

Learning to Explore Her Soul

BY RIVKAH LAMBERT ADLER

When Batya Burd-Oved tells the story of her *teshuva* journey, she explains that she “grew up in a complete religious void.”

When she was eight years old, her Russian-born refusenik father took her outside one night and asked her to look up at the sky. “Do you see a man with a beard, throwing a lightning bolt?” he queried his child. Then he shut down all future discussion by stating, “That’s the last time we’re going to talk about G-d.”

Today, Burd-Oved is a religious Jew, living in the Old City of Jerusalem. Her journey from point A to point B is filled with ceaseless striving and a dramatic pivot from one lifestyle to another.

Burd-Oved’s parents made aliyah from the Former Soviet Union shortly after the Yom Kippur War. Her father, Efim Fefer, was a scientist.

Despite the fact that the Russian olim were, for the most part, “devoid of any spirituality,” according to Burd-Oved, they still longed for a place where they would be considered Jewish and were disappointed to learn that, “in Israel, they were considered Russians.”

Five-hundred Russian olim families left Israel together in 1978, headed for the U.S. While they were in transit, Israel asked the U.S. to close their borders. Burd-Oved, who was born in Israel, ended up living with her family in Italy for two years in difficult conditions.

“We had an apartment with a toilet outside the apartment, and everyone had to pay to use it,” she

recalled.

Her father was a prominent and outspoken opponent of the policies of the Israeli government. “My father was very strong. He survived an assassination attempt,” Burd-Oved recounted.

His protests were noticed by Former President Jimmy Carter who, in cooperation with B’nai Brith of Canada, made it possible for the Fefer family to become Canadian citizens.

At age four, Burd-Oved settled with her family in Thornhill, Toronto. Her father, the Russian scientist, went back to university and became a math teacher. Her mother created and ran a very successful insurance business.

She grew up with Jewish values and a strong Jewish identity but an utter lack of Jewish education. “The only thing I knew about being Jewish was that Einstein was Jewish, that Jews were very smart, and that we went through the Holocaust.”

Her father had grown up in an orphanage and believed wholeheartedly in the slogan attributed to Karl Marx: “Religion is the opiate of the masses.” During her upbringing, “No one ever talked about mitzvot. I was taught that people who believe in G-d are archaic.”

Instead, the single-minded focus of her youth was a quest to become successful.

“In communist Russia, you couldn’t be successful. I was told that my parents brought me to a land where you can make something of yourself. It was a goal to make a lot of money. Then you’ll have the respect of others, you’ll have freedom and you’ll have happiness, because if you have money and success, you’ll be happy.”



Batya with her father being called to the Bar in 1999 (courtesy)

Burd-Oved is nothing if not a diligent student. So she worked hard and earned a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario where she studied business and economics. Following a successful undergraduate career, she attended law school at York University in Canada and graduated at the top of her law school class.

By 24, she was employed at a top Canadian tax firm, complete with a personal secretary and a spending account. She lasted almost two years.

Realizing “there was nowhere up to go from there,” she began rethinking her goals. “This was the most prestigious goal I could imagine. What do I do now? I was making everyone so happy [with my achievements] but I felt a void. I accomplished my goals and should be feeling high as a kite. [Instead], I’m so empty. I always had this big void in me and I never knew how to fill it.”

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It dawned on her that “everyone got it wrong. I have money and respect, but no freedom and no happiness. I made it and it’s not what you think.” Wondering, “maybe it’s just me,” she began interviewing other lawyers in her firm about their quality of life.

Not surprisingly, she discovered that “everyone hated” the lifestyle she referred to as “golden handcuffs.”

She told herself, “This is not a life for me. This is not going to lead me where I want to go. It took Herculean strength to walk away. Everyone said, ‘Are you crazy?’”

She told herself, “I don’t know what life is about, but let’s try something else. Let me set bigger goals.”

