

IllumiNations

Issue 80 | Parshas Va'eschanan
Shnas Hakhel 5783

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

Rabbi Yossi and Ilana Bassman, Bader Hillel High, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

A Match Made in Heaven; A High School Made on Earth

By Chaya Chazan

Imagine a school that caters to a full spectrum of students, from the country's best Jewish day schools to students straight out of public school, providing for all a Torah-true education that rivals that of the most illustrious Jewish high schools. v

It sounds like a dream - and also, a logistical nightmare - but at Bader Hillel High, that's just a normal Tuesday. I've always dreamed of becoming a shliach. When Rabbi Mendel Shmotkin shared his audacious, innovative vision for a critically-necessary Jewish high school in Milwaukee, my wife and I were immediately enthralled.

This high school, now entering its eleventh year, began with just 15 students. This upcoming school year, we anticipate an enrollment of over 80 students, between both the boys' and girls' divisions. The full gamut of Am Yisroel can be found at Bader Hillel High; daughters of shluchim, families identifying as Modern Orthodox, and students who will encounter the Alef Beis for the very first time.



No matter the background, every student at Bader Hillel High knows they belong, and are empowered with all the tools they need to succeed in life and their Judaic and general academic studies.

Watching hundreds of student grow and develop in these transforming ways is what makes our shlichus such a special and incredible zechus. We get to be part of creating an unparalleled impact!

Sonia grew up in Coral Springs, Florida. When she was six years old, her parents divorced, and she and her brother were shuttled from one house to the other. Her parents' fervor for Yiddishkeit slowly faded, and although Sonia was attending a Jewish school, it was hard to remain consistent when her home life differed so greatly from everything she was being taught. Maintaining a Torah-true lifestyle seemed even more unattainable, as more and more observances fell by the wayside.

Sonia felt torn between her two worlds. She'd have her brother do perimeter checks to make sure none of her classmates would see her wearing pants. She always felt three steps behind, and learning in two languages was dizzying. She transferred to public school in 6th grade, and for the first time, felt free to discover who she really was.

"You might be leaving this school," one of her Torah teachers pleaded, "but there's a great overnight camp you would absolutely love. It's called CGI Poconos. You should check it out!"

Sonia loved CGI. For one month, she was fully immersed in a Jewish atmosphere, void of any pressure to conform to anyone else's standards. Her counselors supported and encouraged her, and Sonia went home, inspired to continue the observances she'd kept in the summer months. She'd light Shabbos candles week after week, yet, predictably, the inspiration would slowly fade.

The "Camp Sonia" and the "School Sonia" felt like two different people. At camp, incorporating Judaism into her life felt feasible. At home, with her parents urging her to do one thing, while simultaneously compromising those same values, was simply too confusing.

On top of all of this, both of her parents struggled with their mental health and financial stability. For a long time, it felt like Sonia was living in survival mode.

Sonia, now in 9th grade, was sitting in her favorite class, when she received a text about a complicated family issue. Although not usually prone to powerful mood swings, it was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Sonia began sobbing, shocking her classmates into silence.

"Do you want to call someone?" her teacher asked, hovering helplessly near her desk.

Sonia had no answer; she had no one to call. "I need you, G-d," she whispered. "What do I do now?"

She somehow finished the year, and prepared to attend her final summer as a camper at CGI Poconos. She was excited to become *Camp Sonia* again, and enthusiastically joined the "tzniyus challenge," lighting candles, davening, and all the other immersive Jewish experiences camp offered. Her whole life changed when Rabbi Shais Taub visited for a Tanya workshop. A couple of days later, Rabbi Taub spoke to her and her bunkmates to see what they'd learned.

"Everything you're doing here in camp is great," he told them. "But the most important thing is to impact others, so they can learn something, too."

I want to do that, she thought to herself, but how can I impact others when I'm not even sure who or what I am? I need to figure out how Judaism fits into my life. I need to transfer to a Jewish high school.

"Why not Bader Hillel High?" one of her counselors suggested. "It's exactly what you're looking for!"

"It's like an extension of camp," her other counselor agreed. "Your schoolmates will become your sisters."

Sonia was interested, but with just six weeks left before the start of the school year, there were a lot of logistics to arrange. She decided to head to Bader Hillel High for a trial month, telling her Florida friends that she would be going to school in Wisconsin "for a month or so."

From the moment Mrs. Bassman picked her up at the bus station, Sonia knew this school would be different. She'd never even met the principal of her public school, and now she was chatting casually in her new principal's car! She was immediately welcomed by the other girls, and warmly accepted into their circle.

Thank you, G-d, for answering my prayers and showing me where to go, she whispered.

Although at times the transition was challenging, her classmates' total acceptance made Hillel High feel like home. The month-long trial period soon became permanent.



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The classes, and especially the teachers who taught them, soon clicked everything right into place. Judaism was no longer a cookie cutter, forcing Sonia to conform, or else feel alienated. It made sense to her. Soon, wearing pants at home was no longer a gleeful rebellion against her school, but something that simply didn't feel right. It no longer matched who she truly was.

