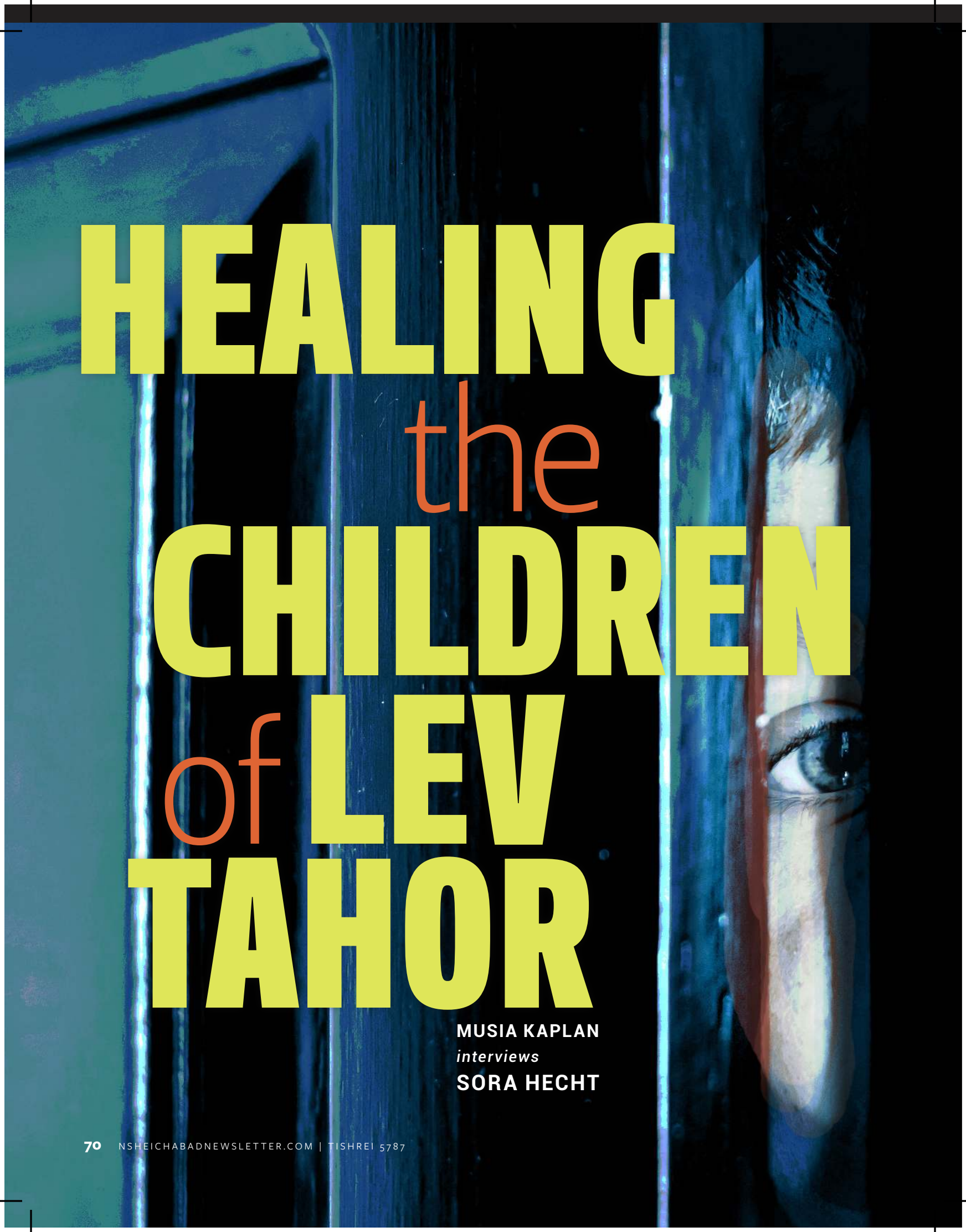


A close-up photograph of a child's face, partially obscured by vertical metal bars. The child's eye is visible through the bars, looking directly at the camera. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a somber and poignant atmosphere.

HEALING the CHILDREN of LEV TAHOR

MUSIA KAPLAN
interviews
SORA HECHT

Let's start at the beginning.

