

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE PART OF JNET?

We thought you'd never ask. JNet matches up chavrusos (men with men, women with women) for weekly Torah study sessions. JNet interviewed three different "couples" to give you an idea of what it's like...

CHANA GITTEL

Chana Gittel Goldstein of Crown Heights, a volunteer for JNet, studies Torah on a weekly basis with Bruni Penina Castro Mandracchia of Victorville, CA.

JN: What inspired you to volunteer with JNet?

CGG: I was inspired to become a JNet volunteer because I have always enjoyed one-on-one learning and meeting new people through Torah study.

Was there a moment in your learning together that made you think, "This is why I do this"?

There have been many such moments in my learning with Penina over almost 20 years since JNet was founded. I often find myself saying, "I enjoy learning with you so much!"

Penina is an enthusiastic *chavrusa*

who loves learning new things and always expresses her excitement. Her energy gives me a renewed sense of joy and curiosity. Our study sessions are an oasis of peace and connection to Hashem and His Torah. I treat that time as sacred and avoid distractions.

How has the chavrusa partnership deepened your own connection to Torah and mitzvos?

Our learning covers many topics—*parshah*, *davening*, and the lives of the Rebbeim and Rebbetzins on special Chabad days. This has made me more thoughtful and detail-oriented in my own study and research.

I often pause during our learning so we can both absorb a new concept. We are not afraid of moments of silence on the phone; they give us space to think and internalize.

This experience has helped me see Torah concepts through the eyes of someone encountering them for the first time, whether in *halachah* or

Chassidus. It has made me reflect more deeply on how and why I serve Hashem.

What's one teaching or idea that you've seen really light up your partner?

Penina loves the Rebbe's *sichos* and even *maamarim*. She doesn't shy away from deep Chassidic ideas. Sometimes we admit that we don't fully understand, and that's okay. We know our *neshamos* understand, and with Hashem's help, our minds will eventually catch up.

What do you feel is the most rewarding part of being a JNet volunteer?

Without a doubt, it's the warm friendship I share with Penina. We can speak openly about our lives, our families.

One cherished memory is when Penina and her daughter Rivka flew from the West Coast to New York for our youngest son's bar mitzvah. Their presence meant so much to me. We are soul sisters and care for each other deeply.

WE ARE NOT JUST TEACHER AND STUDENT; WE HAVE BECOME SISTERS, PART OF THE GREAT FAMILY OF THE REBBE AND REBBETZIN.



Penina (L) and Chana Gittel at Chana Gittel's son's bar mitzvah.

In what ways do you see your JNet volunteering as part of your personal shlichus?

Chavrusa learning through JNet is absolutely a *shlichus*! It brings together *talmud Torah* and *ahavas Yisroel*.

I'm grateful that JNet provides such strong support and guidance. Before JNet, I had other phone *chavrusas*, but it was more challenging because there were fewer resources, especially in English. There has never been a better time to learn with a *chavrusa*.



Bruni Penina Castro Mandracchia speaks to us about her JNet partnership.

JN: Can you tell us how your JNet journey began?

BPCM: My journey began over 20 years ago when I was a nanny for Rabbi Shmuel and Tzippy Fuss and their family in California. While there I met a Chabad student on vacation named Rochel Ginsburg, who encouraged me to join JNet to learn about the Rebbe and deepen my connection to Yiddishkeit.

How has learning with Chana affected your personal journey?

Through studying and sharing my Yiddishkeit with Chana, I found myself changing in a natural way. The more I learned, the more I wanted to live it. Chana's patience and dedication speak volumes.

We are not just teacher and student; we have become sisters, part of the great family of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin.

How has your weekly study session impacted your life?

The impact has been deep. I try to take everything I learn to heart. For Pesach, I buy cases of *shmurah matzah*, grape juice, and wine and give them to every Jewish person I can find, hoping to bring others closer just as I was brought close. When Chana calls me a *shlucha*, it moves me deeply.

Chana sends me beautiful scarves, treats, and learning materials, especially for the Rebbe's special days.

How has learning each week influenced the way you feel about your own Jewish identity?

My connection to Torah has grown stronger than ever. JNet and my *chavrusa* have supported me through the hardest times of my life. Even during my crises over the past 20 years, Chana has prayed for me and gone to the Ohel on my behalf.

After all these years, we finally met in person at her son Zalmy's bar mitzvah. Her boys used to learn with me when they were little. When I was

widowed four years ago, during COVID, Chana guided me through *shivah* and surrounded me with love—the Rebbe's love. I even wrote a journal to the Rebbe, which I shared with her, and she still keeps it.

Has your JNet learning encouraged you to get more involved in your local community?

Yes. JNet and my *chavrusa* have encouraged me to get involved and inspire others to connect. I tell people the Rebbe is waiting for them like a father welcoming his children home.

Is there a mitzvah or practice you've started doing because of your chavrusa partnership?

