

**THERAPY:**  
**A SNEAK PEEK INSIDE**  
 Mindy Blumenfeld, LCSW

## The Kesher Nafshi We Need to Succeed

As we usher in the Yom Tov of Shavuot that celebrates Bnei Yisrael receiving the Torah, it brings more sharply into focus the tragedy our community faces with so many of our children abandoning the mitzvos their great-great-grandparents accepted at Har Sinai.

It feels even more terrible than that because we believe that our souls were present at Mattan Torah and that each and every Jew accepted the Torah then, which means that the very souls that accepted taryag mitzvos then are clothed in bodies today that don't remember their wholehearted acceptance.

And as a child of Holocaust survivors, I have strong feelings about this. Not only did our grandparents agree to naaseh v'nishma over 3,000 years ago at a mountaintop whose location has been hidden from us since, but in the concentration camps and in the death camps, our grandparents died for their commitment to naaseh v'nishma, which was proclaimed at that mountaintop, believing in its

existence despite its hidden location.

Whew. I hadn't realized what pain this topic engenders in me until I began writing that paragraph. I also didn't mean to write a dvar Torah here; I'm only a therapist, not a Rebbetzin. But this topic has been percolating inside of me for a while, so here goes.

Just after I had graduated from school and become a therapist about a decade ago, the only thing I knew about kids at risk, about kids OTD (a horrible acronym— thank you, Batya Ruddell, for turning that acronym on its head with your beautiful book, *On Their Derech*), was from far, far away. So far away that I didn't actually know anyone who had a kid who wasn't frum (or maybe I did but never dreamed that they were harboring the secret of their child's struggle with Yiddishkeit).

Parents who were seeking help were tearing out their hair in anguish, and their bafflement at their child's behavior was creating not only broken relationships with their at-risk

child, but a churban in the home that threatened to burn everyone in the conflagration: parents, siblings and extended family members.

Rabbi Shimon Russell, LCSW, who is the author of the best-selling book, *Raising a Loving Family*, winner of the Gold Benjamin Franklin Award in the category of psychology, was a visionary in his thinking and his work. Rabbi Russell, presently a therapist renowned for his success working with teens at risk and the father of multiple children who had their own tumultuous journeys with Yiddishkeit, is at the forefront of work with kids at risk. Years ago, as the director of Our Place, a refuge for struggling kids, he developed the Crisis Chinuch Model for the mentors working at Our Place.

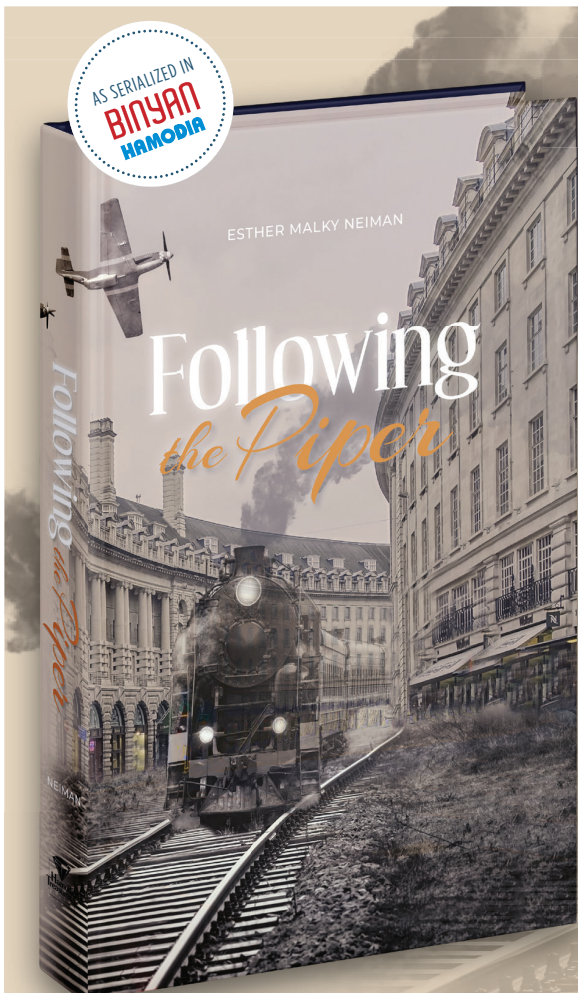
Although Rabbi Russell deserves a column of his own, the two most fundamental concepts that he incorporated into his model are: Firstly, children who are acting out — whether behaviorally or religiously or both — are compelled to this behavior not because of flawed middos, but because they are experiencing extreme distress. Secondly, parent-child attachment

is crucial to a child's psychological, spiritual and even physical health.

