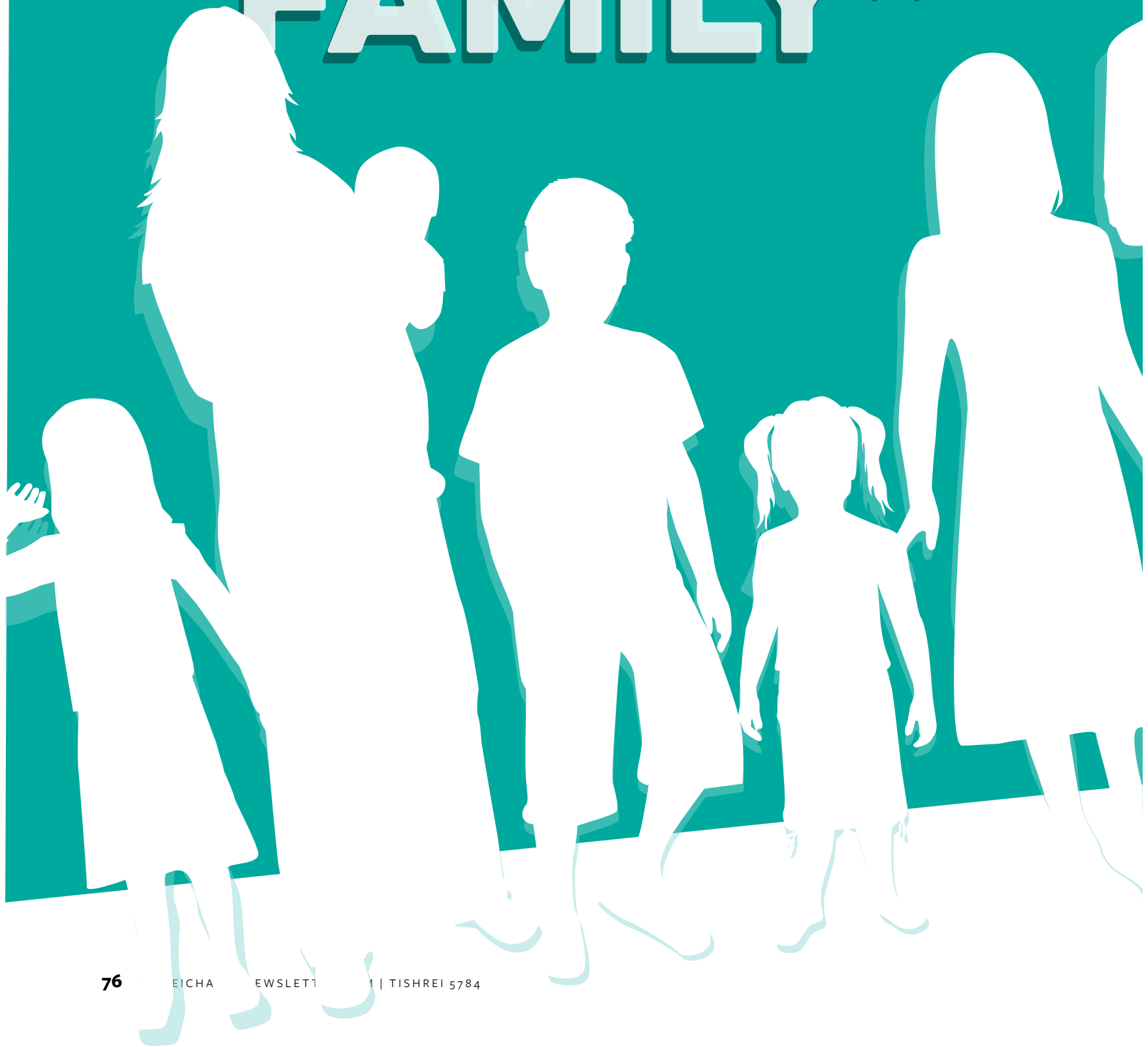


“ONE OF THE FAMILY”





H

Hachnasas orchim is a precious *mitzvah* to us all, yet foster families fulfill it in a manner that is especially worthy, with potentially powerful and wonderful consequences. They

welcome into their homes and hearts children, *neshamos*, who need a home for an indeterminate amount of time, and they give these children everything they possibly can.

The dictionary's definition of "foster family" is "a family that accepts a child for a certain amount of time with the goal of contributing to their physical, emotional, and educational development." This fostering process lasts until the child turns 18; until the child is transferred to a different living situation outside the foster home; until the child is returned to the biological parents; or until the child is adopted.

