Healing a Wounded Covenant

Children of Holocaust Survivors Reclaim their Heritage

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

Children born in the post-Holocaust era of the 1940s, 50s and 60s grew up knowing their parents had gone through hell on earth. The ghosts of murdered grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings loomed large in their homes by their very absence. Sounds like an atmosphere ripe for major crises in faith. Yet, from many of the survivors who either lacked the strength to believe in a benevolent God or to observe His Torah came offspring who have picked up the discarded baton and enthusiastically embraced observant Judaism. I am one of those who chose to reclaim my heritage and have always wondered if there were more like me. These are the stories of survivors' sons and daughters whose struggle with faith led to consequential life choices.

The "2Gs," (the generation after the Holocaust) as many of us refer to ourselves, span a two-decade age range. Some of us were born in war-torn Europe, some smack dab in Middle America, but we all share basic commonalities that helped shaped our sensibilities about what it means to be in a world that could suddenly and brutally fall apart. We felt different, because our parents were different.

Bayla Sheva Brenner is senior writer in the OU Communications and Marketing Department.

Born in the Bronx, New York, and raised in the Rego Park section of Queens, Allen Kolber remembers himself as a nervous and fearful child. "I was obsessed with the Holocaust," he says. "By the time I was eight, I had amassed a whole collection of Holocaust material. I was trying to understand my father's experience."

> Children of Holocaust survivors inevitably absorb the emotional repercussions of their parents' trauma.

His father had grown up in Sanz, Poland, and was nineteen when the war began. On Yom Kippur 1939, the Germans dragged the Jews out of the shul across the street from his home and brazenly cut off their beards. "My father decided then and there that he was leaving," says Kolber. "He told his parents they should do the same, but they resisted. He convinced a brother and sister to join him and together they traveled to Soviet-controlled Lemberg." The Soviets then shipped them to a labor camp in Siberia. "My father went through the war with a pouch around his neck that contained five photos of his family. Except for the brother and sister [with whom he had fled], his parents, two brothers with their families and another sister were murdered."

Although his parents were raised in Torah-observant homes, Kolber, forty-six, was not. "Judaism [in our home] was defined by the Holocaust," he says. "My Jewish identity was the European Holocaust identity. It wasn't about a relationship with God or learning Torah."

If there was any indication of his father being religious before the war, he "lost it completely afterwards."

"He wasn't anti-religious," says Kuber. "[In fact,] he spoke about [his life in the *shtetl*] with fondness. He remembers going to *cheder* as a five-year-old, but doesn't [seem to] know any of the Jewish practices. [Yet], in the photograph I have of his parents, his mother is wearing a *sheitel* and his father is wearing a *koppel [kippah]*."

At the age of sixteen, Kolber's mother fled with her family from Berlin to France, to Spain, then to Portugal, and finally to the United States in 1942. Unlike her husband, she maintained an affinity for *frumkeit*. "They struck a compromise," says Kolber. "We had a kosher home and Friday night dinners. On Shabbos, my mother, sister and I would go to a Conservative shul and then we were free to do whatever we wanted. [My mother] did, however, raise me with the sense that it would be good for me to become religious when I got older."

Children of Holocaust survivors inevitably absorb the emotional repercussions of their parents' trauma; its effects are usually played out as they enter young adulthood and begin to make their way in the world. Kolber describes his father as always having difficulty venturing beyond his own four walls. "He had this thing about suitcases. He couldn't bring himself to pack a suitcase; he didn't go on vacation or sleep away from the house." Similarly, Kolber found that he also had difficulty navigating life. "It took me six years to graduate college," he says. "I started out pre-med and got kicked out of [college]. I was depressed; I just sat in my room all day and smoked."

Many survivors internalized the crushing deprivation foisted upon them; this, too, was passed on to their children. "I would ask my father, 'What are you eating over the sink for? Sit down at the table and eat on a plate,'" says Kolber. "And he would answer: 'You think I had a plate in Siberia? You think I need a plate? I ate for five years without a plate.' I felt I didn't deserve to be happy, to be fulfilled and complete."

