



TENNESSEE TORAH



By Toby Bulman Katz

Pardon me boy, is this the Chattanooga Choo Choo?" Hum that old song as you read this story.

"rabbinate." We had no children of our own when we moved there, but the "rabbinate" was always full of congregants and guests.

the children were halachically Jewish. That alone speaks volumes about what we were facing.

Some of my lessons proved controversial. When I taught the students about Yom Kippur, one girl told me that you break your fast right after services, and then you have lunch at Denny's. I said, "I'm not commenting on what anyone does, I'm just telling you the *halachah*." Big mistake. Her father was the president of the Reform temple. And I had committed a sin against pluralism.

Every Rosh Chodesh I organized a party in the school with music and dancing. I taught the children to do the "yeshivah shuffle"—the standard men's dance at *frum* weddings. (With two left feet, I never quite mastered anything else.) Everybody in a circle, shuffle, shuffle.

Iknew that people would not realize my hair was covered if I wore a *sheital*, so I wore scarves. One bold student asked me, "Why do you always wear a *shmata* on your head?"

I did wear a *sheital* on Shabbos. Once, in shul, I was in the middle of Shemoneh Esrei when I heard a kerfuffle behind me. A new congregant had started to leave when she noticed that the other women were wearing hats or doilies. An older woman said to her,

Just after we moved in, I got a phone call from the local "non-denominational" Jewish day school. The Judaic studies teacher was taking swigs from a brown paper bag until he was sloshed. The school was in desperate need of a new teacher, stat.

Only later did I discover that I was the first Orthodox teacher they

had ever hired.

A few days later, there was a back-to-school barbecue for parents and staff, near the swimming pool. Michael and I were not sure whether or not to dress formally. Imagine our shock when we got there and found everyone in bathing suits!

The fifth-grade boys and girls I taught knew the Shema, but they had not been taught how to treat holy books. I taught them to kiss a *sefer* when closing it, and not to put a *siddur* or *Chumash* on the floor. I hope they still remember.

Over time, I discovered that few of

When I was young, I always wanted to follow in my parents' footsteps and be an out-of-town *rebbetzin*. I married a South African, lived in Johannesburg and later Australia, but finally achieved my goal in 1986, when my husband, Michael, became the rabbi of the Orthodox shul in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

For sheer human drama, no place else we ever lived beat Chattanooga.

My husband didn't like the word "parsonage," so he called our home the

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“Don’t worry, you can come in with your hair uncovered; look, even the *rebbetzin* doesn’t cover her hair.”

I was always surprised at how little our congregants knew. Very few of them were observant. Sociologically they were not much different from the Reform and Conservative congregants.

Our shul had about thirty families; most of the members were elderly. For the few children in our shul, I started a Sunday school—around my dining



Children at a shul Chanukah party.

Photos and illustrations courtesy of Toby Bulman Katz

table. I made sure to give the kids plenty of nosh so they would learn a few *berachot*, and I played Jewish records for them.

One ten-year-old was very argumentative and always had questions, “How do you know this is true?” “Who says we have to do it this way?” Her parents were very intellectual and secular. I used to think I was getting nowhere with her, but one day her mother let it slip that her daughter was having the same debates at home that she had with me—except there, she turned them around and used *my* lines against her parents!

Our congregants often surprised us. I once had a discussion with one of our congregants about the fact that most Israelis are not religious. Mr. Mentz became very agitated: “Don’t they understand that the Land is holy, and God will take it away from them if they don’t keep Shabbos?”

I was astonished. “Mr. Mentz, why

are you getting so aggravated; you don’t keep Shabbos yourself?” He answered, “It’s too hard for me, but I know it’s the right thing to do.”

Another elderly man in our shul, Mr. Stern, made a point of asking my husband a complex *she’eilah* soon after we arrived. This signaled that even though he drove to shul on Shabbos, he was learned and generally observant, and he accepted the rabbi’s authority.

Mr. Stern had had heartache in his life. His son was deaf and had been sent to a special boarding school. The son had never received a Jewish education, and as an adult, converted to Christianity. The heartbroken father came to my husband and said, “Here are my *meshumads* [apostate] tefillin, maybe you can use them.” He and his wife sat shivah for their only child.

