

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin and his wife Shevi look back on a half century of service to the Fair Lawn community

YOVIEL

for the

Yudins

BY **Barbara Bensoussan** PHOTOS **Naftoli Goldgrab**

How to build an infrastructure

“Our Shabbos table was always a home run, even if my derashah wasn’t”

When the Yudins arrived in Fair Lawn in 1969 with a three-year-old child, Fair Lawn was still Jewish frontier land. Yeshiva University had helped the few Orthodox families who’d moved in from nearby Paterson organize a shul; the original 17 families bought a split-level house for the rabbi with a room downstairs for the “kehillah.”

“On Friday afternoons, I’d drive around and knock on doors to try to ensure a minyan,” Rabbi Yudin says. “We invited people for meals, to our succah. Our Shabbos table was always a home run, even if my derashah wasn’t.”

The relentless outreach, plus the lure of the rebbetzin’s Shabbos fare and Shabbos Mevarechim cholent, helped them slowly grow a community. By 1983 the congregation had built the current building, which included a mikveh in the back, supervised by Dayan Yaakov Posen from K’hal Adath Jeshurun (Breuer’s) and with Rav Moshe Bick as *rav hamachshir*. “I appreciated every step of our

growth,” Rabbi Yudin says. “After the mikveh we put up an eiruv, which was another huge project. We had to work with the town, plot the boundaries — it was quite exciting.”

About 15 years ago it was clear that the two yeshivos in northern New Jersey, Yavneh and Yeshiva of New Jersey, weren’t sufficient for the burgeoning population. Rabbi Yudin says this gave him the privilege to help found Yeshivat Noam, a *yeshiva ketanah*, which now boasts 800 students.

The community took another mighty leap forward about 13 years ago, when the shul asked Yeshiva University to send them four young couples to create a “Torah Enrichment Center,” much in the manner of out-of-town Lakewood kollelim. The center has since helped attract over 80 more young families to the community. Having now reached critical mass, Fair Lawn boasts a kosher supermarket, bakery, and restaurant. But the personal touch was never lost.

“Our kehillah grew slowly,” says Rebbetzin Shevi Yudin. “While some rabbis are too busy to have friends, we all grew together and worked closely together to build. We were the only shul in town for many years, so we were the spiritual and social hub.”

Rabbi Yudin comments that his community is special because it has evolved into a diverse mix of FFB families, *baalei teshuvah*, Russians, Israelis, and others. “There is a lot of mutual respect,” he says. Clearly, that tolerance trickles down from the top.

How to build relationships

“There’s no closer relationship than the one established when people learn Torah together”

Rabbi Yudin’s former teacher, Rabbi Joseph Lookstein *a”h*, told him that an ideal rabbi should

become a member of his congregants’ families. Rabbi Yudin has achieved that — although today, with 275 families instead of 17, this has become a more time-consuming task, despite the aid of Associate Rabbi Avrohom Markowitz.

What Rabbi Yudin modestly avoids mentioning — but his wife, Shevi, does — is that their congregation gelled into a family in large part because the Yudins always maintained an open house. In fact, it’s so open that their dining room has no furniture beyond one very large table. Locals jokingly call their home “Yud-Inn,” because various people are always moving in, some staying for years.

“When the shul outgrew the basement, the members built an extension to our house as a *kinus* room,” Shevi says. “Later the congregation decided to build the shul across the street from us, and we were left with extra rooms.”

Like Jerusalem in the times of the *shalosh regalim*, *l’havdil*, the Yud-Inn seems to expand magically to accommodate whoever needs lodging there. Shevi’s parents lived with them for some years, as did a few children who had lost their parents. Those extra rooms have housed an exemplary *ger* from Poland, an abused *frum* wife who moved in with her son for six weeks, a hippie Israeli couple who stayed six months (then returned to Israel and became Torah observant), and many more who found there was room for them not only in the home but in the heart.

A rabbi’s role is to teach Torah, but Rabbi Yudin also believes it’s the best route to building relationships with congregants. “There’s no closer relationship than the one established when people learn Torah together,” he says. By holding *shiurim* in the shul every morning and evening, he shows members the importance of Torah study. A morning *shiur* for retirees was initiated by a community member some years ago, and Wednesday mornings are dedicated to a women’s *shiur* in *Sefer Hachinuch* (“We’re up to Mitzvah 144,” he says). He makes sure to meet several times with every bar mitzvah, bas mitzvah, and engaged couple, and he says these life cycle events are a golden opportunity for a rav to build relationships with his congregants.

