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By C.B. Weinfeld

Connecting Heaven & Earth

*A Conversation With
Mrs. Batya Burd*



When the Yated features staff discussed whom to feature in the yom tov paper, one of the senior editors suggested Mrs. Batya Burd, administrator of the Western Wall Prayers. This is a renowned organization that matches people in need of yeshuos to bnei Torah who daven for them at the Kosel.

Batya is well known for another, more tragic reason: her husband Gershon, a talmid chochom and baal chessed, drowned a year ago while on vacation, leaving her with five young children to raise. Subsequently, the world learned of Gershon's unique chassodim and the thousands of lives he touched. Batya, who is a talented author, wrote several powerful essays about her hus-

band's petirah and how it changed her outlook on life. I was inspired and moved by the depth of the emotions she shared, and her unique hashkofas hachaim.

I spoke to Batya several times, at length, and she graciously shared the powerful story of her life. Here is her story, in her own words, from the beginning.

My name is Batya Burd, née Lisa Fefer.

I've had an unusual life, spanning numerous continents and lifestyles. By the time I was married, at age 28 (I'm 40 now), I'd enjoyed a lucrative career as a corporate lawyer in Toronto, climbed mountains, auditioned in Hollywood, and traveled around

the world. I had been everywhere, done everything, and was ready to settle down.

I don't know why Hashem chose me for such a dramatic story. A couple of years ago, the Toronto Star, my alma mater, published a write-up about my life. A follow up article in my school paper said, "Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction." And it really is.

My story begins in Eretz Yisroel, where I was born to my parents; both Russian émigrés. Both my parents wanted to come to Israel to escape then-Communist Russia and its difficulties. My father was an orphan who was raised in a Christian orphanage in Russia. He later went to university and became a scientist, entrusted with state secrets. My mother had a more "ordinary" upbringing; as a child, she managed to survive the war by daring and miraculous escape routes. She married my father partly in order to help him escape to Israel.

It was hard for my father to get permission to leave, due to his position in Communist Russia. In fact, my father was a *refusenik* for a while, until my parents received permission to leave in 1973. They arrived in Israel during a difficult time, shortly after the *Yom Kippur War*. Their passports had been stamped "Jewish," but when they came to Israel they felt like foreigners. They were second-class citizens, rejected by the Israeli elite, yet too upper class to mingle with the penniless immigrants and too brilliant to be relegated into obscurity. There was no place where they truly belonged.

Fortunately, my father soon obtained a position at the Technion, working for the famous Dr. Rosen, Albert Einstein's assistant. Yet my parents, who were not religious, never felt comfortable in Israel. When I was a toddler they left, heading to Italy. They were forced to remain there because the US had closed its doors to Israeli-Russian immigrants, at the request of the Israeli government. Too many Russian *olim* who felt like second-class citizens were leaving, and America was told not to accommodate them. As a result, we spent two years in Italy, along with 500 other Russian-Israelis, waiting to be allowed into the States.

Eventually my father went on a nine-day hunger strike. We still have old newspapers with pictures of my father holding a huge sign, with me, as a toddler, on his shoulders. Eventually, Canada allowed us to enter.

My parents moved to Toronto, where there were opportunities available. I went to excellent schools and did well, buoyed by my parents' expectation of my success. They were both academics and immigrants who wanted only the best for their children. "Go out in the big world and make it," was their constant message.

I sailed through high school and college, then went to law school, after which I passed the bar exam and became a corporate lawyer. I was in my early twenties when I was hired by a top law firm. At the time I had a very good life, at least according to outward appearances. I was earning a respectable salary at the height of my career, had wonderful friends and was enjoying the many perks of my lifestyle. As a lawyer, I worked literally eighty hours a week, which is considered part-time in some law firms!

My parents were very proud of me, their talented daughter who had made it. Yet I was miserable. I was working myself to the bone, with no time to breathe, and I felt that my work had no eternal value.