MK: How did you end up on a volunteer mission in Guatemala?

SH: In January of 2025, I was visiting my father, Rabbi Shea Hecht, at his office for the National Committee for the Furtherance of Jewish Education (NCFJE).

He was organizing a volunteer mission to help 180 Jewish children who had recently been rescued from the Lev Tahor cult, and I overheard him on a phone call. Through the snippets of conversation, I gathered that these children were malnourished, physically and psychologically scarred, and terrified. They were being held by the Guatemalan Childcare Services until custody could be arranged for them.

When my father hung up the phone, I said, "It sounds like these children need healthy love, and healthy love is something I can give. I want to go."

My father wasn't sure. "I don't think it's for you," he said. "These kids are in a really bad state. And they only speak a *heimishe* Yiddish, which you don't know."

Something in my gut told me I was meant to go. Drawing from my own experience as a mother and early-childhood educator, I knew that the most important language is nonverbal. You can connect and communicate with children through touch, song, dance, body language, and more. I felt instinctively that I could help these children through the terrifying transition from culthood to freedom.

So I insisted on going. Just 24 hours later, I was on a flight with three other female volunteers joining the seven-day mission. They were all social workers specializing in different age groups. Before we left, we had an hours-long briefing to prepare us for the journey ahead.

Can you tell us what you learned in that briefing?

My father, a seasoned cult-buster, shared valuable tools for getting through to people who have been brainwashed and controlled for years or their whole lives. We also met with people who had relatives in the cult. They all tried to prepare us for what to expect: The kids would be hauntingly thin, deeply traumatized, and potentially violent.

We also received a crash course on Lev Tahor. In the 1980s, a man named Shlomo Halbrems formed the group in Israel, claiming to practice the purest version of Judaism. He was charismatic and managed to lure many people from the Satmar community, as well as *baalei teshuvah* and converts. We know now that he wasn't even *frum*: he didn't put on *tefillin* or follow Jewish law. But he had everyone fooled. He created his own religion disguised as Judaism.

Once he had people under his sway, he controlled every aspect of their thought, speech, and action. Children were taken from their parents and given to other Lev Tahor families. All forms of abuse were common. Young teenagers were forced into marriage. People were publicly beaten and locked into isolation for minor infractions.

I remember learning in school that in Mitzrayim, the Jews were able to remain separate from the Egyptians by holding onto three core factors: their names, dress code, and language. The leaders in Lev Tahor intentionally made the members change all of those things in order to cut them off from their former identities.

When someone entered the cult, they had to take on a new name. These names were ridiculously long, like "Feiga Bracha Devorah Shaina Penina." It stripped them of a sense of individuality.

They made the women dress in full-body black coverings that resembled a burqa, including a veil that covered their faces. Even young girls had to wear full-body coverings and hair coverings.



Sora Hecht leans in, making eye contact with each child during circle time.

Members were only allowed to speak Yiddish. Anyone speaking a different language was punished. This made it difficult for anyone to leave, because they didn't speak the language of the country they were in.

Because of their illegal practices, the group had to flee from place to place. They went from Israel to Monsey to Quebec to Ontario to Mexico to Guatemala. In Guatemala, they created their own compound in a forest. They lived in ramshackle huts built with garbage bags and cardboard. There wasn't adequate plumbing or basic hygiene, there was no medical care, and there was never enough food.

Eventually, the Guatemalan government invaded the compound, arrested the leaders, and took the children into custody. But the children seemed unreachable—they didn't trust anyone, they wouldn't eat, they just sat and cried all day. Dayan Weiss, a prominent internationally known Rav and Dayan from Belgium (commonly known as the Chidah), called my father to enlist his help. Through NCFJE, my father organized and sponsored a 12-week volunteer program to help heal the children of Lev Tahor.

Wow. That's a lot to take in. What happened when you reached Guatemala?

I didn't sleep on that red-eye flight. I spoke with the social workers, and we discussed our plans, giving each other *chizuk*. We thought we knew what to

expect. But nothing could have prepared us for what we were about to see.