It is the most extraordinary testimony to the success of his work that today, because his teachings have become so widespread, generations of devastated parents who once alienated their at-risk children from fear, ignorance and pain now embrace their children with love and acceptance as the parenting path is clearer and straighter. These parents only ever wanted to help their suffering child and to do what's best for their other children, and now they know how!

Enter Mr. Gedalya Miller, a "regular" Chassidische guy and one of the original disciples of Rabbi Russell's teachings, who learned these two principles well when his adult daughter became irreligious, taking her two children with her and leaving her marriage behind. He then wanted to take the next step and turn his private growth to public growth, and *Keshar Nafshi* (translated as soul bond) was born.

*Keshar Nafshi* began as a Shabbaton for parents whose children are struggling with Yiddishkeit. Their strongest voice is now Rabbi Shimon Russell who



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attends all the Shabbatons, lending his expertise to help families in crisis.

I attended a few of the Shabbatons, originally to support a family member, and then as a therapist. I just stopped writing this column as I found myself unable to put to paper the awestruck feelings I had in response, the deep appreciation to Mr. Miller whose vision created this network of support, this community of education, so that parents can learn from each other, cry together and support each other. I can't breathe with the beauty of the Shabbos, the deep respect I have for the parents who showed up, who show up every single second for their kids, and of course, because Mr. Miller is a Chassid, and Chassidim just know how to do it, the good food and entertainment.

Kesher Nafshi began originally from the cadre of core parents, spearheaded by Mr. Miller, who started this journey years ago and who understand the two principles of how trauma affects children negatively and how parental attachment impacts positively.

At the Shabbaton, the Rabbanim, who are on this journey with these children, and the therapists, who know this journey intimately either because their children are also struggling or from their extensive work with teens at risk (or both), talk. There is support, she'eilos and education. Parents learn the halachah; they learn about trauma and therapy; they learn about love. Whatever confusion existed before Shabbos begins to clear up by the time the Shabbaton is over.

Kesher Nafshi has expanded its scope to provide not only a deeply spiritual and therapeutic retreat on Shabbos throughout the year, but support groups, trips, get-togethers, ongoing connections to Rabbanim who pasken the most awful she'eilos and love — lots of love, loads of love. Today there are bi-weekly support groups in Monsey, Monroe, Williamsburg and Boro Park (separate for fathers and mothers).

What Kesher Nafshi is telling the parents is what the rest of the frum community needs to hear — that these kids are not throwing away their religion because they are rejecting their souls' commitment at Sinai. No, these kids are burn victims ripping off their clothing because the burning is so intense they are afraid they will die from their pain. Just like you wouldn't send away a child from the Shabbos table who had been burned in a terrible fire and whose clothing on their burned skin

caused extreme pain, so, too, don't send away your child from the Shabbos table if they are wearing ripped jeans and a t-shirt. It's just a different kind of burn they are feeling. You say your grandfather was in Auschwitz and still stayed frum? Every generation has a different holocaust it must survive, and as a therapist, I want to tell you that we cannot judge.

As we move into Shavuot, commemorating our commitment to keeping the Torah, know that the way to show our children the beauty of Yiddishkeit will be through understanding that what makes them stay away is not rebellion but ruin and what will keep them close is not shivah but shalom.

This article is a way to reach you — you, who are worrying about your kids and don't know that there are others like you who are on this derech and want to be there to walk along with you. Learn what Kesher Nafshi has to teach. It will change your life and give you a lifeline in an ocean of tears.

Too many therapists working with these teens hear the same words: "I wish my parents went to Kesher Nafshi."

Yes, imagine that. A kid that doesn't keep Shabbos wishes his parents went to a Shabbaton where his parents learn about halachic she'eilos that involve him. And you know why? Because he has friends whose parents go to Kesher Nafshi, and he wants the peace that he sees his friends are experiencing despite their horrific burns.

They want to believe Hashem still loves them and understands them, but it is easier to find their way back to Him if they can first trust that their parents understand and love them. It's the kesher nafshi they need to succeed.

A gut Yom Tov. ●

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Mindy Blumenfeld, LCSW and motivational speaker, maintains a private practice in Brooklyn. She is the author of "Therapy, Shmerapy" and a children's comic book, "Hillel and the Paper Menschies." Mindy welcomes your comments, questions and even complaints. She can be reached through Binah magazine.

Mindy alternates her regular therapy column with responding to readers' questions. Feel free to email your queries — up to 150 words. She will select some of them to respond to on these pages.

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