How to keep them growing

“The message has to come through: Torah excites!”

Rabbi and Rebbetzin Yudin never stops teaching. Shevi says that when she sends her husband to the grocery for an errand that should take five minutes, he sometimes doesn't come home for two hours. “He starts schmoozing with people — Americans, Israelis, whoever — and doing his brand of *kiruv*. He once invited the cashier at the local takeout place to our succah. Then, when people come, he turns it into a teaching experience. He'll tell the uninitiated all about the significance

of the *arba minim*, or use one of the *parshah*-themed challahs from the bakery to launch a *devar Torah*.”

He reaches out over the airwaves as well. His *shiurim* for the Nachum Segal Network/JM in the AM are “the cherry on top” of his other obligations. But creating a radio *shiur* has its own challenges. Rabbi Yudin never knows who

will manage to find his show — the chassid from New Square or the unaffiliated Jew in Hoboken. Therefore, the material has to intrigue both newbies to Judaism and those with more sophisticated knowledge. “If it's going to excite other people, it first has to be exciting for me,” he says. “The message has to come through: Torah excites!”

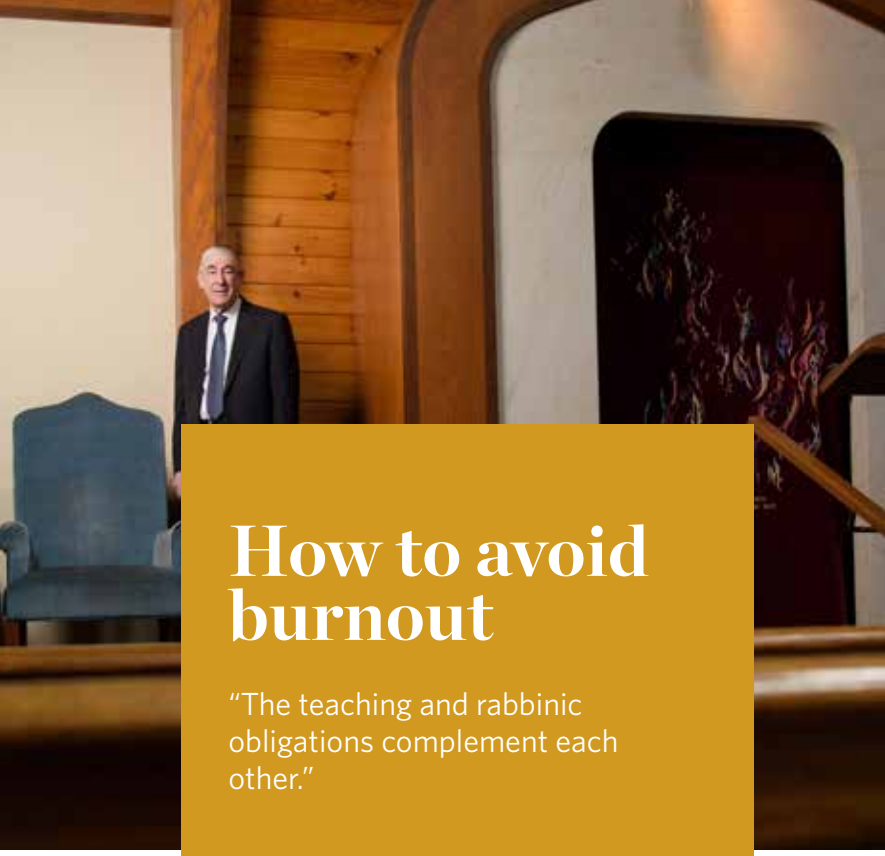
Today Shomrei Torah's original members are grandparents. The initial excitement of building an infrastructure has been replaced by a more stable,

established community that takes Jewish amenities and *frumkeit* for granted. “It's harder to get the *frum*-from-birth people to take their Yiddishkeit to the next level,” he says. “But *frum* people should also keep growing. The Kiddush you make today should be different than the Kiddush you made five years ago.”

It's also important to make sure the next generation catches the fire. Programs like Avos U'banim, led by Rabbi Markowitz, generate excitement among the kids. A highlight of Rabbi Yudin's week is his Monday night class with students mostly from the former Soviet Union. “They have a thirst for Torah that's inspiring,” he says. “Everybody knows that Rabbi Yudin loves the Russians.”