We gained deeper awareness about the topic of foster families and foster children while conducting the following interviews on this sensitive topic. Many families we approached refused to be interviewed, even after we explained that their names and all identifying details would be completely altered so nobody would recognize them. They refused for many reasons: the topic was too personal, they wished to guard their families and the children from any public exposure, they wished to limit their own distress, and so forth. Of course, all of the names and details of the individuals in this article and their families have been changed in order to protect their privacy. -C.S.

*What's it like to take in a foster child?
What's it like to be a foster child?*

CHANA SHLOUSH

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO TAKE IN A FOSTER CHILD?



1 TO GIVE STABILITY AND SERVE AS A ROLE MODEL

A few years ago, Dina and her husband brought two foster children into their home, a brother and a sister. These children joined the already large family.*

Why did you decide to accept foster children?

A relative of mine told me about some children who had been forced suddenly to leave their home. She took in one of the brothers for a short time, until a different living situation was found for him, and said that two other siblings were in a crisis situation with no one to take care of them. Hearing of such dire circumstances pained me very much. My husband and I discussed the topic thoroughly and decided to go for it. We love guests and have always welcomed many of them into our home. Our home was small, but there was plenty of room in our hearts. When our children heard about the idea, they were very excited and happy.

What do you remember about the beginning?

At first, the difficulties seemed minimal because our motivation was at its peak. My children were happy with their new friends and the foster children tried very hard to behave well and to adjust. The realization that it can be challenging at times only set in after a few months.

We understood and we focused on the actual work of fostering children, which is to prepare those children for real life. Foster children have experienced an unstable home, parents with a troubled marriage, mixed messages, bad values, complicated relationships, and/or terrible parenting. The foster families enable them to experience normal family life, households that operate effectively, healthy marriages, and families that function properly.

How do you view the process they went through from the start until now?

At the beginning they were extremely insecure. They constantly asked, "How long will we stay here?" and, "Why are we here?" They received therapy, and gradually the confusion dissipated. Today they have stability, and that in itself is extremely important. When they first came to us, they constantly spoke about the parents at the previous home where they had stayed, and they spoke in a manner of, "At our house it's not that way," and, "At my house it's done differently." Now they can and do visit their birth parents, and they are able to differentiate between our home and theirs. When they are with us, they know that the home runs according to one style, and when

* All names marked with an asterisk have been changed to protect privacy.

they visit their parents, things run a different way. Their behavior has also become much more stable.

When they first arrived here, they had no boundaries in many basic areas of their lives, such as mealtimes and bedtimes, basic rules regarding games and toys, and their manner of speech. They were nervous in general, worried about having enough food, grabbing toys away from others, and so on. At their parents' home they went to sleep at whatever time they wanted and anywhere they wanted, with no permanent beds of their own or sleep schedule. At our home they received, and came to accept, more orderly habits. We didn't make a special effort to make them acquire good habits. We simply run an organized household, and they happily and easily slipped into our rules and routines, because a child loves limits, and needs and craves them.

They didn't oppose the household routines. The role of a foster family is to enable children to experience a normal home and a secure structure where they know their needs will be addressed in a regular, orderly fashion that they can trust and rely upon. This gives them a proper grasp of functional family life and personal responsibility.

Doesn't the predicament of being in foster care, which is by definition only temporary, lead to additional emotional problems as well as a lack of security?

This is difficult for the children, yes. They want very much to be a part of the family exactly like our own children. If they overhear us or our children telling others that they are foster children, they become angry and hurt. Usually, foster children remain in touch with their birth families, and thus sometimes they have the feeling that they don't really belong to any family.

The foster family itself also needs to make certain adjustments. Some families have a hard time bringing the children close to their hearts, to give them an emotional response and a real connection. Because of this, sometimes they don't require the same things of the foster children as they do of their own, since they view the children as guests. For some families, the challenge of being foster parents even affects their *shalom bayis* or causes problems with their own children.

What are your suggestions to other families that are considering becoming foster families?

It's important to know that foster families need to meet

many specific physical and practical legal requirements. People who have the ability and are privileged physically and emotionally to open their homes and their hearts to children who need it should know that this is a tremendous *mitzvah* that is the equivalent of saving a Jewish life. Of course, it's very important to accept that each of us can only give what we personally can give. It's not an obligation for me to have the solution to every single one of the foster child's needs. Remembering this is vital because a foster family can't always take over and fill the role of a biological family. They need to accept this and not constantly be walking around with guilt feelings over what they can't accomplish. Such negative feelings certainly don't help anybody.

