

Growing Closer, Overcoming Barriers

Concrete Steps to Ahavas Chinam

BY DEVORAH KLEIN

IT IS SHABBOS AFTERNOON IN PASSAIC, New Jersey, and several women in the neighborhood gather together in a home. Excitedly, they take their places around the table, ready to participate in an *ahavas Yisrael chaburah*. Determined to grow in this precious *mitzvah*, they spend twenty minutes reviewing printed sheets that include *halachos* and relevant anecdotes on a specific topic, and then answer discussion questions designed to heighten awareness of our attitudes toward our fellow Jews.

Rivka* takes her place at the table. "Let me share what happened to me this week," she begins. Rivka says she has been very overwhelmed lately. Her special-needs child has been taking up the bulk of her time and energy during the day, when her other children are in school. She spends her days either on the phone making appointments and consulting with professionals, or

**Some names and some identifying details have been changed.*

running to appointments. Regrettably, she often ends up being late to pick up her preschooler.

This week things came to a head when one teacher snapped at her, complaining about her chronic lateness. When Rivka returned home, she contemplated the situation and realized that perhaps she was not being considerate enough of the teachers who were assigned to carpool duty — or of her daughter, who was often the last one to leave. Rivka now grappled with her emotions, sharing with the *chaburah* her conflicting feelings and her desire to make amends.

After Shabbos, Rivka was still thinking about her predicament, knowing that next Shabbos her friends at the *ahavas Yisrael chaburah* would be waiting to hear how she had resolved the situation. The next day, she headed to the grocery store and purchased some chocolates and gift bags. On Monday she delivered the gifts to the carpool supervisors with a note stating, “Thank you so much for watching our children through every kind of weather. Sincerely, the carpool mothers.” When she handed the bag to the teacher, she apologized sincerely for her lateness.

“The only reason that I was able to do what I did,” Rivka tells me, “is because I knew that my *chaburah* members were waiting to hear how I had fared. This compelled me to take action that was really very uncomfortable. This is the beauty of the *ahavas Yisrael chaburos*.”



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Birth of a Movement

The Ahavas Yisrael Women’s Project was the initiative of Rebbetzin Tzipora Harris of Passaic, New Jersey. About four years ago, Rebbetzin Harris contemplated the many personal, communal, national, and international tragedies that seemed to be plaguing us. “What is going on here?” she asked herself.

After consulting with a number of *Gedolim*, and with encouragement from Harav Noach Weinberg, *zt”l*, the Bostoner Rebbe of Flatbush, *shlita*, and Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, the Ahavas Yisroel Project was launched at Mrs. Lori Marton’s Ohel Sara Amen Group in the Five Towns, Long Island. Shortly thereafter, Rebbetzin Harris partnered with Rebbetzin Leah Greenman of Passaic, who compiled formal materials explaining the *halachos* and

hashkafos of *ahavas Yisrael*, and formed five *chaburos* in her community. The *chaburos* meet weekly for twenty-minute sessions and review the printed material, which includes stories and discussion questions, and a “Stretch of the Week” designed to encourage participants to move beyond their comfort zone and act with *ahavas Yisrael*.

Created with busy women in mind, the *chaburos* are short, thought-provoking, social, and inspiring.

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All of the program materials were reviewed under the supervision of Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, *Rosh Kollel*

of The Jerusalem Kollel and Linas Hatzedek: The Center for Jewish Values (see sidebar on page 22).

Since its launch in 2009, the Ahavas Yisrael project has grown tremendously. It has spread not only across the country but throughout the world, and material is now available in Spanish, Italian, and Hebrew. There are more than two hundred weekly *chaburos* around the world. “The project has grown beyond our wildest expectations,” says Rebbetzin Harris.

While this program is for women, growth in *ahavas Yisrael* is incumbent upon the entire family. As the *akeres habayis*, however, when the wife and mother is growing in this vital area, the effects are sure to spill over.

Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller expressed her approval of the project. “If every community could embrace this idea, the whole world could change. This could bring Moshiach.”

What Is Ahavas Yisrael?

We all know about the *mitzvah* of *ahavas Yisrael*, but what does that really mean? *Ahavas Yisrael* is about recognizing the intrinsic value of every human being. It is about realizing that since Hashem does so much for us, the least we can do is love His children in return.

Ahavas Yisrael may often be interwoven with *chessed*. However, there is a basic difference, as Rebbetzin Greenman explains. “One may engage in *chessed* with another person but internally be seething at him. *Ahavas Yisrael* is an awareness that one must think and speak well of others and respect them regardless of their background. We must care for their physical and spiritual needs, and apologize to them when they are wronged.”

There are dozens of success stories, testimonials from women who have grown in this vital *middah* and have overcome significant challenges as a result of their exposure to the *ahavas Yisrael chaburos*.

Ahavas Yisrael Not Just for Women

Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, *shlita*, is the dean of the Linas Hatzedek Kollel Network, an international group of eleven *kollelim* whose members study *halachos bein adam lachaveiro* in depth. The network produces publications for varied audiences and organizes *shiurim* and learning programs around the globe.

Under the direction of Rabbi Paysach Freedman, Linas HaTzedek has published a *sefer* entitled *Mishpetei Hashalom* by Rabbi Yitzchak Silver, a *Rosh Kollel* in one of Rabbi Berkowitz’s *kollelim*, which has been translated into English. Using *sefarim* on *bein adam lachaveiro* and *ahavas Yisrael*, Linas Hatzedek sends out approximately five hundred daily e-mails that spread the message of *ahavas Yisrael*.

Mr. Ittamar Janowski of Toronto is also trying to create such a program. “The *chaburos* for women are incredible, but these *mitzvos* are just as important for men to learn, so we have started implementing learning projects for them.

“I attend a Sunday-morning *shiur* given by Rabbi Yechiel Fried, based on the works of Rabbi Berkowitz, his *rebbe*, that teaches how to cherish and value our brethren. It is only by learning these *halachos* that we can emulate Hashem’s love of each Yid.”

Mr. Janowski’s plans include asking shul Rabbanim to deliver a five-minute *shiur* on *ahavas Yisrael* before *Minchah* on Shabbos afternoon, as well as creating postcard-sized handouts that will list a few *halachos* and will be distributed every week in shuls, schools, and stores.

To find out more about these *shiurim*, *sefarim*, or projects, please contact Mr. Janowski at (416) 782-4848 or at ittamar@yahoo.com.

‘Do Not Take Revenge’

Rochel* had not spoken to her aunt in forty years. Rochel’s father had died when she was four years old, and when her mother remarried, her aunt cut off all ties with the family. When Rochel became *frum*, things only became worse.

One day Rochel was at her *ahavas Yisrael chaburah*, and the discussion involved the Torah’s prohibition against bearing a grudge, “*Lo sikom.*” *I would never hold a grudge*, Rochel thought. But as thoughts of her severed relationship with her aunt began to surface, she cringed. After confiding in the group, Rochel was encouraged to call her aunt and make amends, but she just could not find the emotional strength to do so.

One day Rochel received an e-mail from her sister, who had maintained some contact with this now-elderly aunt. “Aunt Lillian* is organizing a family tree. Can you send me the names of all of your children?” *This is my opportunity*, thought Rochel. *Hashem is sending me the chance. I will e-mail Aunt Lillian directly.* Rochel sent an e-mail to her aunt that began, “I know we have not spoken in years...”

The old grudge simply disappeared, and Rochel is now exchanging e-mails with her aunt on a regular basis. They still have not spoken on the phone, but Rochel is confident that this will happen soon. “I sent her a picture of my very *frum*-looking husband with his long beard. She responded that she remembers her own father putting on *tefillin*. I never knew he did that,” she says.

