

VAAD HARABANIM
THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL
of GREATER WASHINGTON

THE BULLETIN

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Wishing you a Kesiva v'Chasima Tova!





Rabbi Yosef Singer
 Cong. Young Israel Ezras Israel
 President

VAAD HARABANIM
 THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL
 of GREATER WASHINGTON

Rabbi Moshe Walter
 Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah
 Executive Director

Elul 5780

Dearest Friends,

It seems like yesterday that we last recited in וַיִּתְּנָהּ וַיִּלְקֶחָהּ :

*who will live and who will die...
 who will die at his predestined time and who before his time...
 who by plague, who by strangulation...*

It also feels like ages ago—something from a bygone, more innocent era. Who could have imagined that, in that coming year, the world would experience the worst pandemic in human history and that all of our lives would be thrown into utter turmoil? Our days now consist of one logistical challenge after another to accomplish objectives that a year ago were, by comparison, so simple and routine: attending shul; sending children to play groups, camps, and schools; having Shabbos and Yom Tov guests; and visiting relatives.

The present circumstances have also contributed to feelings of isolation and loneliness and, in some instances, have engendered *shalom bayis* issues. Worse still is the impact on our livelihoods and the attendant loss of self-esteem we have experienced as we struggle to provide for our families. Worst of all, however, are the casualties of the disease itself—the loss of beloved relatives, friends, and Rabbanim, and the emotional toll this has taken on families, friends, *talmidim*, and each and every one of us. Yet, for all this, we face these logistical, financial, and emotional challenges the way that Jews have always faced such difficulties—with determination, with courage, and with an optimism that is at the core of our collective being. We believe with an *emunah shleimah* that our suffering has not been in vain, that every tear on every Jewish face is precious to Hashem, and that we are closer still to our final redemption.

Years ago, I heard a beautiful story from Rabbi Pesach Krohn about a group of women who were learning Navi with Rebbetzin Chavi Wagschal a”h in Gateshead, England. They were focused on a *pasuk* in Malachi 3:3:

וַיֵּשֶׁב מְצַרְרֵי וּמְטַהֵר כֶּסֶף וְטַהַר אֶת בְּנֵי לֵוִי וְזָקַק אֹתָם פְּזָהָב וְכִפְסֹף
 וְהָיָה לֵה' מְגִישֵׁי מִנְחָה בְּצִדְקָה.

He (Hashem's messenger) will sit smelting and purifying silver,

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*he will purify the children of Levi and refine them like gold and like silver
and they will be for Hashem presents of offerings of righteousness.*

To gain better insight into the meaning of the *pasuk*, they took the initiative to consult a silversmith to learn the details of his craft. He explained that the silver nuggets he receives from his suppliers are laced with impurities that can only be removed when that raw material is subjected to intense heat. On the other hand, one must exercise great caution to not leave the nugget in the flame too long because that will ruin the silver. Thus, the silversmith must be completely focused on this purification process and must remove the now purified silver from the heat source at precisely the right moment.

“How do you know when it is precisely the right moment to remove the silver from the flame?” the women asked. The silversmith replied, “That’s easy: when I can see my reflection in its surface.” The essence of *Malchus*—which is the purpose of creation and the focus of our *avodah* on Rosh HaShanah—is that Hashem should see His reflection in His beloved nation. We can draw some measure of comfort in knowing that, even in the midst of great suffering, Hashem is with us. He is *יוֹשֵׁב מְצַרְךָ וּמְטַהֵר כְּסָפֶיךָ*—watching us carefully and purifying us with the utmost precision—to prepare us for a *geulah shleimah*.

A wise man once said that with every great challenge, there is great opportunity. The Chofetz Chaim in *Ahavas Chesed* brings down in the name of the Tana d’bei Eliyau that when the Jews were enslaved in Mitzrayim, they made a *bris* of *chesed* with one another: They agreed to offer comfort, support, and encouragement to one another, irrespective of their own difficulties. And despite their own hunger, they would be *moser nefesh* to share their meager rations with those in need. The Chofetz Chaim argues that it was specifically those acts of *chesed*, which were performed with great *mesiras nefesh*, that brought about the redemption.

If we commit to help, support, encourage, and nurture our fellow Jews—despite our own pain and turmoil—then we will also be performing acts of *chesed* with *mesiras nefesh*. And, just like our holy ancestors in Mitzrayim, it should be the will of Hashem that we awaken His mercy and bring about our redemption speedily and in our days.

With love and respect,

Rabbi Yosef Singer
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BULLETIN OF THE VAAD HARABANIM OF GREATER WASHINGTON: TISHREI 2020

Introduction from the Director

Rabbi Moshe Walter

We are pleased to present Issue 8.2: The Yamim Noraim Edition of the Bulletin of the Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington.

We are living in challenging times; the pandemic has disrupted our lives and created a “new normal” of which we would never have dreamed when we were davening Mussaf last Rosh HaShanah. This year, the Yamim Noraim will take on an entirely new meaning: We have learned firsthand that, while everything can change in a moment, that change is determined and decided on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. In that vein, Rabbi Levi Shemtov and Rabbi Moshe Walter present articles focused on approaches to maximizing our Yamim Noraim experience in the year of the plague.

A community’s strength is not defined by its years of plenty but, rather, by its years of famine. While we are living through trials and tribulations, our community has risen to the challenge and is successfully helping those who need it most. The chesed, kindness, love, and outpouring of tzedakah is a tribute to each of you—the members of the Greater Washington Jewish community. Thank you, one and all, for your efforts to help those in need.

The Community portion of the Bulletin therefore takes on an entirely new dimension at this time. Communal matters are the focus of many articles in this issue. First, we present an interview with Dr. David Marwick and Mr. Max Rudmann regarding the very successful JobAssist program, which provides guidance and tools to those searching for employment. The work of these dedicated volunteers has become even more important during this pandemic, with JobAssist having a more powerful impact than ever before.

Next, you will find a very helpful guide by Rabbi Dovid Rosenbaum and Mrs. Hedy Peyser on steps to take when a family member dies, presented from halachic and practical standpoints. We thank Rabbi Rosenbaum, Mrs. Peyser, and Young Israel Shomrai Emunah for permission to adapt and present this article, originally created for YISE members.

We have chosen to reprint three articles from the previous Pesach edition of the Bulletin. As the Pesach bulletin appeared at the very time that our shuls were shuttered due to quarantine, we were unable to distribute printed copies of that edition to our readers. We fear, for that reason, that three significant community articles may have been missed. We are pleased to offer an informative interview with Rabbi Reuven Kasierer, secretary of the Beis Din of the Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington, in which he illuminates the workings of the Vaad HaRabanim’s Beis Din for financial arbitration. Mr. David Hornestay shares inspiring stories of models of lay leadership in our community over the decades. Finally, this section includes an enlightening and revealing essay by an outstanding graduate of the Vaad’s Beis Din for *Geirus* (conversion).

