

The Jewish People are perpetual dreamers. We see what should've been done, must be done, could be done. We wish for a holier, kinder, and more considerate world. But some folks out there don't just think big – they act big. Their lamenting triggers transformative initiatives that effect profound change in their communities.

As a new year approaches, *Family First* takes a look at some recent spiritual initiatives in our communities, running the ambit of *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*

Making an **Impact**

MICHAL EISIKOWITZ

Inner Realignment

ADVANCING IN ATLANTA:
THE BUILDING BLOCKS PROGRAM

In 2010, when Atlanta's renowned Rabbi Ilan Feldman was tasked with creating a learning program to mark the 50th anniversary of his congregation's building dedication, he saw it as the opportunity of a lifetime. "I asked myself: If I could present my dream of what an ideal Torah community would look like, what would it be?"

Rabbi Ilan and his wife, Rebbetzin Miriam, came up with eight critical muscles of Jewish life that demand constant stretching: *avodah* (*tefillah*), Shabbos, Klal Yisrael, marriage and relationships, Eretz Yisrael, children, holiness, and Torah. The "Building Blocks" program was born.

"Often, people think leadership is when the rabbinic authority says what must be done and the flock follows. This model can work, but in Atlanta, we're trying to do something different. We want it to be the *community* that jump-starts growth through candid discussion."

For the four to five weeks allotted to each building block, the community is treated to a cornucopia of lectures, workshops, videos, conference calls, and self-exercises relating to the topic. Jumbo-sized posters hanging in the shul lobby announce the current building block and spotlight the subthemes.

"The purpose of our program is *not* to educate," stresses Rabbi Feldman. "Instead, we build on concepts we already have. Our Shabbos building block, for example, wasn't about learning how to peel a cucumber, crucial as that is; it was about learning to experience Shabbos as a joy, not as an unstructured day of setting, clearing, and washing dishes."

For each building block, Rabbi and Rebbetzin Feldman walk their congregants through three steps: a) what's bothering you? b) that's okay — that's where the growth starts, and c) here's a new framework to help you transcend it.

For example, for *avodah*, the first building block, the kickoff session had over 150 congregants articulating the personal challenges they face during *tefillah*: "It's boring." "It's hard to stay focused for so long." "It's repetitive." "It doesn't address what *I* want to talk about."

Rabbi and Rebbetzin Feldman then explained that the discomfort is being voiced by the body only — the soul is enjoying every minute!

Rabbi Feldman challenged his attendees to differentiate between corporeal enjoyment and spiritual pleasure. He gave them daily exercises, like putting one less teaspoon of sugar in their coffee, or setting their alarm clock one minute earlier, so that they could "hear" who's complaining and learn to discern whether it's the body or soul that's talking.

One inspired program participant shared: "Once I understood it was only my body talking, it was easy to stop procrastinating *bentsching*. Letting the soul dominate became joyful."

During the marriage building block, hundreds of community members filled out surveys evaluating their marital health, with pointed questions like: "Do you keep secrets from your spouse?" "How much time do you and your spouse spend listening to each other?" "How often do you criticize each other?"

The purpose of the survey, says Rabbi Feldman, was simply to get people thinking about their marriages, creating a community-wide discussion about issues generally not discussed.

This down-to-earth *modus operandi* has yielded impressive results: Participation and receptivity for Building Blocks has astounded even the big-dreaming Feldmans.

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experience Shabbos as a joy

"we planned an exciting after-Musaf program with speeches and workshops (and, of course, a heavy-duty, cholent-equipped *kiddush*). Predictably, that Shabbos saw a torrential downpour. My wife and I conceded defeat, admitting we'd have to cancel. But in the end, almost 100 people braved the horrendous weather to come.

"There are segments of the community who think that because they *know*, they don't need to participate," he adds. "But Building Blocks is not about knowing, it's about becoming self-aware. And I would wager that success in *avodas Hashem* is not a function of knowledge; it's a function of engagement, a function of being real. This is exactly what the *musar* movement tried to do — and Building Blocks is a reconstitution of *musar* movement principles, in the vernacular of the American Jew."

THE STARS OF THE "RABBI ARYEH NIVIN SHOW"

A New Yorker by birth who "escaped to New Jersey" until settling with his family in beachside Ashdod, Rabbi Aryeh Nivn was knee-deep in his thriving life-coaching practice when one of his high-powered clients had an epiphany. "This stuff is great," she said, enthralled by the material's lucidity and relevance. "Let's get a group together and do a teleconference."

