**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Nitzavim-vayeilech 5773**

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**Chassidic Story #821**

**The Partnership Prayer**

**From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

[**editor@ascentofsafed.com**](http://webmailb.juno.com/webmail/new/5?session_redirect=true&userinfo=eff1e795994608ed6885dfdeac88e827&count=1377090390&cf=SP2&randid=1591470184##)

The month of Elul was drawing to a close. The "scent" of the High Holidays was already in the air and everyone was busy getting ready as best they could. The marketplace was overflowing with merchandise and seasonal produce, including the special fruits that are traditionally eaten on Rosh Hashana, such as pomegranates. Homes were being swept from top to bottom and new clothes were fitted and sewn.

**Preparing Themselves Spiritually**

**For the Coming Year**

At the same time, the Jews prepared themselves spiritually for the coming year. This was serious business; more attention was paid to praying with a minyan, refraining from gossip and in general, improving behavior.

Inside the study hall of the ***Baal Shem Tov***, the final preparations before Rosh Hashana were also underway. Prayers were recited with increased devotion, and all thoughts were focused on returning to G-d in repentance.

One evening, a few days before Rosh Hashana, his disciples were getting ready to pray the evening service. At precisely the appointed hour the Baal Shem Tov entered the study hall, but instead of opening his prayer book he remaining standing, lost in thought.

The minutes ticked by and still the Baal Shem Tov seemed distracted, as if he were in another world. His holy face was suffused with intense emotion. Of course, no one dared mention that it was time to pray; the disciples were already used to such things.

When the Baal Shem Tov suddenly roused himself almost an hour later and opened his prayer book, his countenance was shining with joy. That evening, the Baal Shem Tov prayed with unusual intensity and longing. It was obvious that something of great magnitude had occurred.

**The Baal Shem Tov’s Explanation**

After the service the Baal Shem Tov explained:

"Not very far from here," he began, "lives a Jew who grew up in a traditional Jewish home. But as he grew older, he began to associate with the local peasants. Slowly he abandoned the Jewish path till he was virtually indistinguishable from the gentiles and completely estranged from his roots.

"Many years passed. The man left the province where he was born and went to live in a totally non-Jewish environment. As time passed, he forgot everything about the Jewish way of life, its prayers and its customs. Altogether, 30 years elapsed.

"Tonight," the Baal Shem Tov revealed, "this Jew happened to be visiting a Jewish town on business. As soon as he entered the village he could sense the commotion, and this aroused his curiosity. When he asked a passer-by what was going on the man answered, 'Everyone is getting ready for a holiday we call Rosh Hashana. According to Jewish tradition, it is the day on which man was created and the whole world is judged.'

**Striking A Chord in His**

**Assimilated Jewish Heart**

"For some reason this explanation struck a chord in the heart of the assimilated Jew. Maybe it was the exclusionary 'we' that emphasized the huge chasm that separated him from his brethren, or perhaps the mere mention of the Day of Judgment. In any event, the man's soul was inexplicably awakened, and he was flooded with memories of his childhood.

"As he wandered through the marketplace he was suddenly stricken by the horrifying realization that he had exchanged a life rich in meaning for an empty existence. At that moment he looked up, and was surprised to find himself standing outside the main synagogue. By then it was almost dark, and men were arriving to pray the evening service.

"The man was seized by an overwhelming desire to join them, but he was also embarrassed by his non-Jewish appearance. In the end the urge to pray won out, and he went into the women's section, which was empty then for the weeknight prayer, and hid behind the curtain.

"As the cantor chanted the words 'And He atones for sin...' a shudder passed through the man's body. How he wished to pray, but the words were long forgotten. Tears streamed down his cheeks. When the last congregant had gone home he couldn't bear it any longer and burst out crying. 'Master of the universe!' he wept. 'I know there is no greater sinner than I, but I also know that You are merciful and full of loving-kindness. Heavenly Father, forgive me my transgressions and I will sin no more. I wish to return to You and live as a Jew. Please accept my prayer and do not turn me away!'

**Creating a Great Commotion**

**In the Celestial Realms**

"The man's heartfelt repentance caused a great commotion in the celestial realms," the Baal Shem Tov explained, "and his prayer ascended to the very Throne of Glory. In fact, it was so powerful that it brought along with it many other prayers that had been waiting hundreds of years to ascend.

"When I sensed what was going on in the man's heart," the Baal Shem Tov concluded, "I decided to wait for him to pray so I could join him. Tonight's service was delayed so we could merit to pray with a true penitent!"

**Founder of the Chassidic Movement**

Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from //lchaimweekly.org (#985), with permission.

Biographical note: **Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer** (18 Elul 1698-6 Sivan 1760), the Baal Shem Tov ["master of the good Name"], a unique and seminal figure in Jewish history, revealed the Chassidic movement and his own identity as an exceptionally holy person, on his 36th birthday, 18 Elul 1734. He wrote no books, although many claim to contain his teachings. One available in English is the excellent annotated translation of Tzava'at Harivash, published by Kehot.

