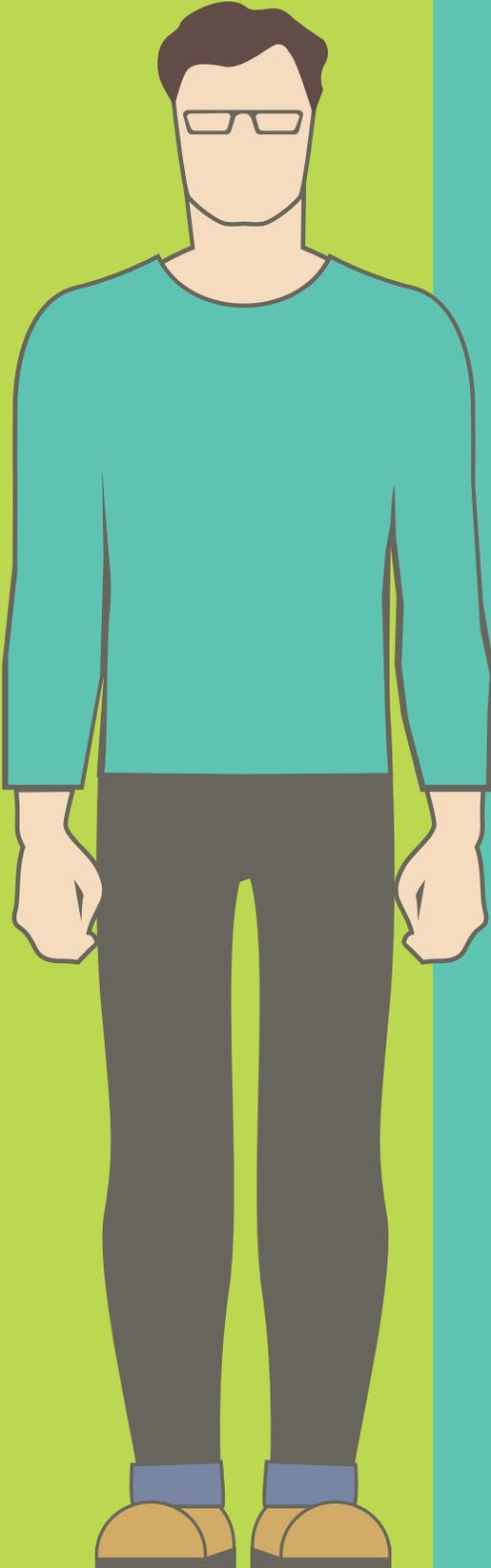


BY CHANIE ASHER





**P.O.R.P.K.**

LIVIA MEZRICH'S  
SUPPORT GROUP FOR  
NON-RELIGIOUS

PARENTS  
OF  
RELIGIOUS  
KIDS

# “THE

seeds were planted 16 years ago in my living room in East Windsor, New Jersey,” says Livia Mezrich who has been involved in kiruv for many years.

“We were having a Shabbaton for people who by and large weren’t observant,” she recalls. “On Friday night, as everyone was introducing himself and talking a little bit about why he was there, one man piped up and said, ‘Hi! My name is Russell Holstein and my wife’s name is Barbara, and we’re members of P.O.R.K.’ The whole room got quiet until he added, ‘Parents of Religious Kids.’ He then went on to share his experiences as the father of a child who had become *frum* and the challenges in navigating the relationship.”

“Right after that Shabbaton, one of the founders of the local Reform temple, called me up and said, ‘My daughter is getting married to an Orthodox Jew and I feel like I’m on an alien planet. Someone suggested that I speak to you.’ She then admitted that incredibly having her daughter marry a *frum* Jew was even more difficult and shocking than when her son had intermarried a few years previously.