Seven years later, the Rabbi Nivn Personal Development program has mushroomed into a worldwide affair, attracting men and women across time zones and religious affiliations.

For Rabbi Nivn, a refined, thoughtful, and approachable mentor who worked in *kiruv*, the goals haven't changed over the years. His aim is to provide listeners with the vitality to face life — a powerful inner energy that enables them to transcend the inevitable vicissitudes.

"Our challenges today are unique," he says. "They demand a different approach. I think people have been craving a structured, Torah-based character development program and I'm excited to try to fill the need."

From the get-go, Rabbi Nivn made it clear that he wasn't interested in starring in the "Aryeh Nivn Show."

"I wanted engaged, dynamic listeners," he explains. "I wanted members who were committed to putting aside 15 minutes daily to learn *b'chavrusa*."

Rabbi Nivn's personal growth system is culled from an array of Torah sources, including the Gemara, the Ramchal, *Nefesh HaChaim*, Rav Shlomo Wolbe *ztz"l*, and the Slonimer Rebbe *ztz"l* (author of *Nesivos Shalom*).

His two distinct curricula include what Rabbi Nivn terms a "G-d direct" *chaburah*, a "pull-no-punches" group seeking to delve into deep, powerful points of *hashkafic* literature; and the traditional, *musar*-oriented *chaburah*, which addresses more tangible issues like anger, patience, discovering one's purpose in life, and mastering the art of juggling family, work, and obligations to G-d.

"I started four years ago, and haven't looked back," says Hudy Abrams, a former Lakewooder who runs a buzzing Dallas *kiruv* center with her husband. "Before every Yom Tov, I always wanted to be spiritually ready — but I'd end up with this vague haziness. Physically, I'd prepare a ton. But Yom Tov came, and I didn't feel I was present; I didn't feel I was tapping into the power of the day." Rabbi Nivn's pointed *mehalech* to each season, she asserts, has transformed the way she experiences the rhythm of the Jewish year.

The program may not be for everyone: Shifra, a former member who was highly impressed by the content, felt overwhelmed by the time commitment. "I have three little kids and a full-time job," she says. "I didn't have the time to properly invest in *chavrusa* learning and reviewing, and it frustrated me.

"This is a real self-improvement program. I feel it's 'go hard or go home': if you're going to do it, do it right."

Hudy, on the other hand, feels it's worth every minute it requires. "I've tried different personal development programs over the years, but I've found that the *chaburah* is unique: it's clarifying, palatable, and effects quantifiable change. It's a two-hour weekly commitment that keeps me going."

TEFILLAH

Transformation through Prayer

CREATING MALACHIM EVERY MORNING: THE AMEN GROUP

Beginning in 2005, eight women in Lawrence, New York, met every Shabbos afternoon to learn *hilchos shmiras halashon*. They couldn't have known then that their commitment would evolve into a game-changing initiative for the Five Towns community: the Amen Group.

"We learned every week in my home, rain or shine," remembers Miri Urbach. "It was a *davar kavua* — we'd attend even when celebrating a family *simchah*."

The group's fierce sense of responsibility stemmed from their deepest prayer: the healing of sick children, and one child in particular: Sarit Marton *a"h*, whose mother, Lori, *tdlch"t*, was one of the group's mainstays.

"These children's families often receive enough challahs and kugels," Rebbetzin Judy Young *a"h*, one of the original eight members, used to reiterate. "We need to offer them a different kind of support — the power of *tefillas* and Torah."

That summer, Lori Marton flew to Eretz Yisrael to obtain *brachos* and engage in *tefillah* for her daughter. Spending a good part of her trip at the Kosel, she developed a deep admiration for the modest, dedicated "Kosel women" — the Wall's regulars. She wanted to bottle the *kedushah* and bring it back home.

Judy Rubin, another member of the group, was also inspired. "It's 2 p.m., 100 degrees outside, and Shabbos is in a few hours," she remarked to Lori. "But these women are undeterred. Could we — too — possibly undertake a commitment of such magnitude?"

Later that summer, Judy herself visited Eretz Yisrael — and the answer to her question came days after her arrival, in a precious encounter with Rebbetzin Batsheva Kanievsky *a"h*.

"I attended *vasikin* davening in Bnei Brak's Lederman shul," Judy recounts. "Each woman recited *birchos hashachar* to a chorus of fervent amens. Then they davened together, silently, followed by Perek Shirah and the entire *Sefer Tehillim*."