*Reprinted from last week’s email of KabbalaOnline.com, a project of Ascent of Safed.* [*www.ascentsafed.com*](http://www.ascentsafed.com)[*ascent@ascentofsafed.com*](mailto:ascent@ascentofsafed.com)

Whispers of 9-11

Inside the World Trade Center on that Fateful

Day, Ari Schonbrun Saw Miracles.

**By** [**Steve Lipman**](http://www.aish.com/authors/104234424.html)

On the morning of [September 11, 2001](http://www.aish.com/ci/sept11/), Ari Schonbrun, who was headed to his office at Cantor Fitzgerald in the World Trade Center where he is in charge of global accounts receivable, considered a last-minute assignment from his wife to be an annoyance.



**It turned out to be a miracle.**

At the door of his home in suburban Long Island, Schonbrun heard his wife, Joyce, yell from upstairs, "Did you do Baruch's school order?"

Baruch is the couple's then-8-year-old son. His order form for school books and games was due that morning. Schonbrun had meant to help Baruch with it the previous night – but, working late that Monday night to make up for time he would miss during the upcoming High Holidays, he'd arrived home by the time Baruch had fallen asleep.

**Commanded by His Wife**

**Not to Leave Until Filling**

**Out Baruch’s Book Order**

"You're not leaving the house until you do it," Schonbrun's wife declared.

He sat down with Baruch.

He missed his commuter train.

He got to work later than usual.

His office was located on the 101st floor of the north tower, better known as Tower One. When American Airlines flight 11, a Boeing 767 crashed into Tower One, he was on the 78th floor, changing elevators in the "sky lobby."

When American Airlines flight 11 crashed into Tower One, he was on the 78th floor, changing elevators.

Schonbrun says his late arrival at [the Twin Towers](http://www.aish.com/ci/be/Through_the_Valley_of_Death.html) was the first of several serendipitous twists of fate, coincidences that he has come to see as miracles which saved his life. All 685 Cantor Fitzgerald employees on the 101st floor that day lost their lives.

**Could Have Been Victim 686th**

Had he arrived on time, as usual, had he been in his office, as usual, he would have been the 686th casualty of Cantor Fitzgerald, the major global financial services firm that lost more employees on 9-11 than any other single business.

**[](http://videos.shalomtv.com/displayCategories_SEO.php?cat_name=all-shows&sort=2a&page=2)**

**Ari Schonbrun being interviewed by**

**Shalom TV on the 10th Anniversary of 9-11.**

Schonbrun, now 56, thinks often about that day – more now, with the [anniversary of 9-11](http://www.aish.com/sp/so/48899422.html) approaching.

"I was plucked out of a burning building and given a second chance," he says, sitting in a café on Manhattan's Upper East Side, near Cantor Fitzgerald's new corporate offices.

**A Completely Different Person**

He has a new title, director of debt capital markets & asset management at Cantor Fitzgerald, where he has worked for two decades.

On the outside, he looks like he did before 9-11: tall, clean-shaven, casually but neatly dressed, pausing to choose the words before telling the story he has told countless times in the dozen years since the Twin Towers fell. Just one visible difference: his sideburns have turned white. "That happened immediately," he says. Overnight – from the shock of what happened that Tuesday morning.

Inside, Schonbrun is a different man. "I don't see my life the same way, and can no longer live it the same way I once did."

Schonbrun speaks often about what happened on 9-11 and how it changed his life. As an outgrowth of his speeches, he wrote a 9-11 autobiography, *Miracles & Fate on 78,* which he self-published two years ago.

**Down the Stairwell**

8:46 a.m. Ari Schonbrun was on the 78th floor when he heard the boom and smelled the smoke. He thought it was a bomb.

In the hall, dark and filled with smoke, he saw a coworker, Virginia DiChiara, an internal auditor, who was badly burned. "Please help me!” she screamed. “I am in so much pain. Please help me and whatever you do, please don't leave me."

"Virginia," Schonbrun said, "I promise I will help you, and I promise I won't leave you. We will get out of here.”

A fire warden directed them to the "[stairwell](http://www.aish.com/sp/pg/Did-You-See-Darya-in-the-Stairwell.html) on the left." Schonbrun slowly led DiChiara, who could not be touched because her burns were so painful, down the only staircase that led directly down to the ground floor exit. The other staircases ended earlier, on floors crowded with hundreds of people also looking to escape the flames and smoke.

**Reassures His Colleague**

"You're going to make it," he reassured his colleague. "If you feel faint, Virginia, fall forward, fall on me."

DiChiara kept on walking.