Kolber managed to graduate from Stony Brook University in Long Island, New York. He decided to go to law school, and to look into *frumkeit*. Throughout his three years of study, he attended Torah classes in Manhattan

Allen Kolber's father at nineteen, when World War II began. The photo was most likely taken by the Judenrat for ID purposes. Photo courtesy of the Kolber family

during the school year and learned at Ohr Somayach, a yeshivah in Israel, each summer. He also started going to shul.

After graduating from law school, Kolber went to Israel for a year of Torah study and returned to the United States with a *kippah, tzitzis* and a desire to get serious about *Yiddishkeit*. He quickly set up a schedule of intensive Torah learning with Rabbi Dovid Schwartz, associate director of the Jewish Heritage Center in Queens.

Also a son of survivors, Rabbi Schwartz, fifty, has mentored a number of 2Gs who became *ba'alei teshuvah*. "The overwhelming sense that I get from learning with 2Gs is that their parents were generally silent about their experiences," says Rabbi Schwartz. "Once they conducted their own Holocaust research and realized the enormity of the murder rate and how miniscule the chance of survival was, they felt a sense of mission, as if to say: 'If my parents survived and they were incapable of regaining their *frumkeit*, I'll be darned if I'm not going to.' It brings them to a tremendous sense of purpose."

Today, Kolber, an attorney, lives in Monsey, New York, with his wife, Liora, and their four children, each of whom is named after members of his father's martyred family. His mother recently died; she had taken ill soon after the birth of Kolber's first child and had been incapable of fully enjoying the gratifying *nachas* of grandparenthood. "I was wondering if she can see everything now," says Kolber. "I have boys with *peyos* and *tzitzis*, and a girl who wears long dresses. She would be so happy with that."

The Soul-Saving Power of Giving

Like Kolber, Sherry Dimarsky, of Chicago, also received the message of "you don't have to actually practice *Yiddishkeit*, but *value* it." I interviewed her a year prior to her passing at the age of forty-six. Dimarsky's parents were both from Chassidic families in Poland, and had clearly taught her "that the Torah is *emes* [truth], but we don't have the *koach* [strength] to do it all." During her early years growing up in Cleveland, Dimarsky's family attended an Orthodox shul. "When we didn't go to shul, we stayed home and watched cartoons," said Dimarsky. "We kept *yom tov* one hundred percent, but didn't keep Shabbos [fully]. Friday night we had Shabbos dinner. It didn't matter how old you were, or if you were in high school and running around with the sports team. No discussion; Friday night was Shabbos dinner. That's how it was."

Her father, one of seven children, was raised as a Gerrer *chassid*. In 1939, his family was thrown out of their home and sent to camps. Her father and his brother, Itchie, were sent to a number of work camps. It was during this time that Dimarsky's father witnessed a scene that would haunt him for life. In the process of trying to help another Jew avoid certain death, Itchie himself was killed by the Polish murderer's bullet. "My father said that at that point, he didn't care if

he lived or died anymore," said Dimarsky. Later, while assigned the gruesome job of sorting through the possessions the Nazis had stolen from thousands of Jews (earmarked for their wives in Germany), he recognized his mother's winter coat. "My father understood at that moment that she was dead," said Dimarsky. "He remembers walking back to the barracks, and he laid himself down. He was told that he stayed that way for seven days without moving. Then he got up and continued life."

Allen Kolber and his son, Shmuel. Photo courtesy of the Kolber family

"My parents are shockingly optimistic human beings," said Dimarsky. "They were in a position to save other people's lives as well as their own during the war." Dimarsky was convinced it's what kept them sane. "If you asked my father what were some of the happiest moments of his life, he'll describe the day immediately after the war, when everything was destroyed—how the Jews lived truly to help each other. Because he had two pairs of pants he considered himself a rich man. He said: 'I met a Jew who had none, and I gave him one.' That's how my parents lived."