A driver picked us up from the airport and brought us to the location where 80 of the children were being kept. When we reached the facility, there was a long line of armed Guatemalan security guards wrapped around the site. There were dangerous individuals from Lev Tahor who

were trying to steal the children back, so 24-hour protection was necessary. We walked to a narrow gate, showed our passports, and were allowed in.

We entered a long corridor and met a scene of absolute chaos. Guatemalan women were carrying dozens of infants through the hall to a bus parked outside. All babies under one year old were being transferred to a different location. We realized we only had a few moments with these babies. So we asked the staff if we could hold them and sing to them. We cuddled each baby for a minute and sang *Shema* to them. In the blink of an eye, they were rushed away. Already we were overcome with emotion, and we hadn't fully entered the building.

The female director of the facility stepped into the corridor to greet us. She explained their rules and regulations. We could bring toys, but no food. We had to follow the daily schedule. She explained that the kids were separated into four rooms. The doors were cut so that the bottom could be locked and the top opened at the same time. That way the kids couldn't run out.

We were still shaky from our experience with the babies. When we walked into the building, the first thing that hit us was sound. An endless high-pitched wail. The kids were screaming at the top of their lungs, without pausing to take a breath. We walked through the hall and observed the children through the open tops of the doors. We saw haunting big eyes filled with fear. Malnourished, skinny faces that reminded me of the first Holocaust images I saw as a child. Rotten, black, and decaying

teeth. And the terrifying screams: “*Rasha! Rasha! Rasha!*” are the words the children chanted together as they wagged their fingers at us. They had been brainwashed to believe we were the enemy.

We tried to project calm and safety. We walked to each door and smiled at each child. We waved and said hello. The only group that didn’t holler at us was the youngest group, who were one and two years old. There were Guatemalan women in the room trying to feed them with bottles, but the babies were just crying.

We made a game plan: Divide and conquer. We split up based on our age-group experience, and then we rotated rooms. I started with the youngest group. The full-throated yelling lasted about an hour, until the kids tired themselves out. Once they were exhausted and resting, we brought out toys and crafts. We sang and danced. And slowly, slowly, the children began to engage with us.

How were you able to win their trust when they were programmed to hate you?

Every morning, I started with the same routine. I got the kids to sit in a circle and sang cheerful songs. The first time I clapped my hands while singing, one of the kids ran to a corner and began to cry hysterically. It was clear that the sound evoked traumatic memories.

Then I brought out little toy trains and balls and blocks. At first they just stared at them, frozen. They had never seen a toy in their lives. I demonstrated how to throw a ball, how to drive the train and say “choo choo.” The change in them could be seen by the hour. They went from anger to exhaustion to curiosity. The most rambunctious kid in the group stepped forward to try out the train. Then another kid followed, and another.

For the first three days, every time we walked into the building in the morning, the screaming and hollering ensued. But it lasted for a shorter time every day. And by day four, the children were excited to see us. They ran up to us, eager to begin circle time and play. The first time they all joined in the circle, I looked around and realized they all had smiles on their faces. They were dancing and singing, the simplest of joys that they had been denied all their lives. I turned to see the Guatemalan director standing outside the door, crying. She said, “I can’t believe these are the same kids who came here.”

We engaged the older kids with lots of arts and crafts and sensory play. We brought tracers and markers, tape and silly putty. When they realized they could tape their own artwork on the wall, they were excited. They would walk over and tenderly touch their art. It was the first time they were allowed to showcase their own talent and express their individuality. They had never been allowed to stand out. I told each one in Yiddish, “*Oooh, azoy shain!* Wow,

A child's bed in the Guatemalan facility.



There were five mattresses on the floor, but the girls were not on the mattresses. They were sleeping in a circle on the floor, holding hands. I checked on the boys, and they were all piled onto one mattress, holding onto each other.

that is beautiful!” They grinned with pride.

Somehow, language was never a barrier. I spoke in my broken Yiddish, and we used lots of sign language. But we had a hard time getting them to tell us their names. One of the boys said, “My mother and father told me to never tell someone my name. If I follow that rule, we will be together with the *heilige* Torah.”

We took pictures of all the kids, had them printed and laminated, and hung them on the walls. It was the first time they ever saw their own faces—there were no mirrors in Lev Tahor. The giggles! They ran to tell their siblings, and that’s when we figured out who was who. They pointed at each face and proudly said their names. It was the happiest I’d ever seen them.