Among the few fully observant people in

our shul was an elderly couple, the Rubins. Mrs. Rubin was another Jew who had experienced heartache. Her mother had died while giving birth to her. It was during World War I, in Russia, and her father was away, fighting in the czar’s army. The oldest brother, a boy of thirteen, somehow managed to support all the children.

He used to take his newborn sister around to all the nursing mothers in the *shtetl*. “Please, can you nurse my baby for me?”

In the end, one kindly lady took in the baby. Mrs. Rubin told me that she became very attached to that woman. When her father came home from the war and took her back, she felt like she was being taken from her mother. “I mourn for her to this day.”

She was already about eighty when she told me this story, and amazingly,

her older brother was still alive, an active man in his nineties, religious, living in Memphis. When he came to visit his “baby sister,” I made sure to meet the hero of the story.

I was always surprised at how little our own congregants knew. Sociologically they were not much different from the Reform and Conservative congregants.

For years, the conductor on the Chattanooga Choo Choo—a trolley that takes tourists around the downtown sites—was a Chattanooga native with a long beard. He would ask visitors where they were from, and rattle off the train schedules of their hometowns. For obviously Jewish passengers, he would switch to Southern-accented Yiddish! Such a Confederate he was! He was actually a Chassid who had grown up in one of the few *shomer Shabbos* homes in Chattanooga.

From time to time observant tourists would stay at the motel next door to the shul. When they came to



The author’s students wearing Chattanooga Day School T-shirts for a school performance, ca. 1987.

shul, we would beg them to come to us for Shabbos lunch.

We were so disappointed if we couldn’t persuade them.

As I mentioned, I encountered some resistance, and even hostility, teaching in the day school, but I also made some good friends. At the first parent-teacher conference, one mother, Laura Shiloh, told me that I reminded her of an Orthodox sister-in-law whom she loved.

Shortly afterwards, the Shilohs' older daughter had her Bat Mitzvah in the Conservative congregation. Mr. Shiloh's Orthodox brother and sister-in-law came for the occasion, and stayed at our house. There was no eruv in Chattanooga, and the Orthodox cousins asked Laura's kids to carry candy home from shul for them. Laura had never heard of the *issur* (prohibition) against carrying, but she immediately said to her children, "If your cousins can't carry on Shabbos, neither can you."

The cousins then told Laura's kids, "You can carry because you're not Jewish." Laura came tearing over to my house the next day. "I want to be as Jewish as my sister-in-law. I want my children to be as Jewish as their cousins."

It turned out that Laura was a Conservative convert. She and her children ended up having Orthodox conversions, and joined our shul. Because they lived too far to walk to shul, they often spent Shabbos in our home. I'm an adrenaline junkie and basically make Shabbos in one frenzied burst of activity, the last two hours before *lecht bentshen* (candle lighting). Every time I ran around frantically throwing chicken in the oven, soup in one pot and *chulent* in another, I would say to Laura, "Don't learn my bad habits." To no avail. Eventually, Laura got the hang of making Shabbos in two frantic hours. It's not one of my more glorious achievements.

Laura often said she learned more from being in our house than from formal lessons. Once I heard one of her kids singing in the shower, and I told her, "You can't sing Hebrew songs in the bathroom." Laura commented, "You

see? I never would have learned that if I hadn't been in your house."

I also became very friendly with one of the other Judaic studies teachers at the day school. Jennifer—later Peninah—was the regular *ba'al korei*



The author and her husband referred to their home as "the rabbinate," which was always full of congregants and guests.

(Torah reader) at the Conservative congregation. My husband eventually converted her and her two small children, too. He wouldn't do it, however, until her husband, a born Jew, agreed to keep Shabbos.

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In our own shul, people could not understand why my husband was so uncompromising about conversions. "Hardly anyone in the shul is observant, why do the converts have to be *frummer* than everyone else?" When we told people to *daven* at home rather than drive to shul, or when we persuaded people to move out of town for their children's education, our congregants were resentful.

One woman had had an ostensibly Orthodox conversion before we arrived, but she did not keep kosher or Shabbos. She and her husband considered my husband's stringent standards an implicit slur on her conversion. This aroused tremendous animosity on their part.

Another couple, affluent and influential, wanted my husband to convert their son's fiancée, but the bride was honest enough to admit that she had no intention of living an Orthodox life. Impasse.

Soon there were two factions in the shul, the faithful loyalists and the "fire-the-rabbi" contingent. Every difficult halachic issue carried the possibility of imminent loss of employment.