During the Russian exodus of the 1970s, Dimarsky's mother readily housed Jewish refugees in their Cleveland home; she clothed them, fed them and found them jobs. Dimarsky remembers her mother informing her on many an evening: "Sherry, go stay by the neighbors next door; there are Russians in your bed."

Dimarsky's mother had been raised in a Chassidic home in Lancut, a small town in southeastern Poland, which prior to the war had a thriving Jewish community, constituting one-third of the city population. Her mother and sister, with the help of another sister's husband, survived the war by bribing Gentiles to hide them. Their first "hosts" turned them in. Her mother's sister and brother-in-law, along with their newborn baby and two-year-old child, were murdered by the Nazis; Dimarsky's mother, her other sister and the murdered sister's three-year-old child miraculously survived. Dimarsky's mother raised the child in a Polish barn. "[For the remainder of the war], he couldn't stand up or speak during the day," said Dimarsky. "He is married now, has two children and became a very high ranking officer in the American military."

Dimarsky's parents met shortly before the end of the war and married soon afterwards. After losing most of their families, they suffered the death of their first child. In 1950, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) helped them immigrate to the US.

Despite their adversity, according to Dimarsky, her parent's home was one in which God was a palpable and loving entity. "I talked to God before I could speak," she said. "I never asked why God does bad things to people. I always knew the world was a really hard place; nobody promised me it wouldn't be."

Though Dimarsky and her siblings attended public school, they also went to an after-school Talmud Torah several times a week. While Dimarsky may not have learned the nuances of halachah, she was imbued with *emunah* (faith) and *bitachon* (trust) in God. In spite of their catastrophic losses, Dimarsky's parents transmitted to their children a profound and abiding love of being Jewish.

"My father had a [ritual]," she said. "He would wake up early in the morning, do his exercises and *daven*. Years back, he didn't *daven* with a minyan every day, because he had to be at work. [I'd watch him as] he sat quietly and he would sit and wait. Then he'd get up and put on *tefillin* and *daven*. In my twenties, I thought to ask him what he was doing when he sat there. He told me: 'I took Hakadosh Baruch Hu to a *beis din*.' I asked him who won. He said: 'Sometimes He wins and sometimes I win.' I asked what happens then. He said: 'It was time to *daven* Shacharis.'"

Nevertheless, by the time Dimarsky entered Northwestern Law School, she was more involved in feminism than in Judaism. At one point, she participated in organizing an international conference on "women and the law."

"I was the only Jew who knew anything about Judaism," she said. "So I

Nathan and Betty Berliner (Dimarsky's parents) after the war in Europe. Photo courtesy of Irving Berlinger

handled all the Jewish programming. In the process, I found myself confronting anti-Semitism among the other Jews [on the project]." Her moment of truth had arrived. "We were working on a conference and it had to be accessible to every one with a disability, as well as to those who are bilingual. Yet, they scheduled sessions on Shabbos. I objected, and they said: 'But you don't care.'" Surprising herself, she responded: "Of course I do."

Eventually, Dimarsky discovered that feminism left her cold and disillusioned. "After the war, my parents had nobody left," said Dimarsky. "[So,] they built themselves a community of friends that are closer than family…. I was looking for this idealized community. It was critical to me." She began searching intensely. "I knew that [a Torah-based life] was the alternative, but I wasn't ready for it yet. I didn't know how to get from point A to point B. I didn't have the knowledge."

Meanwhile, Dimarsky's best friend began taking a class in Chicago given by *kiruv* professionals. The class, which catered to college students interested in Jewish learning, inspired the friend to move to continue learning. While visiting her friend, Dimarsky decided to take some classes herself. "I flew," she said. "In a matter of months I was really solid."