A very, very special thank you to Mrs. Mindy Tolchinsky for her tireless efforts, expertise, and precision in editing this issue. Mrs. Tolchinsky's attention to detail and careful review of the articles has been most impactful.

Thank you to Mrs. Wendy Guberman for the beautiful typesetting, layout, and graphic design, all of which are evident on the pages of this Bulletin.

Last, but far from least, my gratitude to Rabbi Yosef Singer, President of the R.C.G.W., for his direction and stewardship of the Vaad—especially during the last six months, when his leadership was needed most.

We hope you enjoy and share this edition of the Bulletin. Wishing you a Shanah Tovah u'Mesukah—a year of health and *gezunt*, of physical and spiritual redemption!

Rabbi Moshe Walter
Director, Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington

With All the Zooming In, Are We Somehow Tuning Out?

Rabbi Levi Shemtov

Electrical energy is fascinating. We can feel it sometimes even if we normally cannot see it flow. Energy providers are paid for the energy that they provide to the power grid and users pay for its consumption—but the two do not necessarily ever interact.

Life often works that way too, in the “grid” of goodness and kindness. In fact, Rambam teaches that one of the highest forms of benevolence is achieved when the giver and recipient do not know one another. When benevolence is performed anonymously, only the kindness exists, as just that: pure kindness.

Despite all the recent inventions and innovations, electricity still requires actual close contact for the current to flow. We cannot email it, for example. Thus, power lines abound. But once that connection exists, anything is possible. Imagine a dead vehicle roaring back to life with just a small jumpstart from a battery or power restored after a blackout. Sometimes we only truly appreciate such important connections when we lose them, when we suddenly learn that without them little is possible.

No one foresaw nor wished that the whole world would be plunged into the current coronavirus pandemic—a world in which social distancing requirements have sharply reduced the normal everyday interactions that are so important in Jewish life. One social commentator recently wondered about the toll from isolation, anxiety, and depression—especially among the elderly—compared with the toll from the actual coronavirus. The underlying numbers are serious.

Loneliness is a very un-Jewish state. Even as we believe that wherever a Jew is, G-d is with them, communal engagement and support are crucial. Indeed, great effort is exerted throughout Jewish practice and ritual to ensure that people are drawn together and are less alone, especially at times when they might be more vulnerable. If loneliness can erode life emotionally or even physically, separation can surely do so spiritually.

Hearing the clarion call of the *shofar* in person, while assembled with others—as Jews have for millennia—is a crucial aspect of our tradition. Halacha even requires that one hear the actual sound of the *shofar* itself—not merely an echo of it—so that it may pierce the crust of our soul purely and directly, permeating it without even the minutest disruption. It is this direct connection that impacts us and makes the experience real. Once that direct connection is lost, many may not return to it so quickly or, sadly, even seek it out once again in its truest form.

An important approach to technology in Judaism was established by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of sacred memory. While passionately railing against the spiritual dangers of television and cable, for example, he nevertheless found an appropriate way to use it in order to share a great spiritual message with the masses on an ongoing basis. This appreciation for technology—on weekdays—and its importance within contemporary Jewish life, is real. Today, along with my family and thousands of our colleagues around the

world, I deeply appreciate and vigorously engage in appropriate use of technology for the purpose of connecting people to Jewish life.

But even as the Rebbe clearly encouraged use of media for sacred purposes, he would never allow any broadcast or recording on Shabbat or Festivals, or at any time clearly not permitted according to halacha—no matter how great the opportunity. The example he set was clear.

The incredible phenomena of Zoom and similar applications have enabled millions, perhaps billions, to better weather the current pandemic without total isolation and, indeed, to easily connect and remain involved on many levels. But, increasingly, the use of virtual means to conduct religious services— even where halacha does not permit it—is a cause for real concern. It is a short-term solution which may very well present a longer-term existential challenge to Jewish communal life as we know it. It provides a sense of involvement which, ultimately, might actually increase isolation.

I am anxious about the looming Jewish New Year and holidays and a possible paradigm shift in synagogue life, with many fewer people in actual attendance. So many find their way—and often set the spiritual tone for their year—through our services and others like them. What will they do this year? The call of the *shofar* is a very important and powerful kickstart to the months ahead. We should not encourage those who would merely “phone it in.” Instead, we should pursue safe ways to enable them to attend a real service, or at least an actual *shofar* blowing, in person.

It is very important to consider accommodation when it is halachically permissible. But if, through that accommodation, what we essentially represent and wish to preserve can *itself* be compromised—even possibly—we need to hold strong and steady to the structure which protects it, despite the allure of considerable opportunities that might arise from these proposed accommodations. While the intended result of the compromise may or may not be realized, either way the compromise can all too easily become the new standard. And, too often, compromises—however well-intentioned—do not result in the expected solution but, rather, create a new standard upon which one bases further compromises. A cursory review of recent decades in Jewish communal life provides a variety of examples and many regrettable results. Retraction has proved all but impossible.

On occasion, I suppose we have to allow some “opportunities” to pass by in order to maintain the strength of the structure for what comes next. These days, we must strive to accommodate as many people as possible, properly reaching those who are isolated or remote—physically or spiritually; we must expend extra effort to ensure that they, too, can hear the *shofar* in its pure form, without risking the integrity and well-being of our traditional standards and communal structure.

The important muscles of Jewish tradition—strengthened by comity, presence, and unity—which have formed the core of our resilient community life for ages, must not be allowed to atrophy.

Many large annual events occurred online this season, enabling critical networking to continue, even if in a modified or truncated state. A good number of organizations have even reported

vastly expanded participation this year at virtual conventions, dinners, celebrations, and the like. At the same time, no one can deny the discernible loss in quality of experience at these virtual events, creative though they may be.

Back to the example of energy and electricity. To really appreciate the spiritual power of prayer and practice in Jewish life, like so many other special experiences, we ultimately need to be “in the room.” Otherwise, the connection wanes and may be lost, and what we might then resume afterward, if the rules and standards have changed in the interim, would be something very different.

Going back to a standard that is less convenient is quite difficult if not impossible.

So we need to deal carefully with the dilemma we now face. We must be compassionate and exert ourselves to reach out to as many Jews as we can, while remaining aware of the consequences of relaxing the standards themselves to a point from which they may never return. No matter how tempted we may be, this is the course we must follow to ensure that what we return to after the crisis remains strong as before.

