

his and hers

in jerusalem

by Yair Montrose

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For Sarah Aschkenasi, everything was coming together. In the span of just three weeks, she graduated Harvard Medical School – and then married one of her classmates. Now Drs. Aschkenasi, they were headed from Boston – her new husband Yosef’s hometown – to hers, St. Louis, where each was beginning a residency.

But amid the excitement and tension of life as newlywed medical residents, one thing continued to occupy her thoughts – the desire to study Torah in Jerusalem. It wasn’t a new desire, but it was intensifying.

“I had long wanted to go. But getting married and beginning to think in real terms about building a family and all the things I knew I wanted in my mind – they became so much more real. Going to Israel was the only way that I felt was going to make that happen.” Yosef was of the same mind.

LEARNING TO CREATE A JEWISH FAMILY

Making arrangements to take a year off a year after arriving in St. Louis wasn’t easy, but deciding where to go was. The couple knew they wanted to study in a framework that would benefit them as individuals, but also as a couple. They chose the Married Couples Program at the Darche Noam Institutions (DNI) in Jerusalem – the only educational program in Israel designed specifically to meet the needs of growth-minded Jewish couples from around the world. The program combines Torah study at the David Shapell College/Yeshivat Darche Noam for men with a complementary program crafted for women at Midreshet Rachel v’Chaya.



The Aschkenasis’ inspiration to come to DNI had come from an unexpected source. Dr. Robert Sundel, a professor of pediatric rheumatology at Harvard, is also a Shapell’s alumnus. Dr. Sarah recalls how he urged them to make it happen. “He said, ‘You need to go. You need to do it for your family and for yourselves.’”

What Sarah and Yosef found at DNI was much more than they had expected. Yosef studied Talmud, Bible, Jewish law and philosophy at Darche Noam/Shapell’s and was moved by the quality of instruction and the warmth of the faculty. Sarah, at Midreshet Rachel, began to fulfill her need for both inspiration and practical knowledge. She had long wanted to improve her textual skills in Hebrew and gain the know-how to run a Jewish home. Finally, with the chance to engage her mind in full-time Jewish learning, she flourished.

“My husband and I connected and grew together in a way that we couldn’t have done anywhere else or at any other time in our lives.”

But the entirety of their experience together equaled much more than the sum of its parts. Remembering how hard it was to experience their new marriage as doctors and summarizing their experience at DNI, she says, “We connected and grew together in a way that we couldn’t have done anywhere else or at any other time in our lives. We went from being two people to becoming a family – and just the kind we really wanted to be.”

“IT JUST HAPPENED”

Asked about how the Married Couples program came to be, Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky, co-founder and dean of DNI, claims humbly, “It just happened.” For many years, both Darche Noam/Shapell’s and Midreshet Rachel had been attracting university graduates from all over the English-speaking world. Though most students were single, more and more married students began to enroll.

Suddenly in 1990, the two schools found themselves with twelve married couples, each with him at Shapell’s and her at Midreshet Rachel. “It became an obvious thing,” says Rabbi Karlinsky. The two schools had already been dedicated to instilling what Rabbi Karlinsky calls “Tools to learn, tools to think, tools to grow.” But for married students, acquiring those tools take on a whole new meaning. “They realize life is more sophisticated and a little more complicated than it had seemed.” The added challenge they felt of imparting Jewish life and wisdom to their children made the need for solid foundations all the more urgent.

Every detail of the educational program is geared towards achieving shalom bayis, domestic harmony. Each Wednesday morning, the men join Rabbi Yitzchak Hirshfeld, co-founder of DNI and Dean of Darche



Three women nourish their minds through Torah study



Jared Bernstein (right) dedicated over a year to full-time study

Noam/Shapell’s, for a seminar and discussion on methods for building this harmony. Commenting on the unique benefits of his class, Rabbi Hirshfeld shares, “No amount of pre-marital counseling, as important as it is, can fill the role of real-time mentoring and role-modeling while married life is unfolding and developing and as their relationship jells into the ideal of two souls becoming one.”

VALUABLE WORKSHOPS

Mrs. Lynn Finson, the educational director of Midreshet Rachel, gives a weekly class for women. While concentrating mostly on Judaism’s approach to intimacy, the class serves as a gateway for discussion of the many issues that young wives share. Mrs. Finson draws on her years of counseling hundreds of young brides and wives and the wealth of wisdom that she gained from her teachers and advisors.

