WISHING YOU A
KESIVA V'CHASIMA TOVA!

VAAD HARABANIM
THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL
of GREATER WASHINGTON

THE JOURNAL

TISHREI 5787 · SEPTEMBER 2026 · VOLUME 14.2

INTRODUCTION FROM THE DIRECTOR

1 | **Be Proud of Our Special Community**
Rabbi Moshe Walter

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

2 | **Good Fences Make Good Neighbors**
Rabbi Yosef Singer

THE YAMIM NORA'IM

6 | **The Mitzvah That is Near**
Rabbi Binyamin Marwick

10 | **The Lifelong Striving of Teshuvah**
Rabbi Brahm Weinberg

THE BA'AL TEFILLAH: YAMIM NORA'IM

15 | **Nusach HaTefillah:**
Our Connection to Generations of Old
Mr. Judah Lifschitz

18 | **A Ba'al Tefillah's Prep:**
A Link in Our Mesorah
Dr. Ira Rabin, MD

BUILDING GREATER WASHINGTON

20 | **Sarah Landesman a"h:**
A Legacy of Hachnasas Orchim
Mrs. Devorah Grayson

23 | **Ben Shloshim L'Koach:**
Thirty Years of Building Torah in Silver Spring
Rabbi Amram Hes

WASHINGTONIANS IMPACTING THE REGION

28 | **From the Mir…to Capitol Hill!**
Rabbi Yossie Charner

33 | **Kivnei Maron:**
Three Maryland Hillel Journeys to
Jewish Belonging
Rabbi Ari Israel

WASHINGTONIANS IMPACTING ERETZ YISRAEL

38 | **From Silver Spring to Yerushalayim:**
Kollel Torah Temimah
Rabbi Mordechai Linzer

43 | **From the Nation's Capital to the Holy City:**
A Journey of Belonging
Mr. Ami Hordes

Dearest Members of the Greater Washington Community,

Rabbeinu Yonah opens his *sefer*, *Pischei Sha'arei Ha'avodah,* by explaining that *teshuvah* can only be attained by first realizing one's unique personal strengths, grasping the grandeur of one's ancestry, and taking pride in being a child of Hashem. When we recognize the awesome inheritance of being a Jew, we appreciate where we come from and recognize that it is impossible for someone of such stature to sin against our heritage and our G-d.

Open the pages of Volume 14.2 of the *Journal of the Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington* — and you will be filled with pride that you are a member of a historic and magnificent community. This community has produced and nurtured men and women who have flourished locally and abroad — individuals who use their talents to make our community and our world a place where the name of G-d is sanctified in the halls of Torah, the halls of our sanctuaries, the halls of government, and the halls of the workplace. Know where you come from!

I am often asked, "Tell me about Silver Spring. What's it like? What's it all about? What does it mean to be a Silver Springer?" The answers to these questions are found in the pages of this *Journal*. It means to be a *shaliach tzibur* who continues the traditions of his family and of his community. It means to be educated in our day schools and *yeshivos*, with a *mesorah* that is passed on to the next generation. It means to *live* community and to care about bettering the lives of those around you. It means bringing *Yiddishkeit* to places where it's not always easy to do so. It means learning Torah and teaching Torah on the highest of levels. It means going about your day in an honest, responsible, and meaningful way, mindful of who you are.

These are the answers I share when I am asked about Silver Spring. We are a community dedicated and committed to the values, *mesorah*, and principles of what it means to be a Torah Jew. A Jew through and through: without pinning a name, philosophy, or identity on ourselves — besides being true to Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilus chasadim*. That is what it means to be a member of the Greater Washington Jewish community.

During the Yamim Noraim, as you work through the process of *teshuvah*, lift yourself up and return to Hashem because of the pride and honor you have to be part of a community of great people. Return to Hashem because you play a role in the spiritual, emotional, and physical success of this community. Return to Hashem because you, too, are great. Realize that you have been blessed to be a member of a special, elevated, and one-of-a-kind community. Thank You, Hashem! That is *teshuvah shleimah* — complete and perfect repentance.

My deepest thanks to Mrs. Mindy Tolchinsky for her talented and gifted editing of the *Journal* and for her dedication and commitment to the details and the "little things." Thank you to Mrs. Wendy Guberman for the beautiful layout and design of the *Journal*.

Wishing you and your family a *Kesivah v'Chasimah Tovah*: a year of blessings, *nachas*, and continued growth.

Written as a proud member of the Greater Washington Jewish community,

Rabbi Moshe Walter

Message from the President:
Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

This article was written at the request of Rabbi Moshe Walter — my dear friend, colleague, and editor of the *Vaad Journal*. It began with a friendly pre-Pesach conversation at the Yeshiva of Greater Washington about my next-door neighbors, Bob and Louise McCullah.

Sadly, Louise had died suddenly and unexpectedly from a virulent recurrence of an illness that had been in remission for several years. Bob, in his eighties and no longer able to live alone, was preparing, with his daughters' help, to sell his house and move to an assisted living facility. The McCullahs had been our neighbors for more than twenty-five years; my wife, Miriam, and I were shocked by Louise's passing and its disruptive consequences.

For years, Bob and I had conducted a weekly driveway conversation on trash day, during which he invariably expressed admiration for the Jewish people, the State of Israel, my work, my character, my children, my wife's character, and my wife's ability to juggle myriad responsibilities.

Bob was also the ideal "*Shabbos goy*." When our children and their families would visit for Shabbos or Yom Tov, problems would occasionally arise that required "outside intervention." Perhaps it was the extra logistical challenges — or the joyful high energy that comes with the *berachah* of many small children — but Bob was always there to cheerfully offer his help. His kindness was matched by the exuberant welcome he received from our assembled family members, who greeted him with the unrestrained joy reserved for an old friend or a celebrity. Bob was delighted.

During our final driveway conversation, Bob told us of Louise's passing. He also shared that, in her final days, Louise had asked him to make sure Miriam knew how deeply Louise had admired her.

Sometime later, I told Bob that I had shared some of the highlights of our relationship with Rabbi Walter, who had been sufficiently moved by the story to ask me to submit an article about it to the *Vaad Journal*. When Bob mentioned this to his daughters, DeAnne and Loree, they responded by sending Miriam and me the following letter.

> *[Our mother] Louise often spoke with great admiration about her longtime neighbor, Miriam, praising her as an extraordinary mother of six who showed unwavering dedication to her children, her husband, Rabbi Singer, and their Jewish congregation. For over 25 years, she was continually touched by Miriam's warm and caring nature. She was particularly impressed by how Miriam balanced teaching at the [Torah School] with tenderly caring for her elderly mother and father, all while providing steadfast support to her husband in both his rabbinical duties and his full-time career.*
>
> *Louise also admired her husband Bob's relationship with Rabbi Singer. She got a kick out of the fact that he sometimes served as a Sabbath goy for them. She recalled him cheerfully heading over to their house on Fridays or Saturdays to turn*

off lights and handle other small tasks for the observant couple. Louise loved hearing her husband fondly recall his warm interactions with the Singer family.

Above all, Louise admired the loving way Miriam and Rabbi Singer raised their six smart and successful children, calling Miriam a wonderful and inspiring neighbor whose kindness and strength left a lasting impression.

To which Miriam responded:

Dear Loree and DeAnne,

Thank you so very much for taking the time to share your mother's warm feelings about our family — it moved us all very deeply. We have such special feelings toward both your parents. Your father, of course, was our "hero," coming to save the day as our Shabbos helper. When he would come over, he would salute and say he was our favorite "Shabbos goy." The entire family — children and grandchildren included — would celebrate his visits and welcome him as a conquering hero. We loved talking with him as well. We were always reassured by his steadfast love for the Jewish people and by the values we shared.

Your mother was a faithful and loving wife and a truly wonderful, sensitive person. She always showed us extraordinary generosity and kindness, and she consistently went beyond what was expected to be thoughtful, caring, and a good neighbor.

We miss her terribly and miss having such wonderful neighbors. Both of your parents have a very special place in our hearts and we will always cherish their friendship.

With great affection,

Miriam

Those good feelings did not happen by accident. Over the years, a few issues arose that could easily have led to conflict. They did not, because we tried to be *maavir al midosav* — to yield rather than insist on our due — and because we chose to prioritize goodwill over winning arguments.

One such example occurred soon after we bought our house. We learned that the relationship between the previous owner, Frank,* and the McCullahs had been less than ideal. One point of contention had been a rail fence that Frank had built in the front yard; Bob considered it very unattractive. We took down the rail fence within a week of moving in — but we needed to build a fence of our own, to provide a safe and secure space in our backyard for our small children to play.

I discussed the matter with our new neighbors and suggested that a wooden stockade fence would be most appropriate. Such fencing has two sides: one finished and attractive, and the other showing the more utilitarian structural elements, such as crossbeams. I told them that I would

* Name has been changed to protect privacy.

reverse the standard protocol and orient the fence with the attractive side facing their property, while the less attractive structural side would face ours. I also told them that I would wait for their approval before moving forward. A very short time later, Louise informed me that they were very comfortable with the fence, understood completely why we needed it, and appreciated that they were consulted.

The rest, as they say, is history. While this story is a heartwarming tale of neighborly goodwill — and perhaps even a modest manual on how to cultivate an effective *Shabbos goy* — it hopefully also conveys the hard work and sacrifice required to create a *Kiddush Hashem*, an act whose importance and positive impact should never be underestimated.

To illustrate this point, I would like to share a fascinating exchange with President Harry Truman, recorded by Rav Shlomo Lorincz *zt"l* — a former member of the Knesset and confidant of *Gedolei Yisroel* — in his remarkable volume, *In Their Shadow*:

> On one of my visits to the United States, I met Mr. Truman in the city where he lived, Kansas City, together with Rabbi Solomon, one of the city's *rabbanim*. President Truman said to me, "I am glad of the opportunity to explain to you, Rabbi, why I recognized the State of Israel. My decision in favor of 650,000 Jews wanting a state of their own, while surrounded by tens of millions of Arabs firmly opposed to the state's emergence, ran counter to America's political interests.
>
> "Opposition in America to this policy was so fierce that one of the newspapers in the city where I live ran a headline: Truman the traitor. **As a child,"** he continued, **"I grew up as the neighbor of several Jewish families whom I highly esteemed.** On their Sabbath I would switch the light on and off in the home of one of the families, in return for which they gave me a slice of Sabbath challah.
>
> "It was my father's custom to read from the Bible with me every Sunday. ***When we read about Cyrus, King of Persia, who granted the Jews permission to return to the land of Judea, and rebuild the temple, I thought to myself, 'The day will come when I'll be president of the United States —*** parenthetically, the dream of every American boy ***— and I too shall do what Cyrus did in his day.'***
>
> "My dream became reality and, when your president, Chaim Weizmann, visited me, bringing a Torah scroll as a gift and asking me to ***instruct the American ambassador to the United Nations to support the establishment of the State of Israel***, I remembered my childhood dreams. Obviously, on its own, a sentimental feeling like this would not have outweighed my responsibility to the interests of the United States. Why then did I nevertheless decide to recognize your state? The reason is that only Stalin, President of the Soviet Union, and myself are aware of the frightful dangers facing the world."
>
> This was after the destruction of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki using atom bombs at the end of World War II.

> He went on: "This terrible threat of atomic warfare will continue to threaten the world with destruction and with worse still, leaving all the world's inhabitants in a state worse than simple death. And if, despite this, the will to continue living persists within me, it is only because I believe that just as you Jews saved humanity, a barbarous race 3,000 years ago, with your Torah, today too, the Jewish people will manage to enlighten and heal the cruel hearts of our age and rescue the world from total destruction."
>
> When I returned home, I relayed President Truman's words from the Knesset podium, so that the country's chosen leaders might know what the world's leaders expect from the Jewish people.[1]

From this remarkable interview, we can draw a line — without too much difficulty — from a boy who *"grew up as the neighbor of several Jewish families whom I highly esteemed"* to *"When we read about Cyrus, King of Persia, who granted the Jews permission to return to the land of Judea and rebuild the temple, I thought to myself the day will come when I'll be president of the United States…and I too shall do what Cyrus did in his day*" to *"instructing the American ambassador to the United Nations to support the establishment of the State of Israel."*

The laws of *amirah l'akum* (asking a non-Jew to perform tasks which are forbidden to a Jew on Shabbos or Yom Tov) are many and complex. Distinctions are made between activities that involve Torah vs. Rabbinic prohibitions; direct requests vs. hints; communal vs. individual needs; and healthy people vs. the sick, children, or the elderly. Negotiating this landscape successfully requires halachic awareness, frequent *shaylos*, and input from one's *rav*.[2]

While we certainly must be careful to understand the limitations of the *heterim* (rabbinic dispensations that temporarily permit something normally forbidden in Jewish law) associated with *amirah l'akum*, there is no denying that gentiles can and do perform critical functions which greatly enhance our enjoyment of Shabbos (*oneg*) and, in so doing, contribute to its *kavod*. More importantly, the relationship itself can become a *Kiddush Hashem* — which can even contribute to the founding of the State of Israel and, hopefully, the beginning of the redemption of the Jewish people.

Kesivah v'Chasimah Tovah!

With love and respect,

Rabbi Yosef Singer

---

[1] Rabbi Shlomo Lorincz, *In Their Shadow, Vol. 2* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2005), 335.

[2] On a somewhat humorous note, every *rav* and *posek* owes a debt of gratitude to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and the Office of Naval Research for their groundbreaking work, three decades ago, leading to the development and proliferation of White Light Emitting Diodes. LEDs have largely displaced incandescent light bulbs as primary household light sources and, in the opinion of many *poskim*, have rendered the ubiquitous "lights on/lights off" Shabbos problem a rabbinic rather than a Torah issue.