Dimarsky was soon introduced to her husband, Eliezer, a Russian-born *semichah* student at the Telshe Yeshiva who had been involved in the religious underground in Kiev. They married in 1990, settled in Chicago and began building a *frum* home. As is the custom, Dimarsky named her four sons after family members who had perished. Soon after giving birth to her third child, the message she had learned in her early years, that the world was a "hard place," became very real. She contracted sarcoidosis, a disease which causes extreme scarring of the lungs. "It wasn't clear that I was going to make it," she said. "I never asked [God] why this was happening to me," she said. "That kind of crisis of faith is not mine. [Instead], I asked: 'What am I supposed to do with this?' My crisis of faith has always been questioning if I am good enough. The whole world had to go to war for me to be born. Have I justified my life?" She put herself on the list to receive a lung transplant.

Sherry and Rabbi Eliezer Dimarsky. Like her survivor parents, Sherry, who contracted a fatal disease in her forties, refused to let hardship adversely affect her faith. Photo courtesy of Rabbi Dimarsky

Very much her parents' daughter, Dimarsky refused to let hardship hamper her relationship with God, or her yen to give and to inspire. "The thing about growing up as a child of survivors is that loss is normal," she said. "We pray that we can grow from it and not let it destroy us."

Dimarsky remained an integral part of the Heritage Russian Jewish Congregation of Chicago, the *kiruv* organization for Russian Jews that she and her husband had established in 1998. Since its inception, the organization has brought 2,000 Russian Jews back to their spiritual roots. The Dimarskys also founded a Hebrew school for Russian-immigrant children.

The family maintained their open-door policy, installing a large oxygen tank in a central location in their home, enabling Dimarsky to move about. While hooked up to a long tube, she continued to host scores of Shabbos, *yom tov* and weekday guests.

After receiving a life-saving lung transplant in August 2004, Dimarsky was blessed with an additional few years. Soon, however, the lung began rejecting her body, and on January 7, 2008, her lungs finally gave out.

Based on her vigorous commitment to Torah life and her constant demonstrations of love for other Jews, she needn't worry; her life was more than justified. Undoubtedly, Dimarsky would attribute her spiritual accomplishments to her original teachers, her parents—whom she called "walking masters of *chesed*."

"We were raised with [the concept] that we are here [to] give," said Dimarsky. "I knew that it was only [through] Torah that one could become fully actualized. It was inevitable that this was where I was going."

Saturday Will Never be the Same

Some offspring of Holocaust survivors, like myself, grew up in homes devoid of any mention of Shabbos or *yom tov*; we never heard the names Avraham, Yitzchak or Yaakov or that there was something called Torah. I do recall my mother getting very agitated if we placed a glass of milk on the table alongside our hamburgers. We couldn't fathom what the big deal was and she couldn't seem to explain; she just really wanted that glass off.

My two sisters and I did not receive a formal Jewish education. We knew we were Jewish; we just weren't sure what it meant. My primary associations with Judaism were pain, loss and thick European accents. Although my parents didn't speak about their experiences, our home was suffused with an undercurrent of intensity that I dared not stir. We somehow picked up the

unspoken, baffling directive—don't ask, but know everything.

Four decades of distance from those raw years, I decided to ask my parents about their lives in Europe. My mother was barely seventeen in 1939 when her parents and two sisters, along with all the Jews of her neighborhood, were herded out of their Lodz homes and unloaded in Krakow to fend for themselves. A local Jewish family took my mother's family in, and, after a number of weeks, my mother made her way back to her old house to retrieve some items. She found herself trapped in the newly designated Lodz Ghetto, where Jews became targets for beatings and robberies, and soon faced unbearable hunger. After four long years in the ghetto, where starvation and disease were rampant, she was sent to Auschwitz. Finally, in January of 1945, as the Russian army approached, the Nazis began evacuating Auschwitz, and my mother (along with 60,000 others) was sent on a grueling death march to Czechoslovakia in the bitter cold. Liberated at twenty-one, she was left to face her shattered world completely alone.

