



Ezras Nashim

A gate to my soul

In the beginning I was a little girl sitting next to my mother and her close friend; each of us wore new clothes and had a *siddur* open to the right page. *Yom Tov* in the ladies section of our Orthodox shul was “patchwork-crowded,” clusters of women sat here and there with their friends and daughters just like us. From the upstairs gallery I could see my father and my brother and all my father’s friends and acquaintances downstairs. I had time to look at them, in-between walking outside to enjoy the sunshine when I got bored, because when I was a child I didn’t know how to read Hebrew or how to *daven*, and by the time I was a teenager I wasn’t interested in learning. But I went to shul anyway on the High Holidays — because my parents said so, and I held my *siddur* on my lap — because that was expected.

Our family went to Israel for the first time right after my only brother’s bar mitzvah — he’s two and half years younger than I am. My father hired a driver who drove the family around the country on day trips. Our base was the Jerusalem Hilton.

“We’re going on a walking tour today,” Dad announced to my brother and me over breakfast half-way through the trip. We were dressed in T-shirts, shorts and sneakers.

The tour guide arrived with a driver and a comfortable air-conditioned car, and we were on our way. In the Geula section of Jerusalem, the driver parked his car and the guide started walking — while sharing snippets of information with anyone who was interested.

I was already taking photographs — when I was a teenager my camera was my ‘friend.’ Everything looked enchanting, quaint and from another century. My brother held Mum’s hand;

Dad kept pace with the guide; I straggled behind. We entered a place called Meah Shearim through an archway that has an overhead sign in Hebrew and English that read: “Dress Modestly.” I didn’t know what that meant and didn’t ask.

The people in Meah Shearim didn’t look like anyone I had ever seen before; boys with side-curls and white knitted caps on their heads wearing checked shirts and black pants stared at me as I passed by. Girls with two

long, beribboned plaits running down their backs, sporting long-sleeved dresses, turned their heads away when I pointed the camera at them. Mothers and fathers walked quickly past us, dressed in clothes that looked wintry; it seemed odd to me that they wore dark, somber colors on a bright sunny day.

The guide led us through a crowded market area, down a quiet alleyway, and then through an unassuming doorway. We were in a shul. Mum and I were directed upstairs. The room was narrow. On one side were wood-framed windows that looked down onto the street, where the market stalls displayed fruits and vegetables piled high, as well as essential household goods.

The wall on the right was latticed wood with a white lace curtain hung in front of it. When I looked through the lace and the crisscross of the wood I saw my father and brother downstairs in a shul occupied by men reading very large books, most of whom were in a discussion with the man sitting next to them. A singsong hum of foreign words permeated the air. The shul was old, but it felt familiar to me.

Mum took a few deep breaths and then walked out of the room — I could hear the ricochet of her feet on the steps. I sat down and picked up a well-thumbed *siddur*. I couldn't read the Hebrew letters, but I held it anyway. With my other hand I touched the lace curtain. It was so delicate, so feminine, so pretty. I looked at my exposed —

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and tanned — arms and legs, and felt uncomfortable. The feeling was fleeting, but it existed. I heard someone call my English name. For a moment I forgot who I was.

I was the last to rejoin the group outside before we moved on to the next place on the tour guide's itinerary.

For the next thirteen years I forgot about this experience in Israel, as I carved a place for myself in London — in school, college and then the secular working world. After a series of extraordinary events, when I was twenty-eight I began learning Torah in a Jewish Learning Center, and a year later I went to study in a women's seminary in Jerusalem.

I was thirty years old when I met Rebbetzin Raichel Horowitz, the late Bostoner Rebbetzin, a"h, and she invited me to stand beside her in the *ezras nashim* in the Bostoner *beis medrash* in Har Nof. It was Pesach, and she introduced me to *tefillah* and the

pages of the *siddur*. For the next four years I *davened* in the same spot in the same shul nearly every Shabbos. Behind a lace curtain that now held so much meaning for me, I learned to appreciate my role as a *bas Yisrael*. My teacher was a true *bas Melech*.

