



BASKETBALL STAR DORON SHEFFER, WHO
RETIRED FROM BASKETBALL IN 2008,
SPORTS A TRIM BEARD AND KIPPA TODAY.

PHOTO: LIRON MOLDOVAN

SPECIAL SECTION

SCORING FOR GOD:

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF FORMER BASKETBALL STAR DORON SHEFFER

BY HILLEL KUTTLE



rasping a basketball in his enormous hands, Doron Sheffer looks slim and nimble enough to hit the court again as he greets a visitor to his home on Moshav Amirim. The glorious March afternoon in this hilly community with breathtaking views of the Galilee's mountains seems light years from the snow and chill of New England, where Sheffer played for three seasons for the University of Connecticut Huskies in the mid-1990s.

As a UConn guard, Sheffer fed the ball to such star teammates as Ray Allen (now with the NBA's Miami Heat) and played for legendary coach Jim Calhoun. Sheffer averaged five assists and thirteen points per game, hit 40 percent of his three-point attempts and led the Huskies to a sparkling 89-13 record and NCAA tournament appearances in each of his

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PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT

three seasons. Sheffer was the first Israeli ever drafted by the NBA—the Los Angeles Clippers selected him in the second round in 1996—but he instead signed a lucrative contract with Israel's dynastic professional basketball team, Maccabi Tel Aviv, leading it to four consecutive national championships.

Raised in a secular home near Tel Aviv, Sheffer, forty-one, retired from basketball in 2008. Today, he sports a trim beard and a black-knit kippa rests on his head. A set of Talmud Bavli stands with other traditional texts lining his living room shelves. All attest to a changed man, someone who has evolved most strikingly in the past decade but whose shift in orientation began at UConn when his mother, Yael, mailed him a book about spirituality.

Sheffer's journey has featured dramatic mileposts: a sojourn to India, a successful battle with testicular cancer and several basketball comebacks. One such comeback, playing for Hapoel Jerusalem for two seasons beginning in 2003, proved pivotal because that is when Sheffer began wearing tefillin more regularly and reading Tehillim. By the time he returned to Jerusalem in 2006, he had married his second wife, Talia, and together they decided to observe Shabbat, *kashrut* and family-purity laws and to start going to shul. He also began wearing a kippa and *tzitzit* and studying Talmud at the Ashrei Ha'Ish Yeshiva.



"It wasn't a decision made in one day or one minute," Sheffer explains. "At a certain point, though, I realized, 'I'm going for it.' There were rises and falls. I wore tefillin and stopped, learned Torah and stopped, observed Shabbat and stopped."

Sheffer is sitting at a kitchen table in a guest apartment in the couple's modern sun-drenched home where they run a business catering to people who come for healing of the body and mind.

Sheffer points to an Israeli woman and her daughter relaxing on a bench, a small fountain bubbling nearby amid a

lovely garden of purple tulips and clusters of other flowers interspersed with rock paths. The mother has cancer, went through multiple operations and, losing hope, came to their retreat to rest and to contemplate, Sheffer says.

Sheffer's livelihood also comes from running youth basketball clinics that impart values and addressing various audiences in Israel and abroad about his life story. He's synthesized those experiences and life lessons in an autobiography published in Hebrew. It's titled *Aneni*, from David's famous proclamation in Psalm (118:5) "Out of my distress I

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called upon the Lord; the Lord answered me [*aneni*] with liberation.”

Personally, Sheffer says, “I had distress, and God answered.”

One answer was Sheffer’s surviving cancer; another, Sheffer’s path toward observance and back to the region, far changed from the adolescent who headed north to play for the Hapoel Galil Elyon team in 1990 and concluded his career with the same club nearly two decades later.

Amirim consists primarily of nonobservant residents, with approximately twenty observant families. It was founded in 1958 as a retreat for vegetarians, and that ethic remains. Amirim’s entrance features a billboard speckled with more than 100 signs promoting the *moshav’s* businesses: aromatherapists, massage therapists, herb gardens, spas, a health food shop, an organic olive oil shop, art galleries, restaurants and plentiful bed and breakfasts.

“It’s a vegetarian community, which spoke to us,” Sheffer explains. “I eat healthily—organic fruits and vegetables, except for some occasional meat. Health of body and of soul—it’s all here. It does me good to eat healthy, to breathe clear air.”

A healthy soul includes Jewish learning, and classes are held most nights in residents’ homes. Many of Amirim’s observant families come from less observant backgrounds.