At the 75th floor, Schonbrun heard his cell phone ring. It was his wife. She started crying when her husband answered. Joyce knew that a plane had hit her husband's building. "She did not know if I was still alive," he says.

"I never got reception in my office, even on a regular day," he says. On the morning of 9-11, the call went through from the stairwell. "That was one of the biggest miracles of that day. I turned to *shamayim* [heaven], and said 'Thank you.'"

A moment later a man in the stairwell asked to borrow the cell phone. "Of course," Schonbrun said.

"Nothing. The signal was now dead."

"At least my wife knew that I was alive," Schonbrun says, "and as strange as it may seem, given what was going on, that gave me great comfort.”

At the 50th floor, DiChiara began to tire. "Virginia, you can do this," he told her. He poured some bottled water into her mouth and over her arms, to give her some relief from the pain.

To boost her spirits, he began counting down the floors they passed. He lied to her: "You look great."

It kept her going.

Finally, they reached the first floor.

**Warned Out of the Building’s Garage**

A fire warden there told them they would have to walk down a few more flights and exit through the building's garage. Down two flights, out of the darkness, a voice shouted, "You can't get out through the garage." Schonbrun and DiChiara and the others with them trudged back to the first floor and walked out. Anyone in the garage when the building collapsed several minutes later would have died.

Across the street, in front of the Millennium Hotel, Schonbrun helped his colleague into an ambulance. headed for St. Vincent's Hospital. Schonbrun, knowing that DiChiara was in good hands, started to walk away.

"Ari, you're coming with us!" DiChiara insisted.

Thinking that it would probably be a good thing for her psychologically, Schonbrun acquiesced.

"This," he says, "was how I was driven away from my own, otherwise certain, death."

The Towers collapsed minutes later; few at the site survived.

Virginia, who has since recovered, "thanks me every day for saving her life," Schonbrun says. "But I always tell her, 'Virginia, you got it all wrong. Who saved whose life? If you hadn't insisted that I get in that ambulance, I'd be dead.'"

"Against all odds," he says, "I somehow managed to escape without a single scratch. Somebody, obviously, was watching out for me that day."

**Mission to Survive**

Eventually, he left the hospital, walking north.

On a borrowed phone, he called DiChiara's parents, telling them that their daughter was badly burned but still alive.

Then he reached his wife, who was crying. "Tower One collapsed and I thought you were dead," she said.

The last time they had spoken, Schonbrun was on the 75th floor of his burning building. "When it collapsed and she hadn't heard from me again, she was convinced that I was now dead. She had been trying to figure out how she was going to tell our children that Daddy was killed."

Because of the goodness of strangers and friends, Schonbrun made his way home, by subway and taxi, by early evening. He was greeted at home by 20 people, friends concerned about his fate; on his answering machine, at least 100 messages.

**Learning How Many Friends You Really Have**

"You have no idea how many friends you really have until they all think you are dead."

"That day I learned something very important," he says. "You have no idea how many friends you really have until they all think you are dead."

He washed up, went to afternoon Mincha services at his synagogue, and recited the *HaGomel* prayer of thanks that is usually reserved for Torah-reading days.

Early that next morning, a radio reporter called from Israel for an interview. Within a week, Schonbrun found himself speaking to individuals and audiences about his 9-11 experience. "I didn't think my story was anything special," he says. But everyone else did. You survived for a reason, everyone told him, “You have a mission. What is it?"

He realized his mission: to tell about how he survived, “to describe what God did for me," and how it changed him.

**Permanent Change in Ari’s Life**

A native of New York City who moved in his teens with his family to Israel. Schonbrun has always been an observant Jew.

For Schonbrun, everything did change after 9-11.

"But despite my daily rituals built around my devotion to G-d, there were times when I lost sight of what was really important," he writes in his book. "Was I truly aware of what I was doing through of all these practices, or was I just going through the motions most of the time? Did I just do the minimum that was required and find convenient excuses not to attend one more study session or concentrate more on the words of my prayers?"

Everything changed, Schonbrun says, after 9-11.

Just as he can list the miracles that happened to him on 9-11, he can list the changes he has made in his life:

No more cursing. Co-workers who use foul language "don't use foul language around Ari's desk."

No more talking in shul during *davening* time. Previously, "I talked in shul like everyone else."

No excuses when his kids ask him to come to their school events. Earlier, he'd answer, "Daddy's got to work." Today, he'll take time off for a school play, a school trip – anything involving his children. "Now family is the most important thing in my life."

Less temper. "I don't get upset over small things."

More time for Jewish learning.

And he doesn't miss daily prayers, three times a day, with a minyan.

Formerly, when he prayed, it was to make a living. Now, he prays for his children, "that my children should be good children."

Is he a happier now? "100 percent," he says.

The changes he made more than a decade ago are still part of his life, he says, because they "happened gradually, over time." He didn't try to incorporate any sudden changes overnight.