The Mitzvah That Is Near

Rabbi Binyamin Marwick
Congregation Shomrei Emunah, Baltimore

I grew up in Forest Knolls/Kemp Mill. Some of my earliest and most vivid memories of the *Yamim Noraim* are set in the sanctuary of the Young Israel Shomrai Emunah building on University Boulevard, under the leadership of Rabbi Gedaliah Anemer *zt"l*. Now, in my own *shul* in Baltimore (also called Shomrei Emunah), when I call out *tekiah* on Rosh Hashanah, I still hear Rabbi Anemer's voice calling it before mine, with that unmistakable tone and cadence, at once urgent and unhurried. And when *Neilah* arrives each year, I am back in my seat in the front of that shul, near him, watching him closely, absorbing not just his words but also the way he carried himself in those final, trembling moments of the day: a man who seemed to understand, more than anyone I have ever known, what it means to stand before Hashem.

It is that image of Rabbi Anemer at *Neilah*, focused and fully present, *davening* as though his own life depended on the words, which comes to mind every year as I think about what *teshuvah* actually asks of us.

In Moshe Rabbeinu's final address to the Jewish people, he speaks passionately of "this *mitzvah*" הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת— — without ever quite naming it. Whatever it is, he insists, it is not beyond us:

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא נִפְלֵאת הִוא מִמְּךָ וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הִוא.
לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִוא... וְלֹא מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הִוא...
כִּי קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ.

For this mitzvah which I command you today is not concealed from you
and not distant. It is not in the heavens…and not across the sea…
For it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart,
fully within reach to do. (*Devarim* 30:11-14)

The commentators debate what exactly **this** *mitzvah* is. I want to focus on the Ramban's answer: this *mitzvah* is *teshuvah*.

The Ramban points to the references to repentance surrounding this passage, including *"and you shall return it to your heart"* and *"and you shall return to Hashem, your G-d."* The Ramban reads the entire section as a promise, cast in future tense, that even a nation scattered to the ends of the earth will find its way back:

וְטַעַם **כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת**...אֲבָל **הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת** ,עַל הַתְּשׁוּבָה הַנִּזְכֶּרֶת, כִּי וַהֲשֵׁבֹתָ אֶל לְבָבֶךָ (דברים ל׳ :א׳) וְשַׁבְתָּ עַד ה׳ אֱלֹקֶיךָ (דברים ל׳ :ב׳), מִצְוָה שֶׁיְּצִוֶּה אוֹתָנוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן. וְנֶאֱמְרָה בַּלָּשׁוֹן הַבֵּינוֹנִי, לְרָמֹז בַּהַבְטָחָה כִּי עָתִיד הַדָּבָר לִהְיוֹת כֵּן. וְהַטַּעַם לֵאמֹר כִּי אִם יִהְיֶה נִדַּחֲךָ בִּקְצֵה הַשָּׁמָיִם וְאַתָּה בְּיַד הָעַמִּים, תּוּכַל לָשׁוּב אֶל ה׳ וְלַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם, כִּי אֵין הַדָּבָר נִפְלָא וְרָחוֹק מִמְּךָ אֲבָל קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ מְאֹד לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ בְּכָל עֵת וּבְכָל מָקוֹם. (רמב״ן פרק ל׳, פסוק י״א)

> FOR THIS COMMANDMENT. *This commandment* refers to [the commandment of] repentance aforementioned, for the verses, "*and you shall return it to your heart"* and *"you shall return to Hashem, your G-d"* constitute a commandment, wherein He commands us to do so. It is stated in a future tense [rather than in the imperative] to suggest, in the form of a pledge, that it is destined [that Israel will repent]. And the sense thereof is to state that *if your outcasts are scattered to the uttermost parts of heaven* and you are under the power of the nations, you can yet return to G-d and do *according to all that I command you this day*, for the thing is not hard, nor far off from you, but rather *very close to you* to do it at all times and in all places.

But if we accept the Ramban's reading, a real question remains: Is *teshuvah* actually that accessible? Anyone who has tried to change — really change — knows how far from simple it can feel.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz, in *Living Inspired*, cites a *Gemara* (*Niddah* 30a) that helps us answer this question. *Chazal* relate that, before a child is born, an angel teaches him the entire Torah — every secret of creation, everything he will ever need to reach his fullest potential. Then, at the moment of birth, the angel strikes the child on the mouth, and he forgets it all.

Why teach so much only to erase it?

Rabbi Tatz explains: It isn't erased. It is buried, driven deep beneath the surface, intact, waiting. A person is born appearing to know nothing, but underneath, everything is already there. The work of a lifetime is not to acquire something new, but to uncover something that was always ours. As he writes:

> *…it is not forgotten; it is driven deep into the unconscious…The pathway is clear — a person is born with a lifetime of work ahead, spiritual wisdom and growth are hard-earned. But the inspiration is within; you were once there! And that inner sense of inspiration provides the motivation, the source of optimism and confidence that genuine achievement is possible, even assured, if the necessary effort is made.*[1]

In light of this explanation, the Ramban's position becomes clear. Keeping the Torah, making proper moral choices, is really not a *new* path for us. Rather, it is a return to the way we were, to what we once knew with certainty to be true. *Teshuvah* is really a return to our true selves.

This is why the Ramban can say that *teshuvah* is close, "in your mouth and in your heart," even as we know how hard the work of change truly is. *Teshuvah* is not an invention. It is a return — to the person we already were, at our core, before the world got its hands on us.

If *teshuvah* is truly a return, rather than a new invention, then we understand why *Chazal* portray repentance in precisely those terms. One remarkable *Gemara* (*Avodah Zarah* 17a) captures this:

Elazar ben Durdaya, a man who had sunk about as low as a person can sink, finally resolves to do *teshuvah*. He turns to the mountains and hills: "Ask mercy for me."

[1] Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *Living Inspired* (Jerusalem: Targum Press, 1993), p.24.

No response.

He turns to the heavens and earth, then to the sun and moon, and finally to the stars: the same silence, again and again and again.

> אָמַר: אֵין הַדָּבָר תָּלוּי אֶלָּא בִּי. הִנִּיחַ רֹאשׁוֹ בֵּין בִּרְכָּיו וְגָעָה בִּבְכִיָּה עַד שֶׁיָּצְתָה נִשְׁמָתוֹ. יָצְתָה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה: רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן דּוּרְדְּיָא מְזֻמָּן לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא!

Finally, he understands: אֵין הַדָּבָר תָּלוּי אֶלָּא בִּי — "T*he matter depends on no one but me."*

He puts his head between his knees, a posture that evokes the fetal position, cries, and dies on the spot.

As a result of intense remorse and repentance, a Heavenly voice announces that he is destined for *Olam Habah*.

What is the symbolism of placing his head between his knees, in a fetal position?

I believe this was the ultimate acknowledgment that his repentance was really a return to himself, a return to the way he was in his mother's womb. It is a physical statement of what the Ramban is teaching. Elazar ben Durdaya was not inventing a new self through sheer willpower. He was returning: collapsing back, almost literally, into the position he held before he was anyone at all, before he had made a single choice, good or bad. His *teshuvah* was a return to the womb, to the self that already knew the whole Torah, before anything else was layered on top of it.

This is similar to an idea expressed by T.S. Eliot in *Little Gidding* about the journey of self-discovery (Section V, Lines 26–30):

> *We shall not cease from exploration*
> *and the end of all exploring*
> *will be to arrive where we started*
> *and know the place for the first time.*

We can now understand why Moshe Rabbeinu could promise that *teshuvah* is "very near." Not because repentance is easy, but because home is always closer than we think it is. We spend our lives imagining that holiness lies somewhere beyond the horizon, while the Torah insists that the journey back to ourselves is shorter than we imagine. That, I think, is the real work of these *Yamim Noraim*. Not to attempt to become someone new, but to strip away enough to recognize, finally, who we already were. We spend these days searching for our truest selves, only to discover that they have been waiting for us all along.

At *Neilah*, I often think of Rabbi Anemer: how he seemed, in those closing minutes, to have arrived at exactly that place, simply by being who he most truly was. That is the image I carry with me every year as the *shofar* sounds. It is, I believe, exactly what Moshe Rabbeinu promised us: not a distant mountain to climb, but a door, already open, in our own mouths and in our own hearts.

May we all be *zoche* to a year of *mitzvos*, *Talmud Torah, chesed*, and true *teshuvah*. Wishing the entire community a *kesivah v'chasimah tovah*, and a year filled with *berachah*, *hatzlachah* and good health!

The Lifelong Striving of Teshuvah

Rabbi Brahm Weinberg, Kemp Mill Synagogue

At the beginning of the seventh chapter of *Hilchot Teshuvah*, the Rambam makes two seemingly innocuous statements that, upon closer examination, prove surprisingly difficult to explain. Together, they point toward a deeper understanding of what *teshuvah* is meant to accomplish. The Rambam writes:

הוֹאִיל וּרְשׁוּת כָּל אָדָם נְתוּנָה לוֹ כְּמוֹ שֶׁבֵּאַרְנוּ
יִשְׁתַּדֵּל אָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה וּלְהִתְוַדּוֹת בְּפִיו מֵחֲטָאָיו
וְלִנְעֹר כַּפָּיו מֵחֲטָאָיו
כְּדֵי שֶׁיָּמוּת וְהוּא בַּעַל תְּשׁוּבָה וְיִזְכֶּה לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

Since free choice is granted to all people as explained,
a person should always strive ('yishtadel adam') to do Teshuvah
and to confess verbally for his sins, striving to cleanse his hands from sin
so that that he will die having repented and merit the World to Come.[1]

The sentence appears straightforward, but two expressions are difficult to understand. The first is the Rambam's choice of the word *yishtadel* (he should strive). One would have expected him to write that a person is *chayav* (obligated) to do *teshuvah*. That is, after all, the language appropriate for a *mitzvah*. The Torah's commandments are not presented as admirable aspirations toward which one should merely strive; they are binding obligations. Why, then, does the Rambam choose the softer expression, *yishtadel adam*, "a person should strive"?

The question becomes even more compelling when one considers the Rambam's other uses of this expression. He employs *yishtadel* only a few times in all of *Mishneh Torah*, almost exclusively in contexts that are not formal obligations, but ideals that one should endeavor to fulfill. Thus, in *Hilchot Tzitzit*,[2] he encourages a person to strive to wear a garment obligated in *tzitzit*, despite there being no obligation to acquire such a garment. Likewise, in *Hilchot De'ot*,[3] he urges a person to strive to cultivate healthy habits. Precisely because those cases involve aspiration rather than obligation, the verb *yishtadel* fits very well. By contrast, the Rambam's use of the same language with respect to *teshuvah* becomes all the more surprising.[4]

---

[1] *Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:1.

[2] 3:11.

[3] 4:13.

[4] The *Minchat Chinuch* (*Mitzvah* 364) raises the possibility that the Rambam does not regard *teshuvah* itself as an independent *mitzvah*, citing several passages in the Rambam in support of that position. Even if one were to adopt that reading, however, the question raised here remains. The Rambam unquestionably counts *viduy* as a *mitzvah*, and in this *halachah* he introduces both *teshuvah* and *viduy* with the expression "*yishtadel adam la'asot teshuvah u'lehitvadot be-fiv.*" Thus, the Rambam's choice of the aspirational language of *yishtadel* requires explanation regardless of whether *teshuvah* itself is counted as an independent *mitzvah*.

The second difficulty in the Rambam's formulation is no less puzzling. He explains that a person should strive to do *teshuvah* "so that he will die having repented and merit the World to Come." His language appears to suggest that the prospect of reward is the motivation for *teshuvah*. While we certainly recognize that many people begin their religious lives motivated by reward, it is not the ideal for which we are taught to strive. The *Mishnah* in *Avot* expresses this principle succinctly:

אַל תִּהְיוּ כַּעֲבָדִים הַמְשַׁמְּשִׁין אֶת הָרַב עַל מְנָת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס.

Do not be like servants who serve their Master in order to receive a reward.[5]

Our highest aspiration is to serve Hashem because He is worthy of our service, not because of what we hope to gain in return. The Rambam himself adopts this very formulation at the conclusion of *Hilchot Teshuvah*. Describing an immature level of *avodat Hashem*, he writes:

אַל יֹאמַר אָדָם הֲרֵינִי עוֹשֶׂה מִצְוֹת הַתּוֹרָה וְעוֹסֵק בְּחָכְמָתָהּ
כְּדֵי שֶׁאַקַּבֵּל כָּל הַבְּרָכוֹת הַכְּתוּבוֹת בָּהּ
אוֹ כְּדֵי שֶׁאֶזְכֶּה לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

A person should not say: "I will fulfill the mitzvot of the Torah and occupy myself in its wisdom in order to receive all the blessings which are contained within it or in order to merit the life of the World to Come."[6]

Of all the possible illustrations of an inadequate religious motivation, he selects the very aspiration that appears to stand at the center of his own description of *teshuvah* in Chapter Seven! Why would the Rambam present "in order to merit the life of the World to Come" as the goal of *teshuvah* if, only three chapters later, he cites that very motivation as the paradigm of that to which one should *not* aspire?

Perhaps a broader appreciation of what *teshuvah* is ultimately meant to achieve can help us better understand the Rambam's choice of language in this pivotal *halachah*. In the opening chapter of *Sha'ar HaTeshuvah* in *Beit Elokim*, the Mabit[7] defines *teshuvah* in a moving passage:

> *We have investigated the essence of teshuvah (repentance) and found it to be true and complete: it is drawing close to G-d by distancing oneself from sin. The meaning of "drawing close" is that the intention of the one who repents should be to come near to his Creator, from whom he has become distant by transgressing His word — not merely to escape punishment for his sins.*

[5] *Avot* 1:3.
[6] *Hilchot Teshuvah* 10:1.
[7] Rabbi Moses ben Joseph di Trani, 16th-century, Tzfat.