“I offered to show her the video from my daughter’s recent wedding and she agreed it would be helpful. I went to her house and we watched it together as I explained what was happening, step by step. It made me think of Russell and Barbara Holstein and their interest in trying to understand their children’s way of life. Other parents had also told me how difficult it was having children who were religious when they themselves weren’t observant. It made me wonder if they might like to get together and form a support group. I hoped that once they were more familiar with the Torah way of life it would decrease the hostility. For many *baalei teshuvah* having to grapple with resentful parents and siblings is a difficult part of acclimating to and living a Torah life.”

The P.O.R.K. program was subsequently founded at Rimon also known as

the Mordecai T. Mezrich Center for Jewish Learning, with the encouragement of Laurie Dinerstein Kurs, whose daughter had become *frum*, as well as the Holsteins, who originally coined the name. People flocked to the Center from as far away as Long Island, Delaware and Monsey for the opportunity to be with others who truly understood how it felt when their children became observant and to better understand the life they have chosen. To many parents, having their children become religious was a slap in the face. Some even characterized it as if they had run off and joined a cult.

Barbara Holstein, an Allenhurst, New Jersey, resident whose daughter embraced a *chasidische* lifestyle and now lives in Upstate New York. A psychologist by training (as is her husband, Russell), Barbara subsequently wrote a book about her own journey entitled *Delight*.

“The hurt is experienced differently in each family. For one mother, it might be a sudden unwillingness by the child to eat the food she cooks. For someone else, it might be when the son or daughter no longer has pictures of Grandma around the house because Grandma wears short sleeves. The stark change and unfamiliar rules that are suddenly imposed by the newly religious child are often emotionally wrenching and can cause a lot of anger and hurt. This is the most dangerous stage of the relationship, as it can lead to things being said by both sides that are so harsh that no one ever fully recovers.”

“What we wanted to do was give parents a chance to share, vent, laugh and cry if necessary, then try to come up with possible solutions,” Livia says. “Many problems are simple to solve once the raw emotions are out of the way. Things are easier if everyone still feels loved and wanted. Once people are able to put their feelings about their children’s choices and commitments in perspective, they can go back to their most important roles as loving parents and grandparents. But it takes time and sometimes requires profes-

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sional help.

“It’s very helpful when the recently turned *frum* child is understanding and helps the parents with this transition. It’s to everyone’s benefit when both sides remain generous of spirit and loving throughout these rites of passage. When both generations try hard to do their best, the initial resentments, misunderstandings and awkwardness are forgotten that much sooner.”

What are some of the potential relationship-breakers experienced in “mixed” families that P.O.R.K. helps smooth over? The hurt when family pictures are hidden away or touched up with markers; the end of many family activities like going to the beach, taking the grandkids to the movies, baseball games, Broadway shows or favorite restaurants; parents being asked to dress differently around their grandchildren and having to buy new clothing for visits; and grandkids who can’t sleep over unattended for fear that the grandparents may turn on the TV.

As the group’s mascot (a pink pig!) sways gently overhead during meetings to help lighten the heavy hearts of people when they first seek support for what they perceive as a tragedy, a facilitator (usually a social worker or therapist familiar with the *frum* community) helps them with their concerns. And while some may be put off by the group’s provocative name, the porcine mascot really cuts to the core of the issue.

“It makes parents laugh and feel comfortable, and that’s our goal,” Livia says. “It says right away that we understand that there’s a great cultural divide between secular parents and their *baal tes-huvah* children.

“It’s very valuable for people to know that they’re not the only ones in this situation. The parents think that their children have gone off the deep end. It’s very hard. You have a certain vision of how you want your child to be and he’s changed the path.

“The tragic thing is that many of these parents sometimes get



Sophistication  
looks good  
on you.



more upset about this than when their children intermarry. Yes, they're upset when that happens, but not to the same degree. To these parents, when their child turns religious, they have more of a sense of having lost the child and that he or she has turned into a stranger. It's an 'alien' world. It creates a rift in the family. Initially it's a shock, but I have seen many families work it out. Parents and children should both get the proper help from rabbis and social workers to work with the new dynamics in a way that's comfortable and also acceptable from a halachic standpoint. No one says it isn't a hard transition."