In his book and speeches, Schonbrun offers some advice. Recognize the "hand of G-d" in your lives. Give to charity. Do volunteer work. Seek out role models. Be kinder. Don't speak poorly of others. "Take one thing that you are not doing today, that you could do to make yourself better, no matter how basic, and make the conscious decision to do better."

**Small Whispers**

Schonbrun likes to tell the story of a "young and successful executive" who, speeding down an urban street in his new Jaguar, feels a brick smash into the side of his prized automobile. Angered, he backs up, gets out of the car, and grabs the kid who threw the brick.

"What the heck are you doing?" the driver screams.

The kid, crying, answers, "I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do. I threw the brick because no one else would stop." His brother's wheelchair had rolled off the curb and his brother had fallen out.

"I can't lift him up!" the stone-thrower cries. "Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair?"

**Why Must it Take a Brick to Get Your Attention**

The driver helps lift the fallen boy and keeps the dent in the Jaguar's side as a reminder of the incident's message: "Don't go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention."

Everyone has a choice, Schonbrun says. You can listen to the whispers of life, its subtle messages. "Or you can wait for the brick."

Now, he passes out a business card that identifies him as a "Motivational Speaker." On a background of a cloud-filled sky are the words: "Listen to the Whispers."

What about the victims, the nearly 3,000 people who lost their lives on 9-11? How does he explain his survival while others perished? In other words, wasn't God looking out for them, too?

His answer: “G-d has a plan, and I can't explain.”

Imagine a small piece of black canvas, Schonbrun says. Beautiful?

No.

Then, he says, imagine it's part of a bigger canvas, a Picasso painting. The small black patch makes sense.

"We only see part of the picture," he says.

**Bad Things are Part of a Grand Design**

"I don't need reminders. 9-11 is with me every single day."

When bad things – or things that seem bad – happen to Schonbrun, he says he understands that they're part of a grand design.

Hurricane Sandy damaged his home last year. If it had happened before 9-11, he says, "I would have asked, 'Why me?'" As he surveyed the damage, he said to himself, "God has a reason. I don't know why. We'll figure it out.”

The 12th anniversary of 9-11 is coming up. On the anniversary, many survivors and their relatives attend commemoration and memorial services.

Schonbrun goes golfing. Alone.

On that day, he doesn't want to talk about his experiences. He doesn't want to think about it nor read the newspaper on that day.

"I don't need reminders," Schonbrun says. "9-11 is with me every single day."

The only physical memento he carries with him, on his keychain, is the key to his office in Tower One.

*Reprinted from a recent email of Aish.com*

**Tossing a Jewish Lasso Over Wyoming’s Wild West**

**By Carin M. Smilk**

[**Chabad.org**](http://www.jewishpress.com/author/chabad-org/)

Summer is winding down in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. It’s a short season, weather-wise, but it’s also a season that brings in tourists, lots of them, who come for the mountains and national parks, the outdoor sports and the wide open spaces. They come to make good on the state slogan: “Like No Place on Earth.”



*Rabbi Zalman Mendelsohn, co-director of Chabad Jewish Center of Wyoming with his wife, Raizy, and their children.*Photo Credit: Chabad.org

Not long after they leave, winter beckons a slew of other travelers, those lured to the skiing and snow activities. It’s another bustling time; the two seasons bring in about 4 million visitors a year.

And about 1 percent of them—an estimated 40,000 people—are Jewish.  
 That helps make life busy for Rabbi Zalman Mendelsohn, co-director of Chabad Jewish Center of Wyoming with his wife, Raizy. Not that it's so quiet the rest of the year. The couple, based in the town of Jackson—in western Wyoming near the border of Idaho, almost completely surrounded by mountains and in the well-known valley of Jackson Hole—serves the roughly 500 permanent Jewish residents there, out of a general population of nearly 10,000. It’s an interesting mix, says the rabbi, of singles, couples, families, retirees, tourists and those with second homes in the area.

][](http://www.jewishpress.com/?attachment_id=141406)

**Ben from San Francisco put on tefillin for the first**

**time in his life. Photo credit: Chabad.org[/caption]**

“We have a very small community,” acknowledges Mendelsohn, “but we offer quality services—substantive services. We’re reaching out to individual Jews in a very personal, warm, inviting way.”

Since their official 2008 move to Jackson, they have started all kinds of programs. There’s the annual [Jackson Hole Jewish Music Festival](http://www.chabad.org/article.asp?AID=2300903), which brings in bands and performers from all over, coupled with Camp Gan Israel, a Jewish women’s circle, a “Mommy & Me” class, Torah study, lectures, “Coffee & Kabbalah,” and Shabbat and Jewish holiday dinners and services. Currently, they rent space for High Holiday services but are looking for a place to buy.

