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Call of Transformation

BY GAVRIEL HORAN

A chassidish bubby in Boro Park, a kollel wife in Jerusalem, a Modern Orthodox mother in Sydney, Australia, and an attorney in Los Angeles might have next to nothing in common besides their religion. Surprising as it may be, however, the four of them get together once a week to grow spiritually. No – they don't all meet in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Instead they join each other, and hundreds of other frum women around the world, on an hourlong Torah-based self-improvement teleconference call each week, led by Ashdod resident Rabbi Aryeh Leib Nivin. Each of them is committed to increasing her spiritual and emotional well-being on a daily basis, and thanks to Rabbi Nivin's unique program, they are growing by leaps and bounds.



A Spiritual Mentor

Originally from New Jersey, Rabbi Nivin went to Eretz Yisrael to learn in yeshivah in 1980. He and his family were among the first residents of the city of Beitar Illit, which now numbers over forty thousand. After learning in Eretz Yisrael for several years, Rabbi Nivin developed a close relationship with Harav Noach Weinberg, *zt"l*.

Over the next fifteen years he was heavily involved in helping to develop Aish HaTorah. He eventually ended up becoming one of the senior lecturers in Aish HaTorah's Discovery program, as well as a *rebbe* in the yeshivah. Five years ago, the Nivins moved to Ashdod with their large family, *ka"h*, at the behest of their Rebbe, the Pittsburgher Rebbe, Harav Mordechai Yissachar Dov Leifer.

"Being part of a strong *kehillah* with the Rebbe at the center has been amazing," he explains. "When you are stuck in life and need guidance, you have someone to turn to. Having that closeness is crucial."

During his fifteen years teaching at Aish, Rabbi Nivin began to create his own system of personal development based on his experience counseling *bachurim* there. Ten years ago, he left Aish to pursue a career in life coaching, just as the fledgling field was beginning to grow.

Taking Off

Over the next four years, Rabbi Nivin developed his coaching practice, focusing on assisting Jewish educators — primarily *kiruv* rabbis in far-flung communities of North America — in becoming more effective leaders. At one point, he was training Rebbetzin Aviva Barnett of the outreach shul in Livingston, New Jersey, in Jewish life-coaching principles. She was very impressed with his approach to personal growth and asked herself why this wasn't available to all *frum* women.

Mrs. Barnett offered to organize a conference call with Rabbi Nivin for a group of ten to fifteen wives, most of whom were living out of town and in a position similar to hers, and who wanted to grow together as a group. He didn't see any reason he shouldn't try, so they got

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started. The group was a tremendous success and word spread rapidly. "It really clicked," Rabbi Nivin recalls. "I was totally surprised at how powerful it was and how well it worked."

Six years later, many of the core members of that *chaburah* are still learning together every week, and it has helped spawn countless other phone groups. Rabbi Nivin currently has seven different women's *chaburos* operating, and a new one begins every six months. Over 1,500 women on four continents have participated, many of whom are enrolled in advanced-level learning.

"The concept of *middos chaburos* is widespread in Jewish history," Rabbi Nivin explains. "*Chaburos* were big in

Novarodok, in most Chassidic groups, and in the writings of the Ramchal and others. The goal is to get a group of people to relate to each other and help each other to grow. The Rambam explains that when ten people get together to do *teshuvah*, they can bring down the power of Yom Kippur even on an ordinary day. When a *chaburah* works, the energy is electric, and the members create an identity that's greater than the combination of each one. One plus one equals three."

As the son of a Holocaust survivor, Rabbi Nivin always felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to help rebuild the Jewish people. His father came from a large family of staunch Gerrer chassidim. After the war, however, the family drifted



Rabbi Nivin (L) with the Pittsburgher Rebbe.

away from *Chassidus*, and the extended family, which had once numbered over three hundred, dwindled to about three.

“Most postwar efforts were focused on rebuilding Torah, but the personal growth methods of fiery *mussar* and *Chassidus* took a hit in many circles,” Rabbi Nivin explains. “There is a tremendous need to revive it now that we are more settled and the foundations of Torah have been re-established. People are hurting everywhere. In prewar Poland, this stuff was in the air. Now the air is full of iPads and iPhones.”