What have you gained by being a foster family?

My children are gaining many valuable life skills. They are becoming far stronger, more caring people who think much more about the needs of others than they otherwise would be. I believe that being a foster family brings blessings.

2 GATHERING DIAMONDS FROM THE FLOOR

Sarah and her family served as a foster family for a number of years for Chanie,* a teenage girl. They had already known Chanie previously and they had invited her to stay with them.*

How would you describe your foster-parenting experience?

Our experience with being a foster family was quite positive. We already knew Chanie very well and knew that she was a sociable, pleasant girl. Her father had married a second time when she was a teenager and she had had a difficult time getting along with her new stepmother. Her birth mother was grappling with serious *parmassah* problems, and Chanie needed a stable living situation. Chanie asked to come and live with us, and we agreed without thinking about it too much.

How did Chanie feel in your home?

I don't think she felt as if this was her actual home. She was already a mature, independent girl and because of it

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I gave her a lot of freedom and didn't get involved in her life more than necessary. On her part, she didn't ask for anything; by nature, she is very refined. I think that if you don't form an emotional connection with a child from an early age, a strong emotional connection won't be formed. The relationship at this point is more like the relationship between two adults, not like a parent and child.

How did your children accept her?

She fit in amazingly well, especially since she already knew everyone in the family. She did have lots of nice physical possessions compared to our children. Her grandmother gave her a computer and a telephone when the grandmother upgraded to better ones for herself. One of my children once said to Chanie, "You have it so good! You get everything you want." Chanie answered her, "That's how it looks to you from the outside. But really, they only give me what I *don't* need." Chanie viewed the gifts as a disadvantage, a liability; the things weren't given to her because of anyone's caring or good intentions, but only when others didn't need them anymore. Besides,

Chanie is truly a girl with good values, and the superficiality of possessions is not her priority.

Chanie, you were Sarah's foster child. What was it like for you?

It was good, I don't remember anything negative about my stay with Sarah. The only thing was that maybe I didn't fully appreciate the very *chassidische* household that I had the *zechus* to be a part of for a number of years. I didn't think deeply about it or pay enough attention to really take to heart what I saw there.

Can you give an example?

Their Shabbos table was a rich experience, with real *toichen*, depth and meaning, with stories and Torah knowledge shared. At the time it didn't interest me much, but today, when I'm already thinking about having my own home and family and how I want it to be run, I'm sorry that I didn't take full advantage of Shabbos at Sarah's because it was like I had the opportunity to gather diamonds from the floor, and I didn't.

Did you feel like a member of the family?

I felt extremely comfortable, but they didn't require of me all that they required of the other children. On the family job list, I had my chores, but if I didn't do them, nobody reminded me. I volunteered myself to wash the dishes. By nature, I'm a social person who goes with the flow, so I didn't find it difficult to fit in, but maybe somebody else would have...

After I left the house, someone told me that one of the other children had been jealous that I had a computer. I didn't know about it, or I forgot. I enjoyed living with the family and I helped in whatever ways I could. Yes, I felt like part of the family. Everyone gave me a good feeling.

They were successful in educating the children in an easy, pleasant, gentle way, and at the same time, they didn't take the easy way out when it came to raising the children. If one of the parents asked that something be done, the kids did it even if they were tired. If one of the children didn't want to say a *dvar Torah* at the Shabbos table, they asked them to read something short, or at least to make the minimum effort. This is a very *chassidische* kind of *chinuch*, and I haven't yet succeeded in unraveling the secret of its success.

Did you adapt to the household order, to the mealtime and bedtime schedule?

In the beginning I was embarrassed to open the refrigerator without asking permission. When I began to help out around the house, that helped me overcome the embarrassment. I slept in a room with one of the girls, and she liked sleeping with the light on while I like the bedroom dark. Ultimately, we compromised by having a dark room and leaving the door slightly open.

What else did you take with you and benefit from during your time with your foster family?

My time with them strengthened me and made me independent and more adaptable. For example, when I went away to seminary, I adjusted to dormitory life immediately. It's an experience that puts you in a different situation, one that builds you as a person. As a result, I'm not fussy or spoiled.

How is your connection with Sarah and her family today?