As the Germans overran Poland, Nazis wantonly "arrested" young Jewish men and sent them to work camps. My father was among the "selected." One night, he approached a Nazi guard, asking for a drink of water. Sneering at him, the guard said there was no point in drinking since all of the Jews would be executed the following morning. Aware that the changing of guards was imminent, my father devised a plan on the spot. He asked to go to the bathroom and escaped through the window, scaling a steep wall. He quickly headed east, and was soon captured by the Russians, who sent him to a slave labor camp in Siberia. Eventually, he made his way into the Russian army, where he served until the end of the war. Just when he was certain that he was the only one in his family to survive, he heard the wonderful news that his older brother, David, was alive.

My parents met at a DP camp in Landsberg, Germany, where my older sister was born. With baby in tow, they left for the US in 1949. Arriving in the Bronx, they settled in an apartment above a *Chassidishe shtiebel;* my uncle and his wife chose the nearby Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights.

As a toddler, I would make my way downstairs to the main sanctuary of the shul and wander from the women's section to the men's section and back again, captivated by the velvet and gold *parochet* adorning the *aron kodesh*. I can still call to mind the feel of the tall curtain *mechitzah* brushing against my young cheek.

The author (raised as Betty Sharon) with her parents in the Bronx, 1950s. Photo courtesy of Bayla Sheva Brenner

We would go to Washington Heights for the Seders, where Uncle David sat at the helm, perfectly erect as he raced through the Haggadah in rapid-fire Hebrew (Greek to me). Anxious to get to the *tzimmis* already, my cousins and I would squirm in our seats behind Maxwell House Haggadahs, unsuccessfully squelching our desperate mumbles of "Come on. *Come on!*" That, and family members taking turns lighting the eight Chanukah candles, was the extent of our holiday celebrations. I actually thought it was optional to fast on Yom Kippur. Although I sensed there had to be more to Judaism, I held my questions. I understood my parents' resistance, their consuming rage with no place to go—and their bottomless sorrow.

My parents spoke mainly Polish and Yiddish to each other and broken English to my sisters and me. I felt like an alien in my own home. I often looked out the window of our living room at the branches of a lone tree as they reached for the sky and spoke to God. I wondered why we were alive, what it all meant and why no one was talking about it.

The search for God seems to be a running theme among those who have reclaimed observant Judaism. With 2Gs, the search is relentless. I don't have the statistics on how many children of Holocaust survivors have embraced *frumkeit*. Nevertheless, I'm intrigued that though our parents' lives were devastated by unrelenting degradation and seeming abandonment by God, *any* of us chose to not only search for Him, but to also accept the laws of His Torah. I think early on 2Gs developed a driving need to believe in God's absolute goodness and in His fundamental desire for our happiness.

I know that I made a decision, and stored it somewhere deep in my subconscious, to one day begin looking for the rest of *Yiddishkeit*—the happier parts—intuiting that there I would find the answers to my questions.

In 1979, I was a young adult living in Greenwich Village in New York City. After a few unsuccessful attempts at finding a synagogue in which I felt comfortable, I put my spiritual search on hold—or so I thought. One Friday, while watching a Hollywood film crew shoot a scene on my block, I noticed a tall, middle-aged man towering among the spectators. Suddenly, I had this unexpected urge to ask him where I could buy *challah*, which—even more unexpectedly—I followed. He told me to go to "Moishe's" on the East Side and immediately invited me to visit the shul he would be attending that evening, which I did.

Michael Yakobovitcz (later changed to Jacobs), the author's father, photographed at his Bar Mitzvah in Sieradz, Poland, 1930. From left to right: The bar mitzvah boy's mother, Bayla Sheva, for whom the author is named; the bar mitzvah boy; sister Sarah; brother David; Sarah's husband; younger sister Yehudis and father, Hersh Yosef. Everyone except Michael and David was murdered by the Nazis. The photograph on the table is of Michael's brother and sister-in-law, Phil and Anne, who lived in America at the time. Photo courtesy of Bayla Sheva Brenner

After services, a group of young congregants asked me if I'd like to join them for Shabbos dinner. I still wasn't sure what Shabbos was, but dinner I knew and gladly acquiesced. I stared as the group lined up to wash their hands for *Hamotzi* and wondered about their abrupt silence afterwards. As I swayed back and forth to the lilt of the *zemiros*, not understanding a word, the woman next to me whispered, "I think you should try the Beginners Service on the Upper West Side." I whispered back: "You're right. What is it?"

