



# The Full Circle of **KIRUV**

BY ESTHER PERKAL

*Allen, a clinical pharmacist. Amy, an eye doctor. Daniel, a nationally ranked debater. Rachel, a tennis player. What prompts four members of a Jewish family from the Midwest to become baalei teshuvah – independently? An inspiring tale of hashgachah pratis that led the Wolnerman family into a world of kiruv and Torah.*

FOR DECADES, Drs. Allen and Amy Wolnerman lived the American Dream. Allen was the successful owner of lucrative pharmacies and nursing homes, and Amy was an optometrist. Their children, Daniel and Rachel, grew up in a warm, loving environment in the Wolnermans' fashionable home in Des Moines, Iowa, surrounded by beautiful houses, manicured lawns and elite country clubs.

### A Daughter's Dream

Twelve years ago, Rabbi Martin Applebaum, Rav of Beth El Jacob Synagogue, founded an NCSY chapter for the modest Jewish community of Des Moines. Allen's parents, survivors of Nazi atrocities in Auschwitz, had rebuilt their lives in the United States after the war. While they maintained Jewish traditions and even spoke Yiddish at home, the senior Wolnermans were non-observant. Allen's childhood was filled with joyful memories of Yamim Tovim spent with his extended family in Brooklyn. Yet Orthodox Jewish life did not extend the eleven hundred miles to the Wolnerman home — then in Gary, Indiana.

Still, the Wolnermans encouraged Rachel, then fourteen and in ninth grade, to attend an NCSY Shabbaton. Rachel returned home on a high, crying tears of inspiration. The Jewish peers she'd met were unlike any of her friends in her Des Moines public school, and the spiritual unity, exhilaration and *kedushah* of Shabbos drew her back for more. In the ensuing months, Rachel became actively involved in the NCSY chapter, participating in numerous Shabbatons and spending the following two summers at Camp Stone in Israel and in Canada.

Rachel began keeping kosher and spent nearly every Shabbos with her NCSY friends and their families. Her parents, genuinely proud and supportive, encouraged her growing religious observance and allowed her to fly to Brooklyn, Baltimore, Saint Louis, Toronto



Dr. Allen Wolnerman and his son, Daniel, overlooking the Western Wall.

and Kansas City — anywhere she would experience an authentic, uplifting Shabbos.

One afternoon, Rachel, the star player of the school tennis team, laid down her racket. “Mom, Dad,” she announced, “I can’t play tennis anymore.”

Her statement made the Wolnermans' jaws drop. “But why not, honey?” Amy finally stammered.

“Because it’s not *tznius* [modest],” Rachel replied simply.

Amy Wolnerman grew livid. She couldn’t allow her beautiful, talented daughter, star of the tennis team, to squander her talents for this ... cult! “We’re going to the *kollel* rabbi’s house right now to discuss this,” she declared. “If he tells you to quit the team, then I’ll *know* it’s a cult, and we’ll stop this kosher stuff now!”

Allen remained silent, refusing to join the fray. In the recesses of his heart, he was proud of his daughter. Having grown up in a “Conservadox” household, with a strong regard for tradition, he was enjoying his family’s increased leaning toward Judaism. He quietly prayed that his wife would soon appreciate the truth as well.

Amy stormed out of the house with a meek Rachel in tow, heading straight for

the rabbi’s house. One hour passed, then two, with still no word from his wife or daughter. Allen grew anxious. What could be taking so long? Finally, he called the rabbi to inquire if all was well, and the rabbi replied, “Everything’s fine. Your wife and daughter are learning with the *rebbe*tzin now.”

Much to Allen’s relief, the female Wolnermans returned home quite calmly at 9:30 p.m. Unable to contain himself, Allen burst out, “How was it? What did the rabbi say?”

Amy shrugged and replied, “The rabbi said that Hashem bequeathed her a special talent. In the meantime, she’ll continue playing but will dress appropriately. Oh, and by the way, I really enjoyed the study session with the *rebbe*tzin. I’m going back tomorrow.”

### Parents on Board

Amy began attending classes regularly. This time, it was she who dragged her husband along in her fervor for learning. The couple invested their spare time in learning Torah and enhancing their religious observance. In time, they kashered their home and were on the road to a full commitment to religious life.

Keeping Shabbos, however, was a giant hurdle. The Wolnermans lived seven miles

from the nearest Orthodox shul, which made it nearly impossible to keep Shabbos and go to shul without driving. One evening, Amy and Rachel dropped their bombshell on Allen. “We want to move. We can’t be *shomer Shabbos* in Des Moines.”

