



Coming Back Home to Judaism — Deep in the Heart of Texas

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

On a typical Sunday morning you'll rarely find a soul on the streets of Sherman, a city in North Texas. Most everybody has gone to church, and Sherman, fixed firmly in the Bible Belt, has got plenty of churches. This small city also boasts flour and feed mills, cotton gins, textile factories, two Starbucks, one Wal-Mart and a family by the name of Schachar, who has fallen in love with Shabbat, *kashrut* and everything having to do with *Yiddishkeit*.

"It's like a magnet is pulling them [to Judaism]," says Shimon Lachterman, assistant regional director of the NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) Southwest Region.

Glenn Schachar, a Brooklyn native who moved to Texas over two decades ago, followed an inexplicable soul-tug to a class given by the Dallas

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Area Torah Association (DATA), Dallas' *kollel*. One Wednesday evening, nine years ago, Schachar was joined by his wife and four children for the hour-and-a-half journey to DATA. As Providence would have it, Rabbi Israel Lashak, director of the NCSY

says Rabbi Lashak. He invited Jodie to come to NCSY's weekly class at the local Teen Torah Center to socialize, learn about the *parashah* and do a "slurpy run." "That's how it all started," says Rabbi Lashak.



Rabbi Israel Lashak, director of the NCSY Southwest Region, Erik Schachar and Shimon Lachterman, assistant regional director. Through stimulating classes, trips across the country, Shabbatonim and the ever-popular slurpy runs, NCSY continues to help Jewish youth find their Jewish heritage.

Southwest Region, which encompasses Texas, Mexico and Colorado, was learning at DATA with his *chavruta* that evening.

"When the DATA rabbis noticed Jodie, the Schachars' teenage daughter, they promptly introduced her to me,"

Discovering NCSY

Jodie continued to join her parents for the Wednesday night Torah commute to Dallas; they would drop her off at her class and then head out to theirs.

"Rabbi Lashak has a way of relating to teenagers," says Jodie. "He makes Judaism so positive and so doable without [putting] any pressure [on anyone]. His attitude is 'We're going to New Orleans for an NCSY event. You're the right age. Would you like to come? Before you go, maybe you should come to some of

our Wednesday night sessions, just to see what it's like.' I showed up and found out they'd prefer me [coming] in a skirt. I thought, 'Okay, I can deal with that.'"

Each class served to whet Jodie's appetite. "Everyone was so into

Judaism. I was taken aback by how much they knew. In my high school, I was the only Jewish kid ... and I was the Jewish expert. After joining NCSY, I realized I didn't know anything," says Jodie.

Soon after, she began attending NCSY *Shabbatonim* and reveled in the atmosphere. She joined the NCSY board and spent a summer at NCSY's Summer Experience for Girls (SEG) in New York's Catskill Mountains. Rabbi Lashak arranged for Jodie to go on NCSY's Israel Summer Experience (ISE)—the first time anyone in the Schachar family had gone to Israel.

"I remember standing in Jerusalem, watching the people walking by and thinking, 'I have never seen so many *kippot* in my entire life!'" says Jodie. "To see a whole Jewish country ... I just can't describe the feeling."

Upon her return, she told Rabbi Lashak she wanted to continue her Jewish education. He helped arrange a year of learning for her at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

While in Israel, Jodie became concerned about her family's precarious spiritual predicament back in Sherman. "I called my Dad and said, 'We've got to get Joel, Erik and Natalie into [a] Jewish day school,'" recounts Jodie. "I told him it wasn't a choice anymore. They are losing out every day." Glenn agreed and looked into enrolling Joel in Yavneh Academy of Dallas, a coed Jewish high school, and his younger children in Akiba Academy of Dallas, a Jewish elemen-

tary school.

The Schachars Go to Yeshivah

Joel made his disinterest in attending Jewish day school very clear. "He sat down and cried and refused to go," says Glenn. "Joel was in the school band at the time and was excit-

His father made a deal with him. Joel was to try the day school for six months, if he didn't like it, he could return to public school.

ed about the prospect of wearing the band uniform. He told me there was no way he was going to wear a yarmulke. I reminded him of how proud he felt about wearing his band uniform. I asked him what the difference was between that and wearing a yarmulke and *tzitzit*, [which is] another uniform. In fact, [the latter] has been around a lot longer."



Rabbi Yaakov Rich, a rebbe at Yavneh Academy of Dallas (background) and Natalie Schachar (foreground). Natalie and her brother, Erik, travel one hundred and thirty miles every weekday to school.