Another problem arose: Some Conservative converts, we found, were under the impression that they had had Orthodox conversions. My husband got the shul board to pass a resolution requiring non-Orthodox converts who used our mikvah to sign a form: "I am aware that my conversion will not be recognized by Orthodox Jews." The Conservative rabbi was furious. There were stormy board meetings over our supposed refusal to allow Jewish women to use our mikvah. Some of our own members didn't know the difference between *taharas hamishpachah* and conversion.

As the mikvah lady in town (I wore many hats!), I assured the board that we never denied use of the mikvah to any Jewish woman. In fact, the wife of a Conservative rabbi in another town used to come to our mikvah. (After losing contact with that rabbi and his wife for fifteen years, I recently "found" them again, thanks to the wonders of the Internet. They are now Orthodox and live in Israel.)

There was a non-Jewish family living in the Georgia mountains, near



An article about Rabbi Michael Katz in the Chattanooga News-Free Press on September 27, 1986, discusses his appointment as rabbi of Beth Sholom Congregation.

the Tennessee border, who used to frequent our shul. They had ten children, all homeschooled. The Clintocks knew the Bible by heart and had decided to convert to Judaism. Initially, Michael turned them away, but they persisted. They had a small car from which they had removed the back seat, creating a large floor space contiguous with the trunk. When all the kidlets piled out of the car, it looked like one of those clown cars at the circus.

Today the Clintocks are Orthodox Jews living in Israel, and the children—mostly grown and married by now—are real *bonei Torah*. One of the daughters recently phoned to say hello, and to reminisce about her earliest memories of me, when she was six years old: “You told me that you can’t *daven* with gum in your mouth. It was the first *halachah* I ever learned.”

One fascinating person we became friendly with in Chattanooga was Sam Abrams, who despite his Jewish-sounding name was an ex-Baptist minister. His study had led him to adopt the *Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach*, the Noahide Laws. A charismatic personality, he persuaded his entire flock to turn its Baptist church into a Noahide congregation! The mem-

bers of the congregation took down the steeple and all the Christian symbols, and looked for a rabbi to teach them. Their search led them to us. My husband ended up teaching them for several years, and he still maintains contact with many of them.

Each was quite a story at our house. We invited many congregants to our Sedarim, and these drawn-out affairs lasted till three a.m. Some people were appalled, but others begged to come back year after year. One year, minutes before *yom tov*, I plugged in a lamp and—bang!—the electricity went out. My husband rushed to fix the fuse and got the fridge working, but we read the Haggadah by candlelight.

In my current neighborhood of North Miami Beach people have dual shul memberships and go to each other’s shuls for *simchas*. In Chattanooga, that’s how it was with the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform congregations. The three congregations also approached each other’s members to raise money for their dinner journals.

The result was that the other congregations had a degree of influence over our members. They could withhold donations, and since our shul was very small, we were vulnerable.

One day there was a big pro-choice rally downtown. The non-Orthodox rabbis and Jewish leaders were prominent speakers at the event. In the Bible belt, Chattanooga is home to a large percentage of devout Christians. My husband felt that the rally was a *chillul Hashem*, and spoke to a reporter from the local paper.

Well, the non-Orthodox Jews were most unhappy with the article that resulted. Jews should speak with one voice, they thought—one liberal voice! People who had formerly come to our home for Shabbos meals would cross the street to avoid us. The non-Orthodox rabbis made thundering denunciations from their pulpits.

One inflammatory claim they made was that we really did not consider non-Orthodox Jews to be Jews. (Explain

then why we invested so much effort in outreach?)

Ironically, many members of the Reform temple were not, in fact, Jews, even by Conservative standards. The Conservative movement does not recognize patrilineal descent, for example. Yet, the Reform rabbi did not denounce the Conservative rabbi. In fact, they were allied in their opposition to us. Go figure.

We were very lonely in Chattanooga. We lived two hours away from Atlanta and used to go there to stock up on kosher food. We also used to go there to hear an occasional guest speaker, a visiting *rav* or *rosh yeshivah*. Can you imagine being so hungry for *chizuk* (inspiration) that you would travel two hours each way to hear a speech?

We also started traveling to Atlanta frequently for fertility treatments. After eleven years of marriage, we were still childless. We had plenty of toys in our house to entertain the children who came to visit. We tried to have guests every Shabbos because our house seemed so dark and empty when it was only the two of us.

