

I No Longer Keep The Rebbe To Myself

Defining Hiskashrus

SOPHIE BASSMAN



I was born and raised in Charlotte, NC, way down south.

My father was born and raised a religious Catholic, though as a young adult he detached from Catholicism.

My mother was born Jewish but raised completely unaffiliated. No holidays, no Jewish education, no Yiddishkeit at all.

My parents moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, before my brother Max and I were born; they moved there for my father's successful clothing business.

After my parents, Catholic and Jew, got married and my brother and I were born, they had to start thinking of how to raise us. One religion, two religions, or no religion at all. They knew they wanted to pick one, and my father was happy for it to be Judaism. But that was about as far as the conversation went.

When my older brother turned three years old, my mom, Mrs. Jody Molinari, was looking for that perfect preschool. You know, the five-star one that would get my brother into an Ivy League college.

When a bunch of her friends told her they were going to "the Chabad" in Charlotte to check out their preschool, she decided to go along. She was greeted by Rebbetzins Mariashi Groner and Channie Weiss, and as she listened to the little children singing unfamiliar *davening* tunes and watched them proudly pointing out the Hebrew letters on the walls, she was completely won over.

My family was brought in with the warmest embrace from our *shluchim*, Rabbi Yossi and Rebbetzin Mariashi

Groner and Rabbi Binyomin and Rebbetzin Channie Weiss.

Eventually, my brother came home from school wanting to wear *tzitzis*, wanting to go to shul, and wanting to know everything about his Yiddishkeit.

This encouraged both my parents to learn more as well, which led my father to want to convert to Judaism, which was a difficult and lengthy process.

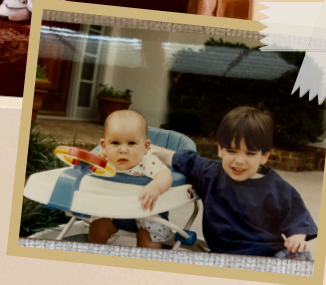
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On March 11, 2001 (16 Adar 5761), when I was six years old, my father, Mr. Michael Molinari, converted to Yiddishkeit through Rabbi Chaim Zev (Herbert) Bomzer (to whom the Rebbe sent many people who wanted to convert); the process took place through and with our *shluchim* in Charlotte, the Groners and the Weisses.

We would spend every Shabbos at the *shluchim*'s homes, the Groners and the Weisses. Usually we would sleep over, but there were many times when my parents would walk home, while my brother and I would stay the whole day until Shabbos was over. We became part of both families. Naturally, what they did, what they said, even what they wore deeply affected me.

Their lives were very different from mine.

While I played sports competitively, was the world's biggest tomboy, and seemed to have it all going for me, there was a part of me, from a very young age, that was being pulled towards the powerful force that the *shluchim*



The photos on this page show Sophie and her younger brother Max, growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina, in the 1990s, with their parents, Michael and Jody Molinari.

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held—the holiness I sensed in them.

Today, I know that force was the Rebbe.

In my spare time I would dress up and play pretend, just so I could imagine being more like them.

One of the many videos we would watch at both the Groners' and the Weisses' homes was "I Am a Chossid" and "Hand in Hand" (both by Malka Touger).

Of course I needed to have those videos in my childhood home too.

One of those videos has a girl named Mushky with her warm gloves; of course, I needed to have Mushky's warm gloves and her backpack with all of the colors. I also wanted the same notepad and would even stick my tongue out at it just like she did!

I wore the big Tzivos Hashem shirts and would make pretend rallies in my driveway just like I saw in those videos.

In one of the videos I loved to watch, there is a scene of a little girl visiting the Ohel.

My *shluchim* would always talk about how they too visit the Ohel and *daven* there.

Of course, I wanted to have this experience as well.

And so, shortly after my father's conversion, when I was turning six years old and my father asked me where I wanted go for my birthday, I told my father I wanted to go to the Ohel,

so—G-d bless Daddy!—we did it.

I will never ever forget that moment, arriving at the Ohel in my beautiful birthday dress, walking in to the Ohel myself, while my father went in on the men's side.

The awe and holiness I felt in that moment stays with me to this day.

I chose to go to the Ohel for my sixth birthday, and I felt the Rebbe as a real part of my life at such a young age, even though I wasn't very involved in my own Yiddishkeit at the time. All of this was only because my *shluchim*, the Groners and the Weisses, were deeply connected to the Rebbe, and I was deeply connected to them.