His father made a deal with him. Joel was to try the day school for six months, if he didn't like it, he could return to public school. After a month, Joel loved it.

"Let's say my expectations were incorrect. [Yeshivah] changed the way I

viewed religion," says Joel, now twenty and studying at Machon Lev in Jerusalem. "But [NCSY] gave me the Jewish experiences I needed before I could jump into the Yavneh classes full time." Recently, Joel announced his decision to make *aliyah*.

Worth the Sacrifice

Currently, Erik, seventeen, and Natalie, fifteen, travel one hundred and thirty miles every weekday to attend Yavneh. Vicki, their stepmother and devoted driver, works in Akiba's preschool.

"I'm very proud that the children feel committed enough to their Jewish education to be willing to travel three hours a day," says Vicki. "It's not easy getting up at five o'clock every morning."

The Schachar kids know what it means to feel isolated. "Growing up in a small town, it's just you and your

Judaism. You have to have strong faith in God, because there [are] so many people trying to persuade you to become a Gentile," says Erik.

And the Children Will Teach Their Parents

Jodie says she knows many teenagers who come home after an NCSY event eager to keep kosher only to meet a brick wall of parental

resistance. "I came home after a summer with NCSY and told my parents I wanted to keep kosher, and they said, 'Okay, tell us what we've got to do,'" relates Jodie.

"[Subsequently,] I told them we needed to keep a real Shabbat. Before

we began, I taught them all the songs I knew. We sang the entire NCSY bencher! Their attitude is, "This is great, keep going—teach us."

Keeping kosher in Sherman means frequent trips to Dallas to purchase meat along with other kosher food. What many would see as a sacrifice, the Schachars view as an opportunity. "My father was born in Jerusalem and immigrated to America in 1926, when he was eight-years-old," says Glenn. "My grandfather actually had rabbinic training, but succumbed to the socialist movement and dropped everything Jewish in his life."

Glenn says he first felt a sense of his Jewishness while attending Loyola University, a church-run institution in Chicago. After settling in Texas, Glenn became more interested in Judaism and sought avenues of Jewish learning. He heard about a two-day Aish HaTorah Discovery Seminar in Dallas and decided to attend. "It opened my eyes to the fact that there was something beyond being a bagel-Jew," he says. Part mechanic, part philosopher and all smiles, the CEO of Glenn's Auto continues to be a popular address for cars and people in need of a little boost.

"Glenn truly wants his children to continue growing in Judaism. He considers all this a blessing for them," says Rabbi Lashak.

Equally enthused about discovering the beauty of *Yiddishkeit*, Vicki exemplifies a blossoming *aishet chayil*. "I used to feel an emptiness. When I started learning about Judaism and the traditions, I felt I had come home, that I was where I belonged," she says.

"Being Jewish in a small town is no small struggle. One is targeted all the time," says Lachterman. "Texas is full of missionaries, and [there are] churches on every corner. It takes a lot of strength, and dedication to one's Jewish roots to push away the powerful current of assimilation. Despite the pressures, the Schachars choose to keep Shabbat, to go

to synagogue, to strive for the truth."

Tilling a Torah Terrain

Rabbi Lashak says when he arrived in Dallas close to fifteen years ago, Jewish education for youth was far from ideal. Through stimulating classes, trips across the country, *Shabbatonim* and the ever-popular slurpy runs, NCSY continues to help the area's Jewish youth find the kind of educational, social and spiritual connection that speaks to who they are.

"NCSY is the only national outreach organization for teens today," says Steve Burg, national director of NCSY. "The Schachar family is the reason the OU funds NCSY. There are thousands of families like the Schachars out there who can benefit from our programs."

Jodie, now twenty-two and engaged, says she's looking forward to building an "amazing Jewish home" and raising her children as observant Jews. When referred to as the one responsible for bringing her family to Torah, she flatly dismisses the suggestion. "It was my Dad. Everybody calls him a frustrated Orthodox Jew. He's really all about the faith."

Glenn speaks from the heart when he expresses his pride in, and gratitude for, the path his children have taken. "They see that their lives can be so much more, and they can have goals that transcend themselves," he says. "Rather than just getting up every day and figuring out how much money to earn and how many material possessions they can buy, they realize life should be more than that. I don't force my kids to take on Judaism; I just provide them with the platform to see it. Rabbi Lashak and NCSY inspire them, and they, in turn, inspire me." JA

To help NCSY continue to reach out to families like the Schachars or to sponsor an event, please call Andrew Goldsmith at 212-613-8132.