

## Don't Throw Out the Baby with the Bath Water

■ While I had not grown up with NCSY, nor did I even hear of this organization until the age of 18, my memories of the wonderful “mother of all *kiruv* organizations” are quite different than the images of the NCSY that we have heard about these past two years.

For about two-and-a-half years (around 25 years ago), I joined the ranks of NCSY as an advisor for the New Jersey, New England and Central East Regions. I was initiated into NCSY with a phone call from the dedicated director of NCSY at that time, Rabbi Baruch Taub who invited me to lead an NCSY summer tour to Israel. I did so, and was hooked. Having attended more than 30 conventions (and having served as head advisor at a national convention at the Pine View Hotel), I witnessed nothing less than a youth revolution taking place across America. Almost every teenager that joined NCSY became a success story and helped build *Yiddishkeit* for the next generation.

While I left NCSY after two-and-a-half years to learn in Eretz Yisrael, I left much richer for having met so many gifted and talented young people, including many of those featured in the “NCSY Alumni” section in the spring 2002/5762 issue of your fine magazine. They showed exemplary leadership then, and the brief sketches of their current positions show that they continue to do so today as well.

This is the NCSY that we all remember and that we were all a part of. Clearly what happened is tragic, and needs to be corrected in every way possible, but sadly, the media has thrown out the baby with the bath water. Any organization that has pro-

duced even one of those NCSY alumni featured deserves our recognition and praise. An organization that has produced *all* of those people (and thousands like them) deserves not only our recognition and praise, but also our everlasting support and gratitude, especially in these difficult days.

Thank you for restoring our pride and faith in this wonderful organization. May NCSY continue to go *mechayil el chayil*.

**Rabbi Aryeh Z. Ginzberg  
Rav of Chofetz Chaim Torah Center  
Cedarhurst, NY**

Your articles (“Leaders Then and Now: Profiles of NCSY Alumni”) brought back many fond memories of my years (1975-78) as co-chapter president of Or Hanegev, Southern Region NCSY. Rabbi Leff, whom you profiled in the article, was the rabbi of our *shul* (Young Israel of Greater Miami in North Miami Beach, Florida) at that time and encouraged me to take on the leadership of the NCSY youth group. I didn't feel ready for such a task, but he felt I was, so I did. I've never regretted that decision.

Thanks to NCSY, I gained valuable leadership skills and life experience through organizing *Shabbatonim*, teaching children about Judaism and becoming a regular participant in local Jewish community events. I was even interviewed about NCSY on a local Jewish radio program at the tender age of 15.

NCSY gave me the opportunity to meet Jewish high school students from all over the Southern United States at conventions in Savannah, Charleston and Miami Beach, whom I'm sure I wouldn't have met otherwise. Although I was brought up in an observant home, there were many people who were not as fortunate, and I

know they became observant as a direct result of NCSY programs.

NCSY also had a profound effect in my choosing Jewish education as a profession, one I have been involved with for over 20 years. Thanks for the trip down memory lane!

**Esther (Nemtsov) Tauby  
Richmond, British Columbia  
Canada**

Having grown up in Indianapolis in the 1970s I found your section on NCSY alumni to be a real treat. I probably lived the furthest of any of the Indianapolis NCSYers from the *shul* [Ed.: see profile on Lisa Kermaier.] My hike, in frigid winter temperatures and torrid summer heat, was close to five miles each way. In my senior year, my family moved a mere two miles away from the city's two Orthodox synagogues. For me, this was nothing short of a godsend.

NCSY, at least in those pioneer years, was very successful in outreach work because it gave Jewish youngsters a sense of real ownership about their connection to God and Torah. For me, part of that ownership was the sweat that drenched my suit every Shabbat to and from *shul*. It is interesting that since my marriage my house has become, for my less observant relatives, the center point for their connection to Jewish holidays and lifecycle events. I often study *mishnayot* during breaks at my office and even served as an NCSY advisor in the 1980s in Chicago. All of these would not have come to pass were it not for the time I spent as a member of the Indianapolis NCSY chapter a quarter of a century ago!

**David Blatt  
Chicago, IL**

*Ed.: As a result of the positive response generated by an article detailing his personal struggle with depression (“Dimensions of Torment: A Young Man's Story of Surviving Depression,” fall*

*2001), Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot coordinated a conference on mental health and the Orthodox community, run in cooperation with the Orthodox Union and other organizations. The conference, which was held in New York and was the first of many such conferences to be held in various communities, spawned renewed interest in the original article.*

## Treating Mental Illness

■ A web page on [www.ou.org](http://www.ou.org) titled “Mental Health and the Orthodox Community” speaks about a recent conference held at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and emphasizes “the need to go for treatment, therapy, and the effectiveness of modern medications.” A linked page contains an article from *Jewish Action*, written by Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot praising not only psychiatric drugs but also electroshock, which he claims is “extremely safe and effective.”

There is no mention of the many people, including those in our community, who have been harmed by biopsychiatric interventions, or of psychiatrists who are critical of biopsychiatry. Nor is there any mention of psychiatric coercion, that is, when people are forced to submit to psychiatric interventions without their consent or full knowledge of potential adverse effects. I realize that these omissions are due to ignorance and a lack of awareness of the experiences of psychiatric survivors, but the exclusion of psychiatric survivors from the Jewish community needs to be addressed.

**Stephen Mendelsohn, Editor  
Jewish Access (newsletter of the  
Accessible Shuls and Attitudes Project)  
New Britain, CT**

## Rabbi Helfgot Responds

1. In the lengthy 3000-word essay reflecting on the Orthodox community and my experiences with depression, published in *Jewish Action*, I included, in passing, two short sentences regarding electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Contrary to Mr. Mendelsohn's assertion I did not “praise” ECT, but

simply stated that “*in extreme cases, sometimes ECT is even warranted.*” “Extreme cases” refers to people who are severely suicidal and who have not responded, over a long period, to talk therapy or various anti-depressant medications.

2. In my comments, I noted specifically that it was “modern day methods of applying this therapy” that have been found to be “extremely safe and effective.” While methods of ECT practiced in the 1960s, '70s and '80s were less effective, sometimes painful in their administration and caused more long-term cognitive side effects, such as memory loss, the current preferred method of unilateral ECT to the non-dominant side of the brain is carefully administered, pain-free, very effective and has less than one-sixth the incidences of side-effects of bi-hemispheric brain therapy. Current research, such as that cited by Dr. Peter Whybrow in his book, *A Mood Apart* (Basic Books, 1997), Dr. Richard Abrams in his seminal text, *Electric Convulsive Therapy* (Oxford University Press, 1992) and Andrew Solomon in his comprehensive *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* (Scribner, 2001), puts the effectiveness rate of modern day ECT at 85 to 90 percent with low incidences of significant cognitive and physiological side-effects.

3. I fully concur with Mr. Mendelsohn that this extreme medical intervention, like all medical interventions, is subject to abuse and was in its more primitive stages used inappropriately. I also concur that patients should be made aware of all potential risks or side-effects, even remote ones, of this therapy just as with any other medical procedure. Finally, I agree in principle that as a general rule full patient consent to such a procedure must be obtained. At the same time, I am sure that even Mr. Mendelsohn will concede that in the rare and extreme situation where a person constitutes an immediate danger to himself—and all other methods of psychiatric and pharmacological intervention have not been effective—fully informed consent of family members to begin such treatment on the suicidal individual may be the correct moral, legal and halachic option to be pursued. **JA**