On a Saturday morning not long afterwards, I followed the woman's advice and headed uptown to Lincoln Square Synagogue. The Beginners Service's exuberant rabbi, wearing a *tallis* and smile, explained the service from start to finish. He sang much of it, encouraging us to join in. As if reading my mind, he added: "If you don't know the words, just fake it." He welcomed questions, the more challenging the better. One part of me knew I had come home; another was ready to bolt, realizing that this wasn't just an interesting class—it was a life change. Although I didn't return for three years, Saturday would never be the same.

On those occasions when I rode my bicycle uptown on the holy day, I'd sit on Central Park's Great Lawn and gaze at the "Shabbos people" strolling by, unmistakable in their Shabbos finery. I felt a distinct tug, which only intensified over time. Finally, I gave in.

The author with her parents at her wedding, March 20, 2002 (Nissan 8, 5762). Photo courtesy of Bayla Sheva Brenner

I signed up for classes at Lincoln Square Synagogue, slowly took on *mitzvos* and fell in love with Shabbos. Initially, my parents probably viewed it as a phase, but as the years passed they began associating me with *frumkeit*. During a visit to their home in Florida, I overheard my father informing another retired landsman at the other end of the phone line: "My *Yiddishe* daughter is here."

Many children of survivors struggle with issues of trust, often marrying later in life. In a community where people tend to marry young, I made my way to the *chuppah* more than twenty years into Torah observance. My relationship with God was also strained. If my parents' world could be torn apart so suddenly and viciously, how could I feel secure in His world? I truly don't know how I would have fared under the unremitting cruelty they endured. I'm certain I carried their rage. I suspect my two sisters also did; they have not, as of yet, felt at all drawn to observant Judaism. We each dealt with the unspoken trauma, our "elephant in the room," differently.

"Everyone struggles with the question of why the righteous suffer," says Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, founding director of the National Jewish Outreach Program (NJOP) and originator of the Beginners Service, a concept that is now commonplace in synagogues. "For the children of Holocaust survivors, it is more pronounced. There are obvious scars, but the positive aspects of Judaism and the joys of Jewish life leave a deep impression on them. The great silver lining is that we [the Jewish people] are able to renew ourselves like the moon."

At moments it amazes me how entrenched I have become in the *frum* world. A number of years back, while attending a Siyum HaShas (a celebration marking the completion of the entire Talmud), I sat upon the enormous bleachers at the New Jersey

Meadowlands among tens of thousands of Torah-observant Jews and thought: "I am one of you." As we simultaneously covered our eyes and let out a unified cry of *"Shema Yisrael,"* a surge of humility, awe and gratitude rushed through me. I thought: God took me by the hand and led me here, to a place that connects me to the ancestors I never knew, a place my parents could not bear to enter. Perhaps I am mending that wounded covenant.

Finding Refuge in Forgetting

Unlike the vast majority of children of survivors, Mark Strazynski, fifty-four, was born and raised in his parents' Polish hometown. After the war, his father and mother (single at the time) independently returned to Wloclawek, hoping that other family members had survived the camps. Finding each other among the few Jews who remained, they decided to marry and settle in Poland. Some years later, when they were ready to leave, it was too late. "The [Communist] government closed the borders," says Strazynski, a physician who now lives in Atlanta. "By the time they were reopened, my parents had four small children and my father was afraid to go without knowing how he would support his family."