Also on tap are lecture series, including one to take place this weekend, Aug. 16-17. The Shabbaton will include services and a Friday-night dinner, then Saturday-morning services and a three-course lunch, with lectures both days by guest speaker David N. Weiss. A Hollywood film writer with several blockbusters to his credit, Weiss has traversed religiously from being a secular Jew to a Christian youth worker, and now follows a life of observant Judaism.

**His Story is Very Compelling**

“His story is very compelling,” says Mendelsohn. “He never really had the opportunity to study Judaism in-depth. It shows that you can always start fresh and new, even if you’re very famous or a celebrity. You can always rediscover your roots.”

The series has attracted 50 to 60 people on average, and the rabbi expects a similar turnout for Weiss.

So how has life changed for a couple raised in completely different living environments? The rabbi, in his early 30s, hails from Miami, Fla., and Raizy, in her late 20s, grew up in Israel. What’s it like to live in the least populated state in the nation?

“We felt very much at home right away,” says the rabbi. “People are warm and welcoming; there’sthe renowned Western hospitality. It’s a cowboy town, it’s the Wild West, but people also have a more spiritual character here. And our goal is to introduce a Yiddishkeit element to it.”

That sense of spirituality could have something to do with the physical backdrop. Jackson is a stone’s throw from Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Teton Mountains. The rabbi talks of the everyday appearance of bison, moose, deer, wolves and bears. “There’s wildlife in the streets,” he says, pausing to add that he just saw a herd of elk run up the side of a nearby mountain.

**A Scenically and Spiritually Good Atmosphere**

He also notes the atmosphere—both scenically and spiritually—is good for the couple’s four young children. After all, for kids in such a place, aside from their home-schooling time, “life is surrounded by G-d’s great outdoors.”

Of course, it’s not all vales and wild flowers. There’s no kosher food, no Jewish schools, no other Orthodox presence and no *mikvah*. The closest *mikvahs* are in Bozeman, Mont., and Salt Lake City, Utah—both a five-hour drive or one-hour flight away.

"Still," says Mendelsohn, “we have a wonderful community, and we are honored to also accommodate visitors who come through. I travel around the state quarterly visiting Jewish people. We’ve put up about 60 mezuzahs in the last three years all over the state. One by one, we’re connecting Jews with their heritage."

“That’s the story of Wyoming. We may be one of the most remote Jewish communities in the country, but I want people to know that Yiddishkeit is alive and well and thriving in Jackson Hole.”

**Originally from New Jersey**

Laura Goldstein, 34, can attest to that. Originally from New Jersey, she now lives in Victor, Idaho, which borders Wyoming and is about a 45-minute drive from Jackson. She and her husband Howard, a wildlife biologist, came to live out West in 2009, and she says the rabbi was one of the first people they met.

“We were looking for a way to connect with other Jewish people, and we knew Chabad would be a good way to do that,” says Goldstein, an administrative assistant. “They invited us over for Shabbat dinner, and it was lovely. They were so gracious. They make you want to be part of the community.

“And every opportunity they have of doing a *mitzvah*, they do. It’s incredible.”

She’s also seen Chabad grow as an organization. At Rosh Hashanah, there used to be three men, not even a *minyan*; now there may be 14. And Shabbat dinners in the summer can draw 40 to 50 people. She even mentions that just this year, she met a Jewish woman from New York who runs a clothing store/jewelry shop in Victor.

**Learning by Example**

Most of all, Goldstein says she and her husband have modeled their Shabbat observance at home on the Mendelsohns’ example. “Knowing them has been a huge part in that direction. We feel that we’re better Jewish people out here. It probably wouldn’t have been as big a part of our identity” back East.

She adds that Raizy has shown her how to make challah, light Shabbat candles and recite the Havdalah prayers.

“It’s great to see how they bring in what they need,” says Goldstein. “These people are making it work; they’re doing it.” So she figures she can, too.

“Rabbi Zalman,” as Josh Beck and other local residents call him, “is involved in everything. He’s an amazing man.”

“And he’s one of my closest friends here.”

Beck, 41, an orthopedic surgeon from New Jersey, has been living in Wyoming for seven years. He says he considers himself a very big supporter and very active with Chabad there.

He attends Shabbat dinners (the true reason, he says, is because of “Raizy’s fantastic cooking”) and various programs, but admits to preferring “the off-season, when there’s a handful of locals.”

He says that he, his wife and 3-year-old daughter “love living out here.” Beck hunts and fishes and skis; in fact, he notes, he found his job there while on a ski vacation.

**A Spiritual Change of Scenery**

Cross-country skiing also appeals to Stephen and Linda Melcer from Boca Raton, Fla., who have rented a house in Jackson the last two winters and intend to come again this year.

“It’s a nice change of scenery, of climate,” says Stephen Melcer, a 61-year-old lawyer. “It’s also a nice change religiously and a change in diversity.”