We keep up a good connection. I come sometimes for Shabbos. At the weddings of the older children, I was just like a member of the family, dressed like the sisters in an identical gown. I was in their family photos, and this was after I had already left their home to go to seminary. All in all, it's a big *zechus* to live for a good amount of time with a truly *chassidische* family, and I am sure that when I have my own family one day, I will put into practice a lot of what I experienced in their home.

3

EACH CHILD IS A WHOLE WORLD

How did your fostering experience begin?

We received a request to accept children from a family of six siblings who had been removed from their home. They came over for a visit and were wonderful children. We agreed to begin the process of becoming a foster family to them. When they moved in, it became clear that the behavior of one of the children was very challenging.

The child was *chutzpadik*, physically hurting people, and was extremely emotional. This was quite difficult for me.

We knew we were dealing with a child who was in the midst of acting out a war that took place between his parents, who fought a great deal in front of him. The boy started having physical fights with my young son, to the point of nearly strangling him. Once I heard the boy shouting at my son in their bedroom. I entered the room and asked, "Why are you shouting?" The boy lashed out at me and asked, "Why are you inciting me? Is it because I'm not your son?" When our older children came home from yeshiva for Shabbos, he would speak to them disrespectfully and would refuse to listen to what they said to him. He always imagined that all of us were talking about him behind his back in our private conversations.

How did you deal with this?

These children had grown up in their father's home from an early age. The parents had divorced, both had remarried, and the children lived with their father and his new wife. At a certain point the father decided to send them out of his home. At the point when we began having great difficulty with the little boy, miraculously, their mother—who had never raised them but had kept up a continuing connection with them—decided that her children were absolutely not going to be placed in foster care, so she took them to live with her. She took in not only the two children who had stayed briefly with us, but the others as well. After years during which she had not raised them herself, she strengthened herself like a lion and notified the agency that come what may, she was taking her children to live with her. And so it was. I personally think that Hashem set up an extreme situation in order to return those children to their mother's embrace. It is truly amazing to see now how this woman reveals new strengths within herself, and how Hashem is giving her the power and ability to raise her children.

Are you still in touch with them?

They came to visit us after they had gone to live with their mother, and I saw that their life with her had had a tremendously positive effect on them. Children need their mother, and it's almost always best when they are with her, despite all her weaknesses and shortcomings. The deep mother-child connection is extremely important.

What would you suggest to people who are considering taking in foster children?

I think a person must carefully examine their energies and abilities before they enter into foster parenting because once you're involved in it, in my opinion there's no backing out. You simply can't play games with the soul of a child who has already been hurt by his parents. I didn't fully understand all the implications involved, nor did I realize the amount and type of energy this would require of me.

In any event, nobody is going to fully grasp the entire depth and breadth of what being a foster parent involves until they are doing it, but it's still worthwhile and important to generally clarify the responsibilities you would be taking on and to decide if your family has the strength, desire, and ability to accept them all, particularly in relation to the specific child under discussion. Even if you served as a foster family in the past, it's vital to remember that each child is an entire world. Their background and their behavior are different than others' and one needs to think everything through as thoroughly as possible since being a foster family is a great responsibility.

May all Jewish children, wherever they may be, have a warm, loving home where their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs are addressed. And may we all move from an individual *geulah* to the *Geulah* of our entire people immediately.

The conversations with Dina, Sarah, Chanie and Malka are based on articles in Kfar Chabad Magazine #1730. They were translated and adapted by Chana Shloush with permission from Kfar Chabad Magazine.

4 MY CHILDREN FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

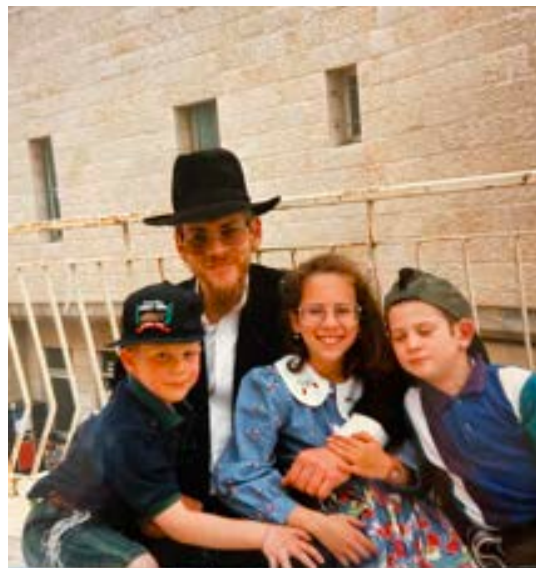
Shayna Charter

How did you first become foster parents?

