

Journeys at Kesher Nafshi Strengthening a Bond of the Soul

BY S. KLEIN

Chai Lifeline. RCCS. Misaskim. Bonei Olam. HASC. LINKS.

Name nearly every challenge, and there is inevitably an organization that offers support and *chizuk* to those who are struggling in its midst. Health challenges. Cancer. Infertility. Children with special needs or Down Syndrome. Widows and orphans. And so forth.

There is one segment of the population, however, that has been growing steadily in the past few years, but whose needs have mostly been overlooked. I am referring, of course, to parents of KIPS, (kids in pain,) children who are struggling and have left the 'derech,' plunging their families into a whirlwind of pain, confusion and grief.

Being the parent of an OTD child is one of the most painful challenges, and one of the most isolating as well. As one parent expressed, "It's not a classy *nisayon*." The phones aren't ringing with offers of volunteers to do homework with the children, to deliver meals and pay for treatment. Many parents are ashamed to reach out and ask for support, to build connections with other parents experiencing the same ordeal.

There are so many questions, so few answers. Trying to figure out where to turn for help and guidance is like groping in the dark.

For over a decade, Rabbi Gedalia Miller has been involved in helping parents struggling with this *nisayon*, providing advice, guidance, connections and support. Several years ago he founded *Kesher Nafshi*, an organization whose goal is to strengthen the bond between parent and child, giving them the strength to not only survive, but to thrive during this incredibly difficult *nisayon*.

This past *Shabbos*, *Parshas Korach*, *Kesher Nafshi* hosted its fourth weekend of *chizuk*. Over 500 parents gathered from Thursday-Sunday at the Raleigh Hotel, for four days of inspiration, encouragement, and connection. The *Kesher Nafshi* committee, which included Rabbi Gedalia Miller; Chesky Kauftheil; Mendy Eder; Eli Kaufman; Hainech Korman; Shloimy Litzman; Ginky Markowitz; Hershel Rosenberg; and Moshe Hersh Rosenfeld, prepared a stellar program that kept us inspired and enthralled all weekend.

Rav Hillel David. Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson. Rav Mota Frank. Rav Shulem Kessler. Rav Yitzchok Loebenstein from Eretz Yisroel. Rav Pinchos Jung. Rav Shalom Noach Landau. Rav Shmuel Neiman. Rabbi Daniel Mechanic. Rabbi Aryeh Royde. Rabbi Benzion Klatzko. Rabbi Yom Tov Glaser. Rabbi Benzion Twersky. Rabbi Sruli Bistriz with Resolve. Rabbi Shaul Halpern, Avi Fishoff. Akiva Perlman Phd and Tamar Perlman, PsyD. Sony Perlman; Dr. Alberta

For four days and three nights, during which we barely slept, I connected with some of the most loving, compassionate, sensitive and caring parents that I have ever met—parents who would go the moon and back, and then make another return trip for the sake of their children.

I had the privilege of spending *Shabbos* in the company of giants: *Rabbonim* and *Rebetzins* of *shuls*. Professionals and therapists. Artists and teachers and psychologists and

day afternoon with a workshop by Rabbi Shimon and Mrs. Yocheved Russell, who have spent the last 32 years at the forefront of this challenge, guiding, advising, and inspiring untold thousands.

Dinner was followed by a keynote address by the one and only YY Jacobson, who exhorted us to raise our voices like a *shofar*, a conduit for the divine, with no ego or need for self-gratification. Rabbi Jacobson was so inspired by the *olam* that he decided to join for the entire *Shabbos*, during which he delivered another powerful *shiur*.

The Thursday night program ended with a rousing *kumzits* sing-along on the lawn, with Rav Mota Frank and Eli Beer.

Friday's program included four groups of concurrent sessions, as well as a special keynote by Rabbi Russell, entitled "What we Learned along the Way."

After candle-lighting, the women enjoyed a beautiful *kabolas Shabbos* and greetings by Pearl Stroh, while the men enjoyed a melodious *tefillah* by Chazan Yoel Ausch and the Zingers choir, followed by a keynote address by Rav Shalom Noach Landau. Reb Azik Leib Miller entertained and inspired at the Friday night meal, and his son, Amrom Miller, brought the house down at a late night address. Chaim and Danni Bin-Nun, a father and son duo, shared their personal journey and enduring bond.

On *Shabbos* morning, the women were riveted by two personal accounts, delivered by Faiga

Leah Landau and Dina Lebovic, while an afternoon panel, *Sharing the Journey*, featured Rabbi Russell, Rav Landau, Rav Jung and Rav Kessler. Rabbi Shloime Ehrlich's personal account of triumph over his challenges brought the audience to tears, as did Batya Ruddell's poignant portrayal of her own journey. A musical and mystical *Havdolah* by Berri Weber kept us enthralled, followed by lively dancing.

The highlight of the program was the *Motzoei Shabbos* entertainment, which included an award for Rabbi and Mrs. Russell; a heart-to-heart talk by Rav Landau, with music and dancing by the one-and-only Lipa. The Sunday program concluded with another keynote, featuring parting gems by Rabbi Russell.

The weekend was invigorating, inspiring, and unforgettable. Most importantly, it was an opportunity to let our guard down, sharing and confiding and laughing and crying together with people who 'get it.' It was understanding that we are not alone, that there are others on this journey together who are always ready to listen, to understand.

It was learning that we are not flawed, that our children are not flawed. That we must reach deep within ourselves to find those reservoirs of kindness and strength and faith and courage, and most importantly, keep *davening*, keep loving, and never ever lose hope. May we merit the day when Hashem will return the hearts of the fathers to their sons, speedily, in our days.



Montano-DiFabio of Crossroads Recovery. Faith Niece, LCSW, Mindy Blumenfeld LCSW and Batya Ruddel, author of 'On their Derech.' These were just a sampling of the powerful and memorable speakers.

Yet it wasn't just the stellar speeches and stirring addresses, the opportunity to speak to *Rabbonim*, professionals and those on the front lines, those working with children at risk. It wasn't the scenic grounds and lavish tea room, the rousing Thursday night *kumzits*, Friday morning Hallel with Eli Beer and stirring *melava malka* program.

It was the opportunity to spend time with kindred souls who 'get it.'

regular fathers and mothers, all of whom have one thing in common: we are raising children who are struggling, teens and adults who are in agony, who need us so desperately and who force us to face our deepest doubts and fears. Most of all, they compel us to keep growing, keep reaching deeper within ourselves to find love, compassion, and understanding.

If the quality of the participants at this weekend was any indication, *Kesher Nafshi* parents are some of the most respected, caring, compassionate and elevated souls *Klal Yisroel* has to offer.

The weekend began on Thurs-

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