

# Keshar Nafshi Mezibuzh—Going back to where it all began

**T**ry to visualize the scene...

The place? The kever of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of chasidus, in Mezibuzh, Ukraine, a kever that has absorbed centuries of tears, prayers, hopes and dreams.

The crowd? Two hundred Yidden from disparate backgrounds and communities, all of whom share a painful bond. For we are all parents of children who are 'on their derech,' who go about our daily lives with a so-called 'poker face,' yet whose hearts are raw and bleeding.

The matzav? A Shabbos of chizuk and connection, orchestrated by Keshar Nafshi, the first - and perhaps the only - organization of its kind.

These are but the bare-bones details, the setting of a weekend that breathed new life into our weary souls, creating bonds of courage and clarity and everlasting connection.

There is something uniquely empowering about spending Shabbos with kindred souls, with mothers and fathers who understand, who are on our journey, with whom we can exchange a glance that is worth a thousand words.

When Reb Gedalia Miller, the founder of this life-saving organization, and his dedicated team of volunteers, who have already coordinated five sold-out weekends of chizuk, dreamed of bringing Keshar Nafshi to Mezibuzh, Berditchev and Uman, a powerful chain of events were set into motion. It culminated in what we can honestly attest was the "trip of a lifetime."

Reb Gedaliah, along with psychotherapist Rav Shimon Russell, a worldwide expert on struggling children, and the heart and soul of Keshar Nafshi since its inception, first brainstormed this event several months ago, with the guidance and encouragement of the Krulla Rebbe, and the participation of Rav Shalom Noach Landau of Veretzki and Rav Moshe Weinberger of Aish Kodesh in Woodmere.

They were joined by the London contingent, a group of dedicated askanim and parents, including Chaim Hoffman; Yoily Schwartz; and Shani Lisser, the founder of Unconditional Parenting; and the dedicated Keshar Nafshi staff- including Hainech Korman; Yanky Goldman; Eli and Roizy Kaufman; Shloime and Shterney Litzman; Pearl Stroh; Gingy and Mindy Markowitz; Chaim and Dassi Bin-Nun; Hershel and Zeldy Rosenberg; Chaya Gitty Rosenberg; and so many others. Mendy Samet of Alexi Travel and Avrumi Wilner of the Holiness Hotel spent countless sleepless nights coordinating the logistics, while Sarah Miller arranged the magnificent décor.

## And this is how it began:

It is late Thursday night, and we have just completed an exhausting 15 hour journey, which included a lengthy stopover, a connecting flight to Kiev, some technical issues at the airport with cumbersome Covid regulations, plus a four hour journey to Berditchev. We spill out of the buses, exhausted beyond words, and trek across the bridge, toward the great Oheiv Yisroel, Rav Levi Yitzchok, who loved every Yid ahavas nefesh.

As the talented Don Stern and musical accompaniment belt out the classic "Ribono Shel Olam, Luz mir machen ah beit," Ribono Shel Olam, let us make a switch, the eternal tefillah of this protector of Klal Yisroel, we stand, huddled together. Soon the dam breaks and our collective sobs, emanating from the deepest, purest place, the hearts of parents who witness their children struggling with unfathomable pain, ascends heavenward.

Afterward, after the poignant testimonials and singing and whispered tefillos, we feel cleansed, uplifted, empowered. We get back onto the buses for the lengthy drive to Mezibuzh, the

birthplace of chasidus, where it all began.

We're an eclectic group - chasidim from Monsey and Boro Park, Yeshivaleit from Lakewood, an entire contingent from London, and a group from Eretz Yisroel; mothers and fathers who have endured the unfathomable, who have reached their breaking point and found new strength, who are finally allowing themselves to express the emotions simmering within their souls.

The weekend is magical, otherworldly. Friday morning's program is chock-full of inspiration by Rav Shimon Russell, the heart and soul of Keshar Nafshi and one of the foremost experts on this painful reality; Reb Shloime Ehrlich, Rav Yitzchok Loebenstein and the incredible Mrs. Shani Lisser of London. The women are treated to a mystical hafrashas challah experience with Orit Esther Riter, with melodious accompaniment by renowned songwriter Miriam Israeli.

Towards late afternoon we head to the Maayan of the Baal Shem Tov. It's the place where the Besht collapsed on the ground in distress, beseeching Hashem to either

give him water to wash for mincha- or take his soul. Almost immediately, a well appeared, spouting life-giving water, a living maayan with healing powers that thrives to this day. We fill our water bottles with this miraculous liquid and return to the primitive shtetl where dogs bark on the unpaved streets, and babushkes with kerchiefs stand guard over their crumbling abodes.

The Mezibuz complex, by contrast, is modern and well-maintained, a cozy enclave containing several hotels, a well-appointed lobby with couches, especially ordered by Keshar Nafshi, and a lavishly decorated dining room. The women light candles, their muffled sobs expressing their deepest wishes for their beloved children, and then we trek to the Baal Shem Tov's shul. This 18th century abode has been restored, the exposed beams and hewn benches an exact replica of the shul where the Baal Shem Tov and his chevraya kadisha poured out their hearts in song, bringing the simple folk of Mezibuzh along on their journey.

