



(Armon Hotel in Stamford, CT; photo credit: Hersh Rosner)

## Successful Weekend of Growth, Connection, and *Chizuk* for Nearly 800 Parents from Around the World

by Zalman Goldstein

It is said that pain shared is pain halved. Spending the final weekend of 2021 with nearly 800 parents from around the world at the *Kesher Nafshi* convention in Stamford, Connecticut, taught me that it can also be healing tripled, even exponentially so.

Coming together with so many other parents who are on the same journey, searching for guidance and inspiration while raising children who are struggling within the system and with *Yiddishkeit* in general, infused me with incredible *Chizuk*, healing, sense of brotherhood, and hope. Although participants hailed from every community—Chassidish, Litvish, Yeshivish, Sefardic—and from nearly every continent, the sense of unity, mutual understanding and non-judgmental acceptance was as palpable as it was validating and nourishing.

Top experts on parenting, child development, *Chinuch*, and mental health, such as the world-renown Rabbi Shimon Russell, Rabbi YY Jacobson, Rabbi Shais Taub, Rabbi Benzion Twersky, Rabbi Daniel Kalish, Rabbi Aaron Friedman, Binyomin Greenspoon, and others, gave generously and selflessly of their time throughout the entire weekend, offering their wisdom, warmth, and practical guidance through a variety

of lectures, workshops, keynote addresses, and nonstop hours of private consultations into the wee hours.

The experience was as magical as it was healing. Being together with so many parents who all clearly share a deep sense of dedication and love for their children, mirrored back to each and every one of us a feeling of being less alone, less isolated, imbuing a sense of faith and hope that there is indeed a path forward, and that there's an ultimate purpose to each of our struggles.

As the weekend drew to a close, I invited fellow participants to share some reflections about their experience, to inspire and encourage each other, and so that others can learn about the amazing resource that is *Kesher Nafshi*. Here are several excerpts of what they wrote, shared with their permission:

“What gave me the biggest *Chizuk* was the interactions and conversations I had with others who are in the same or a similar situation. As painful as it is to see, when you spend a Shabbos with hundreds of people who are in the same boat, who understand you, it is comforting to know that we aren't alone. —  
**S.S.**

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“We honestly did not know what to expect as it was our first *Kesher Nafshi* Shabbaton, but as we walked into the main ballroom for the first keynote speech to be given by Rabbi Russell, we were surrounded by mothers and fathers just like us. For the first time since we began this journey, we did not feel as isolated or alone. We looked around at the men and women around us from all walks of life and were amazed at the number of people all committed to sharing and being together, to benefit our children who are struggling. Throughout the weekend, that is what gave us strength. The knowledge that there are so many others like us, each with the honor of caring for our own special *neshamas*. It was so freeing to watch the fathers be able to dance together at *havdala* with smiles of hope and tears of courage. As was said over Shabbos, "אֶשָׂא עֵינַי אֶל הַהוֹרִים" I will raise my eyes to the *parents*—the parents like us, who risk shame, embarrassment and ostracization to do everything they can to help their child. The parents who talk so openly about their journeys. We came alone, but left with friends and an extended family, an army of the most special people determined to do whatever it takes to help our children. We are so grateful to the *Kesher Nafshi* organizers for putting this amazing program together for parents like us.” —**A *Kesher Nafshi* Parent**

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“There is no need to elaborate on the pain a father feels when his children veer from the family's path and traditions, and, furthermore, choose a dangerous and painful path. For me, the most painful part is the feeling of being alone in this tremendous challenge. Alone because the community does not understand what I am going through. Some even judge me as a bad parent and lay the blame at my feet. Alone because often the professionals available in my area don't fully understand what's going on with my child. They are quick to apply labels such as ODD, ADHD, and sometimes even rush to medicate, yet relief and resolution remain elusive. Alone because I don't know where to turn to find guidance that is possible to apply in real life, rather than just ideas and theories. Alone because I often feel in my bones that something is deeply hurting my child, but have no one to share it with who will listen without blame or judgement. Who can cry with me and hold me in the most difficult moments, and gently guide me on

a practical path forward. To ease my pain, my child's pain, and the pain of my other children who watching this unfold also suffer. It's a triple suffering—parent, child, and siblings. Spending Shabbos at the *Kesher Nafshi* event gave me a real group of fellow travelers on this painful journey. Kind and loving people that understand and don't judge. People that cried with me in my pain and I was able to cry with them in their pain. People that shared their experiences and expertise, and gently sought out from me my own experience. I'm no longer alone. It is a tremendous relief to journey these painful pathways accompanied by such loving people who came together from all around the world. *Kesher Nafshi* gave me a community that embraces me; that understands me and tries to help me. I now return home rejuvenated and invigorated, filled with hope and armed with practical tools and ideas tailored for my challenge that I can immediately apply in my own life. But the most significant for me is the fact that I don't feel so alone anymore." —**T.S.**

