



## COURAGE AND GUTS

By: Mindy Aber Barad

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### ***The Map Seeker: One Woman's Quest***

By Leah Kotkes

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It takes courage and guts for a well-known person in the Orthodox world to write a memoir, a personal account sharing chapters of her life, which include how she became *frum*. On May 11 in New York, Leah Kotkes, a beloved writer among her readers, will release her first book, a candid, friendly, page-turner: *The Map Seeker: One Woman's Quest*.

The title of this interview article is a quote from the book; a direct quote from Leah's father, after she told him, at the age of 28, she intended to lead the life of a Torah Jew in Israel. Her father's response was due to his surprise and also awe at his daughter's decision, having lived a secular life all these years.

Reading Leah's book, and speaking to her during over the years, has been an inspiring experience. As from a Torah class, I have come away with a more enriched life perspective. I read the final manuscript before *Pesach*. The story Leah tells is similar to the process and progress of the *Purim* and *Pesach* stories. G-d's unseen hand plays such a prominent role in Leah's quest for a life of truth and personal peace of mind that while the reader is clear of the story's end - that the author takes on Torah and *mitzvot* - the "how" - as in "how will *Hashem* help her achieve this goal" is the most compelling part of the story and adds an extra depth and meaning to the power and beauty of this remarkable memoir. The reader is privileged to be witness to a story of contemporary redemption and is left in awe of *Hashem*'s miraculous ways.

I interviewed Leah Kotkes, features writer, editor and writing mentor as well as wife and homemaker, in Jerusalem where she lives with her husband and children.

**Q: How did you decide which aspects of your life to share before you became a *ba'alat teshuvah*? How did you balance detail and significant meaning within the realm of *halachah*?**

A: I approach every story I write, whether it is my own or someone else's with thoughtfulness, sensitivity and modesty, my goal at all times being to present an accurate account in the most appropriate way according to what is correct for the Jewish woman reader.

Memoir is a genre that lends itself to honesty, openness and vivid portrayal in storytelling - that is why I love it so much. However, as an Orthodox Jewish woman writer, working for various Orthodox publications, I know how to write for my readers. Therefore my boundaries were clear. When I started visualizing how I wanted to pen the memoir, my *rav* asked me to write for Jewish women.

*The Map Seeker: One Woman's Quest* is my story, but not my whole life story; the book captures the spirit of my life, it portrays chapters of my life, which have made-up the journey so far. This was the way I was able to share what I felt was appropriate for the reader and what would move the memoir along from the beginning to the end.

What I am offering my reader is a story that starts when I am 7 years old and takes the reader up to the present day, when I am 45. The book has a purpose and that is what drives the story and has helped me focus my efforts on deciding what chapters of my life to include in support of that purpose, and which to leave out.

For nearly eight and half years I wrote the book alone but in consultation with my *rav* until it was submitted to my publisher last summer. My *rav* encouraged me to "write the truth" because the "truth will help and inspire women." I struggled often with writing the "truth" because it was painful, or challenging, or difficult to present without hurting or disturbing the picture perfect image of myself. However, my *rav* kept prompting me to "tell it as it was," which is what I did, but in the most careful, selective and *tznius* way, leaving the reader room to form own viewpoint through her own interruption of the reality I presented. The Jewish woman reader is a wise

soul and understands much of the workings of the world.

The original manuscript did have more "truthful" scenes but during the editing process I chose to remove them or tone them down. By saying less it gave the reader the opportunity to understand more on her own.

**Q. Let's backtrack a moment, when you say "my rav," to whom are you referring? And how did he become so involved in your story?**

A. My *rav* is HaRav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, *shlita*. And how did the *rav* become so involved in my life, is probably a more accurate question.

When I arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* in August 1993, I had no idea what was in store for me; I was jobless, homeless and had all my worldly possessions in two cases. I held all my dreams and hopes close to my heart.

Seminary was initially an exciting new experience, but having been a dynamic career girl in London and a world traveler besides, sitting still and listening in a classroom didn't come easy to me. Within a matter of a few months, *Sukkos* time to be precise, I was traveling to Tsfat on a *chesed* mission which included looking after a household of eight children for a few weeks.

When I got back to Jerusalem I could not concentrate on my studies; the whole Tsfat experience had given me a taste of the future - family life - and in seminary I had returned to being the girl I was before, single, jobless and homeless while I yearned privately for much more. My roommate suggested we go to see Rav Scheinberg for a *bracha*; it was Chanukah.

The moment I met the *rav* I realized the meaning of the words: light and dark, material and spiritual, holy and this world. Rav Scheinberg was all of these things in one person while I was in a dark, material, this world place. The *rav* became my teacher that day - my mentor, a "surrogate" *Zeidy*, father and a "wise and most kind, giving and supportive friend" - I trusted the *rav's* vision implicitly and so began a 16-year relationship, which continues today. The *rav* has taught me most of what I know about faith and has helped me live a life of faith.

The *rav* also told me to write my first book; he said this to me on Chanukah 2000 without ever having discussed my childhood dream of being an author. The *rav* guided me at my most challenging moments during the writing of the book and the *rav* smiled and laughed when I told him we would release the book on May 11. I am most grateful to my *rav* for his belief in my potential, my abilities and my dreams.

*Leah Kotkes will be touring North America both to launch her new book and host workshops. I highly recommend that you make the effort to go hear her; you can access her schedule, times, places, etc., by visiting her website: [www.leahkotkes.com](http://www.leahkotkes.com)*