Deeply moved, Judy became determined to simulate this format of reciting *brachos* and "amen" aloud. With the *haskamah* of Rav

"THERE WERE NO BARRIERS — NOT AGE, NOT SOCIAL STRATUM. IT WAS JUST ABOUT WOMEN GETTING TOGETHER, connecting to Hashem and to each other"

Elyashiv *ztz"l* and the guidance of Rabbi Dovid Weinberger, she shared her vision — and each member of the Lawrence group said, "Count me in." Lori Marton added: "Use my home."

Tzom Gedaliah morning, while it was still dark outside, the group clustered in the Marton library for their first session. They'd originally aimed to keep it up only for the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, but word got out quickly and the numbers doubled each week.

Rosh Chodesh Kislev saw 200 women walking through the Marton home to recite *brachos*. That's when the organizers realized there was no stopping.

"It was an almost ethereal kind of experience," says Judy. "There were no barriers — not age, not social stratum. It was just about women getting together, connecting to Hashem and to each other."

Since the Amen Group's inception, *birchos hashachar* in the spacious Marton basement are led every morning (except Shabbos) at 8:15 by Rebbetzin Beaty Kalish, followed by *shminas halashon* and heartfelt Tehillim. Women are encouraged to stay and daven, and then participate in various classes, initiatives and *chaburos* that have since sprouted.

Rosh Chodesh sees hundreds of women from across the tristate area streaming to Sutton Park to herald the new month through a joyful singing of Hallel, followed by a guest speaker and breakfast. *Ahavas Yisrael* initiatives include: *kiruv*, *hachmassas orchim*, *shidduchim*, and *hachmassas kal-lah*. In addition to the *chaburos* for learning

hilchos Shabbos, *hilchos brachos*, *iyun tefillah*, and the six constant mitzvos, a special *chaburah* on *tzniyus* was recently added. Rebbetzin Kanievsky, the group's beloved mentor, encouraged all women to be especially vigilant in this mitzvah.

"We're not a minyan — there are no feministic undertones here," stresses Judy. "We're a place for women looking to deepen their connection, to start their day off right."

Recently, following the *petirah* of Rebbetzin Kanievsky (who would regularly ask visiting Five Towns *rabbanim* how "her girls" were doing), the Amen Group launched "Zichron Batsheva," a moving Erev Shabbos program where each Friday, one woman separates



Shmirah for the neighborhood: the Amen Group's gathering spot in the Marton home

challah before the entire crowd, sharing the merit and moment.

"On Rosh Chodesh Av," remembers an exhilarated Judy, "after several minutes of concentrated *tefillah* and the challah baker's sincere *yehi ratzon* recitation, 300 women stood together, linking arms, singing 'Acheinu Kol Beis Yisrael.' We were certain Mashiach was coming; you could touch the holiness in the room."

The group's impact is not just communal; it has provided uplift and strength on a personal level as well.

"When my mother *a"h* recently passed away, I was hit hard," shares Bayla Sebrow, a Lawrence resident and frequent attendee. "Entering the Amen Group room every morning gave me a sense of comfort that nothing else could."

Two years into the group's creation, 20-year-old Sarit — Lori Marton's beloved daughter — succumbed to her illness. The loss was devastating.

"Despite her enormous *nisyonos*," attests Rebbetzin Corinne Fuchs, the Amen Group's coordinator, "Sarit loved to come and daven with us each morning. She was so connected."

Sarit was, and continues to be, the inspiration for the transformative initiative now called The "Ohel Sara" Amen Group. And Lori and her husband, Dr. Freddie Marton, continue to open their home to hundreds of women — every day of the year.

"They consider it a *zechus* for themselves and for our neighborhood," says Judy. "The Amen Group is a *shmirah* for our entire community."

ARE YOU BAKING THIS WEEK?
AZAT PINDER'S CHALLAH EMPIRE

Some 15 years ago, a childless Jerusalem couple approached a well-known *rav*. "Rebbe," the husband said tearfully, "tell us how we can merit a child."

The *rav* was unambiguous in his response: "Gather 40 women to do *hafrashas challah*, and ask them to daven for you."

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One of the women recruited was Azat Pinder, a Ramot-based elementary school teacher. Azat was deeply moved by the whole process.

“The couple had a baby a year later,” recounts Azat. “But the *yeshuah* aspect was not the only thing that drew me in. Being part of this mitzvah as a group gave me a unique spiritual energy.”