Aunt Lillian is planning a family reunion, but since it will take place on a weekend cruise, Rochel won’t attend. However, she promised her aunt that she would send a video of her family, and Aunt Lillian was happy to accept. “This would never have happened without the *ahavas Yisrael chaburah*,” Rochel asserts.

Avoiding Machlokes

The destructive power of *machlokes* is well known to all. This powerful story illustrates how one woman used the

lessons of *ahavas Yisrael* to end a *machlokes* quickly, leaving no residual hard feelings.

Tziporah was asked to watch her friend's children one afternoon and asked another friend, Aliza,* to join her to help out. They decided to bake challah together. Another friend, Sarah, heard that Tziporah and Aliza were getting together and asked Aliza if she and her daughter could join. Tziporah asked Aliza to relay the message that this time it would be too much if Sarah joined.

Later that afternoon, Tziporah received a note from Sarah. To say Sarah was furious would be an understatement. "I can't believe you would not let us participate in your challah-baking. I know you think we are not *frum* enough, and you think you are so holy. I will publish a letter in the newspaper about what a disgusting human being you are..."

Tziporah was shocked. Her first instinct was to crumple up the letter, throw it in the garbage, and resolve never to speak to Sarah again. If she saw Sarah outside, she would go to the other side of the street. But that little voice inside her whispered, "*Ahavas Yisrael...*"

Tziporah picked up the phone and called Sarah. "Can I come over?" she asked. At Sarah's apartment, Tziporah listened as Sarah vented her anger for what seemed like a very long time. When she was done, Tziporah was shocked that for the first time in her life she felt like lashing out physically. But instead she calmly asked, "Anything else?"

"No, I think I'm done," Sarah replied.

Now it was Tziporah's turn. "I cannot even imagine how upset you are," she said. "You must be in so much pain. I am so sorry that I caused you so much pain." Sarah heaved a deep sigh, apparently releasing a load from her aching heart. "Now can I tell you what happened?" Tziporah inquired.

She explained to Sarah that she had been asked to watch her friend's children while the friend dealt with a medical emergency. Tziporah knew that this friend was very particular about how her children were cared for and was



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concerned that things could easily get out of hand, especially with all the flour and sugar involved in the challah-baking. "I would love to include you another time, though," she finished.

"Oh, is that what happened?" Sarah responded. "I didn't realize. It's okay."

And just like that, the whole incident was over. Tziporah returned home, shuddering to think what could have been had she not exercised the lessons of *ahavas Yisrael*.

Everything Is From Hashem

One powerful tool for internalizing the lessons of *ahavas Yisrael* is to realize that everything is from Hashem and that no person has the power to hurt another unless Hashem has so decreed.

Chani's* best friend was about to celebrate the bar mitzvah of her oldest son. One day Chani received a simple card in the mail inviting her to come to shul and listen to the *leining*. Okay, Chani thought, *I guess she's making a small seudah for her family and is inviting everyone else just to shul*. However, after the bar mitzvah date, Chani's husband happened to hear that the family had indeed hosted a large *seudah* for family and friends.

Chani and her husband were somewhat surprised that they had not

been invited. However, using the lessons of *ahavas Yisrael*, they comforted themselves, saying, "Obviously, Hashem did not want us to be at this affair. Right now, our lives are very busy taking care of our family and other obligations, and it is *bashert* that we not spend time at this bar mitzvah *seudah*."

A Powerful *Kiruv* Tool

The *Ahavas Yisrael* materials were designed to be appealing and accessible to women of all ages and backgrounds. Consequently, they can serve as a powerful *kiruv* tool.

Aliza Cohen of Toronto runs a *kiruv*-oriented *chaburah*. About a year ago the group was discussing the great merit earned by one who does not lash out in anger when he or she is embarrassed.

Aliza told the story of a woman who had not yet had children. A Rav instructed her to find someone who was being embarrassed in public and ask that person for a *brachah*. A while later, at a wedding, she noticed a woman being embarrassed publicly. Overcoming her discomfort, the childless woman approached her and asked for a *brachah*, explaining what the Rav had told her. She received the *brachah*, and within a year she was blessed with a healthy baby.

