

Still blazing trails

Groundbreaker from Yonkers now makes her mark in Jerusalem

By SARAH BRONSON

In the late 1990s, Yonkers native Sharona Margolin Halickman became a symbol of women's advances in Orthodox Judaism.

She was the second female congregational intern in the United States, fulfilling responsibilities normally performed by rabbinic interns, men studying to become Orthodox rabbis.

Eventually, her title at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale was upgraded to *madricha ruchanit*, spiritual mentor, acknowledgment that she was performing traditionally rabbinic duties, even if tradition did not allow her to hold a rabbinic title. She taught Torah classes, spoke from the bimah, even officiated at funerals.

But her feminist ideals were eventually trumped by her Zionist ones.

In 2004, she made aliyah with her husband, Josh, and two small children, fulfilling a dream that she and Josh had shared since their post-high school year in Israel.

"We were both brought up in the Zionist educational system," she explained. "We felt we should be raising our children in Israel. It made no sense to give them the same Zionist education we had, if we could live here. Why study about it, if you can do it? And we knew that we had to come while the children were little, because it gets harder for them to adjust as they get older."

But Halickman could not give up her innovative visions for expanding Torah learning opportunities, especially for those who are currently suffering from a lack of such opportunities.

She has founded Torat Reva Yerushalayim (www.toratreva.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to providing free Torah classes in Hebrew and English. Though the organization has some funding from private American donors, Halickman currently volunteers her time, teaching weekly

classes on Shabbat afternoons to Israeli women, daytime classes for residents of nursing homes and assisted living centers, and English-language afternoon classes for stay-at-home mothers. Eventually she hopes to hire additional teachers and add lunch-and-learn classes for businesspeople, and to expand operations outside of the capital.

GOING HOME

THE ALIYAH DIARIES

"So many people come from abroad to study Torah in Jerusalem," she observed. "But many people who actually live here don't have access because they can't fit it into their schedules. The idea of Torat Reva is that no matter how busy a person is, we can help them fit some Torah into their busy lives."

As for stay-at-home mothers, she said, "they have flexibility, but they can't find classes where they can bring their babies. They can go to playgroups, but that is for the children, not the moms. At our classes, the babies have toys, they are playing on a clean floor; the moms have an intellectual conversation about the week's Torah portion or a chapter of Prophets, and if someone needs to nurse, or if a baby cries, no one cares."

Indeed, at a recent Mommy-and-Baby class at a participant's home in the Old Katamon neighborhood, several toddlers played more or less quietly with a kitchen set and a ball, while their mothers sipped coffee or bottled water and studied a chapter of the Book of Joshua.

Halickman spent most of her childhood and teen years living in Van Cortlandt Crescent on the Yonkers-Riverdale border. She attended SAR Academy and Ramaz High School, spending several summers in France.

After graduating from Ramaz, she attended the Machon Gold program in Jerusalem for a year and half, during which she met and began dating Josh Halickman of Montreal. They each attended Yeshiva University, where Sharona majored in Judaic Studies with a French minor. They married immediately after finishing college.



Sharona Margolin Halickman and her husband, Josh, made aliyah with their two sons, Moshe, left, and Dov, because, Sharona explains, "It made no sense to give them the same Zionist education we had, if we could live here. Why study about it, if you can do it?"

Over the next few years, while her husband worked as an accountant, Halickman served as youth director for the Young Israel of Scarsdale, teacher at Westchester Day School and Solomon Schechter Day School in White Plains, and as religious activities coordinator at the Hebrew Home for the Aged. Her connection with the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale deepened when she accepted a Torat Miriam Fellowship, designed to promote Modern Orthodoxy, at the synagogue. Through the fellowship, several women with advanced Torah skills heard speakers each week, then led an "open bet midrash" for community members.

The invitation to make history came in December of 1997 with a midnight phone call from Rabbi Avi Weiss, the politically active and sometimes controversial leader of the Hebrew Institute.

"He had enough men working at the shul," Halickman said. "But the women's section was missing something. There was no one there whose official job it was to help the women who were saying kaddish, or greet newcomers, or help converts. If he was going to add someone to the staff, it made sense to hire a woman."

Halickman's becoming a congregational intern sparked a media frenzy, with coverage in the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Moment Magazine, Jewish Press and other newspapers.

"They wanted to make it sound like Julie [Stern-Joseph, congregational intern at Lincoln Square Synagogue] and I wanted to be rabbis," Halickman said. "We made it clear that we didn't want to, but they put that bent in to sell papers. Actually, the New York Times did the best job in accurately explaining the development."

"I knew Rabbi Weiss would stay within the bounds of halachah," she said. "There are people who accuse him of functioning outside of it, but he really does have a textual basis for everything he does. It wasn't as radical as the media made it sound."

Still, Halickman performed official duties that her grandmother may never have imagined. She started with giving classes and sermons. Soon her hours expanded as she added pastoral work, such as visiting

homebound synagogue members and those in nursing homes and hospitals. Then she ran the Hebrew school. By the time she was organizing minyans for shiva homes (without counting herself as part of them) and speaking at weddings (without functioning as a witness), the synagogue had created the term spiritual mentor to describe her position in the community.

Despite her trailblazing path in America, Halickman's heart was still being pulled to Jerusalem.

In March of 2004, Josh came to Israel for a wedding, and scheduled 60 meetings with business contacts and real estate agents. Having determined that they both had a good chance of finding work and a place to live, the Halickmans decided "if we sell the house in Riverdale, we'll make aliyah." Five months later, they stunned the Hebrew Institute community when they announced their emigration plans on just two weeks' notice.

"It all came together at the last minute," Sharona said. "We didn't tell anyone because we didn't know ourselves if it would work out."

Halickman said that their absorption "has gone very well," that the couple has made many new friends, are enjoying their work, and love their newly-built apartment on the Arnona-Talpiot border in Jerusalem. Their two children, Dov, 6, and Moshe, 2, speak fluent Hebrew. Halickman said that Dov "loves going to school."

In addition to volunteering her time to Torat Reva, Halickman also teaches at her alma mater, Machon Gold, and at the Pardes Institute and the Institute for Future Foreign Leaders. She may not be appearing in Israeli media, but what is important to her, she said, is that she share her enthusiasm for studying Jewish texts.

"There is so much to learn," she said. "And even people who have a day school education, both in America and Israel, didn't necessarily develop a love for Torah in school. When you are growing up, it's a pressure to study Torah for a test and a grade. Now, as adults, they can enjoy it. They have the skills. The question is finding a venue."

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