Strazynski's mother, Pola Klepacz. At fifteen, she was taken to a labor camp while the rest of her family was murdered in Treblinka. Photo courtesy of the Strazynski family

Before the Nazi invasion, Wloclawek boasted a flourishing Jewish population dating back hundreds of years. At the onset of the war, the town earned the disgraceful distinction of being the first in Europe to require its Jews to wear yellow Stars of David on their clothes. Forced to move to the Wloclawek Ghetto, the imprisoned Jews died from Nazi and Polish fists, guns, starvation or illness. Others were gassed upon arrival at the Chelmno death camp, leaving not a trace of the town's once vibrant Jewish presence.

In the years after the war, most of Poland's Jews left, but anti-Semitism remained. "Because I didn't look Jewish, classmates at the technical high school I attended had no idea I was Jewish," says Strazynski. "I was studying with one of them and we started schmoozing. He told me he hated all the Jews and that he would put all of them against the wall and shoot them. I asked him if he had ever seen a Jew in his life. He said no. I told him he'd been looking at one through middle school and high school. I never spoke to him again."

Growing up, although the Strazynskis were "always proud of being Jewish," the children did not receive a Jewish education and the family never attended synagogue. "I think my father was angry," says Strazynski. "And that's why he was denying God. Once in a while he would talk about how religious he was before the war. He lost it [all] during the war."

Strazynski's father was from a long line of Gerrer Chassidim. Prior to the war, his father, who had married at nineteen, had served as *gabbai* of the shul in town. At the age of thirty-one, he, along with his family, was taken to the Wloclawek Ghetto, where the Nazis "selected" him for forced labor. On April 22, 1942, while Strazynski's father was in a labor camp, the Nazis liquidated the ghetto; the remaining Jews, including his first wife and four children, were taken to the Chelmno death camp and murdered that same day. Strazynski's father was then sent to various work camps and finally to Auschwitz and Dachau.

The war took a spiritual toll on both Strazynski's parents, who later identified themselves as atheists. The family didn't celebrate Shabbos or *yom tov;* they never celebrated a Seder or lit a Chanukah menorah. "My father would say: 'If there is a God, where are six million people?" says Strazynski.

Although Strazynski's maternal grandfathers had been pious *shochetim*, Strazynski's mother considered herself a secular Zionist. At fifteen, she was taken to a labor camp while the rest of her family was murdered in Treblinka.

Strazynski's life proves the resilience of the Jewish *neshamah.* Though his daily existence in Poland was devoid of any sign of Judaism, he never felt anything but Jewish. He posits that he could have blended into the Polish culture easily, but chose not to. "I always felt different," he says.

In September 1974, the year Strazynski turned twenty, his father was diagnosed with cancer. Shortly before his death, he made some final requests of his son: to "take care of Mama" and to make sure the rest of the family leaves Poland. (Strazynski's oldest sister and brother had already left.) He then instructed him to go to Duvidel, the only *frum* Jew in the town, and to bring back "the *sefarim.*"

"I had no idea what he was asking for, but I said okay," says Strazynski. Duvidel understood that the *sefarim* his father wanted contained the Viduy confessional prayers, said before one leaves this world. Strazynski's father recited Viduy and died two days later. "I felt that my father made peace with God," says Strazynski. "From that moment, I thought there must be something [to *Yiddishkeit*]." Duvidel taught him how to say Kaddish. He dictated the Aramaic words to Strazynski, who transliterated them into Polish. "I didn't *daven;* I didn't have a *siddur, tallis, tefillin* or a *minyan;* I just said Kaddish."

Shortly after his father's death, Strazynski was informed that he would be drafted into the Polish army. He knew it was time to get out of the country. He wangled his way out of the service and promptly arranged passports for his mother and himself. (His remaining sister wasn't permitted to leave until 1982.) Soon after, Strazynski and his mother arrived in the US and settled in Atlanta, where his sister had moved four years earlier. A year later he met his wife, Marsha, then nineteen and also the child of survivors from Poland. Though her parents weren't religious, she attended the Katherine and Jacob Greenfield Hebrew Academy in Atlanta, stirring in her an interest in religious life.

