

SHLICHUS FROM THE OTHER SIDE

SHAYNA CHARTER

My name is Shayna Charter and I am the world's oldest *baalas teshuvah*. Well, maybe not exactly, but I have been a *baalas teshuvah* long enough to have observant children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. That should make me an expert on *shlichus* from the other side.

Most *baalos teshuvah* I have met were spiritual and hunting for meaning in their life or inspired by a Rabbi or Rebbetzin. I was dragged into the fold kicking and screaming. Let's just say it was not my idea.

My father was an atheist who believed that Jews were a superior race but that there was no G-d. His family was not religious even in Russia. My maternal grandparents were observant but didn't pass anything down to their children.

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"The day before our wedding, December 15, 1963. My mother said if we waited until I turned 18 she would make us a wedding. If not, it would be in the rabbi's study. We didn't care. I was 16 and my husband was 20. A Reform rabbi married us in his study. This is the only picture and it was taken the day before." - Shayna

My in-laws were sort of kosher.

I got married at 16 to my husband, Stuart (now Isser Chaim), which was unheard of even in the '60s. I was in high school, he was in college, and we met through mutual friends. We didn't know what we wanted but we did know that we wanted something different for our family. After three and a half years, we were blessed with our oldest daughter and life changed. Debby was born during the Six-Day War, and pride in being Jewish as well as love for Israel was rising among American Jews.

One Saturday morning, my husband decided that since we were beginning our new life as a family, he should start going to shul. After being greeted by ten old men who were thrilled to see a young face, my young husband came home, threw our Chanukah bush out the window and pronounced that we were going to keep kosher, keep Shabbos and become totally observant. We proceeded to argue for the next seven years. I would tell him that if he wanted a religious girl, he should have just married one in the first place. At the time we lived in Malden, MA, a suburb north of Boston. There was a Lubavitch Yeshiva in Boston, but we did not find Chabad of Boston at the



Rabbi Dovid Wichnin receiving *kos shel brachah* from the Rebbe | Photo: JEMID120988

time and we didn't know the Yeshiva existed.

There were a few young couples interested in Judaism, but, unfortunately, the Rabbi in Brockton (non-Chabad, obviously) believed that if you were meant to be *shomer mitzvos*, Hashem would have made sure you were born that way.

So most of us moved out of Malden and went to Brockton, MA, which is south of Boston. We hoped to start a community like Monsey.

In Brockton, I met an observant woman who had gone through the Modern Orthodox system and we became close.

Until that point, whatever I did was for my husband. I had no interest in being *frum*. I thought about leaving him and was completely supported by both our families, who thought he had gone crazy. But I liked him! He was and is a wonderful husband and father.

There was no public kindergarten, so we sent our three little girls to a small preschool in a local shul. This school only went up to first grade, so we enrolled our daughter in the local public elementary school. One of the teachers asked me how I could send our precious Jewish girls to a huge impersonal public school. All of a sudden, my reluctant path to Judaism was now for my children, not just for my husband.

We enrolled them at Maimonides, a co-ed Ivy-League-track Modern Orthodox school. Again, a friend, Rabbi Yisroel Tenenbaum, interceded and introduced us to New England Hebrew Academy, a Lubavitch-run school. At that time Rabbi Dovid Wichnin of blessed memory was the Hebrew principal, and our first contact with Chabad. If you were lucky enough to meet Rabbi Wichnin, you would know that there is never a problem without a solution. We live 30 miles away? Don't worry, there is a carpool. You can't afford tuition? Don't worry, you can work for us as a preschool assistant. Before we knew it, we were part of a Chabad community. We eventually moved to Brookline, MA, where we lived for 25 years and where I began my first *shlichus*. I had the privilege to be an assistant to Mrs. Chaya Devorah Bergstein, who later moved to Farmington Hills, Michigan, where she has been a *shlucha* for many years. Chaya Devorah is my age and became a dear friend and advisor. Her influence on me is immeasurable and I attribute to her the fact that I became completely *frum*. Now a life of Torah was not just for my family; it defined me.

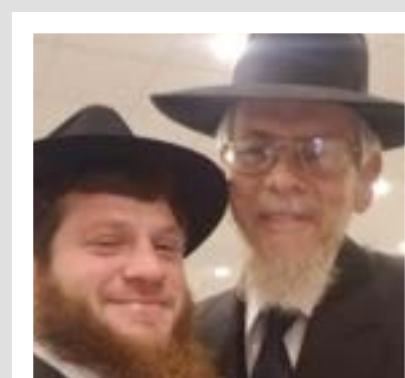
In the 1980s, a young couple, Rabbi Chaim and Mrs. Sara Wolosow, moved to Boston. He became the *Rosh Yeshiva* to a new group of *bachurim*, and my husband started learning nightly with them. Rabbi Tenenbaum,



Shayna Charter (L) and Chaya Devorah Bergstein with their class, 1976.