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"As parents of a child who has been struggling for years, we have felt the pain of confusion, desperation and loneliness. Being a part of *Kesher Nafshi* and all those associated with it has literally changed our lives and given us hope, clarity and connection as we continue on our journey together. We met many others who are in similar situations. Through the sharing of our stories and pain, we have connected in a very unique and comforting way. We no longer view our child's situation as hopeless, but as a special mission assigned to us by *Hashem*. —**Y.R.N.**

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"My experience at the 2021 *Kesher Nafshi* conference was life-changing. The keynote on Friday night was very moving and emotional for me. The fact that so many people were interested in hearing my story was in itself a tremendously validating experience. But that was not the best part. What followed for the next thirty-six hours was just wow. Person after person, couple after couple, coming over to me and to my wife and pouring out their hearts to us. Telling us how much our stories meant to them. Sharing their stories with us. Opening up about their struggles and secrets. *That* was the best part. My takeaway is this: *Hashem* takes us through twists and turns in this journey of life. Sometimes I struggle to understand and sometimes *Hashem bentches* me with perfect clarity. I would never have thought at the time of my pain and struggles that my experiences could have had any kind of positive side to them. Over the years, I have seen time and time again, that nothing could be further from the truth. Everything I went through has a reason. This Shabbos was yet another powerful reason and obvious sign that nothing happens in *Hashem's* world by mistake. Sometimes I need to simply wait—sometimes decades—to see the ultimate purpose. I'm glad I stuck around to see it through. You are all amazing people and parents to be doing what you are doing for your children. Hope is real. Life always gets different. *Hashem* should *bentch* you all to see your stories through to their positive beginnings." —**Barry Lampert**

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(Rabbi Shimon Russell delivering a keynote address; photo credit: Hersh Rosner)

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“I did not come as a parent. I came as a professional to offer support and chizuk to parents of struggling children. I got so much more than I gave. First, there were the talks on the value of every *neshama*, the importance and the power of unconditional love. Rabbi Shimon Russell, sharing his own struggles openly with the large crowd, taught us all about trauma, attachment, and the power of unconditional love. Don’t a lot of our children need this, at least some of the time? I wondered. If only the whole world outside would be aware of this, perhaps fewer of our children would be in so much pain. This was the first time I was exposed to the work of *Kesher Nafshi*. As a therapist, I was truly blown away by the work they are doing to support parents in pain and to reunite children with their parents. I was also incredibly inspired by the parents I met. Each one had a story, some with happy endings and some not yet, but each person was open to new ideas, new approaches, and new tools to help their child, even as they acknowledged their personal pain and disappointment. If only we would all be so open to trying new approaches, and learning new, healthier ways of being with our children, how much pain could be averted? —**Devora Segall LCSW**

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“As inspired as I was by the remarkable speeches and commentary, I was deeply moved by the heroic parents surrounding me. Giants of spirit. Giants of character. Giants of *emunah* and perseverance. I was surrounded by greatness on so many levels. To stand shoulder to shoulder with such courageous, heroic

parents was an unparalleled *zechus*, and an experience that I believe has forever changed me as a parent, as a person, and as an *oved Hashem*. —**YH**

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“As I arrive home after this unbelievable Shabbos, I must say this was an extraordinary experience. Dispersed through the weekend, there were sessions by authentic and experienced professionals who put life’s challenges into perspective. I gained so much from them, as I am sure many other participants did. These professionals selflessly made themselves available to all just so that one can relieve their pain and anguish. The aura of non-judgmentalism was so refreshing and rewarding. We have all learned so much and have a road ahead of us to pave. I already look forward to the next event.” —**S.A.**

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“I have so much to say about the diverse backgrounds of the speakers and attendees, and how we all had one thing in common—the need and will to understand each other. The aura of being in a comfortable, no-judgment zone, when I so often feel like an alien as I continually field the complaints of “normal” people. I often wish I didn’t have to wear such “masks” all the time, hiding our shame. It all falls away here. This is real pain and helplessness, yet we all laughed and, of course, cried together, but we had someplace to go to do it. Someplace with amazing individuals who understood.” —**S.G.**

