

The World of Kiruv

Western Wall Prayers: The Power of *Tefillah*

By Braha Bender

In the ancient tradition of Yissaschar and Zevulun, worldwide Jewry is at it again. This time, the partnership is happening via the mom-and-pop *chessed* and *kiruv* venture Western Wall Prayers.

Gershon and Batya Burd's project began in response to gaping needs in both sectors of the international Jewish community. "It is difficult to see so many people in Jerusalem really living hand to mouth, watching every dime. What they need most is material help," says Batya. "At the same time, there are all sorts of people in North America who are not lacking by way of material comfort, but are in spiritual need. We partner these sectors of the international Jewish community together."

What began as an experiment has turned into a burgeoning international adventure. Jewish men and women from around the world contact Western Wall Prayers to request a *shaliach* to *daven* for them. In turn, Western Wall Prayers draws upon the spiritual resources of *bnei Torah* living in the Old City of Yerushalayim. Local *rebbeim*, *avreichim*, and *yeshivah bachurim* spend forty days in prayer at Yerushalayim's spiritual heart, the Kosel HaMaaravi, on behalf of their brethren. Donations help these *bnei Torah* receive the necessary financial compensation to stay in *yeshivah* and continue to support *Klal Yisrael*. Everyone wins.

Some win bigger than others, though. While hundreds have merited to find their bashert, receive a *refuah shleimah*, or rise above financial straits, many others have regained the priceless treasure they never knew they had lost: their Jewish heritage.

How Connie Became Chana

Connie* was a successful interior designer in her mid-forties. Living a Jewish life with her daughter in Florida meant occasionally donating money to the UJA, but not much else. However, when Connie's daughter turned thirteen and their relationship began to slip "onto the rocks," as Connie put it, being Jewish suddenly began to mean much more.

Communication was breaking down and so was the happy life mother and daughter had shared together. Connie saw an advertisement for Western Wall Prayers and decided to turn to the *Ribbono shel Olam*.

"When Connie called me up saying that she wanted us to pray for her to become a kinder, more understanding person, I knew we were dealing with someone special," reminisces Batya. A *shaliach* was quickly arranged to *daven* for Connie at the Kosel.

Connie and Batya's relationship didn't end there, though.



A young *avreich* *davens* for his Western Wall Prayers "partner" at the Kosel.

Batya explained to Connie that she and her *shaliach* would need to recite the same *tefillah* daily, and that Connie would need to take on a *mitzvah* to gain merit for her prayer to be accepted.

Over the course of their many conversations, Batya explained to Connie how nonkosher food spiritually clogs the Jewish heart and makes it much more difficult to be a kind, understanding person.

"These words of Torah really resonated with her," says Batya. "I decided to take a risk and ask her to stop eating one nonkosher food, shellfish, as her *mitzvah*." Connie accepted. Throughout the next forty days, Batya kept in touch with Connie to hear about how her *tefillah*, her *mitzvah*, and her relationship with her daughter were going.

But the results of her *mitzvah* and her *tefillah* far exceeded Connie's expectations. Forty days later, shellfish wasn't the only *treif* food Connie had given up. Thanks to her new involvement with Judaism, Connie had decided to contact her local Orthodox rabbi and become involved in the *frum* community. Soon Connie's daughter was switched from public school to a Jewish day school. Their relationship had certainly improved.

During a visit to the Burds' generous Shabbos table in Yerushalayim only a year later, Connie, who had been single, was talking about getting engaged to a rabbi. Only now she wasn't Connie anymore. She was Chana.

"Open Me a space in your heart the size of a needle and I will open your heart wide enough to drive wagons through..."

Tefillah Inside Out

With *daas Torah* behind them every step of the way, the Burds are eager to assure everyone that their formula is not pseudo-Kabbalistic hocus-pocus. "The

idea is not for people to use the forty days like a lucky rabbit's foot," says Batya. "There are no guarantees, obviously, but when we agree to do a full cycle of *tefillah* for others, they need to be involved as well. Their own *tefillah* and *mitzvos* are just as important, and we are there to support them in their growth."

Gershon explains that the root of the word "*tefillah*" is "*pallel*," meaning "to inspect." "*Le'his*," is the prefix to a root word that places its meaning in reflexive form. Put more simply, when you put the prefix "*le'his*," in front of a root word, you take the meaning of that word and point it at yourself. That means that the word "*le'his'pallel*," to pray, might more accurately be translated as "to inspect one-

Thanks to her new involvement with Judaism, she contacted her local Orthodox rabbi.

self."

Chazal teach us that by facing Hashem in prayer every day, we find ourselves compelled to explore our own worthiness — and readiness. What changes could we make to become fitting recipients of our request? It is our personal change that causes Hashem to change our lot in life. Like any loving, responsible parent, Hashem wants to give us everything, but will only give us what we want when that gift will be good for us.