Shayna Charter (L) with Nechama Prus, 2001.



Reb Isser Chaim Charter with oldest grandchild, Ari Cadaner, 2019.

who had taught our girls in Brockton, was a neighbor. When my husband started to learn with him, Rabbi Tenenbaum said, “Charter, you think you know something? You know nothing!” These new friends didn’t coddle us: They pushed us and persuaded us to take on more *mitzvos* and to never be content with what we had learned. Torah learning is a lifelong pursuit. We also became close to another family of *shluchim* in Boston, Rabbi Chaim and Mrs. Nechama Prus. Nechama was a good friend who was always there to listen, proof that a *shlucha* can be a friend on an equal level. She was the perfect example of a *mashpia*, offering advice without judgment.

The Wolosows encouraged us to have more children. We had already had three in a row and then 16 years passed with no more children. The Wolosows told us to write to the Rebbe and to see a new doctor. We did both, and miracle of miracles, we had another daughter (in 1987) and then a son (in 1990).

Our oldest daughter was not flourishing in Lubavitch Yeshiva. Again, we were advised to write to the Rebbe. We received a strong, clear answer and our girls all were sent away to Bais Rivkah in Crown Heights and Yeshiva Girls’ School in Pittsburgh.

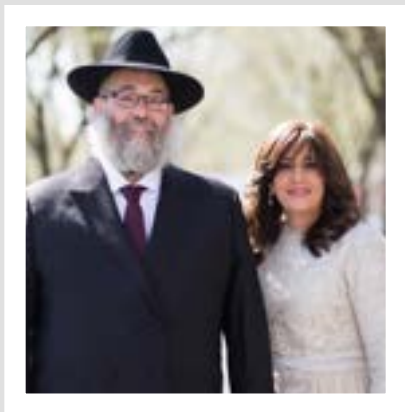
I wasn’t always eager to accept the advice given by the

shluchim and this caused some *shalom bayis* issues, but the Wolosows didn’t give up. We eventually moved to Brooklyn in 2001 so that our youngest two children could attend Beis Chaya Mushka and Oholei Torah. I worked as an administrator for BCM and I still work for them remotely from California (nobody else wanted the job!).

The move to New York changed our lives in many ways. On the positive side, we lived a full Chabad life, but our desire to be more active in outreach was not achieved. Flatbush is a *frum* community and although they welcomed us and the Rebbe picture on our house, we don’t feel we influenced anyone personally.

When our youngest daughter, Shira, and her husband, Rabbi Yosef Muchnik, moved on *shlichus* to Camarillo, California, we moved to California to be closer to her and to get away from the rat race that is New York. This was also our chance to get more directly involved in *shlichus* work.

Dear *shluchim*, you have devoted your lives to fulfilling the Rebbe’s mission to bring the light of *Yiddishkeit* to every Jew in every place. Befriend people in your community and do not be afraid to push them. Every *Yiddishe neshamah* truly wants to live a life of Torah and *mitzvos*. We are just waiting for someone to show us how. Each individual is different, but we respond to love and



Rabbi Chaim and Mrs. Sara Wolosow, *shluchim* in Sharon, Mass.

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The Charters at their granddaughter's wedding, 2019.

friendliness. Being invited to your home accomplishes more than sitting in shul. Teach Yidden to *daven* in Hebrew and the meaning of the prayers. You can do so much more by speaking to people individually than by giving a speech to your congregation. When an entire family takes on more *mitzvos*, then you truly have affected the future for generations to come. Tell them about your childhood and ask about theirs. Reaching out now during corona is even more important. There are a lot of lonely people during the best of times. Just be a friend.

When a family becomes *frum*, remember that they don't have the same support system that a *frum*-from-birth family does. It's important to continue the connection

as the family grows. New BT families know nothing about how to make an *upsheren* or bar mitzvah, or how to navigate the *shidduch* system.

My husband had the wisdom, foresight and determination to make sure our children would grow up within the Jewish fold. Our children do not have any Jewish cousins. Not just not observant—not actually Jewish.

I express my thanks to *shluchim* like Mrs. Bergstein and the Wolosow and Prus families for never giving up on us. Mostly I thank my husband, whose dream was fulfilled. We now have five children, 21 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren (so far). *Baruch Hashem!* ❧



Wedding of the Charters' granddaughter Batsheva Fridman to Mendy Krasniansky.