The whole point of my success was to enable me to live a certain lifestyle and therefore be happy and free, but there was no happiness or freedom to be found. In fact, at the ripe old age of 25, I felt more enslaved than ever. I had climbed to the top of my field, and there was nowhere else to go. I had reached the apex of the mountain, but it was all downhill from there. Once the euphoria of my accomplishments faded, daily life felt very empty. My intel-

lectual accomplishments were a gift, not something I had toiled over to achieve. As a result, they didn't nourish my soul.

In an effort to fill the emptiness in my soul, I turned to athletic pursuits, taking a leave of absence to travel around the world. I visited the most beautiful and secluded beaches in the world, went mountain climbing, scuba diving, hang gliding, bungee jumping, swimming with the sharks and other extreme activities. In retrospect, I was looking for an out-of-body spiritual experience, for a chance to escape my finite limitations. As experiences go, they were fun and exciting, but left me emptier than ever.

As an aside, this is precisely why many mountain climbers who finally reach their goal of scaling Mt. Everest or other exploits often fall into a depression afterwards. As long as they are trying to reach great heights, they have something to live for, but afterwards there is nothing left to aim for, nothing to achieve.

When my extreme activities didn't curb the emptiness in my soul, I decided to try for fame and fortune. I had heard that it was very difficult to make it in Hollywood, so here was a mountain potentially bigger than I could climb! Perhaps the ascent would fulfill my need to accomplish for a while. I went to Hollywood and introduced myself to the head honchos there as a corporate lawyer who wanted to be part of the movie production process. Within a week or two I was interviewing for the big guys: CBS, NBC, and Fox.

I stayed in Hollywood for about a month, long enough for me to realize that I could climb all the way to the top, but there was nothing there for me, either. I visited the famed Kabbalah Center in Toronto (they have branches all around the world). Though I was intrigued, it didn't give me what I needed.

By this time I was thoroughly disgusted with the physical rat race, with fame and glory, and I had enough of extreme sports. I realized that what I truly needed was to nourish my soul. There was only one small issue: I had no idea how to go about it. So, like many lost souls looking for spirituality, I decided to travel to India. By now I had made a decision not to return to the corporate world, and took an extended leave of absence. My parents thought I had gone off the deep end, but they decided to humor me. They didn't really have much of a choice, as I was an adult capable of making my own decisions.

India is an exotic country of extremes. There are the uber-rich who live in mansions, and the hordes who sleep on the streets, with raw sewage, scrounging in the gutters for their sustenance. The middle class does not exist. There are the primitive villagers in the countryside, who work as farmers, earning their daily bread. I was headed for the mountains, home to the wise gurus who might guide me in my spiritual quest.

I headed for Nepal, where I climbed Mt. Annapurna, and back to India, home of the Dalai Lama, rumored to be one of the wisest men on Earth. According to the media, the Dalai Lama was the epitome of truth, peace, and enlightenment.

After a long and exhausting journey, which lasted many days, I finally arrived at the mountain home of the Dalai Lama. I met the Guru and absorbed his wisdom, but I still felt empty. During my stay in India I learned the secrets of meditation and many healing methods, and met simple Tibetans who lived austere lives, renouncing their physical needs. Some of them were over 100 years old, but their minds were amazingly sharp and clear. Yet soon I was finished with whatever India had to offer, and was ready to move on.

I returned to Toronto with a new understanding about life. I knew I could never return to a meaningless life as a corporate lawyer. It was clear to me that life was about evolving spiritually, refraining from bad and doing good. I just wasn't quite sure ex-

actly what was good and bad. And so, when a friend told me about a Birthright trip to Israel, I jumped at the opportunity.

My last visit to Israel was when I went backpacking through Europe and ended up in Israel. Back then, as I walked into the *Kosel* area, I had no idea where I was or what it was; I had never heard of it. It was just like the dozen other old cities I had been to during my trip. Yet as I got off the number 2 bus and walked into this unknown place, I felt an incredible thickness in the air, and I felt completion. I dropped my backpack and said, “wow, I think I just felt G-d! I have to rethink the last 22 years of my life as a scientist’s daughter!”