Around that time, she met a Christian woman on a flight who espoused an abiding love for the Jewish people. That woman invited Burd-Oved to produce her son’s movie.

Thinking this was her next big goal, Burd-Oved quit her job and headed to Hollywood. In her first month, she met the top entertainment lawyer in Canada, a man whose name opened doors. She took the bar exam in California and, while waiting for results, did some traveling.

On her travels, she “dove with sharks and climbed tall mountains. I was trying to fill that void with big exciting, extreme sports.” In her travels, she met someone “who encouraged me to visit the Dalai Lama to find my life’s quest.”

She agreed to go because “I didn’t understand

what this world is for. I knew what I was doing in it wasn’t filling my need for something.”

She noted, “I was 25 years old and I definitely didn’t call it a spiritual quest at the time.”

While waiting for an audience with the Dalia Lama, she spent three months in Dharamshala in northern India, an experience she likened to being in “a spiritual supermarket. I learned a few things from the Eastern traditions. I was always interested in the esoteric, but it wasn’t relevant to the world of economics and business.

“I didn’t find a place in that world. I had questions, but I didn’t have a social group to ask these questions to. While there, I saw much that was strange and primitive.”

Although she ultimately recognized that Eastern spirituality wasn’t a long-term destination, her time in Dharamshala did open her up to being able to ask spiritual questions.

“When you have so much quiet time to yourself and you are allowed to explore the soul,” she recounted, “I got to experience my soul. I had unbelievable epiphanies. I realized that, if I want to find happiness, the finite world is so limited and the spiritual world is so infinite. It never runs out. It was an incredible transformation in my life. I understood that life is to evolve spiritually.”

But she was left with another perplexing question. “Which is the right direction? What’s the path? There was tons of different paths. Everyone has a different opinion of what’s good and what’s bad in that world.”

She picked up pieces of spiritual insight along the way. At age 26, she participated in a three-day silent meditation. The 1993 novel *The Celestine Prophecy*, written by James Redfield, was very popular at the time. The book introduced a number of psychological and spiritual ideas that were sourced in Eastern traditions and New Age spirituality.

Burd-Oved drew from that wellspring. “The universe has a plan and everything moves according to that plan. There’s a divinity behind each of us,” she came to realize.

“I had been leading my life for so long. For whatever reason, Hashem put me under the star



The launch of westernwallprayers.org in 2003 (courtesy)

that whatever I wanted, I got. But I didn’t know how to figure out what direction to go in.”

She decided that, “Instead of leading, I’m going to be a follower. I’m going to listen to the universe and follow, and I’ll find my path that way.

She added, “I let go of control, let go of deciding what I had to do in life and where I had to go and what I had to be.”

With that mindset, Hashem began whispering to her. “I heard a voice telling me to go to a certain café. I laughed and went. I trusted the voice. I walked into the café and Tibetan nuns were talking about how they were tortured by the Chinese government.”

While deciding whether or not to make a film about religious persecution in China, an I Ching practitioner, experienced in the art of Chinese divination, told her, “This is G-d’s will for you.”

“It was such a paradigm shift,” she related.

She returned to Toronto and gave herself five months to make the film. A friend told her that there was a Birthright trip to Israel scheduled five months later. “Perfect,” she told herself, “If my movie doesn’t take off, I’ll go to Israel and then to India to follow G-d’s will in India.”

The movie actually was taking off. But she went on the 10-day Birthright trip, sponsored by Aish, anyway. That’s when everything changed.



Batya, Gershon and their children in 2013, just before Gershon’s passing (courtesy)





Batya with Gershon, z"l

"I went to Israel and did not come back until my honeymoon three years later."

Studying Torah in Israel helped Burd-Oved identify a significant problem with spirituality in the East. "It gives you a big ego. You feel enlightened. It's very self-oriented, very ego-based, though I would never have admitted that to myself back then."