Even as they warmed up, getting them to eat was a daily challenge. Sometimes they ate like they would never see food again, but more often they went on hunger strikes. They believed everything was *treif*. Their diet in Lev Tahor mainly consisted of matzah, chickpeas, avocado, and water from the sink. There was no bread or animal protein. “*Ich, ich, ich,*” they would chant during mealtime. Our tactic to get them to eat was to work on the bravest child in each

group, the unspoken leader. Once he or she broke the hunger strike, the others would quickly follow. They all loved dates, so we brought them lots of dates.

Another issue was personal hygiene. The children were not used to bathing. They were never taught to clean themselves after using the bathroom. And they were scared of the showers. Getting them washed up was a painful battle the staff of the facility had to wage. Once they trusted us, we incorporated self-grooming into our daily routine. We showed them how to cut their nails, wash their hands, and brush their hair.

Can you share a moment that impacted you deeply while you were there?

It happened on Shabbos, our last day in Guatemala. During the week, we stayed at a hotel and drove to the facility. On Shabbos it was too far to walk, so the director allowed us to sleep there. They set up cots for us near the kitchen. On Friday afternoon, the director told us, “By the way, it’s been going so well here, and the other facilities are still struggling. So they are sending us ten more kids today.”

At that point, six days into our seven-day mission,

They are so excited to see their pictures on the wall! There were no mirrors in Lev Tahor.



the children in our care had dramatically improved. They were calm, sleeping at night, and eating. There was hardly any crying. The girls had taken off their head coverings. The doors didn't have to be locked anymore. But now we were worried about what would happen when the new kids arrived. They were eight years old, older than the rest. They had not yet been deprogrammed. What would happen if they spotted a sibling? They might reindoctrinate them. They might harass them. So we decided to keep them separate. The new kids would stay downstairs, near the kitchen and our quarters. The other kids would sleep upstairs.

When the new children arrived, it felt like day one all over again. They were angry, wild, and violent. They managed to seriously scratch and hurt the director before being locked into their rooms for safety. We realized we could not engage with them until they were calmer. We decided to let them release their anger and we would approach them once they were drained and tired. So we went upstairs to the younger kids.

It was an unforgettable Friday night. It felt

holy, even though we were sitting on the floor of a dingy bedroom with all the mattresses pushed to the side. The children sat in a big circle. We lit Shabbos candles and then made *Kiddush*. We gave each child grape juice and challah. The children put their arms around each other, and we sang Shabbos songs. Then we tucked them into bed, said *Shema*, and sang songs. We had never spent a night there before. We were so glad to be able to give them one soothing, nurturing bedtime, like we've done thousands of times with our own children.

Then we went downstairs to the eight-year-olds. But, they still weren't ready. They were seething with rage. One of the kids asked for a knife from the kitchen. We retreated to our cots near the kitchen, but I couldn't sleep. I was scared. What if one of the kids actually managed to jump over the door, get a knife, and hurt us?

The yelling continued for a while. Eventually, it got quiet. You know that feeling when your kids are sleeping and for some reason you feel compelled to check that they're still breathing? I got that feeling. So I tiptoed to the room where the

five girls were sleeping. I leaned over the door and peeked in. There were five mattresses on the floor, but the girls were not on the mattresses. They were sleeping in a circle on the floor, holding hands. I checked on the boys, and they were all piled onto one mattress, holding onto each other.

My heart clenched. I realized in that moment what young, innocent, and pure children they were. Their anger was a mask for terror. They had been abused in every way. The people who were supposed to love them had hurt them. Suddenly, they were taken by strangers to a foreign place. They had no idea that this was the beginning of their salvation. *How could I ever have been afraid of them?* I asked myself.

On Shabbos morning, we spoke to the new children a bit. They were still hostile and refused to eat. The girls refused to remove their burqas. After 20 hours, we convinced them to eat some matzah and avocado. We didn't have enough time to bond with this group, because we had to leave early Sunday morning. But we knew other volunteers were coming after us and we hoped they would succeed.