Shabbos *davening* was the underpinning of the weekday *davening* that I did, first in my dorm-room at seminary, then in the home of the family with whom I lived before I took my own apartment, where I chose a space that became my appointed *ezras nashim*.

In this space I recalled the spiritually uplifting moments I experienced in the Bostoner shul, and it became infused with *kedushah* and my desire to *daven* from my *siddur* sincerely, while talking to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* from my heart.

In this space — my personal *makom tefillah* — before I started to *daven* I often closed my eyes and saw myself walking to the wall of the Kosel —



touching the cool stones and steadying myself. In this way I was able to drive out distractions and focus my *kavanah*.

In my personal *makom tefillah* I discovered the gate to my soul, and let all my hope pour forth with a wish on my lips that a kindly angel would take my prayers to the gates of Heaven. I had so much to be thankful for, so much to ask Him — so much to say to my Tatty, my Confidant, my Teacher.

Over the next two years I met many women who invited me into their *ezras nashim* on a regular basis — the place where they *davened*, the place where they talked to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, the place where they taught me many life lessons, and our friendship blossomed.

I sat with Rebbetzin Bessie Scheinberg in her living room, and we *davened Shacharis*.

I went with Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller to Kever Rochel to learn how to *daven* to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* in the merit of our righteous *Imahos*.

I stood with Rebbetzin Ruchama

Shain at the Kosel while we sang *Hallel* in our hearts.

I watched with awe as the Belzer Rebbetzin created an *ezras nashim* around herself and a *kallah*, a place where the two women held hands and the Rebbetzin mouthed silent words of *tefillah* — her gift to this new *eishes chayil* — while she shuffled a modest dance, the *simchah* radiating from her regal visage.

I followed Rebbetzin Yehudit Soloveitchik, the wife of Harav Dovid of Brisk, as she tiptoed down a meandering pathway from her home to the little *shtiebel* next door, where she invited me to sit with her and recite a *kapitel Tehillim* for a woman in need. Together we stormed the heavens in our own little way, and smiled at each other through veils of tears. How wonderful it is to ‘find’ a friend in your mentor, a friend who can show you how to use your power of *tefillah leshem Shamayim*.

I was welcomed into the inner sanctum of Rebbetzin Kanievsky in Bnei Brak, where she gave me a lesson

in how to talk to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* from the depths of my soul. And then she invited me to sit and *daven* in the chair of her late father-in-law, the Steipler, *zt”l*, in the study of her husband, Harav Chaim Kanievsky, *shlita*.

I visited the *kevarim* of holy *tzaddikim* and many righteous people in the North of Israel with my mother, who visited from London four years after I made Yerushalayim my home. I handed her my *sefer Tehillim* and she smiled. She read the English transliteration and we became one voice united in prayer — at last. Only seven weeks later, I met my true *zivug*.

These are just a few special and meaningful experiences I have had with special and meaningful women in my life, in the place that became our so-called *ezras nashim*. When I was alone, immersed in prayer, I often called up images of these women to inspire my *tefillah*. Other ways I inspired my *davening* was to concentrate on the present moment — the here and now and the words I needed to say to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* that were a priority on my mind, heart and soul. In this state of *dveikus*, I tried to build an *ezras nashim* inside of myself; a place from which I can speak truthfully and openly with my Creator.

I undertook this endeavor only after I got married. During the four years I lived in Yerushalayim before I met my husband, I treasured every opportunity I had to *daven* in shul on Shabbos, and at the Kosel, the Me’aras HaMachpeilah and Kever Rochel, to which I traveled every Friday morning at 5 a.m. But after I married, I had no desire to go to shul, and rarely *davened* outside of the house. I preferred to stand in my ‘place’ in the corner of the living room by the window to pray and

talk to Hashem.

Harav Shlomo Brevda, *shlita*, and Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, *shlita*, inspired this change of direction in my *tefillah* — the “internal praying,” as I like to call it. When I had visited both of them in the early days of my marriage to ask for ways to enhance my *avodas Hashem*, they had suggested I invest in *tefillah* and affirmed my decision to designate a set place in our home in which I would *daven*. Rav Brevda gave me a personal *nusach* to recite before *davening*, and Rabbi Pliskin gave me a lesson in visualization — he suggested bringing images of inspiration into my mind’s eye to inspire concentration before *tefillah*.