This time, it was Allen’s jaw that dropped. “Move? We can’t just move! We have jobs, a house, a business!” Allen, a clinical pharmacist, thought of his chain of pharmacies and several nursing homes in Des Moines. “We can’t just pack it all up in a day to become observant.”

But his wife and daughter persisted, and Allen capitulated. “Okay, we’ll move, but it can’t be overnight. I’ll need to create a five-year strategy to sell the business before we move.”

Amy considered her husband’s words. “You can have your five years on one condition — that we become *shomer Shabbos* as a family today.” That afternoon, they traveled into the city and rented an apartment near the Orthodox shul, where they would stay on Shabbosos. The Wolnerman family was officially *shomer Shabbos*.

Hashem says: “Open for Me an aperture the size of the hole of a needle, and I’ll open for you an opening as vast as a hall (*Midrash Shir Hashirim* 5:2).” The Wolnermans’ one step toward *shemiras Shabbos* was the “eye of the needle” that ultimately led them to complete *teshuvah*.

Exactly three weeks later, Allen Wolnerman hung up his office phone in shock. He had just received a call from a rival company in Maryland that was seeking to buy out his entire chain of pharmacies. Hashem, in turn, had opened the doors to a vast hall.

A short time later, arrangements were official. The Wolnermans packed up their home of thirty years, preparing for their move to Boca Raton, Florida. In the interim, Rachel, then a high-school junior, had been accepted to college in New York. All through high school, she had been skipping school on Fridays in order to travel across the country to spend Shabbos in religious environments. While the school was satisfied with her perfect grades (she graduated as valedictorian a year

ahead of her class), her teachers had noted her unhappiness and recommended that she apply for early admissions to a school in a thriving Jewish community.

Rachel was accepted to an Ivy League university but chose the Jewish environment of Stern College instead. The following year, she attended Midreshet HaRovah seminary in Yerushalayim together with her NCSY peers and then returned to New York. Last December, she married Yitzy Bardos of Baltimore and is



Dr. Allen Wolnerman and his son, Daniel, at the *bris* of Allen’s first grandchild, Moshe Eliyahu.

currently earning her doctorate in child psychology.

### Daniel’s Promise

Twelve years earlier, while his family was taking gradual steps toward religious observance, Daniel Wolnerman, four years Rachel’s senior, had been attending the University of Southern California (USC). A nationally ranked debater who perceived the world through the lens of reason and logic, Daniel watched his family from afar with more than a trace of amusement.

“Dad, Mom, it’s just a phase. You’ll see, Rachel will get past this soon enough,” he

said, and laughed. Yet when Rachel’s adolescent phase became an enduring family reality, Daniel made it clear that he wanted no part in it.

In his freshman year at USC, Daniel asked his parents for a car. “We’ll buy you a car if you promise to go to shul once a month,” they replied. Daniel reluctantly agreed, and his parents suggested that he try the local Aish HaTorah. True to his word, Daniel went to shul at least once a month. While his family in Iowa prayed for their son’s return to a life of Torah, Daniel simultaneously prayed for his family to return from the deep end...

Having been accepted into prestigious law schools, Daniel was approached by the local Aish rabbi and presented with an unbelievable offer: a ticket to the six-week Aish HaTorah Essentials program. But to everyone’s disappointment, Daniel didn’t want to go. “This religion thing is not for me,” he said flatly.

His parents persuaded him to go. “Daniel, it’s a free trip to Israel. You’re a star debater — go debate with Rabbi Motti Berger, with Rabbi Yom Tov Glaser, with Rav Noach Weinberg!” Against his better judgment, Daniel joined the Aish Essentials program in Jerusalem.

Two weeks later, the Wolnermans received a shocking phone call from their son. Daniel, usually so calm, sounded positively animated as he repeated a *shiur* he had just heard by one of Aish HaTorah’s dynamic speakers. “Oh, and by the way,” Daniel added before hanging up,

“I’ve spoken to Rav Noach Weinberg, and I’m staying the year in Israel.”

“Are you nuts?” his parents responded, repeating the words Daniel had fired at them throughout the past three years. “You didn’t want to go for six weeks, and now you’re staying for a full year? What about law school?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll defer for a year.”