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“I was invited by *Kesher Nafshi* to attend the Shabbaton as a speaker and lecturer. I thought of everything I could talk about in order to help, support and strengthen the parents, and I prepared as best as I could. I came equipped with a variety of ideas, tools, and tips, and I thought that, *Be’ezras Hashem*, I could benefit and share with you what I have learned in the many years I had the privilege of engaging in the field. But I was surprised. Besides the wonderful speakers that I enjoyed hearing and learning from, I met wonderful and amazing people, people who do not look at others from above, people without a bloated ego, people imbued with Emuna, people with big hearts who are willing to embrace, help and support everyone else. The Achdus was outstanding. The experience was amazing! I thought I was coming to teach others, and I ended up learning from all. I thought I was coming to give, and I ended up receiving so much more. I thought I was coming to strengthen, and I ended up strengthened. And for that I thank those who gave me the *Z’chia* to attend, and to all of you who shared with me and gave me the permission to get to know them and their stories, and all those who just smiled to me, and I had the privilege to meet on those four days of the Shabbaton.” —**Aaron Friedman**

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“This was my first *Kesher Nafshi* Shabbos—so inspirational and so much food for thought. A takeaway I had: *Hashem* puts us through challenges in life to bring out *middos* and good parts of us we never knew we had. As humans we are naturally judgmental of those who are different than us. This can lead to feeling of anger, frustration, annoyance, and general unhappiness. When one has a child who is struggling and we put our own ego and pain aside—which is not easy to do, and yes, takes a lot of work—and we focus on *their* pain, and we love them for who they are, not for who we want them to be, we become better people and less judgmental of the world around us. In turn, our lives become happier, more fulfilling, and

better than those who never had to undergo this challenge. Our job is to embrace the situation *Hashem* brought our way and realize that this, and all that we go through, is all for our good.” —*B.*



(Rabbi YY Jacobson delivering remarks at the grand Melave Malka; photo credit: Hersh Rosner)

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“As parents, we all want to do the best possible for our children. When things don’t follow the regular path of Chinuch, we are faced with decisions some could ever imagine. Very few can even advise us confidently. The ambiance of the *Keshar Nafshi* Shabbos was magnificent. They gave us moments of relief and laughter, and provided amazing speakers who gave us tools to take home. But what I felt most inspired by was sitting in a room with hundreds of parents, *Rabbonim*, therapists and professionals, listening to hair-raising accounts of parents with selfless *mesiras nefesh*. And crying together with every single one of them...no one could hold back tears, not even the prepared speakers. We felt each other’s pain. And to top that off, I walked out of that Shabbos with the message: If we want to help our children, we must make ourselves into fitting role models, so we don’t have to tell our children what to do, but let them see it, and when they’re ready they’ll follow it on their own. I now know I have a lot of growing to do before they can grow.” —*E.C.*

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“It is difficult to describe the pain and shame that parents of a child who is struggling with *Yiddishkeit* endure. In many aspects it is a suffering that is endured in silence and with a feeling of a heavy load on



their shoulders. From the moment we walked in to the *Kesher Nafshi* Shabbaton, that burden felt lifted from my shoulders. Before anyone even greeted us there was a feeling in the air that we are in a safe zone, someplace where you are truly understood and there is no need to hide anything. The sessions were masterfully presented, the panels enlightening. There were so many lessons that we took home from this weekend. To us, the greatest lesson was the following: One of the people presenting was talking from the perspective of a parent on their ten-year journey with a son who was struggling and is now on the path back to Yiddishkeit. When he told his son he was speaking, he asked him what he would describe as his low point during his struggles. The son described the shame he felt as he was doing the various wrong things, the guilt and the pain were so strong, and that compelled him to seek ways to numb the pain. As parents going through the ordeal of a child struggling, we may forget the child is suffering as well, not only with whatever issue is causing them to turn away from their tradition, but also with the guilt of knowing what they are doing is wrong. The other aspect of the Shabbaton that for us was so meaningful to us was meeting other parents experiencing the same journey as us. There were, litvish, chassidish, yeshivish, modern orthodox parents all going through the same struggle. The parents were open, honest and understanding. People were sharing advice, stories, pain and struggles all for the purpose of helping another Jew. I can't tell you how many times over Shabbos my wife and I heard the refrain, "I've never shared this anyone..." For the many parents who were attending their first *Kesher Nafshi* Shabbaton, the veteran parents were available to guide, advise and be an opening ear for anyone who wanted. This weekend presented an opportunity for parents to unload and unburden themselves. The superhuman efforts parents of struggling children exert to accept, embrace, and show love for their children was amazing to hear about. To know there are *rabbonim*, *mechanchim*, and therapists who are there to guide, teach and help heal is comforting. Walking away after this Shabbaton, it was impossible not to be a changed person." —**M.G.**