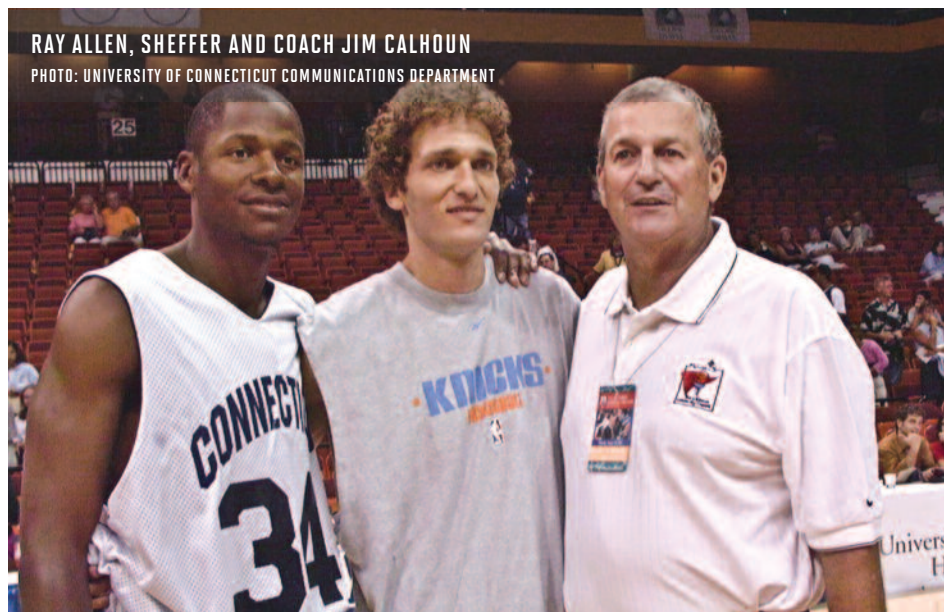
“To be a *ba’al teshuvah* is a way of life, a never-ending story: not too much, not too little; not to climb too high up the tree, but not to flee from it, always seeking balance,” he says.

The Sheffers have four children together: daughters Gavriel, eight, and Michal, seven, who were given the names of angels; a son, Yedidya, four; and another daughter, Yaara, three. Sheffer’s eldest child, Ori, eleven, resides primarily with her mother in Tel Aviv, but often comes to Amirim. Ori’s situation is unique, Sheffer says, because she lives with both observant and nonobservant parents.

“We don’t push. We give her freedom,” he says. “On Shabbat, if she wants to call her mom, we let her. We try not to push something before its time. Thankfully, she feels a part of our home and blends into our lifestyle, *baruch Hashem*.”

Not pushing children—when it comes to religion or to sports—is central to his philosophy. Screaming parents and coaches making demands on players, says Sheffer, constitute pressure points that sidetrack young athletes from the joys of competition.

But, played for the right reasons, he says, basketball is “a teacher of life,” im-



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parting joy and inculcating in its practitioners the values of work, play and consistency. That is the approach Sheffer takes in promoting basketball to kids—what he dubs “basketball therapy.”

In comparison, “the Torah is *the* teacher of life,” he says. “The Torah includes everything. It gives me endless advice, tools and inspiration for how to live in a more healthy, happy and balanced way—in my married life, raising my kids, employment and faith. All in all, it helps me be a better human being.”

Sheffer rises. He has to head to Jerusalem, a three-hour drive, to address Hebrew University students, mostly nonobservant, who gather weekly for discussions on Jewish thought.

In a university meeting room thirty-five students and a rabbi await. Sheffer strides to the front and softly relates his background, basketball career and battle with cancer. Finally, he tells of his search for meaning and his discovering it in living a religious life.

THE CHILDREN CONSTITUTE THE SHEFFERS’ “STARTING FIVE.”

During the hour-long appearance, Sheffer quotes freely from NBA legends Pat Riley and Michael Jordan, along with Chazal, Chasidism, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and *Pirkei Avot*. He acknowledges that religious observance stimulates ever-more questioning of a path fraught with continual challenges. He takes students’ questions: Are you happy? How did cancer shape your life? What about the stereotypes of newly observant Jews?

Afterward, a third-year engineering student, Luda Loginova, speaks of having gained from the presentation.

“It gives us inspiration that it’s possible to deal with any difficulty, make any change and try to be a better person,” she says. “He helped me think about things I don’t think about daily.” ■