The Magic of Technology

Today, the real challenge is figuring out how to get a group of people to agree on a fixed time to meet each week. With such busy lifestyles, it’s difficult to find consistency — an essential ingredient in personal growth. The telephone ended up

providing the perfect solution.

“A virtual community is a safe place where you can grow together,” Rabbi Nivin says. “For *frum* women, who are busy with so much during the day, this becomes a city of refuge, a safety net. When up to a hundred women join a phone call, it’s vital, alive, and passionate.”

The *chaburah* is made up of women of all backgrounds and ages, from twenty-five to seventy, from all over the world and across the Orthodox spectrum.

Although the majority of members are yeshivish, there are Modern Orthodox members, new *baalei teshuvah*, and chassidim. It’s not unusual for well-known community leaders to join the program under an alias. “Because we can’t see each other, we transcend the boundaries of age, affiliation, and levels. We have all of *Klal Yisrael* on the phone.”

Each member of the *chaburah* is

encouraged to find a *chavrusa* in the group — it can be a friend or a perfect stranger who lives thousands of miles away — and to work together with that person for fifteen minutes a day, five days a week. Many people develop close, lifelong friendships with their *chavrusas* even though they’ve never met in person. “The *chavrusas* become unusually close and develop a connection that I never knew could happen over the phone,” he says.

Suri and Deena are from completely different backgrounds. Suri, who is Chassidic, is from Brooklyn, and Deena, a *baalas teshuvah*, lives in a suburb of Philadelphia. The two have kept up their daily phone *chavrusa* for the past three and a half years and have become the closest of friends.

“We’re completely different, but we have so many things to teach each other that we never would have had the opportunity to learn,” Deena said. “The

first time we spoke, the conversation lasted for two hours. We were literally eating up everything the other had to say. We are from two different worlds, but as different as we are, we are also so strikingly similar and are going through so many similar challenges in life."

Learning From the Masters

The basic goal of the *chaburah* is to present a practical, Torah-based system of self-knowledge and self-improvement that helps a person transform his or her life, family, and even the world. The course is based primarily on the classic *mussar sefarim* of Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, Rav Shlomo Wolbe, and the Ramchal, Rav Moshe Chaim Luzatto, *zeicher tzaddikim livrachah*, although Rabbi Nivin also uses Chassidic texts such as the *Nesivos Shalom*, written by the previous Slonimer Rebbe, Rav Sholom Noach Berezovsky, *zy" a*, and the writings of the Piaseczne Rebbe, Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Hy" d*.

"Many *frum* people have heard most of

the ideas that we discuss, but it is presented in a practical way that is very novel," he says. "A person can learn the same ideas dozens of times in yeshivah or seminary, but they may not know how to apply it to their lives. Once you look at *sefarim* through the lens of self-development, you see that the masters are guiding you step by step towards self-improvement."

Rabbi Nivin also draws tremendous inspiration from his years with Rav Weinberg, and much of what he gained has heavily influenced his curriculum. "Rav Noach was a home-run man; his mottos were 'Don't be afraid to do new things,' 'Attempt to live above nature,' and 'Sacrifice for a cause.' He held that since Hashem ultimately does everything, if you're serious about doing His will, you can accomplish anything, regardless of your talents and skills. He saw the world through a 'believe you can succeed' paradigm, and he had unbelievable successes again and again."

When asked what he did in terms *cheshbon hanefesh* every night, Rav Noach responded that he would ask himself if he had done enough in the past twenty-four hours to save the world.

Does this type of deep spiritual work replace therapy?

"Much of old-time psychology is incompatible with Torah Judaism; however, a lot of modern positive psychology is very compatible. As you grow and gain more self-knowledge, you'll outgrow a lot of your problems," Rabbi Nivin says. "Someone with serious issues needs extra help. However, normal, healthy people who want to develop and learn to deal with normal, day-to-day challenges will learn to fortify themselves so that minor problems don't become major problems.

For example, dealing with a child at risk requires a specialty course; however, how to survive and thrive during a trying situation is something this type of work can help with."

Rabbi Nivin and his sons:
sheves "banim" gam yachad.