Until my first son was born about a year later, their words of inspiration were the bedrock of my three daily *tefillos* and helped me achieve a *kavanah* that is hard to duplicate today.

Our first Sukkos as a married couple is another time I was able to achieve a *dveikus* that I still hold dear. While my husband was at the Kosel *davening vasikin*, I entered the quiet *sukkah*, stood in the center, and looked around me at this *makom* that stood under Hashem’s sheltering skies. I felt so loved and protected, something I craved given my vulnerability as a newly expectant mother. I cried tears of gratitude to Hashem for bringing me to this beautiful moment in my life; to this state of complete *dveikus*, complete humility. Standing there in that sun-washed *sukkah*, I extracted new kernels of opportunity in each word of that day’s *tefillah*; those words permeated my soul and left me refreshed and excited about our future as a new family.

The morning after our son was born in the midst of a hectic hospital ward,

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I was able to silence the outside world as I stepped into an invisible chamber that allowed me to *daven* a *Hallel* of a lifetime in honor of Rosh Chodesh, and to thank Hashem for a gift of a lifetime. On that day, (29 Teves 5759/January 17, 1999) I finally realized I had the strength and the ability to create an *ezras nashim* inside of myself, a place I can go to at any time to have an intimate prayer relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

This awareness has sustained me for the last nine years. It began when I *davened* at home — during the week, on Shabbos and on *Yom Tov*. Sometimes these *tefillos* emerged while small children bumbled underfoot, or when my older children were at *cheder* and my husband was in *kollel*. Other times they were offered up when the household was asleep and I needed to pray to G-d or talk to Him in my own words in the stillness of the night, when it is easier to speak from the heart. At any given moment, my personal *ezras nashim* was always a sanctuary.

I continue to notice how women enter their own, unique *ezras nashim*, and this has inspired my *tefillos*. An *ezras nashim* is a place that we can create when we need it, and it is a place that exists in all the rooms of

our life, as well as in those of others.

Last year, on *Chol Hamoed* Sukkos, I visited Rebbetzin Kanievsky with my family. Since my husband and I went to see the Rav and Rebbetzin for *brachos* an hour before we became *chassan* and *kallah*, we visit them often to give them *nachas*.

While my husband and the children were looking at the Rav’s gigantic *esrog* collection which he keeps in his study, I waited in a queue — with another forty women — leading into the Rebbetzin’s kitchen, which is big enough to accommodate perhaps four women, if they are all standing. When the Rebbetzin popped out of the kitchen to retrieve something from the Rav’s study, she saw me, took me by the hand, and led me into the kitchen. Her hands were dusty with flour, while a dough waiting atop the oven to be braided; she looked into my eyes and then down at my skirt, where two of my smaller children were huddled.

“Rebbetzin, these are the fruits of your *brachos*,” I said in my pidgin-Hebrew, referring to the abundance of *brachos* she always bestows on us from the kindness of her heart.

At that moment my other two boys sidled up to me after walking with their backs against the wall to enter the kitchen in a modest manner, past



the queue of women and their daughters.

“And where is the *meidele*?” asked the Rebbetzin, her smile beautiful and bright.

I shook my head — and lowered my eyes, unwilling to distress the Rebbetzin with my recent loss of a hoped-for daughter.

The Rebbetzin returned to her *challos* and finished braiding. She then took my hand in hers, laid it on the *challah*, and with her other hand reached up towards the ceiling in a pulling gesture, as if she were bringing something precious down from Heaven. She blessed me, gave me a kiss, and then stroked the cheeks of the children — one by one — and handed each of them a toffee.

I was crying. It was a stunning moment.

“I took a *brachah* from *Shamayim*,” she said.

I whispered “*Amein*,” as my eyes scanned her *ezras nashim*, the place where she felt comfortable talking to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, and *bentching* the

women of *Klal Yisrael*.

In Rebbetzin Kanievsky’s *ezras nashim* I felt her love just like I had felt it the time I had sat with her in her reception room six years earlier to discuss a private matter which she assured me could be resolved with an extra dose of *tefillah* and two daily *halachos* of *shemiras halashon* — her remedy for every soul’s needs.