Someone brought me to the Discovery Seminar the next day, and I was so grateful, as it gave my logical mind permission to believe that which my heart found out to be true: there is a Creator to the Universe Who is Here right now. At that time, though, the thought that Torah could be true never entered my mind. Keeping up ancient traditions was interesting and noble, but it never occurred to me that it could actually be something real.

When I returned to Israel on Birthright after spending time in India, I had new eyes through which to look at Torah. Eyes that knew that there was a reality to spiritual practices, that they could transform a person, that one could connect and feel and perceive different levels of reality. Those eyes were about to test the Torah and its practices through new lenses.

Tzitzis were suddenly not an interesting ancient garb and tradition, but a potential portal through which to draw pure light. *Mitzvos* were no longer ridiculous practices that were related to group identity, belonging and tradition, but powerful spiritual modes of affecting the cosmos, the world and our inner makeup. I yearned to measure the metaphysical mechanics of a *mitzvah*.

After so many years of searching, I finally arrived in the Old City of Jerusalem for the second time. I headed to the *Kosel* once more, and felt an instant connection. There was a tugging at my heart and an inner voice that said, “My daughter, you finally have come home.”

One Friday night, I felt a greater light at the *Kosel* than I had experienced during all my meditations and travels. So much of what I had instinctively known all through the years began to make sense to me. During my stay in India, I had been taught that the purpose of spirituality is to completely detach oneself from the physical world. This helped bring me to higher levels, but it left me incomplete. I was born with unique talents and ambitions; was I supposed to bury them all? It was only after I learned that true *Yiddishkeit* is all about using one’s gifts and talents to uplift the material world for the purpose of the spiritual that I felt at peace.

To be honest, I always was a deep thinker. When I was introduced to my faith, I needed to connect with it on a metaphysical level. Not every *baalas teshuvah* needs all this meditation and contemplation, but for me it was vital. My father was a physicist who had studied metaphysics. He actually measured the 6th sense. Pat answers would not work for me.

With the guidance of newfound mentors, I extended my ticket and enrolled in EYAHT, Aish HaTorah’s women’s seminary. I spent several months at the seminary, learning and growing. They were happy months and they were hard months, during which my parched soul was finally getting the nourishment it craved, albeit in a way that required a lot more sacrifice and work than I had ever done before.

In the east, when I would connect with a spiritual teaching, it was as if I was trying on an interesting garment; I could take it on and off and play with it as I wished. In Judaism, I couldn’t just try on a garment. I had to look at myself, find out what was preventing the garment from fitting properly. Then I had to change the

part of me that didn’t fit, until I could integrate that garment into my very being.

My parents were suspicious about what was happening to me, and finally figured it out. When they heard that I was becoming Orthodox, they freaked out. This was their worst nightmare: to see their talented daughter throw away her career and her chance for a normal life. They were terrified that they would lose me, as so many others had convinced them would happen. They sent some of their Israeli relatives, who lived in *kibbutzim*, to try to talk some sense into me. Suddenly, all these long-lost relatives I didn’t even know came out of the woodwork and tried to make me see the light. Somehow, I was strong enough to persevere. One relative even said to me, “maybe in the end it will be you who will change us.”

During these months, a lot of people pressured me to come home. For one thing, I missed two close friends’ weddings, where I was supposed to be the bridesmaid... on *Shabbos*. I also got some calls from Hollywood, where they wanted me to produce a movie. I felt like I had cut off my right arm, but I knew I had made the correct decision. There was no going back.

Over the next couple of years I went to several seminaries and kept on learning and growing. Finally, one day, a friend said to me, “When you’re ready to get married, let me know. I found your *zivug*.”

I was surprised at her confidence. How did she know? But it turned out she was right. When I felt ready to date, I was introduced to my husband, Gershon Burd. We were both 28 years old, and had so much in common. He had a similar background. He was the son of Russian immigrants, born in Odessa in 1973, and raised in Chicago. Gershon was my second date; but I was the fiftieth girl he met!

On our first date, we both already sensed this was it, but Gershon waited until our fifth date to propose. We were married eleven years ago, in 2003, on *Rosh Chodesh Adar Beis*. My parents, though shocked at my decisions, attended the wedding, along with my younger sister. They were very impressed with Gershon, who was tall, dark, handsome and accomplished, and their heartache abated somewhat.

