

TEACH JEW IS A DIAMOND

CHANA STELL



If you would have told me years ago that I'd one day be living a life of Torah and *mitzvos*, I would not have believed you. Not because I didn't long for clarity or connection—but because I didn't yet know that this life could be truly mine.

Growing up, religion was ever-present in our home; it's just that it was not the right religion for me. My parents were Orthodox Christians and raised my sister and me deeply immersed in church life. We prayed regularly, attended services multiple times a week, and hosted clergy in our home. When I was a child my life was filled with structure and belief—but something else was growing beneath the surface.

My mother, despite her Christian practice, is halachically Jewish. Her mother—my grandmother—spoke Yiddish, and our family ran traditional Passover *seders*. But outside of Pesach, Judaism didn't have a strong presence in our day-to-day lives.

When I was eight years old and my sister was seven, my mother felt a strong, personal tug toward Judaism. Taking a leap based only on her instinct, she reached out to the local Chabad House in Lake Worth, Florida. My mom enrolled us in Hebrew School and Camp Gan Israel after meeting the *shluchim*, Rabbi Mendy and Rebbetzin Leah Rosenfeld. We started going to Shabbos dinners at their home. *Mezuzos* went up on our doors. We were still very much involved in church life, but something had been set in motion. A spark was reigniting.

At the time, Judaism felt unfamiliar, almost foreign to me. The prayers were all in Hebrew, which I didn't understand; I was encountering the Aleph-Beis for the first time and learning it to the best of my ability. *Lehavdil*, church, on the other hand, was comfortable and familiar.

But that all changed years later as a teenager, after I had several years of weekly Hebrew School classes under my belt, and I had started JLI teen classes at Chabad. That's when I attended my first CTeen Shabbaton in New York at 15 years old.

Chana (L), 9, with her sister Sarrah, 8, at a menorah-making event at Chabad of Lake Worth in 2009.



Chana (L), 12, with her sister Sarrah, 11, at a havdalah-candle-making event at Chabad of Lake Worth in 2012.

MEETING THE REBBE—FROM ACROSS THE SCREEN

Toward the end of the CTeen Shabbaton, our group arrived at the Ohel. I sat down at one of the wooden tables with my friends and thought about what I wanted to pray for: clarity. More than anything, I wanted clarity. I wrote my letter, folded it carefully, and shuffled my way through the packed gravesite until I could touch the Rebbe's gravestone. I whispered my letter of prayers for my family and for that one thing I needed more than anything else.

Afterward, our group sat in the welcome area of the Ohel, waiting for our bus. We were all quiet, feeling like something powerful had just taken place. A screen in front of us played a

farbrengen with the Rebbe. I was mesmerized. The Rebbe's eyes radiated warmth, compassion, and truth. I'll never forget what he said: *that each Jew is precious, a diamond. That no matter our background, we each hold an eternal connection to Hashem.*

For the first time, I saw myself as a Jew—not as someone dabbling in a heritage, but as someone born into an eternal mission.

Earlier during the Shabbaton, at a roundtable discussion, a rabbi told me something that pierced through all my confusion: "Your Christianity can change, but your Judaism is forever." Judaism wasn't something I was adding. It was something I was returning to. And this Ohel experience strengthened that idea for me.



Chana, 19, chaperone of a group of teens from Chabad of Lake Worth at the International CTeen Shabbaton of 2019. L-R: Chana, Sarrah, and Rebbetzin Leah Rosenfeld.

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THE ROAD TO TZFAT

After that first CTeen Shabbaton, I continued my studies through JLI's teen program. I fell in love with the teachings of Chassidus over the next three years. The concepts were deep, real, and transformative. I learned that I had both an animal soul and a G-dly soul, that my *mitzvos* mattered, that my struggles were meaningful. I craved more.

When high school ended, I knew I needed to take the next step. I applied for Birthright, hoping to go to Eretz Yisroel before starting college. I submitted all my paperwork and waited eagerly.

But I was rejected. They cited medical liability as the reason—even though my doctor had cleared me to travel with my autoimmune illness.

I was devastated. The very next day was my JLI graduation. I told my rabbi and rebbetzin the news. They were disappointed for me—but then my rabbi's face lit up. "You can still go to Israel," he said. "You can learn at Machon Alte in Tzfat."

I didn't know what a seminary was. But if it meant being

in Eretz Yisroel, and if it meant learning more about my place in the world, then I knew my answer.