Meanwhile, a storm broke over our heads because of the newspaper interview. That same weekend, we got a call from close friends in another city who had become aware of a Jewish baby, born with birth defects, who was up for adoption. This is a long story, but the short version is that we left Chattanooga for ten days, and returned home with a new baby.

The opportunity came suddenly—*yeshuas Hashem keheref ayin*, God’s salvation comes in the blink of an eye—and we had nothing in our house for a new baby (except toys). The first night home with the baby, which was a Thursday night, he slept in a cardboard box with soft blankets. The next day—despite the fact that many of our congregants were still angry with us—everyone in the shul showed up bearing gifts. By the end of the day, when I *bentched lecht*, we had a crib, a playpen, a swing, a high chair, baby clothes and diapers.

A year later, we went back to try fertility treatments again. For the first time, I became pregnant. The doctor told me to stay in bed, but it was a few days before Pesach, and I had a toddler to run after. I told people that I was not feeling well and would not be making a shul Seder that year, but one friend called and asked, "Please, can we come to you? We'll cook in the shul kitchen; you won't have to do anything."

Another friend called, "I know you said you don't want to make a Seder, but can we just eat together in the shul? You won't have to wash dishes, we'll use paper..." Another call, and another. Before we knew it, we were *kashering* the shul kitchen and hosting a Seder for thirty people. Stay in bed? Yeah, right.

Soon after that, the "fire-the-rabbi" faction won out, and we left Chattanooga. Our daughter was born in Atlanta, followed by another daughter two years later. Despite his early health problems, our now teenaged son is thriving, *baruch Hashem*. My husband decided that he had had enough of the rabbinate, and went into business. He owns a Judaica store now, which still gives him *kiruv* opportunities but allows him to be his own boss.

Remember Peninah, the Conservative *ba'al korei* whose husband reluctantly agreed to keep Shabbos? They sent their son away for high school, and today he is a real *ben Torah*, who has spent years studying in a yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael. To complete the circle, that son was here in Miami this past summer as part of Torah Umesorah's SEED program, and spent a week learning with my own son! The photograph that Peninah sent me of the two young men together is especially precious to me.

Anyone who is considering a career in the rabbinate or in outreach today has to realize that the challenges are enormous. Inter-marriage is so common that *kiruv* nowadays unavoidably means involvement with non-Jews as well as with Jews.



Although a June 1986 article in the Chattanooga News-Free Press about David Steinberg, the Chattanooga Choo Choo conductor, doesn't mention that he's an Orthodox Jew, he is actually a Chassid who had grown up in one of the few shomer Shabbos homes in Chattanooga.

However, there are many *neshamot* (souls) out there hungering for the truth, and the rewards can be enormous.

Many of our former congregants and friends from Chattanooga still keep in touch with us. Despite the many difficulties we had there, we look back on our days in Chattanooga with some satisfaction. True, we couldn't really build a Torah community there, but we can look at people who were not religious, and some who were not even Jews, yet are today leading Torah lives because our lives touched theirs. We threw them a lifeline, and they grabbed onto it. **IA**

OU Offers Seminars on Synagogue Leadership

Serving as an unparalleled resource for synagogues, the OU's Department of Community and Synagogue Services is hosting several conferences on synagogue leadership throughout the country.

Especially helpful for synagogues in smaller communities, the conferences will focus on effective fundraising and board development.

"By strengthening the synagogue, which is the center of a community, we are supporting and fortifying the community," says Rabbi Mayer Waxman, director of community services. "Smaller communities can often feel isolated; this is the perfect opportunity for them to network, interact and learn from experienced lay leaders and professionals," says Rabbi Waxman.

The OU is planning several one-day conferences to be held over the next few months in Columbus, OH, Fort Lauderdale, FL, as well as Los Angeles, CA, and New York, NY. A larger conference, with a special emphasis on smaller Jewish communities, will be held in Milwaukee, WI, in September.

The seminars, which are geared for shul rabbis, presidents and lay leaders, will feature experts including Andrew Goldsmith, the OU director of financial resource development; Miriam May, a noted consultant for nonprofit organizations and Dr. Alan Singer, executive director of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York.

For more information, contact Rabbi Waxman at 212-613-8285 or waxmanm@ou.org.

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