Daniel’s year in Israel extended to six, culminating in *semichah* from Aish HaTorah. One summer, while teaching in an outreach program in Toronto, he met Brenda Cappe, a student who at the time never could have envisioned living a *frum* lifestyle, but who agreed to attend one of

Daniel's classes. One class evolved into two, and Brenda eventually found herself in seminary in Israel. Two years later, a *shadchan* set up Daniel and Brenda, and they became engaged.

Daniel and Brenda Wolnerman, now parents of two, *ka"h*, are commencing their second year as the campus rabbi and rebbetzin at the University of Florida in Gainesville, the public college with the largest Jewish population in the United States, with eight to nine thousand Jewish students. Their glatt kosher Hillel House hosts hundreds of students every Shabbos. They attract dozens of Jewish college kids to Torah learning programs, creating a nurturing environment where students explore and participate in a vibrant Jewish campus life.

Amazingly, despite his secular upbringing, Daniel Wolnerman has donned *tefillin* nearly every day since his bar mitzvah. His grandfather, David Wolnerman, was eleven years old when he entered the hell of Auschwitz. When he was finally liberated, his very first purchase was a set of kosher *tefillin*. Although non-observant, he told his sons and grandsons that they must don *tefillin* every day of their lives.

"Throughout high school, college, and beyond, I almost never missed a day of *tefillin*. I performed the *mitzvah* to honor my promise to Zeidy. Today, I fulfill the *mitzvah* to honor the *Ribbono shel Olam*," Daniel says.

### Coming Full Circle

With their children studying in Israel, Allen and Amy sold their Des Moines home and relocated to a brand-new house in Boca Raton, Florida, a Jewish hub where they could continue learning and enhancing their *avodas Hashem*. Both semi-retired, they are members of the Boca Raton Synagogue (BRS) and Young Israel of Boca Raton, where they learn Torah regularly and reach out to other Jews in their growing community.

Before moving day, the Wolnermans had informed their Partners-in-Torah tutors that they would need several days off before resuming their learning

sessions. "If you're moving to Boca Raton, you won't be needing us anymore," their partners replied. Indeed, BRS hosts daily learning programs beginning with a seven-a.m. *Daf Yomi shiur* and ending at eleven p.m.

Inspired by their own experiences with NCSY, Aish HaTorah and other *kiruv* organizations, the Wolnermans are passionate about Jewish outreach in Boca Raton. They invite whomever they meet — singles, families, and students — whether at work, at the JCC, or while



Zeidy David Wolnerman (Dr. Wolnerman's father), a survivor of Auschwitz, and his grandson, Rabbi Daniel Wolnerman.

standing in line at the car dealership — to join them for an inspirational Shabbos. At their Shabbos table they often have more than ten guests at each *seudah*, and they've encouraged and assisted dozens of students in going to yeshivos and seminaries in Eretz Yisrael.

Over the years, the Wolnermans have proudly watched many of their young guests become *frum*, marry, and raise beautiful Jewish families across the globe. In addition, Allen's fondness for children has prompted the Wolnermans to adopt the Torah Academy of Boca Raton as one of their special support projects, promoting its growth from

fewer than 120 students to over 220 students in the past four years.

Recently, the Wolnermans met the Pelzes, a couple whose son had become observant in college and who were interested in exploring Judaism. Allen and Amy invited the Pelzes for Shabbos *seudos* and extended an open invitation to their son to stay with them whenever he returned from college. A year later, the Pelzes sold their home to move into "The Circle," Boca Raton's *frum* community, in walking distance of the shul.

The Pelz family had never attended a *frum* wedding before and were invited to Rachel Wolnerman's wedding last December in New York. The couple flew in for the December 28 wedding, in middle of New York's major snowstorm. Over one hundred guests were unable to attend, but the Pelzes, who had come especially from Florida, were deeply inspired by the *simchah* of establishing a Jewish home.

"People ask me, 'What made you do it?'" says Allen Wolnerman. "I was forty-seven years old when I started becoming observant. I was happy with my life; we had our country club, our Corvette, our Jaguar, everything we could want. But we didn't have Torah, and we didn't even know that we were missing anything.

"Once we discovered it, we discovered true happiness, true meaning. The only way to achieve

real happiness is by learning and living Torah. Hashem gave us the instruction manual for the perfect life. All we had to do was follow it. And once we did, we discovered that we really do have it all." ■

---

Some names in this article have been changed for personal and/or professional reasons.

---

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

---

For comments and suggestions related to the *The World of Kiruv* column, you are invited to e-mail [kiruvupdate@gmail.com](mailto:kiruvupdate@gmail.com).