People spend large amounts of money all the time to buy the best tickets to performances, dinners, or sporting events—or travel great distances to be somewhere for important milestones and occasions—even when the same event can be viewed otherwise with less expense and bother. For good reason: physically being “in the room” or arena creates that powerful third dimension which provides a sense of depth and reality. It also allows one to really experience the mood and response to what is occurring, a key component of being there. That is where our focus should be for Rosh HaShanah, even if it requires quicker, multiple services and expanded resources to keep everyone safe. We need to ensure not only physical safety but spiritual safety, now and for the longer term.

May the Almighty grant us the opportunity to return to our *full* lives as we knew them, with the sound of the *Great Shofar* heard by us all—not virtually, but directly, and very soon.

When Rosh HaShanah Falls on Shabbos in the Year of COVID-19:

The significance of this convergence for each of us

Rabbi Moshe Walter

The majestic tune the *chazzan* uses to introduce the opening *Borechu* of *Maariv* on Rosh HaShanah elicits a strong emotional response and spiritual yearning from the congregation. The haunting melodies of *U'Nesannah Tokef* and *Kol Nidrei* bring tears to our eyes. The triumphant chant of *Mareh Kohen* makes us feel as if we are actually witnessing the *Avodah* of Yom Kippur in the *Beis HaMikdash*. This year, however, will be different: shuls will be quieter, the *tefillos* will be quicker, and many will not be able to attend services altogether. The ambience of the holiest of days will be radically different, especially as the majority of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur will be spent at home. What can we do to concretize the Yamim Noraim experience in the year of COVID-19?

The answer may be found in yet another unique aspect to this year's Rosh HaShanah: the first day of Rosh HaShanah falls on Shabbos. A closer look at the singularity of Rosh HaShanah falling on Shabbos may be helpful in our approach to this year's Yamim Noraim season. The following suggestions may be valuable as we consider our observance of the Yamim Noraim in the year of the challenging coronavirus.

STRENGTHENING SHEMIRAS SHABBOS

The great German Rav, *posek*, and famed author of the *Sefer Aruch La'ner*, Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger (1798–1871), offers a groundbreaking and frightening comment in his *Sefer Minchas Ani* (*Parshas Ha'azinu*) in a *drashah* that he delivered in a year when Rosh HaShanah fell on Shabbos.

According to Rabbi Ettlinger's calculations, some of the greatest events and worst tragedies in Jewish history occurred during years in which Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbos. The Jewish people were forgiven for the sin of the golden calf, inaugurated the *Mishkan*, and entered the Land of Israel for the first time during years in which Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbos. On the other hand, the destruction of both the first and second *Batei Mikdash* also took place in years when Rosh HaShanah and Shabbos converged.

Why, asks Rabbi Ettlinger, do events of such extreme proportions—good or bad—take place during years when Rosh Hashanah and Shabbos unite?

Rabbi Ettlinger suggests the following unforgettable explanation: *Shofar* is more than just a mitzvah; it is a lifeline. The sound of the *shofar* connects us to the spiritual heroism of *Akeidas Yitzchak*, uplifts our spirit to do *teshuvah*, and transports our prayers to the holiest of heavenly abodes. As we enter Rosh HaShanah with the goals of purifying ourselves from the sins of the previous year and coronating Hashem as the King of all Kings, it is the energy of the *shofar*

blasts that serves as the conduit to bring us to a place of intense *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and connection with Hashem.

However, when Rosh HaShanah falls on Shabbos, we are prohibited to blow the *shofar*. What then will serve as our conduit this year? Rabbi Ettlinger suggests that it is the mitzvah of *Shemiras Shabbos*—how will we observe Shabbos over the coming year. The reason we do not blow *shofar* when Rosh HaShanah falls on Shabbos is that we are worried that one may violate Shabbos by carrying the *shofar* on that day. If we fall short in seriously observing Shabbos during the coming year, it might appear as if our concern not to blow *shofar* on Shabbos Rosh HaShanah was no more than a convenient excuse not to blow the *shofar* at all. Such behavior not only leaves us bereft of the merits of both *shofar* and Shabbos, but becomes the greatest indictment against the Jewish people that could result in the worst of catastrophes.

However, if we observe all the mitzvos of Shabbos and are meticulous both in the letter and the spirit of the law, then Shabbos will be our shield, defense, and savior. Shabbos will serve as the *mekor brachah*—the source of the greatest blessings in the year to come. This, maintains Rabbi Ettlinger, is the jaw-dropping pattern of Jewish history during years in which Rosh HaShanah fell on Shabbos. When we lived up to the demands of Shabbos during the years when Rosh HaShanah fell on Shabbos, we merited great blessing; when we did not, we paid a difficult price.

This year, when most of Rosh HaShanah will be spent homebound, let us focus on *Kedushas Shabbos* (the sanctity of Shabbos) in our homes: at the table during our *seudos*, learning and reviewing the *halachos* of Shabbos throughout both days of Rosh Hashanah, and taking the time to contemplate and discuss a practical plan to strengthen our Shabbos observance for the next 54 weeks of 5781. One of the greatest treasures the Jewish people received from Hashem—and that we have demonstrated to the world—is the gift of Shabbos. Let us carefully unwrap this gift, understand what Shabbos is all about both halachically and philosophically, and observe and appreciate Shabbos this coming year more than ever before.

MESIRUS NEFESH

Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843–1926), famed author of *Ohr Sameach* and *Meshech Chochmah*, has an incredible insight into the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The *Meshech Chochmah* (*Parshas Emor*) asks how it is possible that we can survive a year without blowing the *shofar* on the first day of Rosh HaShanah—for the Gemara teaches that “any year during which, due to some mishap, the *shofar* was not sounded at its beginning will suffer evil and misfortune at its end.” (*Maseches Rosh HaShanah 16b*) Although Rosh HaShanah falling on Shabbos is not considered “a mishap,” (see *Tosfos*, ad loc.) nonetheless, asks Rav Meir Simcha, what will serve as our salvation when we are still left bereft of the powerful *shofar* blasts this year?