Our story began with a 14-year-old girl named Chava.* Chava had no parents, and several older siblings were trying to raise her. One sister, having found Chabad and begun a life of Torah observance, wanted to send Chava to a stable Lubavitcher home and give her a chance at a normal life. This amazing girl called every Chabad high school trying to find a family who would accept her little sister. Since we had three girls of our own, someone thought of us, and Chava came to join our family.

Chava was a bright and friendly girl who fit in with my teenagers and did well at school. Considering the drama of her former life, she adapted almost too well. She never spoke about her parents but kept up a relationship with her sister. She was calling us "Mom" and "Dad" and seemed to have buried her past as if it never existed. Oddly, when she was away at camp or visiting friends, she stopped any communication with us. Even so, I felt we had done our job for as long as Hashem wanted her with us. We lived in Boston. After graduating high school, Chava went off to seminary in Crown Heights and I assume she has done well.

I learned that as a foster parent, you might not get the



Our daughter Shira Charter, born after 16 years of secondary infertility, pictured with her father, Isser Chaim Charter; her brother Naftali (L); and her nephew Ari Cadaner.



Our own daughters enjoyed and benefited greatly from the company of our foster children.

happy ending that you expect but nevertheless, you do whatever you can to give a child love and a sense of security. Psychiatrists told me that sometimes when children lose touch with their parents at a young age, it can cause an inability to form close relationships, so I never expected any foster children to keep up a relationship with us.

Our second call came just as we were planning a trip to Israel and the girls were going to overnight camp. We lived in Brookline, MA, and our local *shliach*, Rabbi Chaim Prus, had heard about three little children who were in a non-Jewish foster home. He had received a disturbing call from the children's grandfather. The children's mother, Gail,* was institutionalized with schizophrenia. Schizophrenia can be controlled by medication, but since the drugs can adversely affect an unborn child, Gail would stop her meds whenever she became pregnant. She was in such a bad state that her children were taken away from her and unfortunately the grandparents were not capable of caring for three children under the age of six. But the grandfather was adamant that his grandchildren be placed in a loving Jewish home. We told Rabbi Prus that we were traveling and could not even think of taking the children. However, Hashem has His plans, and another rabbi called us about the case when we returned from Israel. Without thinking too much, we agreed to take the children. When Hashem knocks on your door twice, you'd better listen!



Through smiles and tears—all three people in this photo were foster children in the Charter home at the same time.

These three children had the same mother but two different fathers. Sonya,* age six, was a child of the first father, about whom we never really knew anything. Ruth,* two, and Joshua,* six months, had another father. The younger two children had been kidnapped from the previous foster home in front of Sonya's eyes. Before the Department of Social Services (DSS) had stepped in, little Sonya had taken care of her siblings, trying to feed them and keep them as clean as she could, so understandably her bond with them was extremely strong. The father snatched the little ones in front of her and left her behind as she wasn't his biological child. When Sonya came to us, she was traumatized and crying for her siblings. We assured her everything was being done to find them and *baruch Hashem* we got a call that a social worker was bringing Ruth and Joshua to our home that very night.

WITHOUT THINKING TOO MUCH, WE AGREED TO TAKE THE CHILDREN. WHEN HASHEM KNOCKS ON YOUR DOOR TWICE, YOU'D BETTER LISTEN!

As we had nothing ready, especially for a baby, we quickly reached out to our wonderful Boston community. In a flash, we had a crib, baby clothes, toys, and even a carriage. Mrs. Esther Ciment, director of the preschool where I was teaching, accepted the two older ones into the school without tuition. A friend who had a playgroup took Joshua with minimum payment. We could never have helped these children without the support of our community.

Can you describe any especially memorable moments that occurred with these kids?

One of the most meaningful moments was when the older girls (my biological daughters) would teach the younger (foster) children about Shabbos. Every Friday afternoon, the girls would make smiley-face stickers for the light switches and let the lights “rest” over Shabbos. Children have a natural feeling for Hashem and Shabbos, and these three youngsters grew to love the Torah lifestyle and our family traditions.

Did the children have any further contact with their mother?