"It's also very challenging for the siblings who aren't *frum*," says Laurie Dinerstein Kurs, who has come to *shep nachas* from her daughter Rivka Basya, despite the challenge of raising two religiously-divergent teenagers.

"When my daughter decided to become *frum* I realized that my issues with it were my own and had nothing to do with her," she says. "I'm actually happy for her. If she wants to do it, then *gezunterheit*, as my mother would have said.

"I was also impressed by the inner strength it took for her to make the transformation. Once she decided what she wanted, that's *all* she wanted. She was very determined. I'm actually in awe of her choice—it's like she picked up where I left off. I wasn't upset at all. But it really wasn't easy having one *frum* child and one who wasn't. On the surface it might seem like a blessing when your child takes on a Torah-committed lifestyle, but it can also create a crisis when other family members feel the child withdrawing and dissociating from them to a certain degree. For the siblings, it can feel like they're losing their brother or sister to a foreign way of life that doesn't include them. It's very important to leave the lines of communication open."

Rivka Basya admits that her mother's difficulty was partly due to how she went about becoming more observant: without including her parents, especially her mother, in the process.

"It wasn't a conscious decision; I didn't know where I was going," she explains. "When I was around ten, the kids in school started asking questions I couldn't answer. My parents are 'Conservadox'; we kept kosher in the house, but not outside. On

## THE CHILDREN ARE OFTEN THE ONES ENCOURAGING THEIR PARENTS TO JOIN THE SUPPORT GROUP.

Friday nights we always had a Shabbos meal, but that was the extent of it. Someone asked me, 'How come you'll eat a cheeseburger in a restaurant but not at home?' 'How come you go home to hear *Kiddush* on Friday night but afterwards you drive with friends to the mall or to a party?' It was the first time I'd ever thought about it. In the sixth grade I started going to NCSY and the wheels continued to turn. By the 11th grade I was going to Lakewood for Shabbos. It just kind of developed. There was no point in time when I said, 'This is what it's going to be.' I just gradually learned things and incorporated them into my life. I never discussed it with my parents; I just did things on my own. If we went out to eat I'd order *milchigs*. It was a slow transition.

"My brother and I had chores to do in the house. Whenever it was my turn to load the dishwasher I would separate the dairy from the meat dishes and make up excuses as to why I wasn't running it on Shabbos. Not being up front about what I was doing actually caused a lot of friction. My mother was insulted when she found out. Actually, she was on the verge of sending me for psychiatric help—I'd gone from having a social life on Friday nights and Saturdays to suddenly hibernating in my room. My mother was concerned that there was something wrong with me. In the ninth grade I was bringing a bottle of wine up from the basement for *Havdalah* when she 'caught' me and everything came tumbling out. In retrospect, I don't know what I was thinking."

P.O.R.K. meets four times a year at the Rimon Center. The next session is planned for October, after the *Yomim Tovim*. Attendees usually don't know each other until they are introduced at the meetings. Sometimes, one friend will bring another. The children are often the ones encouraging their parents to go. The lineup of speakers has included Rabbi Yosef Blau, senior *mashgiach ruchani* at Yeshiva University, and Azriela Jaffe, author of *What Do You Mean, You Can't Eat in My Home?*

"As a support group, P.O.R.K. has helped parents adjust to the religious growth of their children without seeing it as a personal rejection," says Rabbi Blau. "The most difficult problems for these parents involve when children move in opposite directions, such as when one is *frum* and another has intermarried. This is common. The children should also not be embarrassed about coming from a non-observant background and never forget the mitzvah of *kibbud av va'eim*. Part of my role involved explaining the different strains within Orthodoxy and responding to criticism that parents had of Orthodox rabbis with whom they were upset. Working together as a group and having the opportunity to learn about Judaism and ask questions of an Orthodox rabbi was extremely helpful."