By telling the King of kings about the desires of our hearts, we realize that we must make the necessary preparations to be able to handle what we are asking for. Are we really ready to handle the responsibilities and stresses of getting married or having a child? Will the money

we are asking for bring us closer to or further from our sense of dependence on the Alm-ghty? *Tefillah* motivates us to change our lives and ourselves, so that eventually He will be able to lovingly say "yes."

Segulos, Bridges to *Siyatta DiShmaya*

If our prayers are answered only once we are ready, what's the use of a *segulah*? Any so-called *segulah* not prescribed by *Chazal* may be a ridiculous waste of time, or worse, may tap into forbidden, dangerous spiritual powers. However, even doing a kosher *segulah* is not a recipe for success, devoid of the need for personal growth.

The Nefesh Hachaim and others explain that a *segulah* is an action that evokes a corresponding Heavenly response. Dayan Yitzchak Salid, *shlita*, explains that the Heavenly response a *segulah* evokes is the *siyatta diShmaya* to accomplish the personal growth and the changes we need to make, so that Hashem is able to give us what we are trying to obtain.

Far from being a set of superstitious practices that would spiritually and psychologically absolve the Jews of their responsibility to work on themselves, *Chazal* provided us with tools to bring about the Heavenly help we need in order to achieve that push up and over the fence of our own limitations.

Many *segulos* cited by *Chazal* involve forty consecutive days, such as completing the book of *Tehillim* within that time, reciting *Shir HaShirim* each day, or visiting a holy site to pray for forty days straight. For the many *she'eilos* that come up with the *segulos* they coordinate for people, the Burds turn to their Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Shimon Green, and to Hagaon Harav Mordechai Scheinberger, *shlita*, one of the leading *mekubalim* of our generation and author of a popular

commentary on the *Zohar*. According to Rav Scheinberger, Hagaon Dayan Yisroel Yaakov Fischer, *zt"l*, confirmed that *davening* for one thing at the Kosel for forty consecutive days is a genuine *segulah*.

Bringing Yaakov Home

The power of this *segulah*, combined with the spiritual efforts of an entire family, even succeeded in saving a young man's life.

"I will begin at the end, because I want you to know first about the happy ending for this story," recounts Batya. "On December 20, Yaakov* married a very fine Jewish girl who lives in our neighborhood — in fact, she grew up right around the corner from us."

Yaakov's mother began her e-mail to Batya with that line after completing three consecutive forty-day cycles. Shaindel and Chezky Kahn's* family had been ripped apart when their son Yaakov decided to go to a secular university and break contact with his parents and siblings. Several months later, they found out that the situation was worse than they thought: Yaakov had begun a relationship with someone who was not Jewish.

The Kahns did not know where to turn. In desperation, they turned to the one place Jews have turned for centuries: to the *Ribbono shel Olam*. Shaindel contacted Batya, asking her to send a *shaliach* to *daven* for Yaakov.

"This was a heart-rending situation," Batya says. Apparently, Yaakov had suffered from difficult high-school experiences that started his break away from Judaism — and from his family. The reason he wouldn't return their phone calls wasn't because he was angry at them, but because he was ashamed.

"We started the entire family on a *shemiras halashon* program. They also all recited the daily *tefillah* along with their *shaliach*. They tried calling and writing to Yaakov every day. Their motivation was enormous."

The timing left no room for doubt. Exactly forty days later, Yaakov returned their calls for the first time in over a year... and agreed to come home for Pesach. The Kahns were overjoyed by the renewed relationship their *tefillah* had forged.

Nonetheless, Pesach ended and Yaakov returned to university and his "friend." The Kahns decided to do another forty-day cycle. Once again, the *brachah* came into the world exactly forty days later. Forty days after their *shaliach* had begun *davening* for them daily at the Kosel... Yaakov broke off with the "friend."

The Kahns — and the Burds — were flabbergasted. It seemed that they were enjoying a special *mazel* now. The Kahns decided to go for the gold. Another *tefillah* cycle moved

spiritual mountains. Once again, forty days passed. This time, things changed for the good. Day forty-one came along... and Yaakov agreed to go to yeshivah in Yerushalayim. Months later, Western Wall Prayers received the request for one more prayer cycle for Yaakov...who met his wife and got engaged soon thereafter.

From Chiloni to Chavrusa

But the Western Wall Prayers *kiruv* explosion has not been limited to the Diaspora. Ronen*, a young man in his twenties who had been proud to call himself "chiloni" (secular), came to Western Wall Prayers claiming that only G-d could help with the dilemma he was facing. Ronen was convinced that being left by his fiancée, a young woman whom Ronen cared for deeply, could only be a punishment from G-d. The only way he could reunite with her, believed Ronen, would be by soliciting G-d's favor.