After a few uneventful months, their mother was in good enough shape for us to have supervised visits, which went well. Gail was grateful for the care we had given her children. The next step was unsupervised weekend visits. I would pack clean clothes and toys every week and send the kids off with hugs and kisses. Every Sunday night three dirty, hungry, and distraught children were returned to us. It took a few days for them to settle down, and the cycle continued.

Gail wanted her children back, but since it was obvious to the social workers that she couldn't be a better parent, Gail devised a plan that could have ruined us. Gail taught Ruth, who was three by that time, to say that our family had done terrible things to them. Social workers swooped in and removed the children, leaving us in shock. The social workers easily found out that Gail had made up the story to discredit us, and we were cleared, but that was the end of the children staying with us. The judge who oversaw the case told Gail that if he ever saw her in court again, he would remove the children from her care permanently. Then he issued a decree that astounded the DSS and us: The two older children had to remain in the Boston yeshiva, as that was a stable place for them.

Do you know where the children are now?

The children stayed with us more than 35 years ago.

Recently, we searched for them on Facebook and to my utter surprise, I found Sonya. I hesitantly reached out to her but only asked if she remembered the Charter family from Brookline. Sonya's response was:

“Wow! It really is a small world. Yes, I have memories of this, although I can't remember a whole chunk of that time in my life. Trauma does that to you. Do you remember how old I was then? I went to NEHA [New England Hebrew Academy] until I was in the 8th grade and then transferred... I managed to live with some family for a couple of years and then was on my own basically from the time I was 16. It wasn't an easy life, but *baruch Hashem* I made it through thanks to people like you who helped me along the way. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

My response:

“You were six and an incredible child. You cared about your siblings and took such beautiful care of them. Our job was to allow you to be a child. Two of our teenage daughters were home, along with a teenage girl with a similar sad story. They taught you to love Shabbos. I am so happy that I had a very small part in your life. Hearing from you is a great gift. I want you to know that your mom loved you and would do anything to be with you. Thank you for making my day! Love always.”

I contacted Sonya for permission to write our story in this article. Her response:

“Of course... It would be the least I can do to say thank you for your love and care all those years ago... What a *mitzvah* to share your experiences so that others may be inspired to do good.”

Which of your foster children had the most unique background?

Asher,* 12, had a controlling, abusive father who sent his wife and children to live in the woods of Vermont. The older children were homeschooled but never left the cabin deep in the woods and had no contact with the outside world. The mother finally escaped, but she could not support and educate the older children. When Asher came to live with us, he was bright and sociable but

clueless about how to live in modern society. Because his mother was not capable of homeschooling five children, Asher's education came from an encyclopedia. He had never in his life had to start and complete a task. When he came home from school and was asked, "Do you have homework?" he had no idea what that was, or that he was supposed to write the assignment down before leaving class. He was brought up as an observant Jew but was taught that the outside world was depraved and scary. When we went into a store during the gentile holidays, he would cover my younger children's eyes whenever there was an advertisement that he didn't think was proper. We had to teach Asher to look both ways when crossing a street, along with other practical skills that a child brought up in isolation wouldn't know. This story has a beautiful ending. Their mother reunited with her family and got all her children back. I recently found out that Asher got an education, is employed, and is doing nicely.

Did all the foster children manage well at your local school?

No. Shmuli* was a sweet 13-year-old who couldn't learn in a basic Lubavitch school. Today, *baruch Hashem*, there are many services for children with learning disabilities but years ago, a child was left to struggle. Shmuli spent his days at home, carrying around our baby son. This was lovely for the baby but not exactly what his parents wanted. Shmuli went back to New York, and I was happy to hear that he eventually became a plumber.

Did you ever have the satisfaction of seeing your family's personal positive impact on a foster child's life?

Yes, this occurred with Sari.* She was 15 and from a divorced family, and she didn't get along with her stepfather. Sari attended our local Bais Yaakov, and my husband tutored her. She had great difficulty reading and writing. At first, she loved our children and life was peaceful. Keeping her room neat was a nightmare, but that is standard teenage behavior. Then peace and harmony disappeared and after two years of steady conflict, Sari moved to live with another family. I didn't hear from her for years, until I ran into her in Flatbush. Not only was she happily married, but her husband was a younger copy of my husband! She apologized for her immature teen behavior, and we remain friends until today.

One day back when Sari was living with us, my car



Shayna Charter's oldest and youngest daughters, Debbie Cadaner (R) with Shira Muchnik.