The Mabit does not define *teshuvah* as abandoning sin, obtaining forgiveness, escaping punishment, or even repairing spiritual failure. These are indispensable components and consequences of *teshuvah*, but they are *not* its essence. Its essence is *kirvah*: closeness to Hashem. *Teshuvah* is the movement toward Hashem. Abandoning *aveirah* (sin) is essential because we are commanded to do so, but the ultimate goal is not merely the absence of sin, it is the restoration of a relationship.

Like a careless remark, a betrayal of trust, or a failure to uphold one's responsibilities, every *aveirah* creates distance between two parties. There is an awkwardness that remains and a barrier that exists after hurt is caused. Restitution and apology may be required and consequences may ensue, yet anyone who has lived within a meaningful relationship knows that forgiveness and closeness are not synonymous. One can forgive completely while still sensing that something has changed. Trust must be rebuilt. Affection must be rekindled. The relationship itself requires healing. In the same way, an *aveirah* is not merely an act of disobedience; it creates distance between a person and his Creator. Confession and forgiveness are, therefore, not the endpoint of *teshuvah*, but its beginning. The real work of *teshuvah* is the lifelong effort to restore the closeness that sin has disrupted.

The Mabit's formulation is not an isolated definition. Once one begins reading the classical literature through this lens, a pattern emerges. Again and again, the language of *teshuvah* is framed not primarily in terms of guilt and absolution, but in terms of distance and closeness. Rabbeinu Yonah, for example, describes one of the defining characteristics of genuine *teshuvah* as "how evil and bitter it is to have forsaken Hashem."[8] The pain of *teshuvah* is not limited to the recognition that one has violated a command or incurred punishment. It is the painful awareness that one has drifted away from Hashem.

The prophet Yeshayahu expresses this idea even more explicitly. Rebuking the Jewish people, he declares:

כִּי אִם עֲוֹנֹתֵיכֶם הָיוּ מַבְדִּלִים בֵּינֵכֶם לְבֵין אֱלֹקֵיכֶם...

It is your sins that have created a separation between you and your G-d...[9]

Yeshayahu does not describe sin primarily as an act deserving punishment. He describes it as something that creates separation. *Teshuvah*, accordingly, is not exhausted when punishment is averted or guilt is erased. Its work is complete only when that distance has been bridged and the relationship restored.

This understanding of *teshuvah* finds striking expression in the Rambam himself. He devotes considerable attention throughout *Hilchot Teshuva* to the concrete acts of regret, confession, abandoning the sin, and committing to a different future. However, a few *halachot* after the

passage with which we began, he offers what is perhaps his most succinct characterization of *teshuvah*'s transformative power:

גְּדוֹלָה תְּשׁוּבָה שֶׁמְּקָרֶבֶת אֶת הָאָדָם לַשְּׁכִינָה...

Great is teshuvah, for it brings a person close to the Shechinah...[10]

The goal of *teshuvah*, then, is not simply to erase the past. It is to restore closeness and deepen one's relationship with Hashem.

Viewed through this lens, the Rambam's opening formulation begins to read very differently. If *teshuvah* is fundamentally the restoration of one's closeness with Hashem, then *yishtadel* is precisely the right word. When it comes to forgiveness and atonement, the Torah prescribes concrete acts. There are formal definitive obligations to fulfill, wrongs to acknowledge, restitution to make, and commitments to undertake. These are objective acts of *teshuvah* that can be completed. Once performed, they accomplish what they were intended to do.

Conversely, a relationship is fundamentally different. It cannot be restored through a single act, nor can it ever be reduced to a checklist of objective obligations. Relationships are living realities. They require continual attention, renewed trust, and longing for closeness. One never reaches the point where one can say, "I have finished building this relationship." All we can do is *yishtadel*: continue to strive and to build.

The Rambam's second formulation can likewise be understood in this light. The words, "so that he will die having repented and merit the World to Come," are not describing the *motivation* for *teshuvah*, but its *culmination*. The World to Come is the fullest expression of *kirvah*, the ultimate state of closeness between a human being and Hashem. It is the point at which all physicality is gone and a soul can cleave to Hashem in a whole new way. If the work of *teshuvah* is to bridge the distance created by sin and restore that relationship, then its natural destination is a closeness akin to that existence in the World to Come. The Rambam is not urging us to pursue *teshuvah* for the *sake* of reward. He is describing where a life of genuine *teshuvah* ultimately leads; he is describing the broadest aspiration of the *teshuvah* process.[11]

The genuine question of *teshuvah* is not simply, "What have I done wrong?" It is, "How can I become closer to Hashem?" The goal of *teshuvah* is not only to erase the past; it is to restore a relationship. Perhaps that is why the Rambam chooses to conclude *Hilchot Teshuvah* not with the laws of confession or atonement, but with the soaring ideal of *Ahavat Hashem*.[12]

As Rabbi Michael Rosensweig says:

---

[10] *Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:6.

[11] This reading of the Rambam is primarily based on R. Yerucham Olshin, *Yerach LaMoadim, Yamim Noraim,* Vol. 2:28.

[12] *Hilchot Teshuvah* Ch.10: 2, 3, 6.

> *A close examination of Hilkhot Teshuvah reveals Rambam's intentions. It is no coincidence that Rambam chose the culmination of Hilkhot Teshuvah to ruminate about ahavat Hashem and the motivation and ambition that both suffuse and engender it. By accentuating the importance of ahavat Hashem, by promoting it as an ideal, and by utilizing the metaphor of intense romantic love found in Shir ha-Shirim, Rambam effectively conveys that ahavat Hashem is of paramount importance to all elements of avodat Hashem.*[13]

Teshuvah reaches its fulfillment not when the sinner is merely forgiven, but when he once again loves Hashem with all his heart and, in turn, experiences the closeness for which his soul has always yearned.

The work of *teshuvah* in *Elul* and *Tishrei* is not only about confronting our failures or repairing our mistakes. At its heart, it is motivated by the profound desire to be close to Hashem — to the One who gave us life, who sustains us each moment, who gives our lives meaning and purpose, and to whom we owe everything.

[13] *Mimini Mikhael*, p. 81.

Nusach HaTefillah: Our Connection to Generations of Old

Mr. Judah Lifschitz

From the time I was a little boy, could barely reach the *bimah,* and could only recite the first few words of *Adon Olam*, I was already "davening at the *amud*."

We davened in a large shul with a professional *chazzan*. At age six or seven, I got my first "break" when I was selected to be in the *chazzan*'s choir for the Yamim Noraim. It was a lot of work — over many months — as I learned the *nusach* (the style and melodies of *tefillah*), the cantorial pieces, the harmony, and my solos. I loved it.

Chazzan Abraham Schwerd *a"h* took an interest in me, encouraging me to study the *nusach* of Shabbos and the Yamim Tovim with him. For several years, he tutored me in *Nusach HaTefillah*. He educated me in the primary importance of our generations-old *Nusach HaTefillah* and instilled in me a deep love for it.

The shul of my youth had a very special melody for *Yigdal*, which was sung only at the conclusion of *Maariv* on the Yamim Noraim. It is a beautiful, moving tune of German descent. When I was approximately ten years old, I was selected for the first time to sing it. I was so excited.

For many of my adult years, however, I was hesitant to introduce the stirring *Yigdal* melody into my *Kol Nidrei* davening at Young Israel Shomrai Emunah — until my dear friend, Rabbi Saul Koss, encouraged me several years ago to sing it. I introduced the shul to that beautiful melody; now when I sing *Yigdal* at the conclusion of the *Kol Nidrei* davening, I turn to Rabbi Koss — as the moving melody brings tears to my eyes and evokes memories of my youth.

In addition to the *chazzan*, the shul of my youth had several exceptional *ba'alei tefillah* who davened *Shacharis* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Holocaust survivors from different countries and backgrounds — some Chassidic, some Litvish, with slight variations in their *nusach* — they davened with lovely melodies brought from their European homes. Some sang beautifully, while others had just average voices. But each davened from the heart and gave real, palpable meaning to the words of the *machzor*. They did not just daven — they inspired.

The experiences of my youth provided me with three very important gifts, which I cherish to this very day: *nusach*; cantorial pieces and *nigunim* of old; and the recognition that my responsibility as a *ba'al tefillah* is to inspire those who are davening with me.

In my early twenties, I began serving as a *shaliach tzibur* on the Yamim Noraim: first *Shacharis* and *Mincha* on Yom Kippur, and several years later, *Musaf* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, *Kol Nidrei*, and *Ne'ilah*. These early years were both exciting and intimidating. Exciting: because I now had the opportunity to implement the lessons of my youth and translate them into my own "style" of davening. Intimidating: because of the awesome responsibility of serving as the messenger carrying the congregation's *tefillos*.

As to the first task — developing my personal style — I relied heavily on my training. For me, it was an absolute given that I had to be entirely faithful to the traditional *nusach*. (Years later, I read that Shlomo Carlebach believed that the *nusach* of the Yamim Noraim is the only one that remains from the *nusach* in the *Beis HaMikdash*).

I selected pieces and melodies from my training and added *nigunim* from modern Jewish music. My selections had to meet certain basic criteria: Each melody had to be: (a) appropriate to the text; (b) capable of being sung not only by me but also by the congregation; and, most important of all, (c) moving and inspirational. While over the years I have changed various melodies from time to time, the core of my davening — the cantorial pieces and *nigunim* — have remained constant. Indeed, I was once taken to task by a YISE congregant for using a new melody for one of the *Selichos* in *Maariv* on Yom Kippur. "How could you do that?" she wanted to know. The next year, I returned to the original melody!

The second task was to prepare for the awesome responsibility of serving as a *shaliach tzibur*. This required that I study the words of every *tefillah* and understand its meaning. I had to prepare to be a messenger, one of thousands of *ba'alei tefillah* with the awesome responsibility of delivering the *tefillos* of each individual Jew to the Almighty: the prayers of widows and the infirm, of parents and spouses, of children and orphans, of the elderly and the sick, of the unemployed, of singles in search of a *shidduch*, of *chayalim*, and of so many others. Preparing for this aspect required that I remove the "me" from my *tefillah* and connect with those for whom I would be davening. One of the things I do to connect is to take a list with me of *cholim* for whom I am praying — to have in mind each person during my davening.

Over the many years that I have been a *shaliach tzibur*, I have merited to daven during historical times and consequential events: in the aftermath of September 11, during the Covid pandemic, on and after October 7, and during the war that followed.

Of course, each impacted my davening. When I davened in the days following September 11, the trauma of the attacks and the fears it created were fresh wounds on our individual and collective psyches. The words of *U'Nesaneh Tokef — who will live and who will die* — had a particularly raw meaning and pierced the soul.

During Covid, Rabbi Rosenbaum asked if I could "make a tape" of the davening, which he could share in advance of Yom Tov to help lift the spirits of those who would be unable to attend shul. I recorded tracks of Yamim Noraim davening, in a professional recording studio, and created a website (www.yomtovnusach.com) where one could access the tracks and listen to them. That year, the website was visited by hundreds of people: locally, across the United States, in Europe, and in Israel. Even years later, as Yom Tov approaches, it is visited by many individuals, including those seeking to learn *Nusach HaTefillah.*

After October 7, I felt the need to replace some *nigunim* with music appropriate to our pain, fears, and hopes. At the suggestion of a longtime YISE congregant and dear friend, Mitch Taragin, we created a printed song sheet for both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, distributing it to our *kehillah* in advance of the holidays. It was so popular that we continue to do so through the present.

We also created You Tube playlists to match the song sheets, allowing community members to be inspired by the music in advance of the Yamim Noraim. The playlists have also proved to be quite popular. They can be accessed by scanning this QR code:

One of the *nigunim* that I often use at the end of *U'Nesaneh Tokef* was composed by Shlomo Carlebach, entitled *The Blind Chazzan*. It tells the story of the great Chazzan of Lemburg who, before the Holocaust, was one of the greatest *chazzanim* in Europe. People would travel from near and far to listen to him daven.

One day long after the war, Shlomo Carlebach was in a shul on Shabbos morning somewhere in Europe. An elderly man was davening *Shacharis* at the *amud*. He could barely recite the words correctly and, to quote Carlebach, "He had no voice. No voice!" Carlebach became upset, as he felt that this man had no business serving as the *chazzan*.

When it came to time to take out the Torah, Carlebach noticed that two men were helping the *chazzan* walk.

"Who is this man?" asked Carlebach.

"He is the great Chazzan of Lemburg. He was tortured by the Nazis during the war and lost his voice and his eyesight," he was told. Recognizing his terrible mistake, Carlebach rushed up to the elderly man and embraced him.

Years later, Shlomo Carlebach commented, "If I Iive to be a thousand years old, I will never daven like the Chazzan of Lemburg did on that Shabbos."

It is an awesome responsibility and a great privilege to be a messenger for *Klal Yisrael*. Each year, I pray that I will merit to daven with the same purity and intensity as the great Chazzan of Lemburg did on that Shabbos.

May all our *tefillos* be answered — and may we be blessed with a *Kesivah V'Chasimah Tovah*.

A Ba'al Tefillah's Prep: A Link in Our Mesorah

Dr. Ira Rabin, MD

There is an old saying in sports that hard work can overcome lack of talent. I think this sums up how I approach my preparation for being a *ba'al tefillah* on the High Holidays, something I have had the incredible privilege to do for more than twenty years at Kemp Mill Synagogue. I don't say this as an attempt at self-deprecation or humility. I am simply someone with a pareve voice in a shul that, *Baruch Hashem*, can advertise a menu full of gourmet vocal talent.

If there is perhaps one qualification I have, it is the gift from Hashem of being born into a family where the music of *tefillah* is entwined with our DNA and courses through our blood every day. We can trace our musical *mesorah* back to my great-grandfather in 1800s Lithuania, peaking with my grandfather, Cantor Joseph Rabin *z"l* — a master *chazzan*, composer, and choir director whose exquisite music lives on in numerous shuls today, as well as in the Canadian National Archives.