Listen with your heart to the words of Rav Meir Simcha. He explains that the *shofar* represents the ultimate self-sacrifice: Avraham Avinu’s willingness to sacrifice his precious son Yitzchak

whom Hashem had promised would be the heir who would carry on his legacy. The *shofar* reminds us that we, too, can succeed and stand up to any challenge that Hashem places in our path. We are the children of Avraham Avinu—self-sacrifice is in our blood, our DNA, and our constitution as Jews. This, explains Rav Meir Simcha, is what happens when we do not blow the *shofar* when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbos: we surrender, sacrificing the potency of the *shofar* because of the concern that one may violate Shabbos by carrying that *shofar*. What greater expression of self-sacrifice and sanctification of the Name of Hashem can there be than not blowing the *shofar* in order to protect the sanctity of Shabbos? Not blowing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah which falls on Shabbos is the performance of a personal, spiritual *akeida* (sacrifice) and serves as an extraordinarily powerful replacement for the blowing of the *shofar*.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 quarantine, Jews the world over have shown incredible self-sacrifice in their commitment and dedication to Hashem, His Torah, and His people. We have been blowing the proverbial *shofar* twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We must not let up! As we usher in a new year with Rosh HaShanah, we must build upon that self-sacrifice and raise our Torah, *tefillah*, *tzedakah*, and *chesed* to even higher levels. A Jew who davens with *kavanah* (heartfelt intent) during this Rosh HaShanah, Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, Yom Kippur, and beyond—wherever he or she may be—must recognize how meaningful that prayer is. A Jew who learns a bit more, now more than ever, is accomplishing great things. A Jew who dedicates himself to others—gives to others, cares for others, looks out for others—is acting like Hashem.

In the same way that the void left by not blowing the *shofar* on the first day of Rosh HaShanah is tailor-made for our personal growth, so too our Yamim Noraim experience this year, missing many of the customary things we normally do, is an opportunity laden with potential for growth: an opportunity for our own *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice). Our goal *this Yamim Noraim* is to use what is within our arsenal to serve Hashem. Our job *this Yamim Noraim* is to look for more prospects to expand that arsenal and better serve Hashem. That is exactly what Hashem wants from us right now. If we can do this, we have indeed blown the *shofar* louder and stronger than it has ever been blown before!

ELEVATING TEFILLAH

Rav Moshe Teitelbaum (1759–1841), also known as the *Yismach Moshe*, was the Rebbe of Újhely in Hungary and the forerunner of what is known as Satmar chassidus. In his work, *Yismach Moshe (Parshas Emor)*, he pens an amazing explanation of the following words in the *piyut* we recite in Shacharis when Rosh HaShanah falls on Shabbos:

חַיִּים חֲנִיטִיו לְתַקוּעַ בְּזֶה חֹדֶשׁ, יוֹם זֶה אִם יִקְרָה בְּשַׁבַּת קֹדֶשׁ,
זְכָרוֹן תְּרוּעָה מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ.

G-d instructed Yitzchak's offspring to sound the shofar in this month,
but if the day falls out on the holy Shabbos,
a remembrance of the shofar blast, a holy convocation.

The Yismach Moshe explains that when Shabbos falls on Rosh HaShanah, we are unable to sound the *shofar*, but are instead charged to recite words of *tefillah*, “a remembrance of the *shofar* blast,” recalling and remembering the great *shofar*.

According to the Yismach Moshe, the *shofar* is a form of *tefillah*. However, when the *shofar* cannot not be blown because it is Shabbos, our job is modified: the *kol tefillah* (sound of prayer) replaces the *kol shofar* (sound of the *shofar*). This year, we are charged to intensify our *tefillah*, wherever we may be. This year, we are directed to find more meaning in the words of the *machzor*. This year, we must strive to spend more time understanding the words that we recite. This year, WE are the *shofar*.

LOOKING AHEAD

As we plan the best approach to take advantage of the forty-eight hours of Rosh HaShanah, the twenty-four hours of Yom Kippur and the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah in between, let us recognize that, while we may not be in shul or the *tefillos* in shul may be different from other years, we still have the Yamim Noraim.

This year, we have the power to actually *define* the Yamim Noraim: divide up the days in a way where serious focus can be given to *Shemiras Shabbos*, *Mesirus Nefesh*, and *Tefillah*, and contemplate how these three areas of focus can be implemented practically in the year ahead. In this way, may we all succeed in climbing the mountain of Hashem and flourishing in the spiritual journey of *Chodesh Tishrei* that lies ahead.

JobAssist: Helping Neighbors Find Employment

Interview with David Marwick and Max Rudmann

Looking for a job can be a lengthy, frustrating, and lonely experience. JobAssist was launched in 2003 in Kemp Mill, with the support of shul Rabbis and presidents, as a way for neighbors to help each other find work.

Who requests help from JobAssist?

Transitions can be difficult. Our clients generally seek us out because (1) they just graduated from college or graduate school, (2) they just moved to the area, (3) they were laid off, or (4) they need to or want to explore other jobs in their field or other fields.

How many clients does JobAssist serve?

In “normal” times, we average three or four new clients each month. That number spiked after the sharp economic contraction earlier this year, brought on by COVID-19.

What geographic areas do you serve?

We are based in Kemp Mill and most of our clients live there. We have also helped people from DC, Potomac, White Oak, Woodside, and other areas. When people outside the Washington area contact us, we generally refer them to other organizations for assistance.

Do you charge for your services?

We are all volunteers; there is no fee for our services.

Who is involved with JobAssist? What skills/experience do they bring to their work?

We, David and Max, are the core staff of JobAssist. On occasion, we seek assistance and advice from others. While neither of us has formal credentials as a job coach, we have the accumulated experience of having worked with hundreds of clients over the past decade, and we both watch podcasts and read articles on job search. In addition, David’s years of experience in evaluating the effectiveness of federal employment and training programs provided a good basis for his JobAssist work.

What are your goals for success with each client and what tools do you use to achieve these goals?

Our ultimate goal is to help each client land a job by helping them with various aspects of the job hunt. We do this in two ways:

First, through our coaching, we provide emotional support over the often lengthy, frustrating, and lonely process of finding work. Many clients appreciate that someone is taking an interest in their search.

Second, we provide specific guidance and resources in technical aspects of the job search—networking, LinkedIn (a widely used recruiting tool), resumes, and interviewing. For resumes, for example, we have designed two tools: one explains what goes where on a resume and why, while the other compares an employer’s requirements with the jobseeker’s experience and education.

An additional tool that we promote is informational interviews. In an informational interview, the job seeker conducts an informal, relatively brief conversation with someone in the field or company of interest. Through this process, the job seeker learns more about the field and its requirements from someone who has great familiarity with the work. This process helps job seekers ascertain whether they are focused on the appropriate field/employer for their skill set and interests.

What are the limitations of your services?

We can coach our clients and hone their skills in technical aspects of the job search, but we are not equipped to look for suitable jobs for them or to “pitch” them to potential employers.

How do you develop contacts for networking?

Having lived in the community for many years, we have met people in a variety of fields. Through them, we can help job seekers connect with others in their field of choice.

What is JobAssist’s track record in helping clients find employment?