I knew then and I will always know that the Rebbe isn't someone far removed and too high and lofty for us to reach. The Rebbe is tangible, here, and ready for us to connect to him at whatever stage of life or situation we are in.

I went to Bais Chomesh High School in Toronto. I loved my class and I loved the school; it was a very good experience for me in every way.

I met my husband, Rabbi Tzemmy Bassman, through the regular *shidduch* system; the suggestion was brought up by many mutual friends we both share. By now you won't be surprised to know that our *shluchim* helped a lot with the process. Today, we are on *shlichus* in Budapest, Hungary.

If you ask my father why he converted,

he will tell you that until he converted he felt lost and didn't know why he felt that way. Another motivation for him was to have a family where everyone is the same religion and everyone is acting upon their beliefs in the same way; let the children have consistency.

Today, my dear parents, Mr. Michael and Mrs. Jody Molinari, live in Boynton Beach, Florida, where they are extremely involved in helping *shluchim* in numerous ways, some that are public and known and some that get them no glory at all. But they are happy to be the Rebbe's *chassidim* and *shluchim*, even without the official titles.

When I think of my *hiskashrus* now, it isn't just those times that I consciously decide to connect, whether through writing, learning the Rebbe's Torah, or watching a video of the Rebbe. *Hiskashrus* is our everyday. It is truly living with the Rebbe.

It is in the decisions we make, in our highs and in our lows, and in how we bring the Rebbe into our own lives and then pass that on through the way we lead, teach, and care for our own families and the people in our community.

I know that the Rebbe is here with us when our *shlichus* feels hard, the Rebbe is helping us when parenting is not going as easily as we think it should, and the Rebbe is celebrating with us during all of our wins.

That, to me is *hiskashrus*, a real



Sophie at her bas mitzvah.



Left photo: Michael and Jody serving as kvatters at the *bris* of Yuda Heber, youngest *shliach* in Delray Beach, FL.

Right photo L-R: Rabbi Tzemmy Bassman, Menachem Mendel Berzi, Doron Hoffman, and Reuben Fohn. These boys all participated in a CTeen Shabbaton in Hungary.



The Bassman family today. Rabbi Tzemmy Bassman is holding Berel. Sophie Bassman is holding Berel's twin brother Leibel. Older brother Menny is in the middle.

connection, not bound by *any* limitations.

I always dreamed of the day I would have my own Menachem Mendel, a child who would carry the Rebbe's name with pride and joy. And *baruch Hashem*, oh boy, does our little Menny do that, *ka"h*. Now Menny has two-year-old twin brothers named Berel and Leibel, after the Rebbe's two brothers.

Recently something happened that I never dreamed of. I never imagined that a 14-year-old teen from our community, Menachem Mendel Berzi, would freely choose to take on the Rebbe's name at a *bris* that we had the privilege of arranging, and to carry that name with the same (or more) pride and joy that our son does.

I'm no longer keeping the Rebbe to myself. I am passing along my *hiskashrus* and watching it take on a life of its own in others, as I saw my *shluchim* do when I was a child.

Re'u gedolim shegidalti. I came to the Rebbe as a child, through his *shluchim*, as a small child, not yet *frum*. I was welcomed, embraced, and guided before I even knew what that connection meant.

And today, as *shluchim*, my husband and I have the *zechus*

to witness Menachem Mendel's growth... a teen who only recently walked into our Chabad House and is now choosing, every day, to be fully involved.

At the recent CTeen Shabbaton, I came again to the Ohel. This time as a proud *shlucha* with Menachem Mendel Berzi.

This is my *hiskashrus*—alive, growing, and carried forward. ❧



Michael and Jody at Chabad of Delray Purim party.

The *shluchim* in Delray Beach, Rabbi Mendy and Mrs. Mirel Heber, had this to say about the author's parents:

Jody and Michael Molinari living within walking distance of our home has been a dream come true for us. When there are 70 guests about to walk in for a Shabbat Under the Stars and the kids aren't dressed and neither are the salads, Michael holds the baby, Jody rolls up her sleeves and gets the food out... They're our kids' local grandparents and our partner shluchim here in Delray. Whether it's lining up three-year-olds at Hebrew School of the Arts or cooking supper for our camp counselors, nothing is too hard for them. They also host community members for Shabbos meals—not the easy-to-host-types. Jody started a book club! I could go on and on...