On Sunday, before we left, the facility director cried to us in gratitude. "You can't imagine how much you have helped us," she said.

**Was it hard to leave?
What did you feel
when you returned
to your regular
life?**

Leaving the children was definitely emotional. When we got back to New York, we immediately had a debriefing with my father and several mental health

professionals. We spoke about everything—the tears, the laughter, the fear. We discussed ways to reacclimate to our lives, and to be able to cope with flashbacks. They explained that sometimes memories only hit days or weeks later. We might be doing the dishes in a week and suddenly find ourselves flooded with tears.

And mainly, we discussed what we could do to continue supporting the children from afar. I decided to take on managing the volunteer program for NCFJE. I was in constant communication with the volunteers and Guatemalan staff. If there was a problem, I heard about it. I screened hundreds of potential volunteers and spoke to each one to explain what the mission entailed. Many people, after hearing the details, would say, "This is not for me."

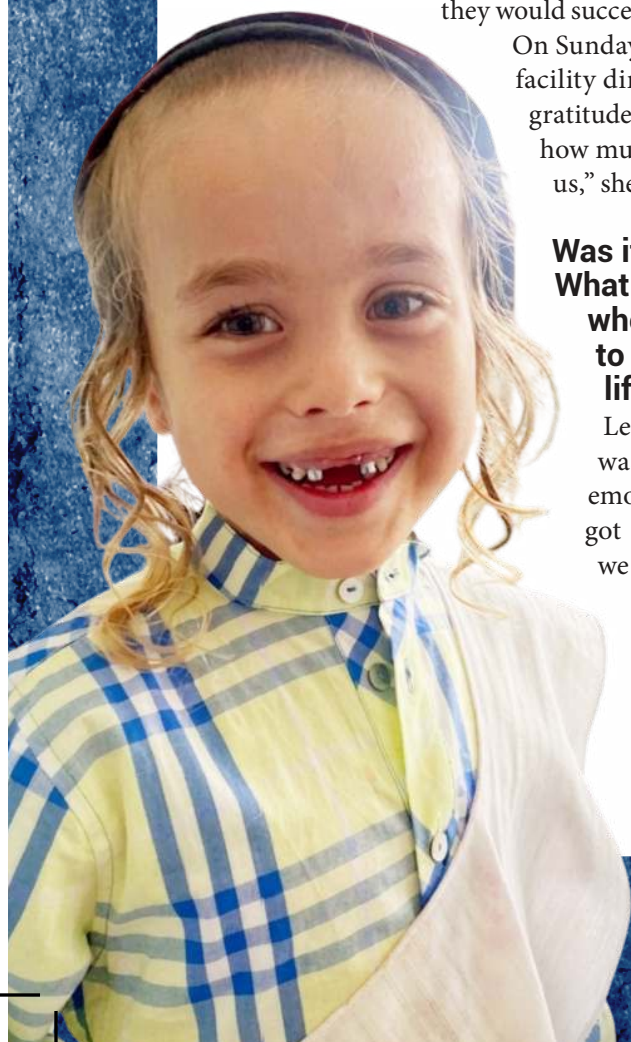
Some of our best volunteers were Lubavitch and Satmar *bachurim*. They were incredible. They taught the older kids how to play chess. They brought live chickens to the facility. One *bochur* brought his flute and played *Keili Atah* to a rapt audience of three-year-olds. My father, Rabbi Shea Hecht, later said at a speaking engagement in London: "When Lubavitch and Satmar work together to save Yiddishe *neshamos*, we can be very successful."

Every group of our volunteers had a briefing and debriefing, just like I had, before and after the trip. After the twelve-week program was over, someone from the Guatemalan Childcare Services said: "We had many volunteers who showed up. But the volunteers from Rabbi Hecht were the most trained, the most ready, and the most helpful." It all stemmed from the crucial briefing beforehand.

The debriefing and support that we received after the trip were very important.

One of my greatest joys was hearing progress reports from returning volunteers. The kids were doing better by the day. Even the eight-year-old children, who had seemed so impossible to reach when we left, were now coloring, singing, and leaving their rooms.

A child survivor of Lev Tahor.