Elie had been in Jewish schools in Milwaukee since he was a toddler, all the way up through graduating eighth grade. Yet, as high school approached, he'd become disillusioned with his understanding of Yiddishkeit, and was very adamant that he'd like to be enrolled in a public high school instead.

Elie's parents were the founding family of Hillel High, and their two oldest children were some of the school's inaugural students. When it came time for Elie to enter high school, his parents felt it was important that Elie make his own decision about where to enroll. So, despite his family's connection to Hillel, as a high school freshman, Elie entered the vast halls of his local public school.

While Elie found significant freedom there and made new friends, over time, he came to realize he wasn't happy. More urgent and concerning to his parents was his dismal academic performance. Elie demonstrated little effort and had the grades to prove it.

Overall, Elie didn't feel like he belonged there, and began missing his old schools and his closest friends.

These challenges and struggles led Elie to call me, equally surprising both me and his parents. Elie was asking about transferring to Bader Hillel High.

Elie transitioned well, greatly improving his grades, fitting in, and slowly developing close relationships with his teachers, and particularly his principal, Rabbi Chayim Friedman.

When he hung out with his public school friends, they poked gentle fun at his metamorphosis.

"Joey will probably be in college in four years, and Mike will be working at the bike shop. But Elie - he's going to be a rabbi!" they said.

During a community event in her junior year, Sonia unexpectedly encountered Elie at his parents' house. The schools each reside on completely different campuses, so Sonia never even knew he existed before then!

The two soon developed a friendship. Sonia was used to having male friends due to her experience in co-ed

schools, and it didn't feel like breaking any rules. However, after attending a CTeen Shabbaton emphasizing the importance of Jewish relationships and marrying within the community, Sonia began viewing her friendship with Elie in a new light. She liked him, and could easily see him as future husband material.

They knew dating one another was clearly against school rules, so they kept their relationship a secret. It invested gravity into their partnership - they could only condone their actions if they truly thought this relationship could stand the test of time.

It made them both examine themselves deeply, probing to see whether their growing commitment to Judaism was to satisfy the other, or if it was genuinely a part of themselves.

Elie had many long conversations with Rabbi Friedman, who introduced him to Chassidus. It brought new meaning into the words he'd been hearing for so long.

As Elie wrapped up his senior year of high school, they decided to put a pause on their relationship.

"If it's meant to be, G-d will help us find each other again," Sonia told him.

Elie had never considered G-d in such a light - someone who cared about his life and had a plan for him.

Elie went off to a year in yeshiva in Israel, to deepen his connection to G-d and learn more about Judaism. Everything he'd started learning in Bader Hillel High became real, and he started keeping Shabbos, kashrus, and more.

When Sonia graduated high school, she, too, wanted a chance to attend an institute of higher Jewish learning to solidify her connection to her Judaism. While she was in seminary in Israel, Elie joined the chareidi troop in the Israeli army. His fellow soldiers and commanders' dedication to their Judaism influenced him deeply. It was his years in the army that decided his future path - a Jewish life, lived according to the Torah.

Sonia and Elie were in touch while they were both in Israel. There was no question that they belonged together. They analyzed themselves, what they wanted in their future spouse, and how they could grow in their relationship. They turned to the mentors that had shaped their lives - the principals of Hillel High.

"You two are clearly meant for each other," Rabbi Bassman encouraged them. "You know we always discourage relationships in high school, telling our students it's a distraction from their studies. But you two are special. It was clear, even back then. It's why we didn't try to in-

terrupt your relationship. You two have what it takes to build a thriving Jewish marriage."

While Elie finished his stint in the army, Sonia helped the shlichim in Buckhurst Hill, England, eagerly awaiting a flight to Israel to officially get engaged, which, to the great joy of the entire Milwaukee community, happened as soon as Elie completed his service.

After their marriage, they settled back down in Milwaukee. Their earnestness, sincerity, and true joy in Yiddishkeit are an inspiration to us, and to our future students. Sonia and Elie both did the hard work, growing themselves and making every aspect of their Yiddishkeit genuine. When they speak to our students - something they do often - their words have a deep impact.

Indeed, their story embodies the very essence of the blessing we wholeheartedly extend to parents upon the birth of a child. A wish for their growth and fulfillment in three profound stages: to Torah, to chuppah, and, ultimately, to a life of good and positive actions.

There's nothing more momentous and sentimental than witnessing two alumni, both from unique, diverse backgrounds, both of whom have experienced life-changing journeys, stand under the chuppah together. Something we never expected - or, perhaps, never *intended* to happen - but happened nonetheless. It was, indeed, a match made in heaven.

Each of them demonstrates the purpose of our shlichus at Bader Hillel High, their story weaving and intertwining beautifully with the very fabric of our mission - how Jewish teens in public school discover their path to Torah. Bader Hillel High served as a crucial crossroads that positively impacted their connection to Yiddishkeit... and to each other.v

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