Isser Chaim Charter with son Naftali at his bar mitzvah in 2003.

needed to be taken to the repair shop, so I had to drive to an unfamiliar location. My husband led the way in his car so he could drive me back home. Sari remembered that my husband stopped at every light and waited for me to catch up so I wouldn't get lost. To us it was an ordinary act, but it made a great impression on her. When the time came for dating, she specifically looked for a compassionate and thoughtful man to marry.

Who was your most stressful foster child?

That was our last foster child, Chasha,* who came from a large *chassidish* family (not Chabad) and attended Lubavitch Yeshiva in Boston before she entered foster care. She came to school every day filthy and disheveled and acted out in class to the point that the yeshiva told the father she needed special services, and they could not keep her. The first day that Chasha attended public school, the principal contacted the DSS. We didn't know at the time that other children in the family had also been

reported to the authorities and there was strong evidence that the mother and several of the younger children were being abused. The father himself called us and asked if we would take Chasha as he wanted to keep his children in a Torah-observant home. Age-wise, Chasha was right between two of my children, so we were concerned as to how this would affect them, but we pushed our fears aside and took her. Chasha went to public school and saw several therapists. She became our full-time job. She wet the bed and had nightmares, although she behaved nicely and got along with our children. The school called us several times as the mother would stand outside the school in hopes of catching sight of her.

Have you ever watched a three-year-old girl play with her doll? The tender way she holds her baby and the love in her eyes demonstrate how motherhood is a dream every little girl wishes for. We imagine holding our precious newborn and watching our child flourish and grow. A child is born completely dependent on his or her mother, and this symbiotic relationship starts from the moment of conception. No matter what the situation is, the bond between mother and child is extremely powerful, and Chasha's glimpses of her mother only upset her. It was heartbreaking: Chasha didn't care if she was unclean and hungry; all she knew was that she was separated from her mother. Chasha was deeply traumatized and needed more care than we could give her. We had to make the difficult decision to return Chasha to the DSS. Somehow the father managed to get custody of his children and fled with them to Israel, where they live today. I found Chasha on Facebook with pictures of her mother. She looks well and happy, but no one knows the truth. I will not contact her, as some situations are better left alone.

Are there other situations besides the cases you've mentioned where children need a foster home?

Yes. There was a very young Russian boy, Boruch, whose mother was partially paralyzed and whose father wasn't Jewish. The mother was looking for a family to co-parent with as she could not physically care for him. We did not take Boruch as our fostering days were over, but we found a couple who did take him. The *shidduch* between the boy and that couple was great, and now he is in

yeshiva in Israel and flourishing, *baruch Hashem*.

When the time came, did you have trouble letting these children go?

I never considered these children mine; we were just temporary parents, helping them on their way to becoming healthy adults. Every child made a huge impression on us, and we will never forget them.

Sadly, there is still a great shortage of Jewish foster homes and there are too many children in need of them. If anyone is ready for the challenge, they should contact Ohel, or reach out to the local DSS if out of NYC. It is a challenging job, but one of joy and fulfillment. *Ih"Y* parents should never need to separate from their child, but this is not always the reality. Parenting comes in many different forms, and fostering a child is a most satisfying *mitzvah*. Each child who came to our home enriched our family in many ways. Our own daughters learned how to love unconditionally without any reward. If you choose to become a foster parent, you might have the great *zechus* of helping a Jewish *neshamah* in a profound way.

Did your family benefit from the fostering you did?

There's no question in our minds that being foster parents brings *brachos* from Above. We had three daughters followed by 16 years of secondary infertility. And then we were asked by the sister of one of our foster children to escort her to the *chuppah*, to which we of course happily agreed (her father was not Jewish). The *chassan* also asked a different couple (not his parents) to escort him, a childless couple. After the *chuppah* as the *chassan* and *kallah* and the two escort couples walked into 770, the Rebbe came out and stopped. He blessed the *chassan* and *kallah* with children (not the typical *brachah* that he would give to brides and grooms), while also looking at both escort couples. Very shortly after, the newlyweds were expecting, and the *chassan's* escorts were expecting, and so were we! After 16 years, we had Shira and, soon after, her brother Naftali. We credit our fostering with the *brachos* of two additional children; the Rebbe knew we were under that *chuppah* because of our fostering.

To read Shayna Charter's article from the NCN of Tishrei 2021, "How to Be a Normal Baal Teshuvah," visit nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives, searchword: Shayna Charter.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A FOSTER CHILD?

5 DAVID ZEDNER, FORMER FOSTER CHILD

How did you become a foster child?