The couple belongs to Boca Raton Synagogue, an Orthodox shul. “Whenever we travel, we look for a place to be for Shabbos, and a good place to start looking is Chabad. We’ve noticed here that a lot of people attending are travelers, and a larger percentage of people are not observant.”

Melcer says he appreciates “going into an environment where a rabbi is focused on the less observant.”

“They are very warm,” he says of the Mendelsohns. “I think they enjoy the challenge of it. And they certainly have a lot of challenges. The incredible thing is that challenges never cross their minds.”

Ken Begelman is glad that’s the case. He and his wife, Helen, helped the Mendelsohns come to town.

**The Rabbi is a Very Outgoing Guy**

Twelve years ago, the Begelmans moved to Teton County, about 8 miles outside Jackson, from Palm Beach County, Fla. When they arrived, they wanted a shul—a congregation of some type. Begelman says he was familiar with Chabad rabbinical students coming to Wyoming temporarily (they have for decades, as part of the “Roving Rabbis” program), and got in touch with people in Brooklyn to work to make it happen permanently.

“He’s a very outgoing guy, very inclusive; he gets along with everybody,” says Begelman, a 66-year-old retired cardiac surgeon, of Mendelsohn.

He notes that there’s a large number of 20-year-olds who come to work during ski season or in the summer who have never had any religious affiliation or education, and “the rabbi has turned a lot of these kids around.”

As for Wyoming, the former Floridian insists that “it’s wonderful here. It’s what America should be. Everybody respects everybody else. You don’t have to lock your house or your car. There’s no crime.”

Sure, the winter temperatures can fall to 20 below and the snow can average 38 feet a year in the mountainous regions, but residents insist that it’s an invigorating experience.

In regards to future expansion, Begelman says that if “one new Jewish family a year comes permanently, that would be a lot.” Population growth is indeed slow; Begelman has seen signs in the state that note there are 10 horses for every one person residing there.

As far as the rabbi and his family go, “I’m very happy that they’ve fit in well in the community and that they like it here. It’s a wonderful place to live.”

Reprinted from last week’s email of The Jewish Press. The article originally appeared on the Chabad.org website.

**Who's Who**

**Serach Bat Asher**

Serach was the daughter of Asher - one of the twelve sons of Jacob. She gently disclosed to Jacob the news that Joseph was still alive by playing a song with the words "Joseph is alive" on her harp, so that he would not suffer a shock.

Jacob blessed her with immortality. She was still alive when Moshe redeemed the Jews from Egypt. It was Serach who showed Moshe where the casket with Joseph's bones lay sunken in the Nile and told him how to raise it. She was one of the few to ascend to the Garden of Eden alive.

*Reprinted from the recent Parshas Va’eschanan edition of “L’Chaim,” a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY.*

**Second Act for the**

**Temple of the Stars**

**By Adam Nagourney**

LOS ANGELES — It was known as the Temple of the Stars: a soaring sanctuary capped by a 100-foot-wide Byzantine dome, built by Hollywood moguls on the eve of the Depression and splashed with the kind of pizazz one might expect at a movie palace rather than a synagogue.



*The Byzantine dome of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple, built on the eve of the Depression, has been restored as part of a renovation and expansion project.(Photo by Monica Almeida/The New York Times)*

But over the last 80 years, the [Wilshire Boulevard Temple](http://www.wbtla.org/) has become a monument to neglect, its handsome murals cracked, the gold-painted dome blackened by soot, the sanctuary dark and grim. A foot-long chunk of plaster crashed to the ground one night.

The congregation, too, has faded; while still vibrant and active, it has grown older, showing no signs of growth. This once proud symbol of religious life in Los Angeles seemed on the brink of becoming a victim of the steady ethnic churn of the city, as its neighborhood grew increasingly Korean and Hispanic and Jews moved to the west side.

But faced with the threat of extinction that has forced synagogues in other parts of the country to close or merge, Wilshire has responded with force: a $150 million program to restore the synagogue to its former grandeur and, in fact, make it even grander — extending the campus to fill a whole block and building a school and a social services center for the community. In the process, the synagogue is looking to reclaim its prominence in the civic order here.

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| *spacer Monica Almeida/The New York Times*  *Murals at the Wilshire Boulevard Temple depicting Jewish history "were a radical artistic statement," the senior rabbi said* | *.* |

It is by any measure a costly gamble — Jewish leaders said the $150 million is among the highest amounts ever spent on a synagogue renovation. And the renovation is in some ways jarring, coming at a moment when cuts in education and social services have rocked this state and taking place in a community that has at times been criticized for being short on philanthropy.

But the leaders of this synagogue, racing to open their new temple before the High Holy Days in September, said they had no other choice.