I often think of my ritual music education in the context of the introduction to *Pirkei Avos*, which describes the lineage of the Torah, passed down through the generations. While I never knew my grandfather, it has been the *zechus* of a lifetime not only to learn his music from my father, Dr. Lionel Rabin (who led High Holiday *davening* at YISE for decades), but also to learn how to prepare oneself for *davening* any day of the year. My father still inspires and coaches me to this day, not just technically and stylistically, but also to understand the meaning of every word and every note. My brother, Dr. Joseph Rabin — named after our grandfather — can, and maybe should, be authoring this article, as he is a highly accomplished and admired *ba'al tefillah*.

There really isn't a distinct High Holiday season in my mind. In *ba'al tefillah* email groups and WhatsApp chats over the years, I have learned that many *ba'alei tefillah* are wired the same way. We think about High Holiday *davening* in Cheshvan. I have been with other *daveners*, jamming Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur pieces, while Chanukah menorahs are twinkling in the background. That said, my initial "pre-season" work (to use another sports analogy) usually begins after Pesach.

While I never stray from the major traditional pieces I use, especially family compositions like *U'nesaneh Tokef*, I think about whether to adjust any of the pieces "around the edges." I have incorporated, and will continue to include, some newer, modern compositions. However, the "3M" rule must always apply: any piece used must fit the mood, mode, and motif of the words. *Davening* is never about entertainment. Even newer, modern "crowd pleasers" should be used deliberately, serving to connect the congregation to the meaning of the words and emotion of the moment.

Between Shavuos and the Three Weeks, I will listen to, then play on the piano, any potential new piece, and practice passages that have proven difficult in the past. During the Three Weeks, I shift to reading the *machzor*, mostly to ensure that I have the proper phrasing, timing, and understanding of the *tefillos*. After Tisha B'av, I start full practices, incorporating additional cardio,

breathing, and voice exercises as well. As I noted, lack of raw talent requires hard work and technique.

Once we cross into Elul, I try to protect my voice; I avoid talking in loud environments like kiddushes or other large gatherings. I also decline *davening* for the *amud,* if asked. I will often play various musical scales on the piano and in my head (Phrygian and Dorian, for example), so that the *nusach* becomes second nature and I can easily make transitions, seamlessly correct a mistake, or — as will be necessary this year — transition between Shabbos and High Holiday modes when appropriate.

The natural beat of the Hebrew calendar helps promote my mental and emotional preparedness. Once Elul arrives, the daily *shofar* is a constant reminder of what looms ahead. Add to this the image of the shul dressed in white on the first night of *Selichos*, as well as the *nusach* and music of that night; the cadence of the daily *Selichos*; and the trip to the *mikvah* — all of which create a natural reminder of and buildup to my responsibilities as *a ba'al tefillah* and what is at stake. By the time *Selichos* begin, I am usually done with most major rehearsing.

On the actual days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (*Baruch Hashem*, I've always fasted well), in addition to a few early morning vocal exercises, the only preparation I do — and my family always looks forward to this with a chuckle — is facial exercises to warm up and relax those muscles to enhance sound quality and projection. I also read through *Hineni He'Ani MiMa'as* (the *chazzan's tefillah* prior to *musaf*) several times. While modern-day therapists would likely take issue with the negative "self-talk" in this incredibly moving and humbling prayer, I find it very grounding. It's a reminder that I really don't deserve to ascend to the *amud* on these profound days of awe — a reminder to make the most of the unique opportunity to lead the *kahal* and carry on a family tradition that is nearly two hundred years old.

Over the past few years, I have also shifted my focus to something significantly more important than my own preparation and *davening*: teaching. *Baruch Hashem*, my son has inherited special musical ability. It is both a responsibility and an honor to do my best to prepare and teach him so that he will be ready when called upon. I hope that, one day, as he contemplates leading the High Holiday *davening*, he will see himself not just as a *ba'al tefillah*, but as another link in both our family's and the Jewish people's musical chain — part of the musical equivalent of the beginning of *Pirkei Avos*.

Sarah Landesman a”h: A Legacy of Hachnasas Orchim

Mrs. Devorah Grayson

Erev Yom Kippur will mark the eleventh yahrzeit of Mrs. Sarah Landesman a"h, a role model of chesed for decades and a renowned pillar of our community. The Journal asked Mrs. Devorah (Landesman) Grayson to reflect on her mother's life and legacy.

My mother, Sarah Landesman *a”h*, led a life that was a testament to resilience, compassion, and the quiet power of giving. Born in 1937 in Yagustov, Poland, my mother's earliest years were shaped by uncertainty and danger as the shadow of the Nazis spread across Europe. My grandfather Reb Chaim Gorfinkle HaLevi led his small family, a wife and two toddler daughters, to safety by fleeing to Shanghai — a place that, while secure from immediate harm, brought with it years of extreme poverty, sickness, and hardship.

For six years, my mother lived in a Shanghai tenement, sharing a single bathroom with all the other families on their floor. As the Jewish refugees were not permitted to work, they were completely dependent upon the charity of the Jews who had settled in Shanghai in the 1920s. The close quarters in which they lived caused a great deal of sickness among the Jewish refugees; my grandparents were hospitalized on several occasions, leaving their two daughters in their neighbors’ care. But in these formative years, seeds were planted: lessons in perseverance, empathy, and the deep human need for connection. My mother learned that selfless giving and seeing to the needs of others were the best kind of fulfillment.

When the Gorfinkle family eventually immigrated to the United States — through San Francisco and Chicago to Far Rockaway, New York — their ordeal did not end. They continued to struggle financially and were concerned about the religious environment for their three children (a son had been born during their time in Shanghai). My mother found solace and comfort with her many friends, with whom she retained numerous close connections throughout her life. She created her own community and enjoyed mutual loyalty and devotion for more than sixty years.

These experiences profoundly shaped the person my mother was to become. She knew firsthand what it meant to be displaced and to lack a sense of belonging — and she also knew how to avoid loneliness. Rather than allowing her early life to harden her, she transformed her experiences into a lifelong mission to ensure that no one around her would ever feel alone.

One day, my mother's close friend became engaged to my father's close friend. My father, Avrom Landesman, was enlisted to drive the happy couple to the airport to celebrate their engagement with family. My mother decided to accompany her friend for the ride. A truck driver ran a stop sign and plowed into my father's car — sending my mother and the newly engaged couple to the hospital. My father remained unscathed, but felt horrible about the situation; he visited my mother in the hospital daily. And that is origin of the *ohel* of Avrom and Sarah Landesman.

My parents moved to Silver Spring in 1962. They became pillars of Summit Hill Congregation, now known as Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah. The Summit Hill community was made up of young couples living away from their immediate families who had moved to the area for government jobs or school. As they did not have family nearby, they learned to rely on each other for whatever was needed. When a baby was born, community women took care of the other children and prepared meals for the young family. For life-cycle events, neighbors self-catered the Shalom Zachor, the bris, or the Bar Mitzvah. It is what made Silver Spring unique. Every member of the community had a role to play — and the success of the community depended on each and every person. One of my fondest childhood memories was the Simchas Torah Kiddush. The whole shul enjoyed a delicious homemade meal together, prepared by community members: the best cooks in town!

As the community began to grow, so did communal needs. A Chevra Kadisha was inaugurated, a new Mikvah opened, and a Bikur Cholim organization was established. (People from out of town seeking medical care in the Washington area would often stay with my parents, sometimes for months.)

My parents played a role in all of the local *chesed* organizations. They helped establish new schools while supporting and maintaining existing ones. My mother was active in many of these organizations. She never backed away if there was a gap that needed to be filled.

At one point, my mother led the fundraising efforts for the Yeshiva of Greater Washington. To this day, people tell me how they dreaded the annual call from Sarah Landesman, asking for their donation to the Yeshiva. They went into the conversation with an idea of the dollar amount they were willing to donate — yet it always cost them more, due to my mother's powerful words of persuasion.

My mother's true calling was *hachnasas orchim* (welcoming guests). She created the home she never had as a child. Her house was not just a place to live — it was a sanctuary for hundreds (maybe thousands, we never really counted) of people. It was filled with warmth, laughter, great food, and kindness, with an open door that was rarely locked.

I once surprised my parents by returning home from college in the middle of the week. I walked through the front door of the home where had I had grown up, only to find a man I did not know sitting at our kitchen table. He informed me that this was a private home and that I couldn't just walk in.

Guests were not occasional visitors: they were a constant presence. Some of them stayed for months, while others ate their Shabbos and Yom Tov meals with my parents for years. My mother's Shabbos table became legendary, often hosting 25–35 people at a time. People passing through town who needed a place to stay, *mishulachim* whose cars miraculously broke down in front of our house on Erev Shabbos — they all knew that the Landesmans would not only take them in but would make them feel wanted.

On the Metro one Friday afternoon, I overheard a conversation between two boys. One was describing how he had missed his flight home and his mother had arranged for him to stay with a local family: the Landesmans. His mother, in Detroit, had heard that the Landesmans were exceptionally kind and welcoming, so she had asked if they would host her son who had missed his flight. The son then invited the other boy to join him, saying that it was OK to just show up if you had nowhere to go.

My mother's attitude, indeed, was that there was always room for one more. No one was ever turned away. On the rare occasions when my mother was unavailable, she took the time to make arrangements, with a great deal of care, for the guest to be hosted elsewhere.

There were some people who were "regulars" in our home. One person always came to break the fast with us after Yom Kippur. Erev Yom Kippur was the day my mother died. Hours before she passed away, she called a friend to ask them to invite our guest to break the fast with them. That was my mother.

What made Sarah Landesman's generosity even more remarkable was that it came without expectation. She did not seek recognition, praise, or acknowledgment. She did not receive financial reimbursement. My mother's giving was quiet, almost instinctive, driven by a deeply held belief that when people are alone, they need someone to champion them. She understood that a meal, a place to stay, a smile, or simply a welcoming environment could make a difference in people's lives.

And my mother stayed in touch with everyone who walked through her door. She found spouses for some and helped others become observant, but for each and every one of them she created a home away from home. For my mother, helping others wasn't a burden; it was a source of joy, the fulfillment of a Torah commandment, and a way of giving back to the community in a special manner. Every extra chair at the table, every plate of food served, and every guest welcomed into her home was an example to others, in the hope that they, too, would find an act of *chesed* that was meaningful to them and at which they could excel.

My mother's story is not one of survival. It is a story of transformation. From a childhood marked by displacement and hardship, she built a happy and fulfilling life — defined by generosity, warmth, and unwavering kindness. She showed that even the most difficult beginnings can lead to a life of extraordinary impact.

The legacy of Sarah Landesman *a"h* is not measured in material wealth or public accolades, but in the countless lives that she touched. It lives on in the people who found comfort at her table, in the sense of belonging she gave so freely, and in the example she set for her family: that true richness comes from opening one's heart and home to others.

Ben Shloshim L'Koach: Thirty Years of Building Torah in Silver Spring

Rabbi Amram Hes, Menahel, Boys Division
Yeshiva of Greater Washington – Tiferes Gedaliah

Chazal teach that, at thirty years of age, a person reaches the fullness of his strength:

...בֶּן שְׁלֹשִׁים לַכֹּחַ...

...at thirty, the peak of strength... (Pirkei Avos 5:21)

Thirty years marks the point where youthful dreams have matured into enduring accomplishments, where ideals have become realities, and where foundations laid with hope have grown into institutions that shape generations.

As the Yeshiva Gedolah of Greater Washington celebrates its thirtieth anniversary, I find myself reflecting not only on the remarkable growth of the Yeshiva but also on the privilege of having grown together with it. In many ways, my own life story has become inseparable from that of the Yeshiva Gedolah.

I arrived in Silver Spring in the summer of 1995 as one of the founding members of the Yeshiva Gedolah. I had grown up in Washington Heights, attended high school at Yeshiva Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, and spent two years learning at Mercaz HaTorah in Eretz Yisrael. Like many young men at that stage of life, I had carefully planned my future. The opportunity to learn under Rav Ahron Lopiansky and to help pioneer a brand-new *yeshiva gedolah* was simply too compelling to pass up. I envisioned spending a few years immersed in Torah, earning a degree in finance, and then moving on to the next chapter.

Hashem, of course, had very different plans.

What I imagined would be a brief stop along the way became my home. Silver Spring became the community where I married, where my wife and I raised our family, where my children were educated, and ultimately where I would have the privilege of serving as Menahel of Yeshiva of Greater Washington, Boys Division.

Looking back, it is remarkable how impossible it would have been to foresee what emerged from those early years.

The first years of the Yeshiva Gedolah were truly special. We were a small group — perhaps twelve to fifteen *bochurim* — learning together in an atmosphere that is difficult to recreate. We had the privilege of learning under two extraordinary Torah personalities: Rav Gedaliah Anemer *zt"l* and Rav Ahron Lopiansky *shlita*. Because of the size of the Yeshiva Gedolah, every *talmid* enjoyed a uniquely close relationship with our *rebbeim*. Rav Ahron's *shiurim*, conversations, guidance, and accessibility shaped us not only intellectually but personally. Those relationships remain among the greatest gifts I received from those years.

At the same time, something else was quietly taking place.

The existence of the Yeshiva Gedolah began changing the aspirations of the high school students. Until then, remaining in full-time learning after high school was often viewed as a path reserved for those who were considered "super yeshivish." Our mere presence challenged that assumption. The younger boys saw ordinary young men who loved learning, enjoyed life, played basketball, and interacted naturally with everyone — and yet had chosen to dedicate years to serious Torah study. Slowly but surely, perceptions began to shift.

Those remain some of my fondest memories — not simply the learning itself, but watching an entire culture begin to evolve.

In 1997 I married my wife, Arona Hyatt, daughter of Rabbi David Hyatt *zt"l*. My father-in-law had already devoted more than twenty-five years of tireless service to the Yeshiva of Greater Washington. His dedication, leadership, and unwavering commitment made him one of the true bedrocks of both the Yeshiva and the broader Silver Spring community. Joining that family carried with it an even deeper appreciation of what had already been built long before I arrived.