Outside the confines of the DNI buildings, the married-couples program enriches the experience of studying in Israel in additional ways. Far from home and with little community, the couples that participate form their own support system and grow together by hosting classes and workshops in their homes.

Rabbi Binyomin Adilman, a teacher at Shapell’s and a Jerusalem-based family therapist, is proud of this component. He shares, “I think the workshops are especially valuable. They provide an opportunity to cover the vital topics that aren’t included in the ‘school day’.” Members of the two faculties join the couples and offer classes and discussions on topics such as: “Ten Things to Never Do in Marriage,” “The Challenge of Balancing Family Life and Torah Learning,” “In-laws and Outlaws: The Art of Getting Along” and “Positive Parenting.”



Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky delivers an evening class in the home of a couple

CREATING COMMUNITY

Creating community that will thrive after students move on is a high priority. Alumni of both institutions and the married couples program continue to stay connected with their teachers by attending local retreats in American communities and by continuing the relationships that are forged in Jerusalem.

For Jared and Liz Bernstein, the community they found at DNI quite literally changed their lives. Married and living in New Jersey, Jared and Liz knew many people who had studied at DNI. But like most people, commitments tied them to their American lives. Jared was a successful photographer, listing among his credits shooting sports stars, musicians and other celebrities like Sting, James Earl Jones, and Donald Trump. Liz was a geriatric social worker who had managed clinics for Holocaust survivors in Los Angeles and New York. But having grown up without knowing even the aleph-bet, Jared's desire to learn more and emulate the lives of his many friends inspired him to study at Shapell's. The daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, Liz had already been privileged to attain

a prestigious Jewish education, but if they were to go, she was certain that she wanted it to be in tandem.

Their experience as students for a year was incredible, but their attachment to the community and to Israel was something that took them by surprise. "Shapell's has been foundational," says Jared. "I still feel like we're in the community. We're friends [with other students and faculty]. We keep in touch."

Dr. Robert Sundel, a professor of pediatric rheumatology at Harvard, is a Shapell's alumnus. "He told us, 'You need to go. You need to do it for your family and for yourselves.'"

That's no surprise, since the delight of their experiences at DNI made them rethink returning to New Jersey. Now running his photography business in Israel, Jared is a frequent visitor to Shapell's and regularly keeps in touch with his teachers and advisors. "It's been an integral part of my learning and of my life." Liz has adapted her social work career in New York to one in Jerusalem, now working at Nefesh B'Nefesh, a world-famous organization helping North American immigrants successfully settle in Israel. Living in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Kiryat Moshe, she loves how she can stop in at Midreshet Rachel along her morning walk to work to "ask a question or say hello."



A PLACE TO MEET

Of the over 180 DNI alumni couples (now living in 20 states and on five continents), not all of them came to Jerusalem married. Gabe Lewin, a young schoolteacher from St. Louis, and Devorah Maho, a recent graduate from Berkeley Law, each arrived in Israel with their own goals of study and religious growth. But with a number of faculty members teaching at both institutions, thoughts of introducing a young man and young woman looking for their soul mate are never far from the mind.

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Rabbi Yitzchak Lerner, a popular teacher at both schools, approached Gabe and Devorah and told each of the other's strong educational background and musical spirit. So, Gabe the violinist and Devorah the pianist decided to meet, and before long confirmed Rabbi Lerner's suspicion that they were meant for each other. Getting married in Israel "was a blessing for us," says Gabe. "Our friends in yeshiva and seminary were able to enliven our spirits and dance with us."

While getting married in Israel was great, beginning their marriage in a supportive environment was even greater. The new Devorah Lewin describes how meaningful it was to be part of a community and to realize that "everyone has the issues that you're experiencing." It helped to comfort them and as Gabe puts it, "made it much easier to navigate [the early days of marriage]." Now living in Baltimore, Gabe, the schoolteacher, and Devorah, the lawyer, are now thriving as Gabe, the husband, and Devorah, the wife.

In a complicated world, a small group of talented teachers and inspired couples continue to actualize Rabbi Hirshfeld's noble goal of helping "two souls become one."

For information about the Married Couples program or any other Darche Noam program and for a wealth of Jewish resources, visit www.darchenoam.org or call (888) 233-6678.



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