HA: Yes, many. I give out Shabbos candles with the printed blessings. I share what I learn each week, recommend others to connect, and started wearing a wig.

We pray for each other, stay patient when we miss a session, and attend online learning events together. Chana and I are sisters forever. I have the deepest respect and love for her. Her wisdom and kindness have helped transform me into a *baalas teshuva*.

May the Rebbe continue to shower blessings upon her and her family.





HADASSAH

Hadassah Aber of Cleveland, OH, a volunteer for JNet, studies Torah on a weekly basis with Shoshana Findling of New York.

JN: What inspired you to volunteer with JNet?

HA: One Shabbos afternoon a friend of mine told me that Chabad has a program of weekly study, and I should look into it. *Baruch Hashem* I did!

Was there a moment in your partnership that made you think, "This is why I do this"?

Since I have been learning with Shoshana for over ten years there are many times when I had that thought. I have been able to find things to learn that have been new to both of us and we explore it together. In this way I have gained in my learning. Also, over the years, we have become friends and are comfortable discussing the ups and downs of what we are going through. I feel that I have been a source of strength and *emunah* for my partner and she has been that for me as well.

How has the *chavrusa* partnership deepened your own connection to Torah and *mitzvos*?

We learned *Tanya*, *Chovos Halevavos* (the new edition of *The Gates of Trust*) as well as *Mishlei*, and *Koheles*. All of these *sefarim* have been a source of inspiration and reinforcement for my own commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*.

What do you feel is the most rewarding part of being a JNet volunteer?

I value the feeling that I can take one hour of my week and have an impact on

another Yid. We connect through our learning as well as our conversations.

In what ways do you see your JNet volunteering as part of your personal *shlichus*?

I work at a Chabad-run daycare center so I teach Torah to children on a daily basis. JNet is another avenue for me to carry out the Rebbe's goal of making sure all Yidden learn Torah. The fact that we study together on a weekly basis adds to the impact of our encounter. I am in awe of my partner's thirst for learning and that we have stayed connected for so long, *bli ayin hara!*



SHOSHANA

Shoshana Findling speaks to us about her JNet partnership.

JN: Can you tell us how your JNet journey began?

SF: My husband heard about the program and knew that I was interested in learning more. I then spoke with a JNet coordinator who matched me up with Hadassah Aber.

Can you share a story or moment when you felt your Jewish learning come alive?

Right from the first session, we decided to go through the *Chumash*, *parshah* by *parshah*, and I saw so many practical applications from that. Also, when we studied the *Chovot Halevavot Shaar Habitachon*— it really helped me bring in more *parnassah*.

What's something new you've discovered about Judaism that surprised you?

Right now, we are studying Songs of the Universe, *Perek Shirah*, written by King David. Each section just brings me a sense of wonder and awe at all of Hashem's creations and how each plays a role in our lives.

How has your volunteer impacted your life outside of the study sessions?

Hadassah is very compassionate and not judgmental. I can ask her anything and she really is there for me. It really meant a lot to me that she was there for me when I was grieving the losses of my mother and sister.

How has learning each week influenced the way you feel about your own Jewish identity?

I thought my learning would stop when I finished high school. Even then, we didn't always finish certain texts or have access to everything. Learning *Tanya*, *Mishlei*, *Kohelet*, *Tehillim* or *Chovot Halevavot* were not on the curriculum. Today, as an adult, celebrating holidays, giving charity, and volunteering is part of my life. I wouldn't necessarily carve out time for Torah study given my work and family responsibilities. That is why studying with JNet is so important to me. It's like going to the gym for your soul.

Has your JNet learning encouraged you to get more involved in your local community?

Yes. I began teaching classes once a month for the Jewish women's club, called Hadassah, that I belong to. We learned about Jewish Women of the Bible, and this year I am leading a class called Celebrating Jewish Heritage Around the World. Each month, we study a different country and learn about their history, customs, and cuisine. It keeps our story about resilience and pride rather than victimhood.





SHAINA

Shaina Stolik of South Palm Beach, FL, a volunteer for JNet, studies Torah on a weekly basis with Natalya Ziff of London, England.

JN: What inspired you to volunteer with JNet?

SS: Five years ago, Rabbi Yudi Duker, the founder of JNet, was very ill with COVID. Having gone to school with his wife Sarah and her sisters, their situation was especially close to my heart. I would wake up at night to take care of my infant and I would *daven* for his *refuah sheleimah*, praying that he would survive the night. After Yudi's tragic passing I decided to volunteer for JNet to help his legacy survive and grow. The challenge was that I had almost no free time as a mother of a large family, high school teacher, and *shlucha*. Nonetheless, I was determined to make it happen.

Sixteen months ago my beloved Bubby, Mrs. Fruma Junik, passed away. On the drive from 770 to the Ohel for her burial, I received a call from a 718 number. I hadn't intended to pick up, but something made me answer. It was Zalman Minkowitz from JNet asking if I was able to study with a *chavrusa* on a weekly basis. I immediately recognized the incredible *hashgachah pratis*—this was a way to do something meaningful in my grandmother's *zechus* even before her burial! My grandmother would study *Tanya* every day with her husband Rabbi Berel Junik and I knew how important Torah study was to her. That's how I ended up joining JNet and studying weekly with Natalya Ziff.