I spent a month at Machon Alte, and it was like stepping into a new universe. I was introduced to *halachah*, *Chumash*, *Tanya*, the mystical beauty of Torah. I wrote pages and pages of notes, which still sit on my bookshelf to this day. My soul was absorbing the light it had longed for without knowing how to ask for it.



Chana, 18, far right, at the International CTeen Shabbaton of 2018 in New York with friends from Chabad of Lake Worth.



Chana (L) with Rebbetzin Leah Rosenfeld in Yerushalayim. Leah was leading a Momentum trip to Israel for women from Lake Worth while Chana was there studying at Machon Alte.

But I also learned things that created deep inner conflict—particularly the halachic prohibition of stepping foot in a church. This forced me to confront a painful truth: If I was truly choosing Judaism, I had to let go of Christianity entirely. That meant distancing myself from the people and practices I had grown up with. I wasn't sure if I was ready for such a drastic life change.

FALLING AND RISING AGAIN

Back in America, I tried to live in both worlds. I dressed according to the laws of *tznius*, kept kosher to the best of my ability—but I still attended church with my family. Then came college. I lost the structure I had started to build, and slowly, the *mitzvos* faded.

But Hashem's plan for me was not over.

After my first year of college, I returned to Machon Alte—this time for four months. I took it slowly. *Mitzvah* by *mitzvah*. With each step, my connection to Hashem deepened. By the end of my time there, I was *shomer Shabbos*, keeping kosher and *tznius*, and fully committed to building a Torah life.

The journey wasn't easy, but it was real. This time, I wasn't overwhelmed. This time, I was ready.



Chana, 18, visiting the Kotel during her first summer at Machon Alte in 2018.

GOING HUNGRY

Upon my return to college, the challenges returned. My school didn't have a kosher program or any Jewish infrastructure on campus. The only reason I could realistically keep Shabbos and kosher at all was because of a campus Chabad House that had just opened a few blocks away. Rabbi Shmuli and Rebbetzin Chayala Sasonkin provided me with meals as much as possible, and in between, I sneaked a hot plate into my dorm and lived off eggs, toast, and smoothies. I often felt hungry—physically and spiritually.

Eventually, someone reported me for cooking in my dorm, which was against school policy. I had to meet with the dean.

I explained that I couldn't eat on campus due to *kashrus*. That the school meal plan didn't accommodate observant Jews. The dean had never heard of kosher or Shabbos. I described the basic rules of *kashrus* and how Jewish students needed support and accommodations unique to them. Doing so required several meetings, and my *shluchim* from Lake Worth drove three hours to join these meetings to advocate for me and other Jewish students.

After a particularly difficult day, Rebbetzin Rosenfeld told me: "Remember Eretz Yisroel, and bring it with you wherever you go." I wasn't in Tzfat anymore, but I could bring Tzfat into my dorm room. Into my conversations. And into my academics.



Chana and Nosson Stell under the *chuppah* two years ago.

I became the editor-in-chief of the college newspaper and published articles exposing antisemitism and highlighting the need for accommodation for religious minorities. By my senior year, I was helping the college's administration interview staff for a kosher kitchen. Today, the school has several kosher options in the main dining hall.

BUILDING A HOME

I graduated college in 2022 with honors. After graduation, I moved to New York, and in August 2023, I married my husband, Nosson Chaim—a convert with his own beautiful journey to Torah—at my Chabad House in Lake Worth, Florida. Our wedding was the very first Chabad of Lake Worth-hosted wedding. Guests came from every stage of my journey—members of the church, professors, mentors, college friends, and long-time friends. Together, we celebrated the fact that my husband and I had chosen to build a home rooted in *halachah*, Chassidus, compassion, and spiritual freedom.

Our home is not just Jewish by name—it is led by Torah values and animated by a shared mission: to live with *ahavas Yisroel*, to grow constantly, and to serve Hashem with joy. Every challenge we've faced has been a steppingstone; every detour, a

part of the plan. This mindset has become a lifestyle for me and has helped me through moments of anxiety, fear, and doubt.

MAKING SPACE FOR KEDUSHAH

The Rebbe taught that every Jew is a *shliach*. Whether or not we carry the official title, we are always carrying the mission. Our presence matters. Our *mitzvos* matter. Our voice matters.

I don't have to be naturally bold or outgoing to lead. Leadership means choosing to be a living example. To say yes to Hashem when it's hard. To make space for *kedushah*, wherever I am.

Hashem doesn't place me in uncomfortable situations to break me—He places me there because He knows *I* can make a change. When I move forward with trust, people follow. They feel my light.

You, too, carry a piece of Eretz Yisroel inside of you. The question is: Will you choose to see it—and live like it's true? ❧

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