Searching for a job is more like a marathon than a 100-yard dash. We see ourselves as coaching the runner to stay the course for as long, and for whatever aspect of the race, he or she needs assistance. We are often involved in the initial phases of a process that can take months. We try to help our clients develop the needed attitudes and skills that the process requires.

Unlike headhunters, who are paid only when they fill an opening, we are pleased when we help job seekers get closer to the finish line and—even better—get across it. The continuing flow of new and returning clients indicates that there is a place for the kind of services we provide.

How has the current pandemic affected the number and type of your clients and how you interact with them?

As noted earlier, we have seen more clients of late because of the pandemic. Many were employed at Jewish non-profits, which have been hit particularly hard by the economic contraction.

The current crisis has affected us in other ways. Before the pandemic, our networking often took place in shul—after services, at kiddush, and at various programs. We now depend upon word-of-mouth and previous contacts for referrals.

David: “I used to meet new clients over coffee, so that I would have a face to associate with the client’s voice and email. Now, I try to schedule an introductory meeting over Zoom for the same purpose.”

What gives you the greatest satisfaction in your work with JobAssist? What are some of the challenges?

David: “As a leading-edge baby boomer, I was very fortunate during my working career. In retirement, I get a lot of satisfaction from helping others land their next job. Over the years, I have learned to work at the pace and interest level of each of our clients. One challenge I encounter is that our clients sometimes do not inform us when they succeed in landing a job. We use their feedback about what worked for them to continuously improve our services and to make referrals for networking.”

Max: “It’s been many years since my first job, but I remember how helpful it was to have someone at college to help me think through the process and to offer tips on potential job leads. I am therefore pleased that our community has many individuals to whom we can refer young—and older—job seekers. It can be challenging at times to connect job seekers in special niches with others who can help them network.”

How can a community member contact you for help?

The best way is to visit our recently re-launched web site, JobAssist.org, and send us a message via the “Contact Us” tab.

How can members of the community help JobAssist in its efforts?

We get referrals from across the area, including from community Rabbis. Because the majority of jobs are not publicized, it is helpful to become aware of openings so we can pass them along.

You can make us aware of your occupation and be available for informational interviews and networking regarding your field of employment. Neighbors who make themselves available for such interviews are very helpful to the job seekers among us. Please introduce yourself to us, virtually, at JobAssist.org, and help us further build our caring community.

What to Do When a Family Member Dies: A Practical and Halachic Guide

Rabbi Dovid Rosenbaum, Young Israel Shomrai Emunah
Hedy Peyser, MSW

The following is based upon a document prepared for members of Young Israel Shomrai Emunah. Certain adjustments have been made for the sake of broader publication in our community. We thank Rabbi Rosenbaum, Mrs. Peyser and YISE for sharing this information with us.

The following document was prepared as a practical and halachic guide to deal with the death of a family member. It will hopefully answer time-sensitive questions that may arise immediately following the loss of a family member. Please feel free to contact your Rabbi with any specific questions.

It is advisable to consult an attorney and/or an accountant for practical advice regarding legal and financial matters before and after the death of a family member. This document does not provide legal or financial advice.

There is much encouragement in halachic literature for an individual to purchase a burial plot for oneself and one's spouse. Practically speaking, if an individual did not yet have the opportunity to purchase a plot, family members would be doing a great kindness by asking where the individual would like to be buried.

Community members are also urged to have the appropriate paperwork completed and available prior to the loss of a loved one. This can be very helpful during their illness and eventual death. Such papers may include cemetery documents, a will, trust(s), advanced directives, general power of attorney, etc.

IF DEATH OCCURS IN THE HOSPITAL

Contact your immediate family member(s), the funeral home and your Rabbi. If you are unsure which funeral home to call, your Rabbi can help you make that decision based upon your specific preferences and may be able to assist in making arrangements with the funeral home. The funeral home plays a vital role both in preparing for and managing the funeral and in providing the necessary documentation at a later date. If a family member's demise seems imminent, it is worthwhile to decide on a funeral home and cemetery at that time.

Requests to hospital staff:

To the extent possible, the deceased should be allowed to stay in the room until the funeral home staff arrive, as opposed to being transferred to the morgue. The deceased’s mouth and eyes should be closed and the head and body should be covered with a sheet.

Someone should remain in the room with the deceased to recite Tehillim until the funeral home staff arrive. It is preferable for the individual saying Tehillim not to be one of the close relatives who will sit shiva (spouse, child, parent or sibling); if no one else is available, a close relative may recite Tehillim.

If applicable, inform staff that the PICC line connections and the like that have been placed under the patient’s skin should be detached from hospital equipment but kept attached to the patient. Additionally, the hospital staff should not wash the deceased. These steps will enable the Chevra Kadisha to prepare the deceased appropriately for burial.

IF DEATH OCCURS AT HOME

Contact your immediate family member(s), the police, the funeral home, the Rabbi and — if relevant — hospice.

Rabbi’s phone numbers (cell/home/office): _____

Name and phone number of personal physician: _____

Montgomery County Police: 301-279-8000. Notifying the police is required in Montgomery County.

The deceased’s mouth and eyes should be closed and the head and body should be covered with a sheet. Someone should remain in the room with the deceased to recite Tehillim until the funeral home staff arrive. It is preferable for the individual saying Tehillim not to be one of the close relatives who will sit shiva (spouse, child, parent or sibling); if no one else is available, a close relative may recite Tehillim.

IF DEATH OCCURS ON SHABBOS/YOM TOV

If there is a significant amount of time left on Shabbos or Yom Tov (causing concern regarding a suitable environment for the deceased), a non-Jew should be asked to place the appropriate phone calls necessary for the funeral home to pick up the deceased. If an individual’s death seems imminent, it might be wise to pre-register with a funeral home so that such Shabbos communication will go more smoothly.

FUNERAL HOMES

Make sure to request a Shomer and a Tahara. Please contact your Rabbi if you would like an explanation of these terms and of their necessity. In the frequently changing circumstances surrounding the current COVID-19 crisis, it is particularly worthwhile to consult with your Rabbi before making arrangements.

The following are the funeral home options used most frequently by members of our community. Your Rabbi can discuss these options in more detail if desired:

Hines-Rinaldi Funeral Home: Make sure to refer to the package arranged by the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington. 11800 New Hampshire Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 20904. (301) 622-2290.

Shomrei Neshama of Greater Washington: 1091-B Rockville Pike, Rockville, MD 20852. (301) 296-6835. shomreineshama.com.

Torchinsky Hebrew Funeral Home: 254 Carroll Street NW, Washington, DC 20012. (202) 541-1001, (301) 495-3395, (800) 500-5401. info@torchinsky.com.