Despite turning to the Burds, though, Ronen was filled with doubts about Judaism, Torah, and *tefillah*. He was highly skeptical of Gershon and Batya Burd themselves, since his *chiloni* friends had warned him that *charedi* Jews couldn't be trusted. Many hours spent on the phone and by e-mail between the Burds and Ronen eventually softened Ronen's prickly Sabra demeanor.

Once Ronen finally decided to trust the Burds, they employed none other than their

Rosh Yeshivah's son, Aharon Green, as this young man's *shaliach*.

Ronen eventually decided to come to Yerushalayim in order to meet his *shaliach*, as well as the Burds, in person. Their Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Shimon Green, is an accomplished musician and was planning a concert for *kiruv* just then. Ronen decided to join Aharon and the Burds at the Rosh Yeshivah's concert, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Ronen and Aharon began a weekly *chavrusa*, traveling between Yerushalayim and Tel Aviv. Ronen decided that if it was *retzon Hashem* that he part with his secular ex-fiance, he was willing to do so — and he met his future *kallah* a few months later in the building next to where their *chavrusa* took place.

On the Outside Looking in

If the *teshuvah* stories Western Wall Prayers has brought about are exciting, they couldn't be any more exciting than Batya Burd's own *teshuvah* journey.

Have you hobnobbed with millionaires? Batya Burd had been brought up to believe that she "had no excuse not to achieve anything she wanted in life." After an accelerated career through business school for her BA and then law school, Batya entered her field via the most prestigious law firm in Canada. She was twenty-four years old and would be earning a six-figure salary within a num-

ber of months. But was money enough for her?

Materially, Batya had it all — but inside she was drowning. Batya explains, "I looked around me and saw people whose entire identity, even their marriages, was based on the number of zeros in their bank account. When the recent financial recession hit, a lot of those zeros disappeared and the divorce rate

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went up." Batya knew there was more to life — but what?

She hoped that a solo tour of twenty-five different countries would yield the answer. Taking an extended leave from her job, Batya set off to explore Europe and the Far East. Visiting Israel wasn't a consideration at that time. After all, everyone in her circles knew that if you were looking for meaning in life, you had to go to the right place — India.

But the promise of India proved false. What Batya gained from her explorations, particularly in the Far East, was the realization that material pleasures would never satisfy.

Whatever she was looking for had something to do with spirituality... but what was it?

After her return to Canada, financial resources were drained but answers were still wanting. A short time later, Batya found out about an opportunity to travel to another country — for free. Birthright would fly her over. Perhaps the answer was waiting for her in Israel. And guess what? It was.

Today, Batya and her family live in the Old City of Yerushalayim. Tourists flock through her neighborhood by the thousands every week. Batya sees them peeking in her windows, staring at how she covers her hair, trying to catch a glimpse of her foreign lifestyle.

Those stares bring a smile to her face. "I visited country after country," she explains. "I used to stare at the local residents just like they stare at me, trying to find out whether the foreign lifestyle I was seeing could be what I was looking for. Now I'm on the other side of the fence. They're still searching, but I have found my way home."

And what led to both her marriage with Gershon and their shared mission in Western Wall Prayers? Gershon puts it succinctly: "After meeting fifty girls in five years, I found 'the one' after forty days at the Wall."

Hakadosh Baruch Hu Yeshalem S'charam

Batya and Gershon Burd have

united the Jewish people by providing a service that exchanges the resources each party needs. Donations feed the *kollel* families of Yerushalayim. Each word of *tefillah* uttered by these *heilige avrechim* at the Western Wall brings another *neshamah* closer to its G-d-given potential. *Yeshuos* abound.

Humble about their accomplishments and adamant about continuing to give and to grow, the Burd family serves as an inspiration. The far-reaching effects of their *chesed* impacts Jewish communities across the globe, but better yet, also brings them together.

Like Yissaschar and Zevulun, *Klal Yisrael* is working together to serve Hashem with the unique strengths Hashem has given each of us. Gershon and Batya Burd are faithfully involved in the needs of the *tzibbur*, not just in their own community, but around the world. As *Chazal* promise, indeed only *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* could be *meshalem s'charam*.

The Burds can be contacted by e-mail at bburd@westernwall-prayers.org.

*Names and identities have been altered to maintain privacy.

For comments and suggestions related to the *The World of Kiruv* column, please e-mail kiruvupdate@gmail.com.

For assistance or questions related to *kiruv*, please call the *Oz Nidberu Kiruv Hotline* at 1-800-98 KIRUV.

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