One of the three mitzvos bestowed specifically to women, the act of *hafrashas challah* is an ideal time for *tefillah*. Furthermore, 40 is a special number in Judaism: 40 days of becoming worthy for the second set of *luchos*; 40 days for an embryo to be formed in the womb; 40 measures of water in a *mikveh*, and many more.

Therefore, according to some, when 40 individuals join together to perform a mitzvah, the force is staggering — sometimes enough to overturn a harsh decree.

Azat dreamed of organizing groups of 40 challah-baking women as a *chesed*, offering sick or otherwise troubled families the enormous merit and *eis ratzon*.

But she first wanted to be sure that the practice wasn't bordering on some kind of voodooism — the stuff of superstition. She sent a letter detailing the endeavor to Rav Elyashiv *ztz"l*, through his disciple, Rav Yosef Efrati, asking for a blessing. “These women should be blessed,” was the *posek hador's* verbal reply. “*Zchus hachesed yaamod lahem.*”

At the time, Rav Efrati asked Azat not to share the approbation publicly, because, as Rav Elyashiv had put it: “I'm a Lithuanian *nav*, and I'm not one to be busy with *segulos.*”

But Azat had received what she wanted, and endorsement in hand, she forged ahead.

At the beginning, the going was rough. “We'd go from door to door, knocking, asking women to participate,” she relates. “Many had never even heard of the mitzvah.”

Ten years ago, notes Azat, *hafrashas challah* was largely off the radar. Even women familiar with the mitzvah *min HaTorah* rarely made a concerted effort to bake and put it into practice. But thanks to awareness-raising initiatives like Azat's, *hafrashas challah* has become a much-cherished mitzvah.

“I know women who will not be *mevater* on it for anything,” says Azat. “They'll give up salad, they'll give up a side dish — but challah is nonnegotiable.”

Today, Azat is the self-appointed, volunteer COO of the world's largest challah *gemach*, 500 women strong. Divided into subgroups of 40, with a designated head for each group, the *gemach* does its work of the hand and heart every Erev Shabbos.

Individuals seeking *refuos* or *yeshuos* leave the name for *tefillah* on Azat's answering machine. Midweek, she compiles the list and sends off one name to each head, who in turn sends the name to her group's members.

Azat is in close contact with challah *gemachs* around the world: Belgium, France, England, Australia, Brazil, Mexico, and more. When these *gemachs* are missing bakers for their quorum of 40, they turn to Azat, who supplies them with women eager to partake.

“My *gemach* is comprised of women of all stripes,” she relates “from Satmar and Meah Shearim women to completely secular Israelis. I'm grateful for the diversity. If my *gemach* can serve as a unifier for Klal Yisrael, what greater merit is there?”

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TZEDAKAH

Spreading Kindness

SHIDDUCH IN A BOX

It's become an undeniable reality: the *shidduch* crisis is looming large, and things seem to look bleaker each year.

But if ever there was an out-of-the-box idea to tackle the problem, it's Shidduch in a Box.

Founded in 2008 by Oriyah, a former Neve graduate whose last name was Lewy-Neuman until her marriage to Aharon Nitkin last month, the initiative creates an easy way for just-marrieds to suggest *shidduchim* for their still-single friends ... through a box.

“Newlyweds are crazy busy; they don't have time to elicit information about exact height, current job position, etc.,” explains Oriyah. “We wanted to make things so effortless that they'd be excited to get moving and start setting their friends up.”

Oriyah notes that newlyweds are in a particularly propitious position to try their hand at matchmaking. They (hopefully) still remember the pain of being single, and can thus approach the *shidduch* process with a unique sensitivity — and a powerful drive. Moreover, their current social circle includes the maximum number of single people, both male and female.

Engaged couples who register for “Shidduch in a Box” (SIB) agree to have two tastefully decorated tables set up at their wedding, one for men, one for women. Each discreetly located table features a gold-lined box alongside blank *shidduch* profiles and pencils. Single friends fill out the profiles and deposit them in the box, and at the end of the wedding, an SIB representative gathers the profiles into two separate binders, creating a personalized *shidduch* kit for the new couple.

“We have three goals for the program,” says Oriyah. “We want to get blissful honeymooners thinking about their friends; we want to give singles the *chizuk* of knowing that their married pals won't forget about them; and we want to see better, more appropriate dates.”

Oriyah clarifies her third objective.

“It's not just about the ‘mazel tov.’ We also want to make the whole dating process less tiresome. We've seen that when friends set up friends (rather than a random *shadchan*), even if it doesn't result in marriage, the date tends to be less strained and

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more enjoyable. For jaded, spent singles, this factor is huge.”