The funeral home may request the following information about the deceased:

- Full Hebrew name
- Date and place of birth
- Parents' full names, including maiden names

Make sure to tell the funeral home if pre-arrangements have been made. Which cemetery? You may also be asked to review legal documents which are required for burial.

The funeral home will make all arrangements for the Chevra Kadisha and Tahara. The funeral home can make arrangements for burial in Israel if desired, including travel arrangements with El Al Airlines. Occasionally, family members may find it helpful to independently contact a group such as Maalin Bakodesh (see below).

BURIAL IN ISRAEL

BROKER TO ASSIST WITH TRANSPORT TO ISRAEL (if not provided by the funeral home):
Maalin Bakodesh: 3803 14th Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11218. (718) 435-6100.

AIRLINE FOR TRANSPORT TO ISRAEL:

El Al Airlines: (800) 223-6700 reservations
(718) 553-2190 to have El Al make arrangements to ship the casket

CEMETERY IN ISRAEL:

Eretz HaChaim Cemetery:

Located 17 minutes outside of Jerusalem at Mifgash Shimshon (on the road to Beit Shemesh).

Plots include perpetual care and a permit for monument placement. The cost of the monument is separate. You must bring a copy of the deed for the cemetery plot.

U.S. Office: (718) 437-2200 or (718) 415-1544

Israel Office: (02) 999-7526 or (054) 844-0404

www.erezhachaim.org

MONUMENT:

Matzevot Bet Shemesh: +972-50-530-9280 or +972-57-730-9280 or +972-57-740-2640

mzvotbs@walla.co.il

PREPARING FOR THE FUNERAL AND SHIVA

- Contact your Rabbi or shul office with funeral and shiva information. They can assist in determining davening times and shiva schedule.
- When shiva is being held in the area, your shul may provide shiva chairs, “HaMakom Yinachem” signs and, if a minyan is to be held in the shiva home, siddurim and a Sefer Torah.
- Misaskim of Greater Washington can also be of assistance for items for the shiva home: Misaskimgw.org. 301-249-3400 (ext. 733 or 734). Emergency message line: 301-246-2132 (24-hour message line; your call will be returned).
- It may be helpful to designate a friend of the family who can serve as the contact for those who would like to assist with meals during shiva.
- Feel free to discuss *halachos* of mourning with your Rabbi. Your Rabbi may also be able to recommend a book that reviews these *halachos*.

OTHER PREPARATIONS

- Prepare lists of relatives and friends to contact with funeral and shiva information:
 - List of immediate relatives with phone numbers
 - List of relatives/phone numbers to notify once funeral/shiva arrangements have been made
 - List of friends/phone numbers to notify once funeral/shiva arrangements have been made
- Notify local Jewish organizations and newspapers of funeral and shiva information.
- Prepare information for the eulogy; determine who will speak at the funeral.
- Prepare information for the newspaper obituary.

A Walk Through the Beis Din

Interview with Rabbi Reuven Kasierer
Mazkir Beis Din, Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington

The goal of this article is to familiarize the community with the Beis Din process, how it works, and what it entails. It is the hope of the Vaad HaRabanim to clarify the Beis Din's procedures and ensure that all community members view it as a useful tool that is available to them if needed.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE BEIS DIN?

The Beis Din of the Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington is available for all types of monetary litigation. While certain divisions within the Vaad HaRabanim deal with matters such as kashrus, divorce, and conversion, the Beis Din division is specific to monetary law. The Beis Din panel consists of three *dayanim* (judges) who listen to the claims of both parties and issue a ruling in the case. The *dayanim* base their judgment upon their expert knowledge of *halachah* (Jewish law) with a blend of sensitivity and fairness.

WHO SHOULD GO TO THE BEIS DIN?

Any Jew who has a monetary dispute with another Jew or Jewish entity should bring the matter to the Beis Din for adjudication, instead of to a secular court. Within the last three years, the Beis Din of the Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington has reviewed a wide variety of monetary disputes. In that time alone, over thirty cases have been adjudicated and the Beis Din is currently considering four separate disputes.

Cases that have come before the Beis Din in the past three years include:

- Unpaid bills or services
- Unfulfilled verbal or contractual agreements
- Landlord/tenant disputes
- Inheritance disputes
- Responsibility of damages
- Financial arrangements resulting from divorce or dissolution of partnership

Anything that involves a monetary dispute between two Jews is within the purview of the Beis Din.

WHAT SORT OF DISPUTE IS WORTHY OF THE BEIS DIN'S REVIEW?

People are often uncertain if their claim is substantial enough to be processed through the Beis Din. If someone is unsure, it is best to discuss the matter with the Mazkir (Secretary) of the Beis

Din to assess whether to proceed with a dispute or claim. More often than not, if someone is considering going to the Beis Din, it may have halachic merit.

WHAT DOES THE MAZKIR DO?

The role of the Mazkir of the Beis Din is to handle the process from intake through an eventual hearing and judgment by the Beis Din. If someone has a dispute or monetary issue, they may contact the Mazkir of the Beis Din directly via phone or email. The Mazkir will listen to the assertions and make a determination to either file a claim or take the matter up in another manner.

CAN MATTERS BE SETTLED WITHOUT GOING TO THE BEIS DIN?

Often a claim or dispute may not make it all the way to a *Din Torah* (litigation) before the Beis Din. Only about 20% of matters brought to the Beis Din actually proceed all the way to an actual *Din Torah* process. In many cases, the Mazkir can help facilitate a settlement or other arrangement, agreed upon by all parties, without the need for a hearing before the Beis Din. Disputes often arise between parties who are unable to work the issue out with each other but who benefit from a neutral third party to help work things out.

HOW CAN A CLAIM BE FILED?

Once the Mazkir determines that a claim should, in fact, be adjudicated by the Beis Din, the next phase of the process begins. The Mazkir will then contact the defendant to summon him/her to appear before the Beis Din for a hearing to decide the matter. Once the defendant agrees to participate in the Beis Din process, a Beis Din hearing is scheduled to determine the outcome. If a defendant refuses to comply with the Beis Din process, the plaintiff may be given halachic authority to use other methods of adjudication (as will be discussed below).

WHO SITS ON THE BEIS DIN?

The Beis Din is comprised of many local Rabbanim. Baruch Hashem, there are many outstanding Rabbis in the community who volunteer their time and expertise to participate on Beis Din panels. Currently, over fifteen Rabbanim may be available to take a particular case. Often a plaintiff and/or defendant may have a significant relationship with some, if not many, of the Rabbis in the local community; we are therefore very fortunate to have so many Rabbis available to compose Beis Din panels. With a large selection from which to choose, we are able to choose Rabbanim who are completely impartial, thus maintaining the integrity of the Beis Din process as well as equality and fairness for both parties.