A recent Strazynski family photo. Seated, from left to right: Strazynski's wife, Marsha; his mother, Pola; Strazynski. Standing, from left to right: Strazynski's daughter Rachel Dobeh Leigh; son Yerachmiel Yitzchak David; son-in-law Rabbi Chaim Neiditch and daughter Chava Gittle Yona Strazynski-Neiditch. Photo courtesy of the Strazynski family

Once they began talking about marriage, Marsha informed Strazynski that she wanted to keep a kosher home. "She was the one who wanted us to start going to shul," he says. "To me it was like being punished; I didn't understand anything going on." They drove to Congregation Beth Jacob each Shabbos and soon began accepting other congregants' invitations for Shabbos meals. At one of the meals, Strazynski was asked to lead the *bentching*. "I looked at them, thinking: 'Are you crazy? I don't even know what I'm doing here.'" The host caught on to Strazynski's discomfort and insisted he and Marsha stay with them over Yom Kippur. "You won't have to drive or *bentch*," he said. It was the first time the couple had completely observed any *yom tov* and they loved it. They have been *shomer Shabbos* ever since.

The Strazynskis promptly put their home on the market and moved to a house within walking distance of the shul. Learning with Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, the shul's rabbi at the time and his first *chavruta,* Strazynski discovered the unparalleled fulfillment of Torah study. "We learned Mishnah and I thought: 'Wow, where was *this* all my life?'" he says. He set up a learning schedule with different rabbis, covering *Mishnah Berurah* and the *Shulchan Aruch,* and eventually progressed to Gemara. "The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. The American hamburgers were great, but my *neshamah* was starving."

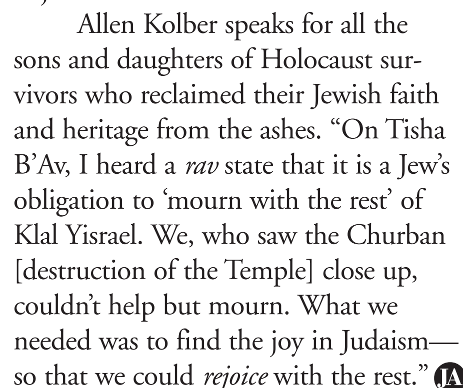
Once 2G *ba'alei teshuvah* taste authentic Judaism, they often wrestle with rivaling impulses. Although anxious to take it all in, they also fret that by doing so they are betraying their families' desperate need to keep Judaism distant. From childhood, we 2Gs have assumed the pivotal role of protector of our parents—yet here we are rubbing salt in very deep wounds.

"I suddenly became the black sheep in the family," says Strazynski. "My sisters kept inviting us over, but we couldn't eat their food. They thought we went too far."

His *frum*-from-birth children, like their parents, have learned to traverse their extended family's two worlds. "They very much connect with survivors," says Strazynski, "and are very accommodating to them." The Strazynskis have three children—Chava Gittle Yona, who is married to Rabbi Chaim Neiditch, the regional director of the Orthodox Union's Southern Region of NCSY; Yerachmiel Yitzchak David, who is serving in the IDF and Rachel Dobeh Leigh, who attends Temima High School for Girls in Atlanta.

"I can't really explain the Holocaust to my children," says Strazynski. "I say it was decreed by Hashem and what He does is right. Would I have liked to have grown up with my uncle and aunts? Yes. But He wanted me to grow up this way. I think, now, my father is pleased that I steered the family in this direction. I couldn't be happier."

Born on the heels of our parents' agonizing trauma, a horror spurred solely by the fact that they were Jews, many of us 2Gs needed to dip into the very essence of what the Nazis found so objectionable—*Yiddishkeit.*



Allen Kolber speaks for all the sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors who reclaimed their Jewish faith and heritage from the ashes. "On Tisha B'Av, I heard a *rav* state that it is a Jew's obligation to 'mourn with the rest' of Klal Yisrael. We, who saw the Churban [destruction of the Temple] close up, couldn't help but mourn. What we needed was to find the joy in Judaism—so that we could *rejoice* with the rest." JA