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| *Monica Almeida/The New York Times*  *Rabbi Steven Z. Leder and Brenda Levin, the architect overseeing the project. "It's very much Hollywood," she said. "Every aspect of this room is theatrical* |  |

“I’m not going to sell this place,” [Steven Z. Leder](http://www.jewishfederations.org/page.aspx?id=170485), the senior rabbi, said as he led his almost daily show-off ritual of taking visitors to admire results slowly being revealed with the dismantling of scaffolding. “I’m not going to be the rabbi that turns this place into a church.”

Risky or not, the renovation of such an admired building is heartening to Jewish leaders who have watched as other synagogues have faltered.

“I’m thrilled with what’s going on at Wilshire,” said Ron Wolfson, a professor at the American Jewish University here. “That’s a spectacular building. They could have very easily moved west, they could have abandoned that building and sold it for who knows how many millions of dollars to some church. They didn’t. I have to respect that.”

**A Decision to Invest on the Future**

To a considerable extent, the decision to invest on the future of this synagogue is an insight into the demographic rhythms of Los Angeles. For a long time, many of this city’s Jews concentrated on the west side, in places like Westwood, Beverlywood, Santa Monica and Beverly Hills. But these days, many younger Jews are settling on the east side, in hip and handsome — and less expensive — neighborhoods like Los Feliz and Silver Lake.

Rabbi Leder, in recounting the demographic studies and debate that went into the decision, noted that two subway stops, part of this city’s rapidly growing transit system, are within walking distance of the synagogue, raising the prospect that people would take a train to services.

Yet there are considerable obstacles.

Jews might be moving back to the east side, but the Wilshire Boulevard Temple is in the heart of Koreatown, a good 15-minute drive from, say, Los Feliz. The sidewalks surrounding the temple are filled with Latinos and Koreans, a contrast with the many neighborhoods across Los Angeles where the streets on Friday night are filled with Jewish families headed for services.

Many synagogues across the nation are also struggling with declining attendance and membership. On a recent Saturday morning at Hollywood Temple Beth El, the very few people in attendance broke out in an anguished discussion about whether they would need to hire a choir for the approaching holidays because there were not enough congregants.

**No Ordinary Synagogue**

From the minute one walks into the grand sanctuary of the Wilshire Temple, there are reminders that this is no ordinary synagogue, with ample evidence of its Hollywood past: Irving G. Thalberg, the film producer, and all three Warner brothers were among its major benefactors.

The walls are covered with murals depicting stages of Jewish history through 1929. They were painted by Hugo Ballin, who for much of his career was a Hollywood art director, and were commissioned by the Warner brothers.

“The murals were a radical artistic statement because the second of the Ten Commandments forbids graven images, so Jews shunned iconography and figurative art,” Rabbi Leder said. “These guys just decided to make a different statement.”

The opening words of the Shema, the prayer at the heart of Jewish daily worship, are painted in a circle at the top of the dome.

Unlike most synagogues, there is no central aisle leading to the bimah, or alter.

**There is No Center Aisle**

“It’s very much Hollywood,” said [Brenda Levin, the architect](http://www.levinarch.com/) who oversaw the renovation. “One of the first things you notice when you come in here is there is no center aisle. And why is there no center aisle? Why would you get rid of center seats? They are the best seats in the house.”

Ms. Levin, who has overseen many of the top historical restorations that have taken place in this city, took a few steps across the floor as workers hammered in the background.

“Every aspect of this room is theatrical,” she said. “The paint on this wall is not a single color; it’s four different colors. They are put together in way that creates the appearance of a different kind of texture.”

Rabbi Leder said he began assessing the synagogue’s future shortly after he was named senior rabbi in 2003. “We had zero kindergarten kids registered for Sunday school here,” he said. “We were dying at the roots.

“I started asking myself, what is it that Wilshire Synagogue has that no other synagogue has?” he said. “We have The Room. And no one had a room like that.”

**Admiration for the Courage to Take a Risk**

The congregation, which has 2,400 families, has raised $121 million so far for the project, Rabbi Leder said.

“It resonated with people because the need was real,” he said. “The place was in terrible disrepair. And the room was aspirational.”

Bruce A. Phillips, a professor of Jewish communal service at Hebrew Union College, said that while the synagogue was taking a bit of a chance in this effort, “there’s also the possibility that by putting that kind of money back into the synagogue and refurbishing it and so forth, that it sends a message that this is a vital area, this is a feasible area and that it’s a Jewish area.”

“It’s taking a risk,” he said. “But I applaud them for taking a risk.”

*Reprinted from the August 19, 2013 edition of The New York Times.*

**A Slice of Life**

**Life Choices**

**By Yaacov Behrman**

I spent my first Shabbat in Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center on March 2nd. Just a week earlier, my parents had hosted a large Purim celebration for family and friends. My mother, dressed in surgeon's scrubs an Israeli doctor had given her when she took my father for a procedure at NYU Medical Center, and my father dressed as the "Laughing King," entertained our 20 guests unaware of the devastation about to begin.