Marriage also forced my wife and me to make an important decision: where would we build our lives? We knew we wanted to begin our marriage while I learned in *kollel*. At the time, however, the concept of a full-time community *kollel* was still a relatively foreign concept in Silver Spring.

That changed dramatically in 1997. After several young men from the original Yeshiva Gedolah got married that year, Rabbi Yitzchok Merkin, together with Rabbi Avrom Landesman, had the vision to establish the Silver Spring Kollel (now known as Kollel Zichron Amram). Looking back, I believe that decision marked one of the great turning points in the spiritual development of our community.

Previously, learning full-time after marriage was simply not part of the community landscape. While there were certainly exceptions, it was not viewed as the normal trajectory for graduates of the high school. The establishment of the Kollel created an entirely new reality.

Young families dedicated to Torah learning settled permanently in Silver Spring. Children grew up seeing *avreichim* (young, married men learning in *kollel*) learning throughout the day. Serious Torah study after marriage became not an exception but a respected aspiration. The atmosphere of the community began to change — almost imperceptibly at first, then quite dramatically.

The impact extended far beyond the walls of the *beis medrash*.

When Rabbi Reingold joined the Yeshiva in 1997, the influence of the Yeshiva Gedolah expanded even further, into every corner of the community. *Shiurim* were delivered throughout Silver Spring. Learning programs filled federal holidays. Relationships developed between *bochurim* (unmarried men who are in learning) and *baalei batim* (lay heads of households). Torah was no longer something confined to the Yeshiva campus; it became woven into the rhythm of community life.

One particularly meaningful development was the *shiur* in *Daf Yomi* started by Mr. Judd Lifshitz. Decades later, it remains one of the pillars of daily learning in our community; I still have the privilege of helping to deliver that *shiur*. It is remarkable to think how many thousands of *dapim* have been learned by people who first committed themselves through that initiative.

Perhaps most importantly, something beautiful happened between the Yeshiva and the community. The *bochurim* came to appreciate the remarkable *baalei batim* of Silver Spring: honest, hard-working individuals who balanced careers, families, and genuine aspirations for spiritual growth. At the same time, community members embraced the presence of the Yeshiva *bochurim*, appreciating the energy, idealism, and Torah they brought to the neighborhood. Both sides enriched one another.

The high school underwent its own transformation as well. In the earliest years of the Yeshiva Gedolah, the existence of older *bochurim* naturally created some tension. High school seniors were accustomed to being the oldest students in the building; suddenly that role belonged to the Yeshiva Gedolah. But over time, those feelings disappeared. Friendships developed. Learning partnerships formed. Older *bochurim* became mentors rather than competitors.

What emerged was something truly unique. The high school became a place where serious Torah learning and rigorous General Studies were not viewed as competing values but as complementary strengths. Students could aspire to excellence in both worlds without feeling they had to sacrifice one for the other.

In 2002, after five wonderful years in the Kollel, Rabbi Merkin approached me with an opportunity to join the high school faculty. Even then, I still wasn't certain whether Silver Spring would ultimately become our permanent home. Teaching seemed like another temporary chapter before pursuing other professional plans. After consulting with my *rebbeim*, I accepted the position. That decision changed the course of my life.

During those early years as a *rebbe*, I witnessed an extraordinary cultural shift within the school. Learning had become "the thing to do."

Of course, sports remained an important part of student life and that healthy balance continued to characterize YGW. But there was no longer any tension between being athletic and being serious about Torah. The culture celebrated both. Parents increasingly chose the school because of its excellence in *Limudei Kodesh*. Some boys proudly wore black hats — not because everyone did, but because each student was encouraged to grow in his own *Avodas Hashem*. Night Seder gradually became a vibrant reality. During free periods, the *beis medrash* was full. Torah learning became the heartbeat of the building.

None of this happened overnight. It was the cumulative result of years of patient investment by visionary *roshei yeshiva*, devoted *rebbeim*, dedicated administrators, supportive parents, and countless *talmidim* who embraced the ideals that had been planted during those first years.

As the years passed, Silver Spring itself continued to mature into a true *makom Torah*: a community in which Torah learning and observance pervades the atmosphere.

One particularly significant milestone was the establishment of Kehillas Or HaTorah, under the leadership of Rabbi Michoel Frank. Founded largely by alumni of the Yeshiva Gedolah and the Kollel, this new *kehillah* reflected the continuing growth of Torah within the community. Families who shared similar aspirations found a home there; today their children form an integral part of the student body of YGW.

Watching the second generation — from those original Yeshiva Gedolah students — emerge has been among the greatest sources of *nachas*. Children of our original classmates now fill the classrooms. Former *talmidim* now send their own sons to the very school where they once learned. The seeds planted thirty years ago have produced fruit far beyond anything we could have imagined.

In 2016, I was given the extraordinary privilege of serving as Menahel of Yeshiva of Greater Washington, Boys Division. The past decade has been among the most fulfilling years of my professional life. There is something deeply moving about leading an institution that helped shape your own life. Every hallway carries memories. Every classroom reminds me of students who have grown into accomplished *bnei Torah*, professionals, *rabbanim*, physicians, attorneys, educators, and devoted community members.

On a personal level, the experience has been even more meaningful. Four of my sons have graduated from YGW, and a fifth is currently a student. *Baruch Hashem*, each has found success in his own unique way while remaining committed to Torah and *Yiras Shamayim*. Our daughters attended the YGW Girls Division which, under the outstanding leadership of Rabbi Zev Katz, has undergone its own remarkable transformation, providing generations of young women with an exceptional Torah education.

The Yeshiva that my children experienced is dramatically different from the one I entered thirty years ago. Yet, in the most important ways, it is exactly the same. The ideals remain unchanged.

Today, YGW offers something that is increasingly rare. It is a place where a young man can strive to become a serious *ben Torah* while simultaneously receiving an outstanding General Studies education and participating in competitive athletics. We refuse to believe that these goals are mutually exclusive. Our mission has always been to develop complete individuals who are deeply committed to Torah while fully prepared to contribute to *Klal Yisrael* and the broader world.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to that success can be found in our alumni. Our graduates can be found learning in Brisk, Mir, Yeshiva University, and other outstanding *batei medrash* throughout the world. They have become *rabbanim*, *roshei kollel*, educators, physicians, attorneys, accountants, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. They have built beautiful Torah homes across North America and Eretz Yisrael.

Few institutions can honestly say that they have successfully prepared students for such a broad spectrum of meaningful Torah lives while remaining faithful to a single vision.

As I reflect upon these past thirty years, I am overwhelmed with gratitude.

Gratitude to Rabbi Merkin, whose vision and determination made the impossible possible.

Gratitude to Rav Lopiansky, whose Torah and leadership continue to shape generations.

Gratitude to Rav Anemer *zt"l,* whose warmth and greatness left an indelible imprint upon every *talmid* fortunate enough to know him.

Gratitude to Rabbi Reingold, for uplifting the *ruchniyos* of the whole Yeshiva and the community and for being such a source of inspiration to me and so many others.

Gratitude to Rabbi Zev Katz, with whom I have enjoyed a deep and profound connection and who has helped guide me in the field of *chinuch*.

Gratitude to the *rebbeim*, administrators, lay leaders, donors, parents, and countless members of the community whose sacrifices built this extraordinary institution.

And gratitude to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu,* for allowing me to play even a small role in this remarkable story.

Thirty years ago, we were a handful of young *bochurim* with a dream, sitting together in a *beis medrash*. Today, that dream has become an institution that has transformed a community, inspired generations of *talmidim*, and established Silver Spring as a true *makom Torah*.

If these first thirty years represent the Yeshiva Gedolah reaching its strength — *Ben Shloshim L'Koach* — then perhaps the greatest years lie still ahead.

The story of the Yeshiva Gedolah is still being written. *Baruch Hashem*, we have all been privileged to be part of its first thirty chapters. May Hashem grant that the next thirty years see even greater growth in Torah, *Yiras Shamayim*, and *Ahavas Yisrael*, and may future generations look back upon this time with the same gratitude that we feel today.

From the Mir…to Capitol Hill!

Rabbi Yossie Charner
Director of Congressional Affairs, Agudath Israel, Washington DC

It was December 2008. My wife, Bracha, and I had been living in Israel for nearly five years when we found ourselves facing an important decision about our next step. I was learning in the Mir and Bracha was working for a medical retrieval company, but we felt that it was time to move on to the next stage of our lives. At that point, we had two beautiful daughters, with a third child on the way.

The questions loomed large: What would I do? Where would we move? Although I had earned a teaching degree, I wasn't certain that this was the path I wanted to pursue. After many hours of reflection and discussion — both with our *rebbeim* and with each other — we decided to move to St. Louis, Missouri, to join the *kollel* there.

Becoming part of the St. Louis community marked the beginning of our involvement in what we came to understand as *klal* work (work dedicated to the needs of the Jewish community). We learned what it truly means to be part of a community, how each organization plays a role, and how all the parts work together to support the whole. Our four years in the "Cardinal City" were years of significant growth.

During that time, I wore many different hats. I learned with *chavrusos*, taught classes, and welcomed many guests to our Shabbos table. By the time we were preparing to leave St. Louis, I was serving as a fifth-grade *rebbe* in the mornings and fundraising for the school in the afternoons. My wife and I also ran both the boys' and girls' summer camps during this period.

On November 9, 2011, while working on a fundraising project for the Torah Prep School in St. Louis, I received an email that would change my career forever. It was from the president of the board of the Torah School of Greater Washington. The school was conducting interviews for a newly created position, Director of Development, to begin in September 2012.

After many months of conversation and careful deliberation, we decided to move to Silver Spring. It was not an easy decision; we were truly happy in St. Louis. However, a *rebbe* whose guidance we deeply valued encouraged us to make the move. He explained that the opportunity to learn directly from my father, Rabbi Yitzchak Charner, Headmaster of the Torah School — by observing the way he listened and spoke with parents, teachers, community members, and students — would offer lessons unmatched by any other experience. Those insights, he assured us, would become some of the most meaningful of my life.

For the next twelve years, I poured my heart and soul into the Torah School and the broader community. I devoted myself to gaining a deep understanding of the inner workings of a school: budgets, salaries, tuition, grants, and how all of those elements must balance. Each day, I worked to grow the school's donor base, learning to view each donor as an individual and, more importantly, to transform donors into long-lasting partners and friends.

I truly learned what it means to assume *achrayus* for a school — to take it under your wing, listen carefully to parents' needs, and thoughtfully incorporate those needs into the day-to-day operations of the institution. I saw firsthand the challenge of balancing a school budget against the rising cost of living and the ever-growing cost of tuition. These were issues about which I was deeply passionate and they led to countless conversations with parents, teachers, community members, and *rabbanim*. Through those conversations, I gained insight into many different perspectives — and I came to appreciate that this diversity of thought is what makes communities so vibrant and beautiful.

After twelve years at the school, my *rebbe's* words proved to be undeniably true: *Move to Silver Spring. The life lessons and guidance you will learn from your father will be vital to your future.*

My father was planning to retire in June of 2023. Around that same time, Agudath Israel of America approached me about working for them in their Washington office to assist with lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill. I literally laughed. I had zero experience in politics — and zero experience working in Washington, D.C.

The Washington office of Agudath Israel of America serves as the organization's federal advocacy arm, representing the needs and values of the Orthodox Jewish community before the U.S. government. The office works closely with members of Congress, their staff, the White House, and federal agencies to advance legislation and policies that affect Jewish life, including tuition relief and school choice, security funding for schools and shuls, religious liberty, and social services. It builds and maintains coalitions with other faith-based and advocacy organizations, analyzes and tracks legislation and regulations, and provides strategic policy guidance to lawmakers. Throughout this work, the office consults closely with Agudah's rabbinic leadership to ensure that all advocacy efforts reflect Torah values and communal priorities, serving as a trusted voice for *Klal Yisroel* at the highest levels of government.

I met with Agudah representatives and learned that the proposed role would focus on building strong relationships with House and Senate members, as well as staff in congressional offices. The organization pointed out that my experience working closely with donors, parents, and the broader community aligned exactly with what the position required — someone who understands the dynamics of the Jewish community, is deeply passionate about making Jewish education more affordable, and recognizes the growing security costs faced by schools and shuls. Agudah emphasized that these issues — tuition affordability and security of schools and shuls — are among the most critical matters for which they advocate on Capitol Hill every single day.

In August 2023, I began working for Agudath Israel of America on Capitol Hill. I had no real sense of what that even meant or where to begin. In many ways, I was starting my career all over again, stepping into a world about which I knew very little. I worked closely with Rabbi Abba Cohen, who has since retired, and Rabbi A.D. Motzen, both of whom played instrumental roles in guiding me through this new and unfamiliar terrain.

We created a targeted list of congressional offices for me to approach, focusing primarily on districts with established Orthodox Jewish communities. Naturally, this also included the offices of members who chaired key committees. At times, I felt like a door-to-door salesman —

preparing diligently and researching each member of Congress before entering their office to introduce myself and represent Agudath Israel of America. Some offices were already familiar with our work; others were hearing Agudah's name for the first time. But little by little, with persistence and preparation, I began establishing contacts and building meaningful relationships in many offices across Capitol Hill.

Then October 7th happened. What followed was a whirlwind — and an intense learning experience. In the immediate aftermath, Agudath Israel of America was called upon to rapidly expand its advocacy efforts to meet an unprecedented moment. We needed to speak with clarity, urgency, and moral resolve on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

Agudah's advocacy focused on ensuring continued and enhanced U.S. support for Israel (including critical military and security funding), strong diplomatic backing, and unequivocal condemnation of terrorism. Just as importantly, we worked to keep the plight of the hostages at the forefront of national attention, pressing lawmakers to consistently and publicly demand their release while pursuing every possible avenue to secure their freedom.