Although she was beginning to connect with her G-dly soul, Burd-Oved's earliest experiences with Torah learning did not immediately impact her. "I really didn't accept any of the teaching at first," she recalled...until she met Rabbi Yom Tov Glaser.

"He happened to be giving a class in astrology. He had a guru glow." That perked her attention. "I started to test him. He looked at me and said, 'You're a Jew, and it's not a coincidence.'"

"It was such a simple line, but how did I not start with the basics? There must be a reason that the 'universe' [had me] born as a Jew. I didn't deal with that question until he made me. *Wow, I really have to think about why I was born as a Jew.* I'm just going to follow what it means to have been born a Jewish woman. I've been spending time looking for all the extreme esoteric, higher end and not seeing the basics. I have to take this seriously."

Even still, the path to teshuva was riddled with challenge.

"He looked at me and said, 'You're a Jew, and it's not a coincidence.'"

"I fought every concept. It did not go in smoothly. I spent four years in a series of seminaries. I tried to build myself into what I thought I was supposed to be, but I never fit in anywhere. It was very hard for me. [On the one hand, teshuva is] such an individual journey, but I felt lots of pressure to conform."

The seminary she was attending felt she was still too rebellious to date, but Hashem had other plans.

"I was still wearing hippie clothing and I married a black hat, stark yeshivish guy. All he wanted to do was learn Torah. His yeshiva was in the Old City." The newly-married couple decided to live in the Old City, close to Gershon Burd's yeshiva.

Burd-Oved described her marriage as "a major paradigm shift, [requiring] a much higher level of refining. My husband was on a much higher level than me, doing what was right. He was completely *mesirut nefesh l'shem Shamayim*."

"I spent most of the marriage trying to figure out how to find the medium between our extremes. It was such a challenge to morph myself into him, to serve him so he could serve Hashem. It took everything. It was so different from the way that I was. Having children and being home was never the role model I had. I had been such a career person! I was home with diapers and vomit."

Gradually, she noticed something astonishing. "I'm stressed and tired, but the void is gone. Following your purpose doesn't mean peace and happiness. Doing what you're meant to do, and not having a feeling of existential angst, even if it's hard and stressful [allowed me to] sigh a sigh of relief. I felt I was in line with my purpose in life. I didn't waste life. I didn't go the wrong direction."

Burd-Oved mentioned her current work with Western Wall Prayers (westernwallprayers.org), an Israel-based non-profit that makes it possible for Jews around the world to take advantage of the segula of davening for 40 consecutive days at the Kotel through a shaliach.

Western Wall Prayers got its start very close to home.

"My husband Gershon, z"l, had dated 50 girls over the course of five years and was still single. The shadchanim

had given up on him.

"He decided to daven 40 days at the Kotel, and we met a week after he finished those 40 days and we got engaged after just five dates. Then my best friend flew in for my wedding and, since she was hitting 30 and still single, we convinced her to spend 40 days in Israel. She went to the Kotel daily and then someone she previously dated flew in to visit her and proposed to her a week later.

"We knew plenty of tzaddikim who lived with just the basics in the Old City of Jerusalem and plenty of people in need of something abroad. So we decided to make another shidduch – between the rabbis and bnei Torah at the Kotel and people around the world who can't pray at the Kotel for 40 days themselves."

Burd-Oved adds, "The best part is that my friend's new chassan had a website business, and he donated the site for us to get started. They now live across the street and often do the 40 days for themselves. Thank G-d, we have had so much siyata dishmaya that the site took off through word of mouth and stories of answered prayers."

Batya's husband, Gershon Burd, was a healthy 40-year-old the day he died as a result of a swimming accident. *The Secret Life of Gershon Burd*, written by Yaakov Astor and published in 2016, tells the story of his astonishing, mostly secret, chessed work which only became known after his death.

Batya has since remarried and still lives in the Old City of Jerusalem with her new husband, Assaf Oved, and their blended family. ▲



With husband Assaf and their blended family outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem in 2019 (courtesy)