I spent my early years in an unconventional household, alone with my mother and with no father in the picture. My mother, a Persian with roots in Shiraz, had a deep appreciation for her Jewish identity which she powerfully conveyed to me. She had been through a lot in life and was eventually hospitalized. First the government was involved in my case, and then Ohel, and so forth. Over the years, I was in about 12 Jewish households and never spent more than two years in any one home.

What was your experience as a foster child?

When we are kids, Hashem gives us a certain *temimut*, innocence. Because we don't know anything else besides the life we are living, there's a lack of self-awareness, and that provides a protective element. Much of the processing of my foster care experience happened later in life.

The bottom line is that I had to adjust and figure out the best way to thrive in each household where I was placed. My experience with every family was different. I spent time in both Sefardic and Ashkenazic homes. Some families were very religious, and others were more to the left on the religious spectrum, which definitely affected my development at different stages in my life. Some families were harder for me to adjust to, while some were more accommodating.

Sometimes there was sibling rivalry. In one home, I was the oldest, and the next sibling in line was upset that I came in as the competent, smarter older kid. For her it was hard: Who's this guy who rolls into my house and thinks he's the head honcho over here? There became an issue of who leads socially, who makes decisions, who leads the team, who gets to influence the parents more, who has the most responsibilities. It's super nuanced. Just as it was difficult for me at those times, it was difficult for the host families. I was invading their habitat. What stands out most is the struggle to blend into the dynamics of a family that was already running, to try to jump into the middle and finesse the situation. This has a cultural, social, and religious aspect to it. I think it takes a socially adept person to perceive these things and to react properly. This built me up a lot as a person. I'm a very social human being and now I know how to read social situations well because of my childhood experiences.



A foster child like David appreciates the value of parents in a unique way.



Did you go to yeshiva? What was that like?

My mother had *mesirat nefesh* to send me to yeshiva from a young age, a Sefardic yeshiva in Queens. Then the people in the foster system realized that it wasn't a good fit for me and switched me to Yeshiva of Central Queens. During my childhood, some kids in yeshiva didn't know and understand how to react to me and my situation and they teased me. It took a lot of courage to survive. To say I passed all the tests with flying colors would be a bit of an exaggeration.

The barometer of my having survived the hard times is that I'm standing here today.

A lot of my personal development took place when I went to Ner Yisroel Yeshiva. In the late 1970s when the Shah of Iran was overthrown, many young Jews arrived in the U.S., and a good number of them came to Ner Yisroel. The yeshiva has teachers who understand the Persian culture, and that was helpful for me. Only at Ner Yisroel did I really come into myself. I enjoyed what I was doing and got to be creative in a way I hadn't been before; here, I could be successful. Part of that involved learning *mussar* with great teachers who understood me. I was also playing guitar and writing music.

Where did you go during *Bein Hazmanim* in Yeshiva?

That was very tough—at times I was in-between two foster families, in transition from one to another. It was a time of tension and sometimes hopelessness. Perhaps this will be interpreted as a criticism of the foster care system, but one of the major difficulties is the bumpy transition from being a foster kid where you are taken care of to being an independent adult where you have to fend for yourself. [You are allowed to stay in foster care until 21; after you turn 18 you may leave whenever you want.]

It's a little hard because a person like me doesn't have a parent figure who is guiding them through practical issues like how to pay rent, what to do when they get into a car accident, etc.

This is especially complex in the yeshiva culture, where there's an understanding that the *bachur* will be taken care of until he gets married; only then is he fully independent. My Rebbeim told me, "There's nothing to worry about. You've got a good head. Sit and learn. Every other *bachur* is here learning, and is fine." But I wasn't like the others. I had to leave yeshiva in the middle because I was a *bachur*



David Zedner singing and playing guitar.

worrying about where to live and how to make a living, due to pressure from the foster care system to become a fully independent adult. Today I'm very fortunate to be working, making *parnassah*, playing and teaching music, and involved in *kiruv*. If you use Instagram, follow me at @davidzedner. Maybe you'd even like me to play at your *simchah*!

What is your takeaway message for our readers?

A lot of people look at every acquaintance as a person who seems to be getting by just fine. I'm not saying you must know what struggles each person has. But please be cognizant that there's probably something going on behind the scenes in everyone's life. Be aware and be sensitive. Tread lightly—not too lightly—but give the person a little wiggle room. ❧

For more on David Zedner, see his interview on the *Grateful Warriors* podcast.