At a time of rapidly shifting narratives and intense global scrutiny, our voice was essential in providing members of the United States Congress with accurate information, moral clarity, and the perspective of a deeply engaged community. I helped arrange meetings with numerous members of Congress, working alongside their own constituents. Over the course of roughly five weeks, we held close to one hundred meetings. Through this process, I gained invaluable insight into each member's priorities and perspectives, while also developing strong, lasting working relationships with many congressional staffers — relationships that proved critical in advancing our advocacy goals during a time of crisis.

It was a rapid and immersive lesson in politics: how bills move, which proposals have momentum, which proposals stall, who the key members truly are, and which staffers are the real drivers behind the scenes. It was inspiring to witness the level of trust congressional offices placed in Agudath Israel, turning to us not only for advocacy, but for guidance, perspective, and support.

Agudath Israel of America has a broad and active agenda in Washington, but at the very top of that list is helping relieve parents of the high cost of tuition. Over the years, Agudah has successfully lobbied for and helped pass legislation in numerous states that provides tuition relief through school vouchers or tax-credit programs. Examples include Ohio, Florida, Texas, Georgia, Virginia, and Nevada.

At the federal level, we understood that the most viable path to passing similar legislation would be through a tax-credit framework. While our work almost always involves engaging both sides of the aisle, we also recognized that advancing a bill of this magnitude would require a specific political alignment. The House, Senate, and administration would all need to be under Republican control. Based on those realities, we understood that our opportunity would come in 2025 and we prepared accordingly.

We worked closely with our coalition partners, including the American Federation for Children and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, to advocate for this legislation. Our

strategy was to include a Tax Scholarship Credit in a reconciliation bill, which does not require sixty votes to pass the Senate.

The concept behind the legislation was straightforward but powerful: individuals would be able to donate up to $1,700 to a Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO) and receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit against their federal tax liability. Those donated funds would then be used to provide scholarships to children attending schools, significantly easing the financial burden on families seeking quality education.

We planned to leverage our relationships to meet with as many Republicans in the House and Senate as possible, educating them about the bill — why it mattered, how it would help families, and why it needed to be included in the reconciliation package. With that strategy in place, we got to work, arranging hundreds of meetings with members of Congress and their staff.

I organized a dedicated day on Capitol Hill when more than one hundred Orthodox community members helped us lobby. In less than three hours, we conducted approximately one hundred meetings with congressional offices. It was a powerful grassroots effort, clearly demonstrating the depth of communal support and helping to build the momentum necessary to move the legislation forward.

That effort paid off. The bill was signed into law on July 4, 2025. Each state governor must now opt in to take advantage of the legislation — but the framework is firmly in place, creating a real opportunity for meaningful tuition relief for families across the country.

This is our work every day. We are on Capitol Hill, in contact with the Speaker's office multiple times each week, connecting with the White House, and in constant engagement with the State Department and many other government offices — advocating, building relationships, and representing our community at the highest levels.

Working on the Hill is ultimately about trust and relationships. Over the past few years, I have built hundreds of meaningful connections that strengthen Agudath Israel of America and, in turn, directly benefit *Klal Yisroel*. The halls of Congress now feel like home, and the people who work there are not just employees of Congress, but individuals I am proud to call friends. I receive multiple emails each week from Congressional offices, asking for input on and support for bills, because they also call us their friends.

One of my favorite Capitol Hill memories happened during my very first meeting with a newly elected Jewish member of Congress. I walked into his office just one week after he had been sworn in. As we were talking, I noticed that someone was putting up a *mezuzah* on the office door. I smiled and said, "Congressman, I'm not sure if you know this, but the Talmud records a famous debate about how a *mezuzah* should be placed. One opinion says it should be completely vertical. Another says it should be completely horizontal."

Then I pointed to the *mezuzah* on his door. "But look at yours. It's on a diagonal. That's neither opinion."

I continued, "In Jewish law, we generally don't compromise on legal rulings. You either follow one opinion or the other. Yet, at the entrance to every Jewish home, we do something different.

The diagonal *mezuzah* teaches one of life's greatest lessons: where you have a husband and wife, a family living together, compromise isn't a weakness — it's the foundation of a peaceful home."

Then I looked at him and said, "Congressman, you've just arrived in Congress. Even though you're a Republican, there will be times when you'll have to work with Democrats. That's often how meaningful legislation gets passed. The *mezuzah* on your door will remind you of that every single day."

He smiled. Since then, we've had dinner together, he's attended many of my events, and we've built a wonderful friendship.

That experience taught me an important lesson about advocacy on Capitol Hill: always be yourself. The relationships that last aren't built by pretending to be someone you're not. They're built by bringing your values, your traditions, and your authenticity into every conversation.

So, yes, I began my journey in the Mir. In yeshiva, you are immersed in *Gemara*, *Rishonim*, and *Acharonim* — analyzing every word and anticipating every question. On Capitol Hill, you are immersed in bills, regulations, and legislative history. Success in both worlds comes from the same discipline: noticing details that others might miss.

In a *Beis Medrash*, you grow through your *chavrusos* and *rebbeim*, through relationships built on trust. On the Hill, effectiveness likewise depends on trust — of members, staff, coalition partners, and advocates. Knowledge may open the door, but relationships are what get things done.

The lessons I learned in yeshiva and the Mir are that Torah is our guide to life, that our Torah and *rabbanim* provide direction in our day-to-day decision-making. In many ways, I have found a parallel on Capitol Hill. There are constant questions and complex issues that arise, and we turn to our rabbinic leadership for guidance to help shape and direct our advocacy. Just as in yeshiva, where we rely on the wisdom of our *rabbanim*, so too in our work we rely on that same framework of Torah guidance to navigate the challenges of public policy and representation.

Agudath Israel's Washington office recently moved to Capitol Hill. Please reach out with questions or comments, if you want to get involved, or if you just want a coffee when you are near the Hill!

Rabbi Yossie Charner may be reached at ycharner@agudah.org.

Kivnei Maron: Three Maryland Hillel Journeys to Jewish Belonging

Rabbi Ari Israel
Chief Executive Officer, Maryland Hillel

As the haunting words of *U'nesaneh Tokef* echo through our shuls this Rosh HaShanah, we declare:

וְכָל בָּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעַבְרוּן לְפָנֶיךָ כִּבְנֵי מָרוֹן.

All who enter the world pass before You, "kivnei maron."

The *Gemara* (*Rosh HaShanah* 18a) asks what this evocative image means and offers three interpretations:

The first compares us to sheep, passing one by one before their Shepherd.

The second likens us to solo climbers, ascending the narrow mountain pass of *Beis Maron*.

The third envisions the soldiers of *David HaMelech*, each with a distinct role, yet united by a common mission.

Chazal are doing far more than translating a difficult phrase; they are offering three enduring portraits of Jewish life.

At times, we are like sheep, sustained by the anonymity and comfort of belonging to a flock, protected by a watchful Shepherd. At other moments, we are each climbing a mountain, engaged in our solitary struggles and opportunities. And sometimes we step forward as military officers, channeling our individuality into the service of *Klal Yisrael*.

Having spent the past thirty years working with Jewish college students and building community, I have found that these images beautifully capture the diverse journeys of the students Maryland Hillel engages. Each navigates a different point along this dynamic continuum. Some embody a leadership mission, like young warriors. Others seek a deeper understanding of themselves, as do mountain climbers. Still others are looking for strength, connection, and a place where they truly belong, like members of a flock of sheep.

THE STUDENT WHO BECOMES A LEADING OFFICER

Some students arrive at Hillel already carrying tremendous leadership potential. Perhaps they served as president of their youth group, captained a team, or naturally gathered friends around a Shabbos table. Others have never fully discovered their gifts, but possess leadership instincts waiting to be unleashed.

For these students, Hillel is about more than attending programs. It is a place to discover that leadership in *Klal Yisrael* is itself an *avodah*. College offers an extraordinary laboratory for this lesson. A Jewish leader measures success not by the number of followers attracted, but by the number of people inspired to grow. Leadership is a force multiplier. One invitation to Friday night dinner can reconnect another student to Judaism. One thoughtful conversation can inspire

someone to attend a *shiur*. One student willing to take responsibility can transform the lives of dozens of peers.

Each semester, Hillel hosts Shabbat Across Maryland, a remarkable night when student leaders spread the *kedushah* of a warm Shabbos meal: one apartment, one fraternity house, one dormitory lounge, and one friendship at a time.

These are our modern-day officers of *Beis David*: not warriors defined by conflict, but by purpose. Each carries a different assignment. Some cultivate relationships across campus. Others organize *chesed* rooted in Jewish values or advocate for Israel. One *Rosh Kollel* student teaches *Daf Yomi* and another leads a daily *chaburah* in *Tanach*, elevating Hillel's *Kol Torah*. Others exercise a subtler form of leadership, helping to develop a welcoming community where every Jewish student feels seen — whether by sitting beside the freshman eating alone or by reaching out to the student who quietly slipped through the cracks. All roles matter, because every part strengthens the whole *kehillah*.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than on today's campuses, where students quickly realize that Judaism is not sustained by professionals alone. It flourishes when students recognize that they are responsible for one another. Like the soldiers of *David HaMelech*, they learn discipline, responsibility, and a shared mission.

THE STUDENT CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

Not every student comes ready to lead. Many arrive with reflective questions: Who am I? What does being Jewish actually mean? Can Judaism speak to someone like me?

For these students, the image of the mountain pass is especially fitting. Every individual occupies a unique spiritual space. No two souls climb the same mountain.

Walk into the Hillel shul, and you'll see two students holding identical *siddurim*, yet experiencing entirely different journeys. One is discovering her first authentic *Kabbalas Shabbos*. Every word feels new. Every *niggun* awakens something long dormant. Beside her stands a student raised in a day school, wondering why davening no longer stirs her as it once did. Outwardly, they appear the same; inwardly, they inhabit entirely different spiritual worlds.

For many young adults, college is the first time Jewish life becomes a matter of personal choice. Parents are not around to arrange Shabbos meals. Day school teachers are no longer requiring attendance at *tefillah*. Students must decide for themselves whether Torah will remain part of their lives.

That freedom can be unsettling. It can also become the catalyst for profound growth.

At its best, Hillel doesn't ask students to stand on the same rung of the ladder. It helps each student identify the next step upward.

For one student, that means opening a *Chumash* for the first time with a weekly *chavrusa*. For another, it means lighting Shabbos candles. Someone else rediscovers *tefillah* after years of going through the motions. Still another begins asking difficult questions — not because they are abandoning Judaism, but because they are finally taking it seriously enough to wrestle with it.

Growth rarely comes in dramatic leaps. More often, it unfolds one conversation, one *shiur*, one Shabbos, one friendship at a time. As the saying goes, what matters most is not which rung of the ladder we occupy, but whether we continue climbing.

THE STUDENT AS A SHEEP SHAPED BY OCTOBER 7

For many college students, Jewish identity arrives on campus in its nascent phase: latent, unexamined, waiting. Then a moment awakens it and, suddenly, like sheep instinctively seeking their shepherd and flock, they become hungry for guidance, belonging, and a Jewish community in which they can find their place. That spark may emerge from moments of darkness or light: the surge of antisemitism or the quiet warmth of a first authentic Shabbos shared with a newfound friend.

For an entire generation of Jewish students, October 7 became that defining moment. Students who had rarely spoken publicly about their Jewish identity suddenly found themselves confronting protests, misinformation, social isolation, and, at times, outright antisemitism. They came to Hillel seeking protection from a campus climate that had suddenly become hostile. They stayed because they found a shepherd to guide them, a flock that embraced them, and a Jewish home in which they could grow.

Better arguments matter. Stronger security is indispensable. Yet neither alone can sustain Jewish life. The most enduring response to hatred has always been a deep, joyful, and knowledgeable Jewish identity.

A student who knows only that others hate Jews stands on fragile ground. A student who understands what Judaism teaches, why Torah matters, how *Am Yisrael* has endured for millennia, and what a privilege it is to belong to this extraordinary people possesses greater fortitude.

Hillel seeks not merely to produce advocates but to cultivate knowledgeable, thoughtful, and joyful Jews. Just two weeks after the attacks, Maryland Hillel gathered more than 1,000 students for a community-wide Shabbos of solidarity with Israel. In a moment of fear and uncertainty, students discovered not only comfort but belonging.

Students study Jewish history not simply to answer accusations but to appreciate the miracle of our survival. They learn Torah because it continues to illuminate life's deepest questions. They celebrate Shabbos because Jewish joy itself becomes an act of resilience. They travel to Israel, volunteer, sing, learn, argue, laugh, and discover that Jewish identity is infinitely richer than any slogan shouted across a campus quad.

This distinction matters enormously. If students define themselves primarily by the hatred directed toward them, then our enemies determine the terms of Jewish identity. But if the students understand themselves as heirs to Avraham and Sarah, recipients of Torah at Sinai, and links in an unbroken chain stretching back thousands of years — then antisemitism becomes only one chapter, not the defining narrative. Resilience starts with knowledge. Knowledge nurtures

confidence. Confidence inspires pride. Pride deepens commitment. Commitment ensures continuity.

Perhaps this is Hillel's greatest gift in the post-October 7 world: not merely helping students withstand hostility, but developing them to love being Jewish. Inspired by Deborah Lipstadt's call for "more Jewish joy and less oy," Hillel seeks to help students compose a symphony of Jewish music, rather than merely respond to the distracting, cacophonous noise.

ONE COMMUNITY, THREE JOURNEYS

Of course, these three portraits are not separate categories. They are three chapters of the same journey.

Today's mountain climber often becomes tomorrow's leader. The student who first came seeking community later welcomes hundreds of others into that same community. The student who initially sought refuge after October 7 eventually becomes an articulate advocate and passionate champion for Israel. Like the *Gemara*'s three interpretations of *kivnei maron*, each reflects a different stage of spiritual growth rather than a competing identity.

Perhaps this is precisely why *Chazal* preserved all three explanations.

Sometimes G-d judges us as members of a flock, asking whether we have remained faithful.