As Reb Shimmy Miller and the Zingers choir led us in an other-wordly kabolos Shabbos, I closed my eyes and am transported to a different time and place, an era of purity and emuna pshutah,



where life was simpler, purer and more real. Reb Gedalia Miller, the founder of Keshar Nafshi, welcomes us to Mezibuzh and introduces Rav Moshe Weinberger, one of the keynote speakers, who delivers a powerful perspective.

Rav Chaim Yosef Weinberg from Golders Green and Reb Issac Leib Miller inspire and enthrall us at the Friday night meal; much later, Rav Mota Frank shlita and Don Stern keep the men singing into the wee hours with a melodious botta, while the women are treated to a kumzits with Miriam Israeli. Avi Fishoff meets privately with the London contingent, sharing chizuk until early in the morning.

Rav Shimon Schneebalg delivers a shiur in chasidus on Shabbos morning, after which we are treated to a davening with a taam gan eden. And then, before laining, Rav Shalom Noach Landau, Rosh Yeshiva of Veretzki, injects us with powerful words that infuse new life into our weary bones, giving us our marching orders and providing an astounding perspective on this most painful nisayon.

As the Rosh Yeshiva expresses, "We are the couriers who were hand-selected to deliver a very precious package, to be mechanech those neshamos who were chosen to endure a circuitous and painful journey, instead of the 'conveyer belt,' chinuch we were expecting."

On Shabbos afternoon, Rabbi Yitzchok Schwartz from Eretz Yisroel, a close friend of Rabbi Russell, gives us an eye-opening glimpse into what really is happening behind the scenes, taking us on a journey of the soul.

The rest of the Shabbos passes in a whirlwind of dveikus and depths of connection. Where shall I start? With the incredible nigunim, ten-star upscale meals, heartfelt talks by those in the trenches, (every speaker, nearly without

forming bonds that will remain with us long after the memories of this incredible weekend fade away.

On Motzei Shabbos, Mordechai Weinberger, LCSW, a beacon of light and clarity, steals the stage with his fascinating hands-on presentation of what struggling children are experiencing, while Miriam Israeli leads the women in an exultant celebration of song and dance.

The icing on the cake, so to speak, is the Sunday evening in Uman, at the kever of Rabi Nachman. We stand at the tzion and sob, listening to Rav Moshe Weinberger express his impressions of the Shabbos; then dance and sing until the wee hours, emotionally taking leave of one another - but not for long.

Keshar Nafshi is already hard at work, planning its next highly anticipated weekend, to take place at the Armon Hotel (formerly Crowne Plaza of Stamford) on Parshas Voeirah, December 30<sup>th</sup> - January 2<sup>nd</sup>. Stay tuned for another four days of connection, of kindred souls uniting to draw strength and comfort from our shared nisayon, one of the most painful ones in this difficult golus.

**To register for the upcoming weekend, which will take place on Parshas Voeirah, December 30<sup>th</sup> - January 2<sup>nd</sup> at the Crowne Plaza, please go to [keshernafshi.org](http://keshernafshi.org)**



exception, is the parent of a child on his or her derech,) the outpouring of emotion at the kever on Motzoei Shabbos? Or perhaps it was simply the reality - spending a Shabbos in one of the most exalted locations, with some of the most noble, refined, and holy Yidden who were handpicked for this most painful of challenges.

We cry a little, laugh a lot, exchange stories and thoughts and experiences,

**A sampling of the feedback from the event:**

There are no words to thank Reb Gedalia Miller and the Keshar Nafshi Team. How on earth did they pull off such an amazing, awesome and mega project with such precision and perfection? They devoted their hearts and souls to give us the best of the best - spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Hashem saw their selflessness and devotion and gave them siyata dishmaya. The phenomenal speakers reached deep into our hearts, giving us so much chizuk and energy to go on with our life's mission. The music and singing, especially Don Stern, elevated our souls. The sumptuous meals, the decor, the gifts on our beds, the boxed lunches, on the bus, the shopping bags for breakfast are just a small part of all you've done. Thank you for filling us up with so much simcha, knowledge and energy to forge ahead on our journey, given to us so lovingly by our Father who knows what's best for us!!!

*A grateful parent*

We would like to thank Reb Gedalia Miller and the entire team of Keshar Nafshi for the most exhilarating weekend! My husband and I didn't know what to expect going into this weekend. When we arrived, we saw so many people that looked/seemed different from us. This journey has been a painful and isolating one, as many shared with us as well, and the courage of one man to transform pain into purpose and inspiration has created a movement! We were so uplifted and humbled to meet authentic beautiful Yidden yearning to grow and connect through their pain and struggle. We felt part of something much larger than ourselves and our individual struggles. We felt connected!! We feel so fortunate to be a part of this group and look forward to using and spreading the infinite wealth that we acquired through this transformative weekend!

*A father and mother who care*

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