The Holsteins' daughter became seriously interested in *Yiddishkeit* in her 20s. The graduate of a prestigious university, she was working in Washington, DC, when she began attending an Orthodox synagogue and participating in Shabbos meals. "After



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# HAVING THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN ABOUT JUDAISM AND ASK QUESTIONS OF AN ORTHODOX RABBI WAS EXTREMELY HELPFUL.

a while she decided to go to seminary in Israel, where she went from interest in Judaism to active involvement,” says her father Russell. “When she returned to the US she was ready to meet someone Orthodox. In fact, not only are she and her husband Orthodox, they’re chasidic.

“I think my daughter was also stimulated by the fact that we lived near Lakewood, and I myself was exploring beyond my Reform Judaism,” Barbara says. “I realized that I had never had my serious spiritual questions answered sufficiently and knew very little. I eventually found myself on a journey where I was led through Lubavitch to a Torah teacher from Lakewood who opened my eyes. Ultimately, though, I was middle-aged and my daughter was young, and we were looking for different things. My concerns were getting answers to certain philosophical and ethical questions and she was looking for a path to live. We met a number of wonderful women who had raised many children and still had time to listen to their souls. We were both profoundly influenced. But whereas my daughter went on to completely change her lifestyle I made minor changes rather than a major shift. It’s one thing to make your house reasonably kosher; it’s another to choose a totally new path. But I’m very happy that I studied with these ladies and I’m still friends with many of them.

“It’s been very comforting to share our experiences with other parents, starting from the wedding itself and learning how certain issues were resolved by others. It’s also been helpful to discuss other hot-button issues, like how other people deal with having to bring in take-out food when their kids and grandkids come to visit. I’m not the only one who finds it upsetting not being able to cook for them.

“Truthfully, a lot of it has to do with perspective. My husband and I realized from the start that we had a choice. Our daughter’s new way of life was either going to be a big hassle or we could continue to have a good relationship if we treated her like a grown-up and didn’t let little things become big. Of course, it’s not always easy.

“I think one of my husband’s biggest disappointments was not being able to take his grandchildren to Disney World. That works for plenty of religious people, but not for my family. So we take them to other amusement parks and go on little trips to places that are mutually acceptable. We bring a lot of kosher food, tell them all the old family

stories and have a good time and laugh. It’s so important to have the continuity of the generations. Throughout the centuries the younger generation hasn’t always followed in their elders’ footsteps. They move away or don’t take over the family business. But whatever it is, you’ve got to find a way to stay a loving family, and P.O.R.K. has helped us navigate a path.”

In fact, the support group at the Rimon Center is not the only one to claim that acronym. Others have been founded in Minneapolis, Houston and Toronto. Clearly, the need is universal.

In Toronto, Rabbi Bernie Moskoff of Ohr Somayach has addressed parents on a number of topics, including the embarrassment they might feel or the sense that they did something “wrong.” Other speakers have explored issues like how to maintain a connection with grandchildren, *kashering* one’s kitchen, and the sometimes awkward laws of *negiah*, hair-covering and other regulations of *tznius*. “Why does Grandma wear pants when only boys are supposed to?” is a familiar theme.

“The key is to keep an open line of communication at all times,” he tells parents. “Whether or not *frumkeit* is for you, you need to understand what this stuff is all about for the sole purpose of understanding *them*. Ignorance is *not* bliss. Knowledge is bliss. Challenge and demand answers. Our meetings have a positive energy. They’re focused on learning, growing and creating a stronger bond with children and grandchildren. It helps us think about why we do things.”

“We live in a society where secular and religious Jews are worlds apart,” says Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg of the Bais Chabad Torah Center of West Bloomfield, Michigan. “They have a totally different mindset, belief system and goals. A religious person’s primary goal is to serve G-d. If you’re dealing with tolerant parents and tolerant kids, they’re usually able to make accommodations for each other. If there is true togetherness, they can work things out. I contend that in families where there’s a close connection before someone becomes *frum*, they will continue to be close afterwards.”

As Barbara puts it, “Most issues are solved with creative solutions. Everyone also mellows over time and becomes more tolerant. Once we feel loved and supported, everything else falls into place.” □