Rabbi Yaakov Yehuda (J.J.) Hecht standing next to the Rebbe at the Lag B'Omer Children's Parade on 18 Iyar 5726/1966. JEM photo ID#310756.

What is the NCFJE?

The National Committee for the Furtherance of Jewish Education (NCFJE) traces its roots to the dark years of World War II, when the Frierdiker Rebbe arrived in America with a singular mission: to rebuild Jewish life and Torah education. Despite immense hardship, he inspired a generation of American Yidden to dedicate themselves to learning, compassion, outreach, and strengthening Jewish identity. Today, that vision continues worldwide through the enduring influence of his son-in-law, the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Founded in 1940 as one of the very first organizations established by the Frierdiker Rebbe in America, the NCFJE began with its groundbreaking Released Time Program, which ultimately reached more than 10,000 public school children throughout New York State with Jewish education and *mitzvos*.

Under the visionary leadership of Rabbi Jacob J. Hecht, the NCFJE expanded into a multifaceted educational and humanitarian organization serving individuals and families from every walk of life. Today, its programs include yeshivos and educational initiatives for men and women; Camp Emunah and summer programs for children of all ages; outreach and educational opportunities



Rabbi Shea Hecht with his son receiving *Kos Shel Brachah* from the Rebbe on *Motzoei Rosh Hashanah*, 5746 (1985).
JEM photo ID#266698.

for college students; drug and substance abuse prevention programs in inner-city schools; assistance for underprivileged families; educational scholarships and tuition support; toys for hospitalized children and hospital visitation programs; services for seniors in

nursing homes; prisoner outreach and rehabilitation; radio and media programming; and numerous other pioneering initiatives dedicated to strengthening individuals, families, and communities.

The NCFJE has also become a voice of education, inspiration, and advocacy through publishing and media. Rabbi Shea Hecht, Chairman of the NCFJE, is the author of the widely acclaimed *Confessions of a Jewish Cultbuster*, chronicling decades of work helping individuals and families affected by cults and coercive groups, as well as *Whatever It Takes*, a collection of inspiring stories and life lessons reflecting compassion, resilience, and the power we each have to make a difference. Rabbi Sholom Ber Hecht, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the NCFJE, is the author of *Escape From Iran*, recounting the remarkable and dangerous rescue of Jewish children from Iran during a time of upheaval and uncertainty.

For 86 years and counting, the NCFJE has remained guided by the spirit, devotion, and far-reaching vision instilled by Rabbi Jacob J. Hecht and carried forward by its leadership today. Its mission continues to evolve to meet the challenges of the modern world while remaining firmly rooted in the timeless values of Torah, education, kindness, and unwavering concern for every individual.



Dancing in a circle with the children.

What happened to all the children? Where are they now?

Over the next few months, most of the children were either adopted by relatives or placed into safe, loving Jewish foster homes. The kids whose parents left the cult were able to return to their parents, but unfortunately that wasn't common. Many of the children ended up with relatives in the Satmar communities of Monroe, Monsey, and Williamsburg.

The families are getting lots of therapy to help them adjust to their new lives. They focus on one baby step at a time. Gently encouraging the girls to remove their burqas. Introducing them to new foods like bread, oatmeal, chicken, eggs, meat, and fish. Teaching them to read and write. Preparing them to go to school and make friends.

Some of the young teenagers, only 14 and 15 years old, had been forced to marry while in the cult. Many of them have chosen to stay

married to their spouses, but they are living together under the care of adults. There are also some teenage girls who had babies in the cult. They have been adopted together with their babies, so that both newborn and teenager can receive the love and nurturing they need and deserve.



A child survivor of Lev Tahor.

Here at NCFJE, we check in with the families and continue to offer support. Some children are having an easier time than others. I recently met one of the eight-year-old girls who arrived on my last day in Guatemala. She's living with relatives in Williamsburg. The last time I had seen her, she was yelling in a burqa. Now she was smiling, wearing a normal pleated skirt and a T-shirt. She had the most gorgeous, shining red braids. I said, "You're a redhead! I had no idea."

What these children went through is unimaginable. But thanks to the dedication of NCFJE and the volunteers, there is hope. I feel deep gratitude to Hashem for giving me the opportunity to play a small part in their healing journey. ❧