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"As a member of the *Kesher Nafshi* staff, I am always impressed by the smiles of the parents as they depart on Sunday. The fact that parents had a safe place to share their experiences, or even just to listen to others, was mind blowing for so many. As a result of this Shabbaton, there are now support groups that are forming everywhere. It's truly sparking an unbelievable healing revolution. The tears of sorrow...and joy...that have been shed throughout the weekend are unbelievable. May *Hashem* grant us all the yeshuos and refuos that we daven for...and may every parent who sees pain and struggle in raising their children reap joy and Yiddishe nachas from them all. —**Chaya Ruchie Mayer, a proud KN mother and staff member**

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"This is what *yemos hamashiach* must be like," remarked a fellow from Monsey to the seven or eight of us that were sitting around a table enjoying Kiddush on Shabbos afternoon. Around the table sat a Satmar fellow from Brooklyn, a Yeshivish guy from Lakewood, a baal habos from Baltimore, etc.—a microcosm of Klal Yisroel. Admittedly, it was one of the lighter moments of a very intense few days, but for just a few minutes everyone around the table was just basking in the company of their fellow Yiddishe brothers. For me personally, having had the opportunity to attend many Shabbatons over the years, I have never attended any Shabbaton that can even be compared to *Kesher Nafshi*. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to put into words what a *Kesher Nafshi* weekend is or what it feels like to experience. But I will try. Picture close to 1,000 people from every walk of life and every community brought together by one thing only—love and *mesiras nefesh* for their struggling child. It was as if everyone checked in their ego and attitude when they walked into the hotel and entered the weekend willing and able to be vulnerable, inspired, connected, and cared for. And the process and impact were breathtaking, as absolute strangers shared

their struggles with tears and sighs, and in return were encouraged and embraced by fellow Yidden that were truly able to identify and empathize. In addition, there were non-stop lectures, discussions, and break-out sessions all thoughtfully crafted to encourage and inform the parents. Many of these lectures and discussion were by professionals who were going through or had gone through their own struggles with their own children. There was so much laughter and so many tears as parents stood shoulder to shoulder, learning. By the time *Motzei Shabbos* came around, complete strangers danced arm in arm feeling more like brothers than unknowns. On Sunday evening, right after the Shabbaton I walked into a local eatery and saw a young father with his teenage son. The boy was clearly a struggling teen. Due this incredible Shabbos I had two immediate sentiments. Number one, I just wanted to walk over to the father and give him a hug and tell him “you are not alone.” Secondly, was almost a feeling of sadness for the father that he probably had not even heard of Keshar Nafshi.” —**Rabbi Shlomo Landau, Director of Community Mentors**

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“As this was the first *Keshar Nafshi* event we attended, I cannot describe it any better than with just one word: *Wow!* I was very hesitant about coming at first, but my wife very much felt that we had to come. I didn’t know what to expect, the setting, the crowd and whether I would gain something, and I was totally surprised and it of course beat any expectations that I could’ve had, on all fronts. Over the years that we have been dealing with this issue, I’ve gotten to meet several psychologists and psychiatrists, many of them in the Frum community, and what stood out most to me at this *Keshar Nafshi* event was the most perfect balance of professionalism with *Yiddishkeit*, *emunah*, and *daas Torah* that I have never ever seen anything even closely resemble this. What an amazing group of parents we encountered over those few days, from all different backgrounds and different stages in life, the *Chizuk* from people that are in the same boat as us, and people having the strength and courage to show up and share their stories and experiences, both good and bad, nothing can match up to actually speaking with parents who have been in that same spot and how they have composed themselves and handled it in the best way possible for the long term success of their kids. I wish we can share this with so many others out there that do not yet know about Keshar Nafshi.— **Y.F.**

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(Rabbi Aaron Friedman delivering remarks at the grand Melave Malka; photo credit: Hersh Rosner)