Lisa,* a participant in this *chaburah*,

had also been married for several years without children. The day after she heard this story, she was at restaurant where she witnessed an employee being strongly reprimanded by the owner for not setting the tables properly. *Here is my chance*, she thought.

Lisa approached the stunned waitress and requested a *brachah*, which she received along with a broad smile. Nine months later was blessed with a child. In the meantime, Lisa started her own *chaburah* for her secular friends and has expanded the group's activities to include Chanukah and Purim parties, creating a catalyst for continued growth in *Yiddishkeit*.

"*Ahavas Yisrael* is so non-threatening," says Mrs. Cohen. "We are all growing together, on the same journey, trying to be more forgiving, more compassionate. I find it is a great springboard for *kiruv*."

Mrs. Cohen was able to convey this lesson to her children. When her son came home one day and complained that the teacher had embarrassed him publicly, she saw an opportunity for *chinuch*. After empathizing with him and addressing his hurt feelings, she promptly asked him for a *brachah*. What a great lesson he learned from his mother's explanation!

In Pursuit of Chessed

Elisheva,* a young mother in Eretz Yisrael, felt overwhelmed. She lived on the fifth floor of an apartment building with her four children, all under the age of six, and her life was quite hectic. One evening after all the children had been bathed and were in pajamas, she suddenly realized that she had no bread to give them for supper. Annoyed, she bundled up the children and herded them downstairs to head to the grocery.

On the way, she passed her neighbors, who were outside shmoozing and watching their children play. Feeling very grumpy, she did not stop to offer to pick up something for her friends at the *makolet*, although that was the accepted practice. However, the lessons of *ahavas Yisrael* did not let her get very far. Less



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than a minute later, she turned around and said sincerely, "I'm going to the store. Can I pick up anything for anyone?"

One neighbor, Naava,* asked for a loaf of bread. Elisheva returned home exhausted and hung the bag with the bread on Naava's door. The next morning, she was stunned to see a sign in the lobby announcing the *petirah* of Naava's mother.

Two days later, Elisheva went to pay a *shivah* call. When Naava saw Elisheva come in, she approached her and said, "You don't know what you did for me the other night. I cannot thank you enough. When you met me outside, I had just come back from saying my final goodbye to my mother, who was not expected to make it through the night. I had no bread in my house to make my children lunches the next morning, and I had no *koach* to run to the store.

"You fed my children — and you took a small but important burden off my shoulders at one of the most difficult moments of my life."

It's the Small Things That Count

These are just a few of *Ahavas Yisrael*'s success stories, many of which may seem too simple to repeat — such as the one about the woman who smiled at her neighbor and complimented her on her

delicious *mishloach manos*, or the woman who attended a *chasunah* and made sure to say hello to those who seemed out of place, or the wife who refrained from criticizing her husband for leaving the house a mess while she was away. These are the bricks and mortar of *ahavas Yisrael*, and little by little they will help us rebuild the Beis Hamikdash.

In his letter of *haskamah*, Harav Berkowitz explains that *sinas chinam* is the cause of our continued *galus*. He states that *Gedolim* have repeatedly called for *chizuk* in this area and that many of us are clueless about how to improve. With the power of a *chaburah*, the *Ahavas Yisrael Women's Project* has taken on these challenges step by step, significantly affecting participants.

Harav Berkowitz concludes, "May Hashem accept our sincere desire for *ahavas Yisrael* and bestow upon us *ahavah v'achvah v'shalom v'reyus*. As in the days of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, may the *nashim tzidkaniyos* of our generation hasten the *geulah bimheirah b'yameinu*."

And the days of *sefirah*, during which we remember the dire results of neglecting this *mitzvah*, is the perfect time to start. ■

For more information on the *Ahavas Yisrael Women's Project*, please contact Mrs. Shuli Kleinman at (301) 237-7306 or visit ayproject.com.