Finding Your Unique Mission

The beginner's *chaburah* starts twice a year, in Elul and again after Chanukah, and uses practical exercises to help participants develop a deeper sense of who they are. Rabbi Nivin explains that everyone has a unique life purpose — what the Slonimer Rebbe calls a “*yi’ud*,” or destiny — as well as a *tikkun*, something that needs correction.

The *yi’ud* refers to a guiding direction in life that ultimately leads one to have a positive impact on the world by revealing an aspect of Hashem that only he or she can bring out. The other side of the coin, *tikkun*, involves finding the main area in one’s personality that needs to be improved. “This requires deep contemplation on who you are and why you were brought into this world,” Rabbi Nivin says.

In addition to each individual’s purpose, the Jewish nation also has a global purpose — the fulfillment of Torah and *mitzvos*. It goes without saying that if there seems to be a contradiction between one’s life purpose and his national purpose, the Torah comes first. As time goes by, members learn to integrate this knowledge of self into their lives, into their family life, and ultimately into the world. The process involves extensive *cheshbon hanefesh* and self-reflection, as described in depth in many *sefarim*. Women in our program are encouraged to work through these major questions with the help of their *rebbeim*, teachers, mentors, spouses, friends, and study partners to ensure objectivity.

Many women testify that once they found their life purpose, it changed every second of their lives. They suddenly had

goals, direction, and a unique raison d’être. One woman, who never thought of herself as a writer, has written two books since beginning the course and is now working on her third. “When I was clear about my life’s purpose, I found that all barriers and hurdles just melted away,” she exclaimed.

How exactly do you find your life’s purpose?

“One way is to ask yourself what you would do if you inherited a billion dollars,” Rabbi Nivin explains. “Once your personal needs are taken care of, what would you do with the money? It’s very telling. Some people want to help learning-disabled children, others want to be *mekarev* Yidden, and others want to create beautiful art. This question brings out the general essence of who they are.

“Another poignant approach is to think about the most fulfilling moments of your life — moments of leadership, *chessed*, or learning, etc. When something inside says, ‘I could do this all day,’ you end up with a very strong life direction. Even if you make a mistake in your life goals, it self-corrects as you continue to work on it.”

As a teenager, Batya was a serious guitarist and songwriter. After getting married, however, she set her musical talents aside. “I knew I loved music,” she says, “but between being the breadwinner, homemaker, cook, and mother, I didn’t have time to be that other person anymore. My guitar waited, abandoned in a corner, but I was too busy to pay any notice.”

After searching for her *yi’ud*, she took out her guitar and started playing and writing songs again. “I was suddenly

rejuvenated. I had more energy for my kids, I was a better wife, and I even worked harder while at my job. With music back in my life, I had the spiritual and emotional gasoline to do more with my life and be me again.”

“Growing up in Bais Yaakov, we learned everything — *Tanach*, *halachah*, *bein adam lachaveiro*, *bein adam laMakom* — but I never before heard anyone mention that you had an obligation to discover your unique life’s purpose,” said Mrs. Aviva Aberman of Passaic, New Jersey. After participating in Rabbi Nivin’s *chaburah* for several years, she now runs her own phone *chaburos* to help women connect with their *neshamos* based on the *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh sefarim* so that they can reap all the benefits of Rabbi Nivin’s approach.

“Throughout my life, I was learning, *davening*, doing *chessed*, and caring for my family, but I didn’t feel particularly connected to my essence. Once I found my *yi’ud*, my entire world shifted. I always learned about how amazing the *Avos* and *Imahos* were, but I never realized that Hashem also gave each of us our own unique gift that we can use to bring Him into the world. When you connect to your *neshamah*, you live a life of *deveikus* and vitality. Once we all learn what our unique light is, the Jewish nation is going to shine.”

“Today many people forget to live a life they love,” Rabbi Nivin says. “How many of us have a true desire to jump up out of bed in the morning?” The first step is to figure out what your talents are and discover what you really love doing. Once you uncover the unique gifts Hashem has given you, it infuses your life with fulfillment, motivation, and pleasure.

“The whole goal is to live a life of vitality and transcendence, so that you can be full of positivity and energy to rise above the vicissitudes of life.” Who couldn’t use some of that? ■

Rabbi Aryeh Nivin can be reached at (646) 863-4123 in the U.S., 02-580-6406 in Israel, or via email at NewChabura@gmail.com.