And how did that work out for you?

Learning with Natalya has become much more than a *chavrusa*, a study partnership; it's a relationship that I treasure. I've enjoyed talking to Natalya through life's ups and downs, from discussing her future as a *kallah* to supporting her when she had a medical issue. Natalya's sincerity and *emunah* inspire me and I look forward to our weekly learning.

What topics do you cover during your study sessions?

We study *Shulchan Shabbat* together which is a summary of a *sichah* that relates to the *parshah*. Before Yom Tov we review the pertinent *halachos* and *minhagim* such as how to maintain a fire for cooking on Yom Tov. Over our months of study, we have learned many of the laws of Shabbos. Natalya's enthusiasm for *mitzvos* and especially Yom Tov is inspiring to me. By Pesach, she had gone through every purse, pocket, and corner of her home to make sure that there was no *chametz*.

What's one teaching or idea that has really resonated with your study partner?

I shared the idea that "the perfect is the enemy of the good" when it comes to Yiddishkeit. Natalya later told me that in the past, if she saw that she would be late to shul, she figured it wouldn't be appropriate to attend at all. Now she's aware that insisting on perfection is a technique of the *yetzer hara* and that she can feel comfortable going to shul whenever she is ready.

What do you feel is the most rewarding part of being a JNet volunteer?

I feel the presence of *hashgachah pratis* in our pairing; a 21-year-old in London and a 45-year-old in Florida coming together in such a meaningful way. The timing, right before my grandmother's burial, made me feel strongly that it was

orchestrated by Hashem. Despite all my obligations and busy schedule, I never complain about this commitment. It gives me real joy to say, "I'm studying with my *chavrusa* in London, I'll call you when we're done."



NATALYA

Natalya Ziff speaks to us about her JNet partnership.

JN: Can you tell us how your JNet journey began?

NZ: For something to begin, something must end. For years, I felt lost and disconnected from who I was, where I was going, and what I was meant to do. I kept asking myself, "What am I here for?"

When north, east, south, and west all led nowhere, I decided to look up. I began searching for a way to get closer to Hashem. I knew I couldn't do it alone, or at least not in the right way. That's how my JNet journey began. I heard about it once, then twice, then did the research to find it and finally enrolled.

Can you share a story or moment when you felt your Jewish learning come alive?

Although I grew up in a Jewish religious community, I wasn't raised in a very religious home. Holidays were about songs, gifts, decorations, and days off from school.

My Jewish learning came alive when I began to understand *why* we celebrate, what *simchah* is, what the laws mean, what's permitted and what's prohibited. It started to make sense.

How has your chavrusa impacted your life outside of the study sessions?

My partner, Shaina Stolik, has made an incredible impact on me. At first, I was shy and nervous. I didn't want to seem like a Jewish girl who knew too little about... well, everything. But Shaina was kind, patient, and supportive from the start.

Today, I keep Shabbat, fast on the fast days, and have a fully kosher kitchen. All this fills me with pride. Through learning with Shaina, I discovered how vast Jewish knowledge is; it is exciting to share what I learn with my fiancé.

Learning with Shaina has become the highlight of my entire week. I'm not exaggerating. I schedule work, errands, and even dentist appointments around my lesson time.

I feel happy and motivated before and after each session. The lessons help me prepare for the weekly *parshah* and give me confidence to ask questions and understand the *chagim*, *minhagim*, and *mitzvot*.

Today, I feel more connected to my Jewish identity than ever before.

Has your JNet learning encouraged you to get more involved in your local community or Jewish life where you live?

I love Chabad.org. I donate, read their uplifting articles, and check candle-lighting times each week. I recently moved closer to the Jewish community in London so I could be part of a genuine Jewish *kehillah*.

Even when I travel and feel far from home, I always look for the nearest Chabad. They make sure I have everything I need for Shabbat.

What's something new you've discovered about Judaism that surprised or inspired you?

There's so much that has inspired me, and it continues to do so. I've come to understand that Judaism isn't only about keeping Shabbat and Yom Tov, doing *mitzvot*, learning, keeping kosher, dressing modestly, or going to shul.

It's a way of life. It's how you respond to anger. Which words you choose to speak. How you show kindness, or give tough love. How you react to honesty and how you accept criticism. Whether you can look inward and admit your flaws and work on them.

Most of all, it's about recognizing that there's something bigger than yourself. You're not the center of the world, but a star in the universe. We all have freedom of choice, but living as a Jew means choosing the harder path, the one that challenges you, shapes you, and fills your soul with meaning. ❄



If you have 30 minutes a week to study with your fellow Jew, please visit jnet.org or email info@jnet.org. You'll be glad you did!

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