out what I do, he looked at me and said, ‘Without you, I wouldn’t have a job. Thank you,’ ” remembered Koegel. “It was the nicest thing I ever heard.”

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*Tova Ross is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in the*New York Times*,*Los Angeles Times*, and*Huffington Post*, and she is also a contributing blogger to Kveller.com. She lives in New Jersey with her family.*

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**The Path to a Family’s Observance and a Grown Man’s ‘Redemption’**

**By Menachem Posner**

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| Marc Shudnow, 45, center, recently participated in his own ''pidyon haben''—or “redemption of the [firstborn] son”—ceremony since it had not been done for him as a baby. With him are the Kohen, Dovid Grinker, left, who presided over the ceremony, and, far right, Rabbi Yosef Posner, director of Lubavitch Chabad of Skokie, Ill. |
| Marc Shudnow, 45, center, recently participated in his own "pidyon haben"—or “redemption of the [firstborn] son”—ceremony since it had not been done for him as a baby. With him are the Kohen, Dovid Grinker, left, who presided over the ceremony, and, far right, Rabbi Yosef Posner, director of Lubavitch Chabad of Skokie, Ill. |

 On a recent Sunday morning, a group of congregants sat talking over lox, bagels and orange juice in an alcove off the sanctuary in Lubavitch Chabad of Skokie, a middle-class suburb of Chicago. The occasion was a [*pidyon haben*](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/652310/jewish/Pidyon-Haben.htm)—or “redemption of the [firstborn] son”—a ceremony where the father of a firstborn male redeems his son by giving a Kohen (priestly descendent ofAaron) five silver coins 30 days after the baby’s birth.

 But there was no baby in sight. Instead, 45-year-old Marc (Michoel) Shudnow, sporting a neat brown beard and a Chassidic robe, was redeeming himself, as his wife and children looked on. While it is a father’s obligation to redeem his baby son, if the father neglects to do his duty, the mitzvah devolves upon the son. In this case, the son decided to redeem himself in style.

Speaking Aramaic, the ancient Jewish vernacular preserved in the Talmud and other texts, Marc and the Kohen (Dovid Grinker) had the following exchange:

 **Marc:** “I am a firstborn, and I am rightfully yours.”

 **Dovid:** “Would you prefer to be mine, or would you like to give me the five *selahs* that you are obligated to give as your redemption?”

 **Marc:** “I want to redeem myself, and here [are the coins].”

*Following the celebratory meal, Marc shared the path that brought him to this milestone, as well as his family’s journey to Torah Judaism. Here is his story:*

 I grew up in Elk Grove Village, a suburb of Chicago as far from anything Jewish that you could ever imagine. To the best of my knowledge, we were one of just four Jewish families in the area. Our Catholic neighbors would scrawl swastikas on our properties, call our homes and play German music into the phone, and egg our houses. Once, they even tried blowing up one family’s home by turning on their gas grill.

 That was my introduction to my Jewish identity. It was a pretty negative association.

**A Third-Generation-Born American**

 I was third-generation-born American, and our family retained very few Jewish practices. While my grandparents were alive, we had a*seder* in a Jewish (but decidedly non-kosher) bagel restaurant, and we would sometimes go to McDonalds on Yom Kippur afternoon when we got bored of services. I was sent to Hebrew school—the only one in the area that did not require synagogue membership—and even had my bar mitzvah in an old Conservative synagogue in Chicago.

 Like most of my Hebrew-school classmates, by the time I became a bar mitzvah, I was done with Judaism.

 When I was 16, we moved. In my new school, I was eligible to graduate high school early. By the time I turned 17, I was out of school and enrolled in the U.S. Armed Forces. I started out in the reserves, then went full-time and was stationed in Fort McClellan in Alabama.

 In those days, just about everyone in the Army went to church. Even though I did nothing Jewish, I still didn’t attend with them. One day, I was tooling around base and saw a door with a Star of David on it. Recognizing something Jewish, I decided to check it out.

**'A Benefit in Being Jewish'**

 I met the chaplain, who informed me that since I was Jewish, I got to celebrate the Sabbath by spending time in the officers’ mess every Saturday, taking a shower and enjoying the other luxuries that it had to offer.

 There were only six other Jews on base, and they were all officers, so it was a pretty good deal for me. It was the first time I saw a benefit in being Jewish.

 After leaving the Army, I was called back to serve in Iraq in Operation Desert Storm. I went to college and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in accounting and a master’s in finance.

 I had gotten married right before I was called to Iraq. By the time I was discharged, the marriage was dead.

 In time, I remarried and had two daughters. Living in a Chicago neighborhood, our family considered ourselves Reform Jews. We attended temple every once in a while and even decorated a Chanukah bush with our girls. As the girls grew, we began to attend temple more often, drawn in by the playgroups and other activities.

 A few years later, I found myself a single father with full custody of two girls. We relocated to Lincolnwood, north of Chicago, and I enrolled the girls in the local Reform Sunday school.

**Marries a Non-Jewish Woman**

 Not long after my move, I met Iva, who had a son not much younger than my girls. She wasn’t Jewish, but that didn’t bother me at the time.