As someone who dated for years before meeting her husband, Oriyah understands the angst all too well.

“I did not enjoy being single. It was a series of frustrating, off-the-mark meetings. At one point, I paid for membership to a famous Jewish dating website, hoping it would be my salvation. But despite my very clear description of the kind of guy I was seeking, I was flooded with e-mails from people who were twice my age, had children, or lived in foreign countries. I said to myself, there has to be a better way.”

Thus was born Shidduch in a Box. Since its start, the rabbinically endorsed program has been implemented at numerous Jerusalem and US weddings, with hopes to expand its reach. The SIB kits — which are kept totally confidential — have led to dozens of dates.

Some skeptics wonder: Is there really a need for singles to fill out profiles for their own friends? Don't friends know each other well enough?

“Information changes quickly,” responds Oriyah. “The girl you knew back in seminary might be doing something very different now. And we go beyond the basics. We ask singles to clarify the qualities they're looking for in a spouse: deal-breakers vs. preferences. You think you know your friend, but you may be surprised to hear what she *really* wants in a husband.”

What's more, even if the *kallah* knows her friends well, her husband probably doesn't. With two full sets of info, both husband and wife get a clear, organized picture. In fact, some couples have told Oriyah that the *shidduch* kit provided a meaningful *sheva brachos* activity.

“It's not about speeding up the *shidduch* process,” says an emphatic Oriyah, clarifying that SIB isn't aiming to force a particular outcome — it's simply *hishtadlus*. “We have zero effect on whether the *shidduch* will ultimately happen. But it gives *nachas* to Hashem, and *chizuk* to single people when we try.”

Oriyah wants to see SIB as mainstream as programs like Saw You at Sinai. So far, she's seen a steady, encouraging uptick in participation. Who knows? Maybe a happy solution to *shidduch* woes lies in the brainchild of a passionate, deeply empathetic doer.

BRISSIM UNLIMITED

When Judith Vogel *a"b*, a beloved, senior member of Beitar Illit's English-speaking community, fell ill with cancer some 12 years ago, her friends lovingly sat at her side, proffering round-the-clock physical and emotional nourishment. Several years later, when she was declared in remission, Judith wanted to give

back to the community.

“Her first idea was a sewing *gemach*,” remembers Mrs. Shoshana Raymond, a longtime friend. “Overwhelmed mothers would drop off clothing in need of mending, and whenever we'd take a visiting shift at the Vogels, she'd happily distribute the work. We'd sew as we schmoozed — we even had a sewing *shiur*.”

After some time, Judith wanted more. She resolved to create a brissim *gemach*; a full-service group offering A-to-Z bris coordination, or as one active participant put it, “Everything but the *mohel* and the baby!”

A weakened Judith couldn't do the physical work, but she made hundreds of coordinating phone calls. Her *gemach* was an instant success.

Sadly, just a short time after its inception, Judith fell ill once again in what was to be the final battle with her illness. Following her *petirah*, the participants decided to keep it running as an *aliyah* for her *neshamah* (as well as the sewing *gemach*, which is still active).

Ten years later, Brissim Unlimited is going strong, averaging several brissim a month. To keep food costs to a minimum (the *baalei simchah* pay for the food), the *gemach* orders from Yad Eliezer, an organization providing delicious, discounted, catered meals. After choosing preferred dishes from the menu, parents need not fuss any further with the bris *seudah* preparations and can focus on their family.

“We're mostly retired grandmothers,” says Mrs. Raymond. “We have the time, and it's our joy.”

On the day of the bris, a peppy threesome or foursome arrives on the scene, armed with a bris pillow, bris outfit, bris *tefillah* cards, several hot plates, extension cords, and dozens of serving bowls, trays, and utensils. Wearing snazzy aprons imprinted with the “Brissim Unlimited” logo and working at a pace that puts young'uns to shame, they set, serve, and clean up, allowing the family to savor the sweetness of the *simchah*.

“We've seen families who are severely strapped economically,” notes Mrs. Renee Smith, the group's director. “They can't even afford Yad Eliezer's food. In those cases, we slip an envelope under their door at night, using money previously received from *hakaras hatov* donations.”

Sometimes, money is not the issue — it's the timing that's a killer. In this line of *chesed*, there's no telling when services will be required. “We've done brissim on Erev Pesach, Erev Rosh HaShanah, you name it,” says Mrs. Smith. “These can be challenging, but we are happy that we can help. And we know that our dear friend, Judith *a"b*, is *shepping nachas* as well.” ■