A few weeks later, we finally went back to Toronto. I had not been home since I went on the Birthright trip that ultimately changed my life. During our short visit, my parents got to know Gershon, and were very impressed with his personality. They began to realize that becoming religious doesn’t mean turning into a narrow-minded, crazy person. You can be Orthodox and be a *mentch* at the same time.

Soon we returned to Eretz Yisroel and settled in the Old City. We were low in financial resources but high in idealism, with a strong desire to live within walking distance of the *Kosel*.

Gershon worked as an administrator for Yeshiva Birchas HaTorah, headed by Rabbi Nissim Tagger, where he had been learning full time. I was busy keeping house and adjusting to our new life. Before long, I was busier than I’d ever been. Our first child, a boy, was born eleven months after our wedding. He was followed by four siblings, a girl and three more boys. Today, our beautiful children are 10, 8, 6, 4, and 2.

During our early years in the Old City, Gershon came up with an idea. Before we were married, one of his roommates was paid to *daven* at the *Kosel* for forty days for someone from abroad who needed a *yeshuah*. He thought it would be a wonderful idea to set up such an arrangement on a larger scale, as a way to make money for the yeshiva. We would call it Western Wall Prayers, and enlist a group of dedicated *bnei Torah*, who, for a small fee, would *daven* at the *Kosel* every day. But we needed to advertise

Rabbi Gershon
Burd *zt"l*



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the service and set up a system.

Since I was a full-time mother with strong business skills, Gershon gave me a computer program and suggested that I get to work on it. And so I did. Little did I dream that Western Wall Prayers would become a worldwide sensation, affecting thousands of lives.

In the early days of the program, upon the guidance of Dayan Fisher *zt"l* of the Eidah Chareidis, I was told that either I or a family member needed to *daven* for those who were paying us. Eventually, though, word got around, and the demand was so great that I simply could not keep up. With the guidance of *gedolim*, we enlisted the young Torah scholars learning in the Zilberman *kollel* and Yeshivas Bircas HaTorah to *daven* for those in need. The proceeds would enable them to continue learning and teaching Torah, rather than leave *yeshiva* to pursue other modes of *parnossah*.

Within a few months, the service began to blossom, adding so much meaning and fulfillment to my life. While I took no ad-

ditional salary for this, the job was more than full-time. I spent hours speaking to those in need, hearing their stories, offering advice and encouragement, and building a rapport.

We didn't just take people's money and promise to *daven* for them. Instead, we tried to convince them to hasten their own *yeshuah* by undertaking a small step in the right direction. We remained in close contact with those who sought our services, and they ecstatically notified us when they received the salvation they had been awaiting.

Sometimes the people who called us were so desperate, we were their last hope. I'll never forget the caller who said she was going to overdose on pills, because she didn't want to live anymore. Fortunately, we were able to stop her in time.

Over the years, I forged close connections with some of our regulars, who still

keep in touch with me. Yet as our list of donors grew, it became impossible for me to maintain this service on my own. Eventually I employed three women, all *kollel* wives in Jerusalem, who maintain the website, take care of the technical arrangements, and speak to our donors on a steady basis. I am still busy with Western Wall Prayers, though I am no longer working forty-plus hours a week!

Though this service was very time-consuming and exhausting, it filled me with joy and a sense of purpose. I felt like I'd wasted so many years. I wanted to make sure that now, when I was finally living a real and meaningful life, I was spending my hours working, doing as many *mitzvos* as I could.

Time passed. Our children grew and brought us much *nachas*. Gershon was a model husband; he was kind and gentle, loving with the children, and beloved in our community. He even adopted my sister! He worked so hard in the *yeshiva*, and bore its financial burden, raising almost

a million dollars a year, yet he never appeared rushed or harried. He was always in a good mood, and had all the time in the world for everyone. His whole family ended up doing *teshuvah*, thanks to his example.

It was very humbling to be in his presence. Gershon was incredibly driven and focused, yet so easygoing and soft-spoken. He found the time to take little walks with each of our children, to give them quality time. And what an incredible smile he wore! It was common to see him in the streets of the Old City, bear-hugging someone.