 We got married and agreed that she would convert at my temple, but that her son Nick would remain Christian. He was 4 years old at the time.

 As soon as he realized that his new sisters went to Hebrew school every week, he wanted to go as well. We tried to dissuade him, but he was determined. He even stopped speaking to Iva until she relented. We spoke to the school, and they let him attend “for a few weeks.”

 The “few weeks” kept on dragging on, as he insisted that he wanted to go. For Chanukah that year, we went to the temple gift shop and got some paraphernalia, Nick insisted on getting a *mezuzah* necklace.

 By the time he was 7, he insisted on converting, like his mother did. Knowing full well that he didn’t need to do it, he underwent circumcision and never complained about the pain.

 As time passed, we became more involved in the temple. Eventually, I was teaching the junior-high-school-aged students. My challenge was to keep them involved even after their bar and bat mitzvahs. As a teacher, I encouraged the boys to wear*kipahs* in the sanctuary.

 The synagogue leadership wasn’t happy with what they viewed as religious coercion, and we ended up leaving that temple for a Conservative congregation, which was consistent with our family’s slow but steady march toward greater Jewish involvement.

 Our stay there ended during the 2008 presidential campaign, when the rabbi used the pulpit to promote his candidate of choice. From there, we went to a more traditional Conservative congregation where the rabbi promised he would not mix politics with Judaism.

**A Major Decision to Eat**

**Kosher Products at Home**

 A major step for our family was when I and my daughter Ana decided to only eat kosher products at home. Around the same time, our synagogue had announced that it would be “downsizing,” and that they would be relocating to a church. We started searching for another place to worship yet again.

 That summer, we needed to be in northern Michigan over the July Fourth weekend. I called around looking for a kosher restaurant; of course, there was nothing.

 After lots of calls and Google searches, we ended up with a Shabbat-meal invitation from Rabbi Yisroel and Shaina Chana Weingarten, co-directors of Chabad House Lubavitch of Eastern Michigan in Flint, Mich.

Iva and I ended up attending alone, since Nick preferred to stay in the hotel room. The first thing that struck us was how many children the Weingartens have—11. The second thing that made a deep impression is the love that is palpable in their home. By just observing them, we saw that each and every member of the family cared for every other one in a way that we had never seen before. The two of us were just so amazed.

 When we came home, we told the girls about what we had seen at Chabad. Two weeks later, we made arrangements to attend Shabbat services at Lubavitch Chabad of Skokie, three miles from our home.

 Knowing that Orthodox Jews don’t drive to synagogue, we parked the car around the corner and walked into the Chabad House, not knowing what to expect. I’ll have to admit that I was quite lost during services. After Kiddush, we were all invited to the home of Rabbi Yochanan and Yona Posner for the Shabbat meal.

 That week, we had a family vote. We had visited some Conservative synagogues and needed to decide if we would join one of them or go with Chabad. To my surprise, my wife and three kids all voted for Chabad, and that was where we began to go every week.

Eventually, we began to park farther and farther away from the synagogue, walking another block each week. By late fall, we were walking all the way—three miles each direction. We were becoming more observant all the time, and knew that Iva and Nick would need to convert with a recognized rabbinic organization. In 2010, we began the process under the auspices of the cRc (Chicago Rabbinical Council).



**The Shudnow family: Marc, his wife Chava (Iva), and children, from left, Noach Dov (Nick), Dorona (Dara) and Channah Leah (Ana)**

 By the next year, the girls—Dara and Ana (now known as Dorona and ChannahLeah)—were enrolled in the Lubavitch Girls High School in Chicago. The administration was originally very wary of accepting them since they were coming directly from public school. But they were determined to succeed—and they did!

 By the end of 2011, the conversions were finalized. My wife (now Chava) and I remarried according to *halachah*, Jewish law, and Rabbi Posner koshered our kitchen. By then, we were a fully observant family.

 All the while, Noach Dov (as Nick is now known) was still in public school since we could not find a boy’s *yeshivah* that would accept him. He was not very happy about it. Despite Muslim bullies, he wore his *kipah* to class every day and made the best of the circumstances. At the same time, he was keeping up with his Judaic studies at home and with Rabbi Chaim Telsner of Skokie Chabad.

 Just when things were getting really desperate, I learned of an option. I was talking with Rabbi Binyamin Walters, who had just begun teaching at YeshivahNetzach Eliyahu, a new high school program for boys with unique educational needs. Although they did not enroll boys transferring from public school at that time, we managed to work things out, and Noach was finally in a healthy Torah environment.

Thank G‑d, he has been thriving ever since.

 This year, Dorona is in seminary in Israel; Channah and Noach are in Jewish high schools in Chicago; Chava is taking regular Torah classes; and I am studying for *semichah* (rabbinical ordination) under the rubric of Yeshiva Pirchei Shoshanim, an online program.

 I had known for some time about the mitzvah of *pidyon haben* and had no doubt that it had not been done for me, so I decided to go for it in honor of the new year, 5775.

*The lox and bagels have long been finished, and everyone has gone home, but the joyous event will be long remembered by the* *Shudnow* *family and the Skokie Jewish Center.*

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