Sometimes we are evaluated as mountain climbers, asking whether we have continued ascending despite the difficulty.

And sometimes we are examined as soldiers, asking how we have used our unique gifts in the service of something larger than ourselves.

These ancient images resonate with renewed urgency. Our campuses need sheep who faithfully preserve Torah and *mitzvos*. We need mountain climbers, courageously pursuing authentic spiritual growth. And we desperately need leadership officers — not combatants of anger, but builders of *Klal Yisrael*, equipped with Torah, confidence, compassion, and purpose.

Every year, Hillel connects with thousands of students searching for something. Some know exactly what they seek. Others cannot yet articulate it.

If we are privileged to help them discover mission, identity, and belonging, if we can help them climb their mountain while recognizing that they are part of something infinitely larger than themselves, then we are doing far more than serving students. Maryland Hillel is helping to shape the next generation of *Klal Yisrael*.

As the *Gemara* concludes:

וְכוּלָּן נִסְקָרִין בְּסִקִירָה אַחַת.

And they are all reviewed in a single glance.

Hillel is built upon the strength of a diverse and wide-ranging community. This has always been the secret sauce of *Klal Yisrael*: spiritually speaking, one plus one has never equaled two. One

person alone can survive. But when two Jews come together with shared purpose, they create something greater than the sum of their parts. One plus one becomes three. Isolation gives way to belonging. Belonging is transformed into community. Community has the power to inspire generations.

Perhaps that is the deepest message of *kivnei maron*. We stand before the *Ribono Shel Olam* one by one, each judged as an individual. Yet we are never meant to remain alone. Our individual journeys find their fullest meaning when they become part of the eternal story of our people.

May we merit to stand not only as *kivnei maron*, individuals who have grown, but as Jews who have strengthened one another, embraced our shared responsibility for *Klal Yisrael*, and helped build a community worthy of being seen together in G-d's single glance.

From Silver Spring to Yerushalayim:
Kollel Torah Temimah

Rabbi Mordechai Linzer
Rosh Kollel, Kollel Torah Temimah, Yerushalayim

It is truly an honor to write for the Journal. As a native "Silver Springer," I would like to share my story.

SILVER SPRING

I grew up in Kemp Mill in the eighties and nineties, attending the Hebrew Academy through sixth grade and YGW from seventh through twelfth. My family davened at Young Israel Shomrei Emunah when Rabbi Anemer was still the rabbi.

I was a good student and, in ninth grade, was fortunate to join Rabbi Anemer's *shiur* at the Yeshiva. As a senior in high school, I joined Rabbi Lopiansky's Yeshiva Gedolah *shiur*.

As is customary in Silver Spring, I planned to study in a *yeshiva* in Israel after high school. After much deliberation, I decided to attend the Mir Yeshiva in Yerushalayim. I felt that it would properly suit my level of learning, while helping me grow and attain new heights.

THE MIR

My arrival at the Mir was like an earthquake in many ways. Moving from a small community and school to the largest *yeshiva* in the world — which at that time numbered over four thousand students — was not an easy transition. I had to find an apartment, *chavrusos* (study partners), and a new group of friends among the many students there. Although I knew a few people studying there, and they did try to help me navigate the system, it was nevertheless daunting.

Another challenge was my age. I was fresh out of high school and only eighteen at the time. The rest of the students were 21 and older, as they had only joined the Mir after attending *yeshiva* in America for a few years.

Yet another major change was the difference in culture. I had come from a modern Orthodox family and community. The Mir, on the other hand, was definitely a *Chareidi yeshiva*, whose students had come from *yeshivos* and families that were very different from my own. The *shiur* I attended was delivered in Yiddish, a language I did not understand or speak at the time.

Despite all these challenges, I saw very soon that this was the right place for me. Adapting to the changes rather quickly, I began thriving at the Mir.

I attended the *shiur* of Rav Asher Arielli *shlita*, which was — and still is — the largest shiur in the world. When I arrived, there were more than 300 students (now numbering over 800!). Due to the large number of students, it was not easy to speak with Rav Arielli, especially on a regular basis. I would wait for him almost every day as he walked into the *yeshiva*, giving me the opportunity to speak with him often and develop a relationship with him.

Rav Arielli's approach to learning is to get a picture of the *sugya* (topic) by seeing the different approaches of the *Rishonim* and then focusing on each of them individually to understand their differences. This learning method resonated with me, and I very soon became a close *talmid* of his.

Shortly after entering the *yeshiva*, I began learning once a week with the *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel *zt"l*, and later with the other *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rav Refael Shmuelevitz *zt"l*. Both were Torah giants and true *tzadikim*, and both had a profound impact on my growth in the *yeshiva*.

After marrying my wonderful wife, we settled in Yerushalayim, and I continued learning at the Mir. The Mir is not only a *yeshiva* for single students. There are thousands of married students as well. I stopped attending *shiur* and began learning in a *chabura*, a group of students studying the same topic together without a formal *shiur*. This forum allows members to study parts of *Shas* that are not covered by the standard *shiurim* in the *yeshiva*.

STARTING A CHABURA

At the age of thirty, after studying at the Mir for almost thirteen years, I began my own *chabura* of about twenty students to study *Seder Kodshim*, dealing with the laws of *korbanos*.

This was a real challenge for me, as the members of the group were really excellent. Many were close to my age, if not older, and they very much kept me on my toes. One of my students at that time was Rabbi Moshe Walter, who shortly thereafter became the Rabbi in Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah. Although I had once studied *Seder Kodshim*, this was not an easy task.

Overseeing a *chabura* included determining what topic to learn and the pace of that learning, while being available to answer students' questions. I also gave a *shiur* once or twice a week, to add depth and understanding to the topic at hand.

YESHIVA LEARNING

The general schedule in most *yeshivos* around the world consists of a four-hour study session in the morning, followed by a break for lunch and a short rest. This is followed by another study session of three to four hours, and another session of roughly three hours after supper.

This schedule is quite rigorous, but in order to really delve into the *sugya*, one needs to be immersed in it. Although this is true when studying any subject, it is an absolute necessity when learning Torah — as Torah is g-dly, and we are only able to comprehend it if Hashem grants us understanding. It is therefore essential to connect oneself with the Torah in order to gain understanding [see *Megilah* 6b, *Sotah* 35a, *Sanhedrin* 99b].

During these learning sessions, students learn *b'chavrusa*: two students studying together. One will read the text, while the other listens or reads along quietly to himself. As they read, they pause to discuss the material being studied and to verify that both understand. More often than not, the two will have different perceptions of the material being read, leading to discussion and debate about the correct understanding. These discussions will often overflow to those seated around them, who will offer their own opinions about the topic at hand. Often people become stumped by questions and contradictions, and will enjoin those sitting nearby, or the *rosh chabura*, to help gain clarity.

These discussions are often very lively. Each student may feel very strongly about his approach and will do his utmost to prove his side of the argument. This may also occur during a *shiur*. The *rebbe*'s approach might be debated by a student who has a different understanding of the *sugya*, and who will interject with questions on the approach that the *rebbe* offers.

One who visits a *yeshiva* at the height of a learning session might be surprised to see students screaming at one another. One might think that this is not the proper conduct of *yeshiva* students. In truth, this comes from each student's strong connection to Torah and his need to understand it properly. Since each aspect of the Torah is vital, a student may react strongly to those who see things differently.

The *Gemara* (*Kiddushin* 30b) relates that when one learns with his partner, they are as 'enemies' — but by the time they have finished learning, they love one another, as each helps the other gain a deeper and more correct understanding of the *sugya*.

When I became a *rosh chabura*, I had to be ready for many deep and excellent questions posed by members of the *chabura*, requiring me to reach new levels in my own learning.

I led this *chabura* for five years. During that time, we learned most of *Seder Kodshim*, including *Maseches Chulin*, which deals with kashrus-related issues.

A NEW PATH IN LEARNING

During this time, I published a *sefer* on *Maseches Meila,* a small *masechta* in *Seder Kodshim*. While working on the book I studied the *masechta* numerous times, including all other *sugyos* throughout *Shas* that related to topics in *Meila*. This process led me to recognize the beauty in this type of learning. One is able to see all the "trees" that compose the "forest" and then come back to study each smaller topic individually.

I believe it is preferable to learn the same topic the entire day, as opposed to learning different topics during each of the study sessions. This method helps one stay focused. It adds tremendously to one's ability to see the big picture without losing focus on the details.

I decided to start a *chabura* that would learn that way. I felt that I would be more successful starting such a group outside the *yeshiva*. There are many *chaburos* in the Mir and students often move freely from one to another. Any *chabura* that is a little bit off the beaten path has a hard time staying afloat. Students will tend to join the more established *chaburos*, not the ones with novel ideas. I therefore decided to leave the Mir and open a *kollel*.

YESHIVA VS. KOLLEL

There are numerous differences between a *yeshiva* and a *kollel*:

- A *yeshiva* is geared toward single students [many *yeshivos* don't have married students at all] and therefore provides food and a dormitory. A *kollel* is for married students and is mainly a *beis medrash* where people learn together for many hours of the day, returning home at the end of the day until the next morning.
- A *yeshiva* has a higher staff to student ratio, as the students need more direction in their learning and may need guidance in other areas of life. A *kollel* will have very limited staff, perhaps just a *rosh kollel* or someone similar, who provides the framework for what will be studied and the pace of study.

- In a *yeshiva*, there is usually a daily *shiur* on the topic being learned. In a *kollel*, the students are older and more advanced. A once-weekly *shiur* usually suffices.
- A *kollel* is generally much smaller than a *yeshiva*, situated in a *beis medrash* close to the homes of the students. A *yeshiva*, which focuses on single students and does not require proximity to any specific place, will find a campus that suits it, even if it is not near the homes of the students.
- A *kollel* provides a stipend for its students. In *yeshivos*, single students pay tuition to cover expenses such as food, dormitory, and staff, while the married students receive a small stipend, or sometimes no stipend at all.

In short, learning in a *kollel* is often a better option for a married student because of its convenient location, higher stipend, and elevated level of learning. However, learning in a *yeshiva*, especially one like the Mir, provides the major advantage of having many students who study there, making it a special *makom Torah* which offers more options to find the right *chabura* and *chavrusa*.

OPENING A KOLLEL

Kollel Torah Temimah is for English-speaking students, almost all of them Americans. I feel that I can connect better with these students as we share a common language and background. Although I speak excellent Hebrew, it is still not my native tongue.

I opened the *kollel* seven years ago with eleven students. As I was unsure how successful I would be at fundraising, I felt that eleven was a good number. The students who joined were very dedicated, arriving on time and not missing days. They had attained a very high level of understanding in learning and were therefore able to master the material being learned.

What makes this *kollel* unique is that we learn the same topic the entire day, which means that one spends more than seven hours a day studying with one's *chavrusa*. Some people feel that this is too intense, and they therefore do not join this *kollel*. Our *kollel*'s students feel that this helps them maintain their focus and accomplish more in their learning.

Another aspect that sets this *kollel* apart is that we study the entire *masechta* in depth [*b'iyun*]. This is very rare for *yeshivos* and *kollels*, as most focus on the more relevant or exciting parts of the *masechta*. Learning a *masechta* from cover to cover can take years, and most do not have the patience for it. In our *kollel*, we learn at a slightly quicker pace. With the increased focus of our students, we are able to cover more ground while leaving no stone unturned.

Completing a *masechta* can nevertheless take quite some time, depending on its length. We studied *Maseches Shabbos*, for example, for slightly over two years, as it is one of the longest *masechtos* in *Shas*.

When we finish a *masechta*, we make a grand *siyum*, attended by the students and their families. These are beautiful events, with tremendous rejoicing at this milestone achievement. The singing and dancing at these *siyumim* surpasses that of Simchas Torah, as we rejoice in this special group accomplishment.

THE KOLLEL GROWS

While we began with eleven students, word began to spread about this innovative and successful *kollel* soon after it opened. Many people wanted to join, which had been my hope all along. I developed more of a fundraising base and felt that it might be possible to expand the number of *kollel* students. So began a slow but steady increase in the number of *kollel* members. Today, seven years later, we have 26 students in the *kollel*.

The increased size enables more people to benefit from the *kollel*'s learning and allows them to grow and develop as *talmidei chachamim*. It also enhances the overall learning in the *kollel*. Each individual adds their perspective to the subject with their own unique questions and insights, resulting in everyone gaining greater clarity in the *sugya*.

The schedule of almost every *kollel* consists of two *sedarim* (learning sessions) of roughly 3.5–4 hours each, from about 9 am–1 pm and then again from about 3–7pm. The break in the middle of the day is for *Mincha*, lunch, rest, or studying other Torah topics. Many students return home during this break to pick up their children from babysitters or school.

After returning home in the evening to spend time with their families, students have another learning session at night: night *seder*. In most *kollels* in Israel, including ours, this session does not take place in the *kollel* itself. Students study in a *beis medrash* near their home. For many students, it is difficult to return to the *kollel*, as they don't live nearby and very few have cars. During night *seder*, students are free to study other areas of Torah or spend more time studying what they have learned during *kollel* hours.

The amount of time students remains in a *kollel* varies. In institutions that have *Semicha* programs, students stay for the length of time necessary to receive *Semicha*. In *kollels* like mine, where we study through *Shas* one *masechta* after another, there is no predetermined time when a student will leave the *kollel*. Most of the students are in the *kollel* indefinitely, with no specific date that they plan to leave.

Circumstances that may cause a student to leave include finding a teaching position (in Israel or the U.S.); deciding to move to America, either to begin working or to continue studying in a *kollel* there; or switching to another *kollel* in Israel which they feel better suits their individual growth.

Many of the *kollel*'s students have moved on to teaching positions in the U.S. and Israel. Now the light of our *kollel* shines brightly from Yerushalayim and is reflected from many other places around the world.