**Rushing to the Hospital**

**In a Matzalah Ambulance**

On Tuesday, two days after Purim, we were rushing to Sloan in a Hatzalah ambulance. My mother was in terrible pain. The doctors at the hospital told her that the problem was likely scar tissue. But my mother felt otherwise. I was still trying to be naively optimistic.

She was admitted into the hospital and instructed not to eat or drink. On Friday my dear friend Yanky came to spend Shabbat with us at the hospital.

My mother insisted that we eat in the lounge and not in her hospital room. She set the table with a lovely white cloth she had ordered, hoping to create a spirit of Shabbat in this hell hole. Although unable to eat or drink, she held the challah to her nose and slowly smelled it, "Lekovod Shabbos Kodesh, oy Lekovod Shabbos Kodesh - In honor of the holy Shabbat."

**Mother Invited Another Jewish**

**Woman for the Shabbat Meal**

We had a guest that Shabbat afternoon. My mother had invited a Jewish woman she had met in the hospital hallway to join us for the meal. The woman's husband was in a room a few doors down, very ill.

The woman poured out her life story. "My husband survived the Holocaust. He married me and started a new life in America. The beginning was hard but eventually we became a successful, happy family. Than we lost a grandchild and another was born with severe physical disabilities.

"Now my husband is very sick and in constant pain. Wasn't the Holocaust enough? Why did G-d create a world where there is a need for a hospital like Sloan in the first place? Why are there three floors for pediatrics?"

My mother held her hand and a had a deep, meaningful conversation. She didn't try to answer her questions, but with humor and wit cheered the woman up and conveyed to her the importance of being a strong support for her husband.

**Mother Accepted Her Gift**

In the course of the conversation, my mother asked the woman where she bought her stylish watch. The woman, eager to comfort someone suffering, said, "I bought it in Italy; you like it, please take it." My mother accepted her gift.

When the woman left, I said, "Mommy, please give back the watch! This woman is emotional, and you can't use the cancer card to take that watch."

The woman heard what I had said, returned and became extremely upset with me. "How dare you tell your mother to give back the watch! No one asked you! We tell our children what to do! Not the other way around." (My mother, having remembered that one cannot accept a gift on Shabbat, explained to the woman that she could not anyway accept the watch.)

Two days later on my parents' anniversary, the woman attempted to give the gift again, and my mother accepted.

**A Terrible Report from the Oncologist**

Three weeks before Mother passed, her oncologist at Sloan told her, "Mrs. Behrman, you've started to die. There is nothing that can be done."

We came home that day, bought two new yellow chairs for the porch and spent an hour gardening. The following day our dear friend and family doctor came over to discuss her prognosis.

Mom was very clear with her medical team that she wanted to be involved in all decisions related to her health. She explained to me that making her own decisions gave her some feeling of control over a situation that was out of her control. Mommy understood this well; she had spent the last 18 years advocating for people with disabilities. No matter how severe their disability, Mom always tried to empower her consumers to make their own decisions and take some control over their lives.

My mother passed away at the age of 69. She passed wearing make-up and a brand new dress. It was exactly how she wanted it to be. She passed in her own home, proud and beautiful, with her dignity intact. I was with her, and we spoke an hour before she passed.

To me, that Shabbat in the hospital will always be very special. Mom was so sick, yet still able to comfort someone else. It will serve as a reminder of how blessed my dear mother was to have had the ability make her own decisions until her last hour. She focused on the little control she did have rather than obsess over her imminent death. She chose her own path.

**Notes of Condolences Sent to the Family**

From notes sent to the family upon Sara's passing:

“Sara was a real advocate for the special needs population. We enjoyed her enthusiasm, positive attitude, good spirits, and entertaining personality. What a dynamic, creative person, caring friend, devoted mother, bubby, and wife...”

“Her vitality and humor was like a tonic for tired souls. Her perceptive insights and no nonsense attitude were vivid and dynamic...

I'm very grateful for the advice and help she gave me; and also for the inspiration and the example of fighting for what's right with pride, determination, and joy...”

“I knew Sarah since 2002 when I started working for HASC. She was my number 1 cheerleader and advocate in this field. There was nothing she would not do to get her participants all the services they wanted and needed. Sarah was eclectic, direct, no nonsense...”

“She was fun to be around. I was always happy to greet her on the street because her "happy vibes" were a tonic to everyone she met....”

“I connected with Sarah the minute I met her. I don't know how any mother could be as devoted as she was. Smart, sharp, dynamic and forthright, she dealt with joy the same way that she dealt with adversity: emotionally-charged, intellectually focused, with a razer sharp humor.”

*Reprinted from the recent Parshas Ki Seitzei edition of “L’Chaim,” a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn.*