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“I joined the *Keshet Nafshi* Shabbaton for the third time this past Shabbos, since hearing about this organization a few years ago. I had two teenage boys at the time who were beginning to show signs of rebelling against the “system.” I so wanted to go and hear from amazing *mechanchim*, experts in the field, and parents who have been on this journey, so that I can help myself, my husband, and the entire family as best I can so the situation shouldn’t spiral out of control *chas v’shalom*. With each Shabbaton I continue to gain and grow. My husband and I brought home so many new tools to help us understand, not only our teens that were struggling, but our “mainstream” kids as well. On top of all that, we gained so much on understanding ourselves, our childhood reactions, our own pain and rejection, and our healing journey to help our children. For this year’s Shabbaton, I made it my mission to let more parents in my position know and understand what this Shabbos is about—having a safe, accepting place for parents in pain to grow, gain, and be embraced for their journey to help their children in crisis. But we do not have to wait for our children to be in deep crisis in order to grow, learn, and gain *chizuk*. In fact, the parents of the children in deep crisis taught me so much through their own unbelievable journeys, so that I can make the right choices and lift my own kids out of their pain, before it gets deeper. In addition, though our children are B”H still in some sort of “Yeshiva system,” they still came to the place of rejection and pain, they are still struggling, and who can measure pain? And that needs to be addressed, explored, and healed; and that can happen after experiencing a *Keshet Nafshi* weekend. So this year was super exciting, as we came along with a large group of like-minded parents who have kids in pain, but may still be in some sort of “system.” What we came out with this year was tremendous education from other parents who may have been in our shoes a few years before us, who could advise us, educate us, and give *chizuk* on how to move forward

and upward, what signs to look for so our children don't fall deeper, and ways to transform our home to a place of love and acceptance. We also gained so much from all the *mechanchim*, both in the area of understanding our children, and in the area of shalom bayis and using our *nisyonos* for growth. We learned the importance of letting go, bringing *Hashem* in, and looking truly inward. These tools are allowing me to grow into a better wife, better mother, better sister, better neighbor and friend...but mostly to become a better me. I wouldn't consider *Kesher Nafshi*, a Shabbaton for parents of struggling children. I would love to call it a Shabbaton for parents who want to learn real *chinuch*; be it for their struggling teens, their mainstream children, their married children, their marriage, and most importantly themselves. Thank you for this opportunity and for Gedalia Miller and all the others who work tirelessly to make this happen!" — **R.F.**

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"I never cried so much in my life. But these were tears of relief and release. I didn't realize how desperate I was for validation for my pain, for all I was going through, until this weekend. For recognition for how I'm keeping a regular house for seven other kids with this whole parsha hanging over us. I was hesitant to come because I felt like I heard it all already... 'love them, be there, give of yourself unconditionally, splurge on them, give, give, give....' I'm wiped out and don't want to be told anymore what I need to improve, that I need to work harder. But I went anyway, if only for the good food and break that I so badly needed. I figured I can always skip the speeches. But boy was I wrong! I didn't have time to sleep because I didn't want to miss a single lecture. The message there was so positive. I never before heard that we parents are literally *tzadikkim* and *tzidkonnios*, dealing with so much. I thought we were failures! I didn't hear 'you need to do more, more, more.' I heard 'you guys are amazing, strong, selfless! Just the fact that you came here shows that your there for your struggling kid and want to change and give!' We don't need to be convinced, pushed, or made to feel like we're not enough. We already feel desperate, the feeling of a loving parent who *needs* to do. To do something, *anything* to see our child thrive. Yes they gave us techniques and guidance...on how to support ourselves, and heal ourselves. So encouraging! So validating! We're a team! A strong team that are getting through one of the hardest *nisyonos* that *klal yisroel* faces today! We are already doing it...and with encouragement and love we will have strength to continue loving and doing more. Because we're amazing, and strong, and most importantly there for each other." — **Anonymous**

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***Kesher Nafshi*** is an organization that provides support and guidance for parents with children who are struggling with Yiddishkeit and related issues; learn more at [www.KesherNafshi.org](http://www.KesherNafshi.org).

**Zalman Goldstein** has been writing on topics of Jewish interest for more than thirty years. He has authored over a dozen books, such as *Jewish Living Simply Explained*, *Going Kosher In 30 Days!*, *Talking Divorce*, and *The Shabbat Table Companion*. He is currently writing *RAISING A LOVING FAMILY*, a much-anticipated book on parenting psychology and guidance drawn from the talks and teachings of Rabbi Shimon Russell. Learn more at [www.RaisingALovingFamily.com](http://www.RaisingALovingFamily.com).