If I had to encapsulate my husband's essence in two words, they would be "*eved Hashem*." He was constantly asking himself, "What does Hashem want from me now?" I always knew Gershon was a unique and incredible human being. I didn't know that everyone else knew it too, because he tried hard to keep it a secret.

On 2 *Cheshvan*, nearly a year ago, Gershon and I embarked on an ambitious weekend vacation without the children. We had been married for eleven years, and Gershon was turning forty. We decided to spend a weekend in a Tel Aviv hotel overlooking the water, since he had free credit card points.

We arrived at our hotel on Friday, October 4, unpacked our belongings, and drove ten minutes away to a secluded spot on the water. The weather was stunning, the sand pristine, but the waves were large and dirty; a storm had just arrived. I said to Gershon, "Wow, you're turning forty. This is a real milestone." He just smiled. I had never seen him so happy before.

After a short walk, I sat down on the sand, and Gershon dived into the water. He loved to swim in the ocean; he had been a trained lifeguard for many years. I sat and waited for him to emerge, but he never did.

Twenty minutes later, we recovered his body, limp and nearly lifeless. It appeared as though his head struck a rock underwater, and he was knocked unconscious. Gershon was rushed to a hospital in Tel Aviv, and I remained with him for the longest weekend of my life. Since it was almost *Shabbos*, it was too late for anyone to join us.

That entire *Shabbos*, I sat near my husband as I watched him slip away. So much went through my mind. I felt how much my life and our children's lives, were going to be shaken. I felt how much Bircas HaTorah, the *yeshiva* where my husband learned and worked, was going to be shaken. I knew that losing Gershon would tear holes in a thousand places.

Early on Sunday morning, Gershon's pure *neshomah* ascended to *Shomayim*. I was now a widow, with five young children all under the age of ten.

The week of *shivah* was surreal. The Old City, normally such a happy place, was wrapped in a pall of sadness. Everyone was mourning one of its beloved members. For me and the children, the grief was intensely personal. Our family unit as we had known it was gone. All I was left with were the memories.

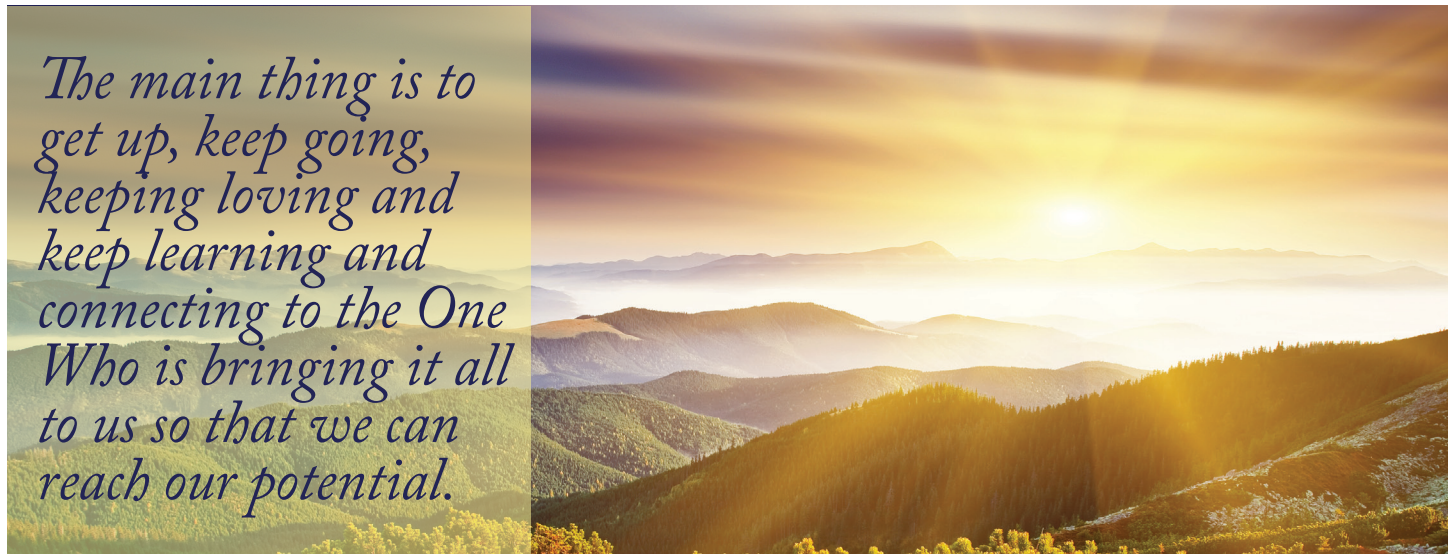
In retrospect, I thought I had known my husband well, but it turned out that he had another, secret life. A life of *chesed*.

