

CONFESSIONS

of a Small-Town Rebbetzin

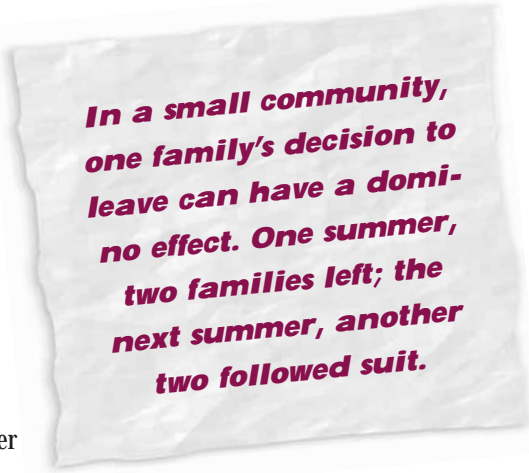
BY RENA LEVY

Some fifteen years ago, my husband and I were struggling with infertility. Aside from seeking treatment, we were advised by my husband's *rav* to move to a community where few others would go, and where we would have the opportunity to do a lot of *chesed*. In the merit of this, the *rav* said, God would grant us our wish to have a family. We chose a community on the West Coast that had been through some rough times and needed strong leadership. Indeed, with my husband serving as rabbi of the small Orthodox shul, we had tremendous opportunities for *chesed*. We invited guests to Shabbat meals, led *shiurim* and arranged for scholars-in-residence, family *Shabbatonim* and one-on-one tutoring. Through all of our efforts, we were grateful to see a slow but steady stream of congregants become *ba'alei teshuvah*. Sure enough, a few years after we moved, we were blessed with a child. Today, we have three beautiful children.

But life out of town was not always so easy. It was difficult to obtain Jewish books and materials as well as certain kosher foods. When our sons were born, we had to fly in the *mohel*. Because there was no eruv, on Shabbat I either had to stay at home with my young children or hire a non-Jewish woman to push the stroller. On more

than one occasion, I forgot to remind her to pick us up from shul.

Since there were so few *frum* families in the city, it was quite isolating socially. Our children suffered as well since they couldn't eat in most of their friends' homes. We had no choice but to become close to people who had a very different lifestyle than our own.



In a small community, one family's decision to leave can have a domino effect. One summer, two families left; the next summer, another two followed suit.

The greatest challenge, however, was educating our children. In a community of 15,000 Jews, only around one hundred families were *frum*. The local community day school, which was run by the federation, tried to cater to children from all backgrounds. This often resulted in the *frum* students feeling like social oddballs since they couldn't attend events that took place on Shabbat or go to certain parties.

Because the school was committed to pluralism, the teachers would invite

guest speakers from across the Jewish spectrum. Some of the *frum* parents in town opted to send their children to public school, preferring that they receive no formal Jewish education rather than a diluted one. They would then supplement their children's Jewish education either through the local Chabad Hebrew school or the Orthodox Union's highly successful youth group, NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth), or both. Other families, frustrated with the lack of options, chose to move. In a small community one family's decision to leave can have a domino effect. One summer, two families left; the next summer, another two followed suit.

When our eldest son, Eitan, turned five, my husband and I, along with a group of parents, decided to start an Orthodox day school. That first year, we opened up a pre-school with ten children. Classes were held on shul premises. The next year, the student body doubled. Ecstatic, we hired more teachers. Unfortunately, in the years that followed the school lost some students; in order to survive, we had to combine classes and genders, creating a veritable one-room schoolhouse. Ironically, this turned out to be a blessing; it became a Montessori-type school, with each child learning at his or her own level. Additionally, there were no cliques, just one large, united, heterogeneous group of children: a community of children.

Rena Levy is a pseudonym.


It was an innovative, child-centered school. Drawing upon Nehama Leibowitz' approach to teaching, our Judaic studies teachers challenged students to seek out problems in the text and find the answers themselves. Emphasizing Hebrew language, teachers assigned an Israeli pen pal to each student and reinforced stories read in the classroom using audio-visual aids such as CDs and videos. Every Friday the children baked *challah* and participated in a school-wide *kabbalat Shabbat*, where each week, a different student would share a *devar Torah*. Similarly, our general studies staff used many creative means to get the children to learn.

Yet, it was difficult. As one of the three Judaic studies teachers, I had to be prepared to teach any grade at any given time, according to the need. In addition to serving as *rav*, my husband was the educational director of the school and had to raise funds to keep it going. My husband and I were exhausted. We continually asked ourselves, Is this the right thing for our children? Shouldn't they be in a "real" classroom, with some twenty other children of their own gender? Shouldn't they see what it's like to live in a "real" *frum* community?

Two years ago, when Eitan was almost eleven, we finally caved in. My husband was offered a rabbinic position near a city with a large Orthodox community. We decided to move.

Little did we know that we were in for a big surprise. We settled into our new community and chose a traditional-type yeshivah for our children. Eitan was placed in a large class where he surpassed most of his classmates in reading and comprehension, in both English and Hebrew. After a few weeks, I noticed he had developed a new hobby: doodling. I soon discovered the reason behind his pastime—boredom. He had never been bored in his previous school. But this yeshivah used *teitch*—the European method of teaching *Chumash*

— translating word for word, even though the sentences usually do not make sense grammatically. How boring to face the same "translation sheets" day after day! When do students learn the beauty of the Torah? I wondered. How do they develop minds like the commentators?




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Eitan was miserable. It was a struggle to wake him up every morning. I offered a few suggestions to his teacher on how to make the lessons more exciting. To no avail. I ended up pulling my son and a few other students out of class for "enrichment." But hadn't I already done that in the small school?

Eitan was homesick and missed his friends and teachers from the "old school," with whom he had made a real connection. Soon after our second child, Yishai, began attending the same yeshivah, we realized it was a mistake. A kindergartener, Yishai had some difficulty sitting still and focusing on the task at hand. His teachers were concerned about his restlessness during circle time. My husband and I, on the other hand, felt that since Yishai was only four years old, his impatience shouldn't be the main concern. Why weren't his teachers concerned about other areas of his development as well—his gross motor skills, social and emotional development, et cetera? We ultimately decided that this yeshivah was not working for him, and ended up changing schools in the middle of the year. Thankfully, we found a school in our area that is more accepting of him.

Overall, our children had been happier in the small community. They were the "children that the village raised," the pride and joy not only of their parents, but of an entire congregation. Now they are just faces in the crowd, trying to fit in. In retrospect, in our old community, my husband and I had not fared too badly either—despite the challenges, we had important and enjoyable work and a close circle of friends.

As a religious person, I believe that the move must be part of a greater plan and that it must be for our ultimate good. After all, we left for the right reason: to provide a better spiritual environment for our children. But every now and then, especially when the kids ask, "Ima, when are we going back?" I am plagued with self-doubt: Was moving the right decision for us? Perhaps living in a small town was better for us as a family. I have met wonderful people who were raised in communities with minimal Jewish resources. Perhaps growing up in such places helps build within one a strong identity and character. Moreover, these Jews tend to be more tolerant of others and more confident in their way of life. I am not about to preach



that we should all raise our children in small communities. After all, the challenges can be quite overwhelming. But I often wish we could raise our children in both places at the same time. **IA**