WHAT ARE THE LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS?

The Beis Din's decision carries not only halachic importance but has relevance in the secular legal system as well. Prior to any hearing, the Beis Din requires both parties to sign an

Arbitration Agreement. This contract is enforceable by the secular legal system, thereby making the Beis Din's ruling both halachically and legally binding.

CAN A CASE GO TO THE SECULAR COURTS?

As previously discussed, the first step for a Jew vs. Jew dispute should be the Beis Din. Sometimes, however, a case may not end up resulting in a Din Torah. This may occur in the event that one of the parties declines to appear before the Beis Din to adjudicate the matter. In such an instance, the cooperating party may then be given halachic authority to use the secular courts to adjudicate the dispute. There are also cases in which the Beis Din will not involve itself in a dispute: when it concerns matters that are already being handled in the secular courts or in other complex situations that have legal components that preclude the Beis Din from involvement.

In any of these situations, one should consult with their personal Rabbi to determine whether going to secular court is appropriate in their situation.

HOW DO I CONTACT THE MAZKIR OF THE BEIS DIN?

Contact information may be found on the Vaad HaRabanim's website at capitolk.org/din-torah-litigation. You may leave a message for the Mazkir by phone or complete the online form. Once a message is left, you may expect a reply within 24–48 hours.

CONCLUSION

The Beis Din is accessible to anyone in the community who needs to settle a dispute or file a claim against another Jew. The process is not as complicated as one may think and the Mazkir is available to advise and guide anyone who may have a dispute or claim. The members of the Beis Din remain ready to serve, provide assistance in dispute resolution, and promote peace in our vibrant Jewish community.

Models in Lay Leadership in Greater Washington

David Hornestay

No observant Jewish community flourishes without the broad support and participation of its members. That involvement is typically inspired, stimulated, and directed by dedicated individuals who discern and respond to vital community needs. The Greater Washington Orthodox community, which continues to experience the challenges of expansion and diversification, has been blessed with outstanding men and women who have led and guided institutions and campaigns essential to the collective well-being.

As always, the Supreme King of Kings elevates those capable of meeting the demands of the day. For many decades, Gilbert Ginsburg, *a"h*, was perhaps the quintessential Greater Washington community leader. Gil, among other endeavors, led both the Yeshiva of Greater Washington and Young Israel Shomrai Emunah from birth pangs through development, crises and successes. A revered contemporary, Sarah Landesman, *a"h*, served multiple causes tirelessly, in formal and informal capacities, often without official title.

Such models are difficult to duplicate. Today, others — some actually recruited by their predecessors in leadership — are in the front ranks of community service. Some naturally gravitated there by family tradition; others were inspired by friends or events. While some devote themselves tirelessly to a single cause, others seem to find it impossible to resist dealing with any serious problem they encounter. Here are some of their stories:

Shlomo Katz, a recent past president of Southeast Hebrew Congregation in White Oak, has held leading roles in community institutions since his school days. For over thirty years, he has produced the weekly *HaMaayan* — a compilation of Torah commentary, halachah and inspirational stories — distributing it both on the internet and in local synagogues. He has taught Daf Yomi and Mishnayos and has served as a Gabbai and as a member of the board of the Mikvah Emunah Society.

Shlomo is perhaps best known, however, as president of the Silver Spring Eruv Association. Having assisted his father, Irving Katz, who preceded him in that role, he has led the organization for the past 17 years. Shlomo's key weekly responsibilities are to ensure that the pre-Shabbos inspections are made and that on-call volunteers are summoned to make any necessary repairs or adjustments to the *eruv* in time for its use on Shabbos.

Shlomo notes that the *eruv* promotes both Torah learning and social life on Shabbos by enabling observant Jews to move about with *sefarim* and baby carriages. He emphasizes

that these benefits depend upon both financial support from the community and the availability of volunteers, particularly on Fridays and Sundays.

Judah (Judd) Lifschitz may be said to have begun community service as a choir boy. His talent led to his becoming a much-admired *baal tefillah* during the Yomim Noraim for the past 40 years, first at Southeast Hebrew Congregation and then at Young Israel Shomrai Emunah. Distinctly different talents were needed when he served as president of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington – Tiferes Gedaliah. In leading the lay forces in planning, organization, and financing activities, Judd's efforts laid the foundation for the school's transition from a middle and high school to a full-fledged yeshiva and kollel a few years later.

Judd currently serves as president of Sulam, which supports and educates students with learning differences, and of the Greater Washington Community Kollel, which strives to bring Torah education to both the affiliated and the unaffiliated in our community. He also provides legal services to the Vaad Harabanim of Greater Washington. In a labor of love, Judd has translated and published several books, including *Stories for Shauli*, a collection of tales about Gedolim when they were young, and *The Klausenberger Rebbe*.

Bikur Cholim of Greater Washington was founded in 1997 by friends of Howard Wildman, *a"h*, and quickly made its mark through the efforts of its dedicated volunteers. Audrey Siegel was enlisted into their ranks by a friend who was making aliyah. Audrey began to play a major role in the organization as it expanded its services to supply dedicated kosher rooms at area hospitals, a pantry at the National Children's Inn and a residential facility adjacent to the campus of the National Institutes of Health.

This steady expansion — above and beyond Bikur Cholim's ongoing visitation, transportation, and educational services — eventually called for the creation of a part-time position to coordinate the activities and volunteers. Audrey, a former high school history teacher, stepped into the breach. The organization has been so successful that she has been invited to advise people in other cities seeking to provide similar services.

Of course, success often breeds further demand for services; Audrey notes that volunteers — particularly for visitation, transportation of patients, and delivery of food — are always needed.

In a recruitment similar to Audrey's, Linda Rishe was urged by her friend, Pearl Bassan — one of the pioneer leaders of a hard-pressed Women's Chevra Kadisha — to join that organization almost fifty years ago. Linda, whose late husband, Mel, headed both the Hebrew Academy of Greater Washington and the Yeshiva of Greater Washington, was a key player in the Chevra Kadisha for many years as the organization dealt with physical, personnel, and financial challenges.

This devoted service did not preclude, however, Linda's regular participation in Yeshiva of Greater Washington fundraisers, Woodside Synagogue committees, and the housing of Bikur Cholim patients before the establishment of that organization's residence. Linda was even a Cub Scout leader and unofficial driving instructor for community youth.