From the Nation's Capital to the Holy City: A Journey of Belonging

Ami Hordes

Many of us would hesitate before taking an international flight scheduled to land Friday afternoon. But there was no choice: three consecutive days of bar exams in New York and New Jersey were finishing at 5:00 pm Thursday afternoon, and the one-week preparatory course for the Israeli law "conversion exams" (*Dinei Yisrael*) — given only twice a year, right before those exams — was set to commence the following Sunday morning in Jerusalem. I needed to pass those tests to be eligible, at the end of my upcoming, yearlong judicial clerkship, to take the Israeli bar exam, in case I ever made Aliyah.

El Al's 10:30 pm departure from JFK was my only shot to arrive in time. A little tight, but with the mid-summer Shabbat starting around 7:30 pm, hopefully it would be fine. (*Right?*)

After weathering an announced delay (*take a deep breath*), we took off an hour-plus late — and the nervous calculating began: What time will we actually land? How quickly will we pass through passport control? Luggage collection?

Thankfully, we arrived safely, and by 4:30 pm, stood at the luggage carousel. Waiting. And waiting. (*Nail-biting begins.*) Eventually, my new friend Tzvi said, "We can't wait any longer. We'll come back for the bags after Shabbat. Let's go!"

We ran, got into a *sherut*, told the driver we were really in a rush and assured him we'd cover the cost of the many empty seats. He started driving, then immediately stopped. "You're paying for ALL these seats, right?" "Yes — just go!"

After a nerve-wracking ride (*Tehillim time*), the driver dropped me off at the entrance to the city shortly before 7:30 pm (he needed to get Tzvi to Ramot). I started the long walk toward my hosts in the Katamon neighborhood. Already frazzled, disheveled, in my weekday clothes, and feeling extremely uncomfortable holding my *muktzah*-filled carry-on (hoping I qualified for a *she'at hadchak* permit) — I was totally mortified when I then ran into, of all people, my Rosh Yeshiva, whom I had not seen in several years. (*Perfect, just perfect.*) When I finally arrived, well into their Shabbat dinner, my stunned hostess could not have summed up my feelings any better, exclaiming: "I don't believe it!"

*****

While the foregoing may sound like the beginning of my Aliyah story — indeed, I have lived in Jerusalem ever since that stressful Friday 30 years ago — it is not, for two reasons. First, I had no intention (at least not consciously) that I was making Aliyah at that time; an associate position at a large Manhattan law firm was waiting for me after my clerkship. (My late mother *z"l*, on the other hand, subsequently claimed that she "knew" I wasn't coming back.)

More fundamentally, however, my journey to Israel had really started to take shape from early childhood. The seeds of my eventual move to the Holy Land were planted, watered, and nurtured in Greater Washington.

My parents, Naomi and Jess Hordes, moved to the area in the mid-1960s, shortly after getting married. They were not expecting to stay for nearly sixty years. When they first met at a post-high school Hebrew language summer camp, Israel was already on their minds. They spent their college junior year in Israel during 1961 (on different programs and, by this time, dating), and returned for a second year in 1968 for my father's doctoral research.

After returning to DC, my parents each set out to work on behalf of the Jewish community and the homeland. Before becoming a professional artist, my mother started her career at AIPAC, still in its infancy, as one of just a handful of employees. My father co-founded and led a non-profit which helped pass legislation in Congress against the Arab boycott of Israel.

It was into this Israel-focused family, exuding Jewish communal service, that my sister and I were born. We moved to a house in Silver Spring's Woodside neighborhood in the mid-1970s, but my parents were constantly working toward their dream of Aliyah. All the while, they were immersing us in visual and audio symbols of, and personal experiences in, Israel.

In preparation for an eventual move to the Holy Land, they started speaking to my sister only in Hebrew. When I was born a year later, they tried the same on me — but quickly gave up when I, realizing that everyone else was using another language, was having none of it. To this day, my sister blames me for any flaw in her Hebrew skills. (Actually, as the family's first *oleh*, I ended up harming myself more than anyone.)

In those pre-internet, pre-cable TV days, my parents regularly tracked the news from Israel with a shortwave radio (when they managed to pick up the faint signal from *Kol Yisrael*). My mother always wanted to know what was up with "The Boys," as she affectionately referred to the Israeli army.

Raising a family in Israel, including a son, daughter, and son-in-law who serve/served in the IDF after drafting around age 19, has lent that nickname new and personal meaning for me, especially since October 7, 2023. Those "boys" and girls — rather, men and women — boldly stepped forward like our forefathers and said, "*Hineini*" (Here I am), transforming themselves into a generation of true Jewish heroes.

So much of my mother's beautiful artwork — needlepoint, papercuts, calligraphy, etc., prominently displayed throughout our house — depicted our homeland or biblical stories that took place in it. Alongside her artwork were many maps, really old and even older, of the Holy Land. My bedroom featured a large burlap applique my mother made in 1961 of Srulik, Dosh's famous cartoon character from Israel's early days, as a 13-year-old, celebrating the State's bar-mitzvah year. While I didn't recognize it at the time, that piece likely inspired me to associate my own growth with that of Israel.

Capping it all off were the trips. Thankfully, we took many enjoyable family vacations over the years, but the exceptional (and only overseas) ones were, without question, the two summers we spent in Israel. Yerushalayim and the Kotel; the Dead Sea, the Red Sea, and the Med. Sea; Masada; the full attention of our parents; and boiling hot — but "not muggy" — weather.

Amazing! There's nothing like those in-person experiences, especially when you're young and impressionable, to instill love for the homeland.

Finally, in the late 1970s, all the efforts my parents had invested into a future move to Israel and preparing us for it seemed to have paid off: my father was offered a very good job in his field in Jerusalem. Aliyah, here we come!

Or so we thought. No sooner had they started planning our transatlantic relocation than those hopes were crushingly dashed; to my parents' dismay and due to circumstances beyond their control, the position fell through at the last minute.

Over the years, I have often pondered how different my life might have been had we made Aliyah then, when I was a youngster. But it was not meant to be. Instead, we spent the remainder of our childhood in Silver Spring. *Gam zu l'tovah* (this too, is for the good): it was a terrific place to grow up!

Quickly pivoting, my parents settled into longer-term life in Greater Washington, all the while holding on to that dream of Aliyah. My father dedicated his career to protecting and defending our people and the State of Israel, spending decades leading the Anti-Defamation League's national office in DC: representing ADL to the federal government, on Embassy Row, and to multiple presidential administrations. My mother further developed her exceptional artistic talents, focusing on *hiddur mitzvah* (beautifying and enhancing a commandment), the Land of Israel, lifecycle events, and other Jewish themes. Her artwork was commissioned by customers far and wide. It gives our family great comfort that many of her pieces are displayed to this day in homes, shuls, and other venues around the world.

The value and importance of the Jewish homeland were strongly reinforced during my school years, nearly all of which I spent at the Hebrew Academy. The Israeli flag stood permanently at attention, across from the Stars and Stripes, on the stage in the gymnasium. We sang *Ha-Tikva* at assemblies. We wore blue and white for *Yom Ha'atzmaut*. On other special days, films of or about Israel (a Six-Day War documentary, *Sallah Shabati*, etc.) were screened in the library. Posters of prominent Israelis such as Menachem Begin hung on classroom walls.

Some of our teachers and fellow students represented additional Israel connections. *Ivrit*, a fixture of our curriculum through twelfth grade, was frequently taught by native Hebrew speakers from Israel. We sometimes welcomed new classmates from the Holy Land who came for a year or two while a parent worked at NIH or the like. Some classmates and their families temporarily or permanently relocated to the Jewish State.

For twelfth-grade graduation, our class presented the school with a papercut crafted by my mother, featuring our Hebrew names designed in the shape of Israel, surrounded by the opening verse of *Bereishit*, *Perek* 12:

…לֶךְ לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ.

…Go forth from your land and from your relatives and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.

This seemed appropriate, since the vast majority of us were headed to *yeshivot* or seminaries in Israel the following year. So far, more than 25% of my graduating class has made Aliyah. Ok, that's only four of us: but, hey, that's not bad for a class of fifteen!

Growing up in suburban Maryland also embedded within me a deep sense of, and a deep appreciation for, belonging. This was true to a degree as a Greater Washingtonian, generally (go Caps; Re****ns/Commanders; Bu***ts/Wizards; and — later — Nationals!), but more primarily as a member of the local Jewish community.

This value, too, first emerged in our home. My parents modeled for us that such belonging, built upon a foundation of close friendships and shared experiences, can be firmly cemented by giving back to the community. My mother volunteered her time for the *Chevra Kadisha* and on the shul renovation and *kiddush* committees; she co-chaired the annual efforts to beautify the sanctuary for Shavuot. My father served as the Hebrew Academy's treasurer and on the shul board.

Member participation was the foundational principle of our shul itself. Without a rabbi or *chazzan*, the shul that became Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah was launched and sustained by the involvement of the *tzibur*. Learned shul members took turns giving the Shabbat *Dvar Torah* and regular *shiurim*; *laining;* and serving as *baalei tefillah* on Shabbat, Yom Tov, and the *Yamim Noraim*. This giving — familial and communal — inspired me to take on many of those same responsibilities as I grew older.

As an outgrowth of these influences, I (subconsciously) yearned for an even greater feeling of belonging. I experienced it in Israel — first, during my *Shana Ba'aretz* and *Shana Bet* years. While there, I felt touched by a profound sense of being "at home" and with my people, similar to being at my parents' house and a part of the Jewish community in the Nation's Capital, but on a very different scale. In Silver Spring, that feeling was local; in the Holy Land — overflowing with Jewish culture, history, language, religion, custom, and cuisine, and with a majority Jewish population — it was national.

Not yet ready for, or even really thinking about, Aliyah at that time, I headed back to Yeshiva University for my BA. During law school, I decided to spend a year in Israel after graduation before getting caught up in the New York City rat race; fortunately, I managed to arrange a clerkship at the Israeli Supreme Court.

Which brings us back to that fateful Friday. When I came up for air — after recovering from that taxing trip and surviving nine *Dinei Yisrael* tests over the next three weeks — Rosh Hashanah was fast approaching. The capital city was brimming with the sights, sounds, and smells of the *chagim*. And that intense sense of belonging — of being home with my people — quickly returned. Jews across the globe pray multiple times a day for the opportunity to live in *Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh*: I was actually doing it!

I made lifelong friends, who became like family, in the Katamon neighborhood's Anglo singles community, where I eventually met my wife. Israel was no longer the "Third-World Country" we had considered it as students in the late 80s; living in Israel had become somewhat easier

by then. It soon became clear that, long-term, I wanted to be in the Holy Land; it felt like the natural place to strengthen my link in the chain of our people. I decided to stay for good.

Happily married, with four amazing children, an apartment in Arnona, and partnership at a large Israeli law firm, I have now spent more than half my life in *Eretz Yisrael*. A few years ago, my parents fulfilled their sixty-year dream to make Aliyah, moving into our neighborhood; while sadly my mother has since passed away, we are fortunate to have my father just around the corner. There is so much for which to be thankful: הוֹדוּ לַה' כִּי טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ!

Three decades after spending that first set of *chagim* in Yerushalayim, Rosh Hashanah is fast approaching again, and with it, the end of *Sefer Devarim*. *Am Yisrael* was encamped along the Jordan River, on the verge of making the final move into the Land of Israel. Their courage in deciding to go forward should not be underestimated, despite *Hashem's* assurances. Their Aliyah required the people to forego the manna and the miraculous desert existence in exchange for a very different reality: fighting wars, farming the Land for food, and doing the hard work of building a country and a society. Whether this was challenging because they feared failure or — as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has quoted the Lubavitcher Rebbe as suggesting regarding Moshe's spies — because of the potential cost to their closeness to *Hashem*, forging ahead took resolve. Their choice to do so is a testament to that generation's abundant *emunah*.

In some ways, the decision may not be easier today for many American Jews who have been blessed with a very comfortable existence — successful careers, thriving families, wonderful communities — including a life full of *yiddishkeit* (though the grotesque global rise of violent and virulent antisemitism adds an incentive, however distressing, to make the move).

In my own case, *Hashem* did not really make me face those tests. I made Aliyah from the US the "easy" way: already inspired to be in Israel from my home and upbringing in the Greater Washington Jewish community. Unknowingly seeking a deeper sense of belonging, I came (without being forced) — single, pre-career, and just temporarily — but instantly felt right at home, and simply never left.

As we enter this season of introspection and ponder our prior decisions, I pray for *Hashem* to grant each of us the strength and wisdom, as we face new decisions in 5787 and beyond, to do His will, *b'emunah shleimah* — with complete and perfect faith.

Shanah tovah u'metukah!

*****

Ami Hordes spent two years at Yeshivat Sha'alvim before securing his BA in Economics at Yeshiva University and his law degree at the University of Pennsylvania. A corporate partner at S. Friedman, Abramson & Co. Law Offices in Jerusalem, he has taught Tanach to adults for over fifteen years. Ami has published articles in The Times of Israel *("Farewell to Woodside"),* Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought, Jewish Bible Quarterly, The Lehrhaus, *and* The Jerusalem Post.

Vaad Harabanim
The Rabbinical Council *of* Greater Washington

Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington
The Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington

Rabbi Yosef Singer, *President*
Rabbi Moshe Walter, *Director*

www.vaadgw.org

301-770-0078
13217 New Hampshire Ave.
Suite #10142
Silver Spring, MD 20914

The Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington is an organization of Orthodox rabbis that provides the Greater Washington Jewish community with critical services such as *kashrus* supervision, a *beis din* for the administration of Jewish divorce, a *beis din* for arbitration of financial disputes, and a *beis din* for conversion. In addition, the Vaad, also known as the Rabbinical Council, acts as a rabbinic resource and supports vital communal service organizations such as the *Chevra Kadisha*, *Bikur Cholim*, *Yad Yehuda* and the *Mikvah Emunah* Society. Members of the Vaad HaRabanim are dedicated to serving the broader Jewish community in whatever way possible and appreciate the opportunity to do so.