When we finished our conversation, she asked me to join her in shul to *daven Minchah*. We stood in the *ezras nashim* of Lederman’s Shul on Rashbam Street in Bnei Brak — a few feet away from Harav Chaim’s *makom tefillah*. The shul was extremely simple — the *tefillah* was simply out of this world.

As the evening light turned to gold through the windows, I thought that this was a moment I would cherish forever — and I do. I recall it often when I feel the need to muster concentration before and during *tefillah*, and when I need to remember how important it is to seek the company of women of greatness who

can guide us on the right path of life.

This is the power and potential of the *ezras nashim* — the place where a woman *davens*, the place where a woman carries out her *avodas Hashem*, the place where a woman fulfills her truest potential. There are chapters in a woman’s life when she can go to shul and *daven* with peace of mind. Of course she needs concentration in shul just as she needs concentration at home. But in shul she often has more of a chance to focus absolutely than among the distractions of home.

Many times, as I have *davened* from my *machzor* in our garden while my children played, I have wished that I was in shul, but realized I have the potential to create my own *ezras nashim* right here and now, amidst the rose bushes and green grass under the blue heavens.

Many times, as I have *davened* on a bus, I have wished I had *davened* at home before I left on my journey, but realized I have the potential to carve out for myself a place to *daven* wherever I am.

Many times, as I have walked on the beach — my favorite place in the universe where I feel Hashem’s presence so strongly amidst the natural beauty He created — I have stopped and raised my hands out to the vast seas and then up to the vast skies, have taken a deep breath, and opened a free-flowing dialogue with Hashem, telling Him everything on my mind. How comforting to realize most profoundly that wherever I am I can talk to Him and He will see me and hear me.

Many times, as I *davened* in bed because I was on bedrest or had to lie down while I fasted and wished I was strong enough to be in shul, I realized this is where *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*

wants me to be, and that from this place I can also connect to Him, because He is with me in every situation.

This is the beauty of the *ezras nashim*. It is a physical place, a spiritual place, an emotional place and an intellectual place — all at once, and independently — always there when you need it.

This is the potential of the *ezras nashim*. It is a space that transcends time and history; it is the place where the heart and soul of the Jewish woman resides, and from which she communicates when she needs to.

Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel and Leah, our *Imahos*, *davened* in their tents, they *davened* on their journeys, they talked to Hashem wherever they were.

Throughout Jewish history, Jewish women have *davened* from their own personal *ezras nashim* — sometimes located in their homes and sometimes elsewhere.

When my son was learning *Parashas Vayikra* in *cheder*, every week he would bring home detailed black-and-white illustrations of the Beis Hamikdash.

One week he said, “You see, here, Mummy, this is the place where

Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel and Leah, our Imahos, davened in their tents, they davened on their journeys, they talked to Hashem wherever they were.

Mummies used to *daven*.”

He was referring to the *Ezras Nashim* in the time of Bayis Rishon, the First Temple.

I looked into my son’s pure shining eyes and then hugged him; his enthusiasm and desire to invite me into a place that was once my own endeared him to me, and made me more deeply appreciate what he was learning. This was living history. This was my past, my present, my future; our son and the picture of the original holy *Ezras Nashim* of our eternal heritage.

How far a Jewish woman can travel in her lifetime — from an *ezras nashim* in London, to an *ezras nashim* in Yerushalayim, to an *ezras nashim* in Bnei Brak, to an *ezras nashim* in her

heart and soul, the *ezras nashim* of her life of Torah.

In *Parashas Terumah*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* commands us to build a *Mishkan* in our lives, in our homes, in our hearts: “*They shall make a sanctuary for Me — so that I may dwell among them.*”

The doors of that sanctuary — my own personal *ezras nashim* — are always open, to give to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and to receive from Him. It is a place into which I can invite His sacred Presence; it is the space that can help me feel more comfortable in the world He created for me.

This is the promise and the opportunity that exists for every Jewish woman who builds an *ezras nashim* in the center of her universe. **B**