Howard Schulman was innocently pursuing graduate studies in psychology in Florida when the unanticipated departure of a Hillel director led him to assume a leadership role in the campus organization. Not long after marrying and moving to Silver Spring, Howie became active in several institutions. From the start, he made a distinctive artistic contribution as author and/or star of a series of unforgettable Purim *spiels* at Summit Hill Synagogue, Woodside Synagogue and Young Israel Shomrai Emunah.

On a more serious note, Howie served on separate occasions as president of Young Israel Shomrai Emunah and, even when out of office, spearheaded the multiyear expansion and beautification of its building. The ongoing efforts of the Mikvah Emunah Society to finance and provide facilities and vital services were also advanced during Howie's term as its president.

David Butler's parents were co-founders of Pittsburgh's Hillel Day School even before he was of age to attend. They instilled in him a responsibility for promoting successful Orthodox institutions in cooperation with a strong overall Jewish community.

With his move to Silver Spring, David, an attorney, enhanced his commitment to service with mentors including Nathan Lewin and Avrom Landesman. Becoming active in both the Hebrew Academy and the Jewish Federation, he was instrumental, along with Gerry Charnoff and Paul Berger, in the Federation's move to substantial funding of area day schools.

David eventually became president of the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy and served as president of Kemp Mill Synagogue in the crucial period when it transitioned from a house to its current synagogue building. As an active participant in major community developments in recent decades, he firmly believes that the increase in the number of local Orthodox organizations has strengthened and enhanced the Greater Washington Jewish community.

While our community owes a debt of gratitude to the leaders portrayed above, they represent only examples of the valuable contributions of time and effort that many others make, day in and day out. It must be remembered that leaders need followers; their creativity and inspiration can go just so far without the dedicated work of much larger numbers of "foot soldiers" who help bring the visions and big ideas to fruition.

Our challenges in education, caring for the sick, *taharas ha'mishpacha* and basic maintenance remain daunting. Each of us has some talent, interest, or motivation that can support, preserve, and enhance our remarkable community.

My Conversion Experience

Anonymous

After my first encounter with Orthodox Judaism as a bright-eyed 18-year-old, I was “sold,” as it were. I couldn’t imagine myself being satisfied with any other way of being Jewish. I had never before experienced the sense of community, commitment, and true *simcha* that was present at that Shabbos table.

I put off converting to Judaism for many years, coming up with every possible reason to avoid what I now know was inevitable and necessary to finding my wholeness. People I knew who had converted in various cities told me over and over again how trying the process was. For a while, being patrilineally Jewish was “Jewish enough” — until the day I sat down and tried to imagine my future home: sons wearing *kippos* gathered around me while I lit the Shabbos candles, a table full of guests, my husband making *kiddush*. Any man who wanted that sort of Friday night would only marry someone who was halachically Jewish, and that was something I was not. If I was going to have the life about which I dreamed, I needed to become Jewish.

By the time I approached a local rabbi to pursue an Orthodox conversion through the Vaad of Greater Washington, I had been “doing Jewish” for a very long time. I had spent years learning with campus *rebbetzins* while in college. I had been to Israel, chosen a career in part because of its compatibility with *frum* life, moved to a neighborhood within the *eruv*, given up my blue jeans, and made my kitchen completely kosher. I thought that what was left was just paperwork. In fact, what was left was learning to *be* Jewish.

Like everyone I encountered throughout my conversion process, the rabbi was incredibly kind, listening to the long story of my relationship with Judaism with openness and warmth. He was honest: the process would not be easy. There would be no expediting my conversion because of my Jewish father nor would my book knowledge of Judaism give me a leg up — but with time and commitment, I could achieve the life that I knew Hashem intended for me.

Soon after that first meeting, I was set up with a tutor from the community. I imagined that this would be a formal and serious learning experience — and it was, in certain ways. Each week, we worked together to fill in the various cracks in the foundation of my Jewish knowledge. But our work together was about far more than understanding the complexities of *borer* on Shabbos or the *halachos* of the various fast days. From my tutor, I learned what it meant to be part of a Jewish community by watching her host guests each week for Shabbos and take late-night calls from neighbors in need of advice. She welcomed me into her family, patiently giving me background on the identities of the various *gedolim* mentioned in the course of conversation.

I was incredibly nervous for my first meeting with the full Beis Din. Would the *rabbonim* be able to see my commitment to living a life in accordance with *halachah*? Would they be stern or skeptical?

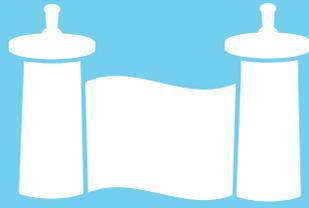
What I found was that, contrary to all of my fears, the members of the Beis Din were incredibly supportive and encouraging. Within the first five minutes of the meeting, it became clear to me that they wanted to help me to grow and thrive on my journey to becoming Jewish. Their expectations of the pace and character of my growth were individual to my circumstances and were also realistic: that I would gradually take on more *mitzvos* as I learned about their meaning and importance.

My single frustration at that first meeting was that the *rabbonim* were not able to give me a timeline for the conversion process. I wanted to know when I could expect to formally join the Jewish people and move forward with my life. I am now, however, able to look back with clarity: how could they possibly know how long it would take me? Every conversion candidate's journey is individual, with progress so dependent upon each person's personal growth, questions, and circumstances.

A major highlight of my conversion experience was the openness with which I was welcomed into the local community. I was moved by the many families I had never met who invited me to join them for Shabbos meals and the people in different neighborhoods who offered me their guest rooms when I was seeking a change of scenery during the *chagim* — all this *chesed* extended with so few questions. Every interaction radiated warmth. I was seen and welcomed as a member of the Jewish people, without regard to my background.

I am married now and building a family. I find myself in the incredibly fortunate position of being able to contribute in many different ways to the community that gave so much to me. Most of the time, I forget that my journey to becoming a *frum* Jew involved not only lots of learning but many meetings with the Beis Din and a trip to the mikvah. When I am reminded, it is because someone thoughtlessly makes a comment at a meal about non-Jews and I think to myself: *Those people they're talking about? Those people are my family members.*

The most helpful and meaningful experiences throughout my conversion process were not necessarily the formal, structured ones. Certainly community *shiurim*, meetings with *rabbonim*, and my work with my tutor were at the core of my Jewish growth. What sustained me, however, were the new friends who, when I opened up to them about my story, treated me exactly the same as they always had. What supported me was when I met someone new and they waited for me to ask questions, instead of assuming I knew little and "explaining" Judaism to me. Most important, however, was every single time when I was assured that, as a convert, I was as valued and welcomed as any other Jew.



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.capitolk.org

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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.