During the *shivah* I heard of the *tzedokah* fund that Gershon maintained and funded. For many years, each month he gave a list of names and money to a woman in the Old City, who distributed the funds to those on the list. He had a *cheshbon* with a

I quickly learned that in order to survive, I needed to take care of myself, of my physical, emotional, and spiritual health. I needed to forge a new and powerful relationship with Hashem, if I had any hope of remaining sane and healthy.

So how did I do it? I honestly don't know. I trust in Hashem, and He helps me pull through, one day after the next. I try to get enough rest (easier said than done, as my children stay close by, ever since they lost their father), eat healthy foods, and *daven* a lot. I'm in a lot of pain, but spiritually, I'm very real and barren before Hashem, and that in itself means that I am going in the right direction.

Gershon is buried on *Har Hazeisim*, right behind the *Kosel*. I can see his *kever* when I *daven* at the *Kosel*, and I feel very connected to him. He's upstairs, and I'm downstairs, and I am sure



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local storeowner, who gave every child in the Old City a helium balloon on his or her birthday. He paid for therapy sessions for families experiencing stress, and financed a ticket for someone who lacked the money to visit her ailing parents, pretending it was a credit card deal, not *tzedokah*. He convinced the *rosh yeshiva* of Birchas HaTorah to accept a new student, promising that his parents would pay most of the tuition. It was only recently that the *rosh yeshiva* learned that his star student's tuition was paid for by Gershon.

The *chasodim* my husband managed to accomplish, while handling the financial burden of the yeshiva and helping to raise our children, are mind-boggling. During his lifetime, he touched and inspired so many lives. The "Secret *Chesed* Club," a worldwide movement, was founded in his memory.

Despite the beautiful stories I heard about Gershon and the support of my amazing community, being a single parent is far from simple. It's an unfathomable challenge to raise five young children alone, day after day, making all the decisions and being the only one to stay awake with the last child to sleep and the first child awake.

Non-religious relatives asked me, "So what do you think of your G-d now?"

My response? "This same G-d Who took away my husband and left my five children orphans is the same G-d Who gave them to me in the first place! I should complain about the bad and not thank for the good?"

We know nothing and we see nothing. Our five senses are limited, near-sighted and small.

that he is helping me and will continue to help our family along our road.

I grieve, I cry, I hurt, I reminisce and sometimes I even laugh. How could it be possible that my life continues while his ended? How could there be a future, when the past just ended and the present is too hard to bear? How can there not be a future, when my children just started their lives and have so much for which to look forward? The answers aren't simple, and the feelings are even less so.

We are brought here to work, to do, to learn, to live, to love and to grow. It is up to us to use all the experiences in life to become complete and expanded human beings with the greatest and most G-d-like qualities and consciousness. In order to do this, we need to trust G-d and to be open to change.

The main thing is to get up, keep going, keeping loving and keep learning and connecting to the One Who is bringing it all to us so that we can reach our potential. At the end of it all, that is who we will be and what we will enjoy for eternity. We will have our G-dly selves that we created.

And that is my message to you, dear readers, as you celebrate the *yom tov* of *Sukkos*, the holiday of joy. True joy can be found within our hearts, regardless of the circumstances. All we have to do is tap into our inner reserves, and it will come pouring out of our very being.

Chag sameach,
Batya

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