“I should also give a shout out to NCSY,” Rabbi Yudin adds. “Thirty years ago, they played a huge part in providing the emotional excitement that wasn't always part of the intellectual strivings of the yeshivos.”





How to avoid burnout

“The teaching and rabbinic obligations complement each other.”

Burnout is frequently cited as a danger for rabbis devoting themselves long-term to their communities. Teaching at YU, he says, offers him an opportunity to detach from the problems of his congregants and clear his head. “You can get bogged down in a family’s troubles,” he says. “The teaching and rabbinic obligations complement each other.”

He finds teaching uninitiated young men very energizing. “In recent years, we’re getting a lot of students from South and Central America — although we’ve had our waves from the Soviet Union and Iran. These boys come in with secular education on par with yeshivah boys, but no Jewish knowledge. When I asked one of them, ‘Why did you choose to come to YU?’ he answered, ‘Because it has a soccer team.’”

His job is to teach them sophisticated concepts of Judaism, beginning at an alef-beis level. Sometimes it’s challenging; young men with no prior knowledge of Shabbos find it hard to take on, while others challenge basic concepts. But Rabbi Yudin is invigorated by their exchanges. “In 50 minutes, I can give over important knowledge they didn’t possess before,” he says. “That’s instant gratification. When it comes to *balabatim*, getting people to grow and change is a much slower process.”

As for the Yudins’ unceasing *hachnassas orchim*, it has become so second nature that they can barely imagine a Shabbos without guests. “My kids often would say, ‘Mommy, don’t you and Abba want a break, a Shabbos alone?’” Shevi relates. “Well, one week we didn’t have anyone coming, so I decided to make a nice meal just for the two of us. Friday night, just as I’d finished washing and my husband was about to wash, there was a knock at the door. It was a couple who’d been en route to Passaic for Shabbos and got stuck in traffic. They pulled off the road and walked the rest of the way to us. Hashem wanted us to have guests after all.”

Mishpacha

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How things have changed

“Some of the most challenging sh’eilos I get these days are end-of-life issues”

Today, there are resources that simply didn’t exist when Rabbi Yudin was a semichah student. For example, semichah students at YU are now offered pastoral counseling classes. “I could have used some of those classes,” he says with a chuckle. “Today my son-in-law [Rabbi Larry Rothwachs] oversees such classes, sometimes bringing in actors to role-play situations with the students.”

With rabbis often serving as first responders, he says the secret is in knowing what you can handle and what you need to delegate. “If warmth and love aren’t enough to solve a teenager’s problems, you should refer it out,” he says. “Fifty years ago, those problems would have fallen directly on the shoulders of the rabbi. Today, we have addresses: support groups, referral agencies, rehab facilities.”

Rabbi Yudin puts in many hours visiting people

“They say there’s no money in it, and they worry about their kids suffering from rabbi’s kid syndrome. People say, ‘Why do you need this headache?’ But for us, it has been a deeply fulfilling life”

in the hospital and, he says, “Some of the most challenging *sh’eilos* I get these days are end-of-life issues. I often find myself educating people about the sacredness of life.”

Yet another change is that fewer young people are interested in becoming a pulpit rabbi, a fact Shevi laments. “They say there’s no money in it, and they worry about their kids suffering from rabbi’s kid syndrome. People say, ‘Why do you need this headache?’ But for us, it has been a deeply fulfilling life.” Their own children were inspired rather than turned off by their parents’ lifestyle; all the Yudin sons

are rabbis, and both daughters married rabbis.

The role of a rebbetzin has changed over the years, as more women work outside the home. Shevi herself taught at a Talmud Torah in Riverdale in the early days of the shul, but as her husband’s job grew, she gave it up. “I thought one of us needed to always be available for the kids,” she says. “Some rebbetzins today are busy with their own careers and aren’t so involved with their husbands’ shuls. I was, and I was fine with having an open house. You have to give based on your personality and strengths.”

What has kept them going for 50 years

“It’s an opportunity for service and partnership with Hashem”

Both Rabbi and Rebbetzin Yudin project a vitality and enthusiasm that belies their years, and surely derives from their close connectedness to others. They are also buoyed by feeling they’ve been *zocheh* to tremendous *siyata d’Shmaya* in their shared mission. When the shul’s mikveh was built, for example, it lacked enough rainwater to fill the *bor*. But right after the construction was finished, there was a sudden spate of rainy weather — four

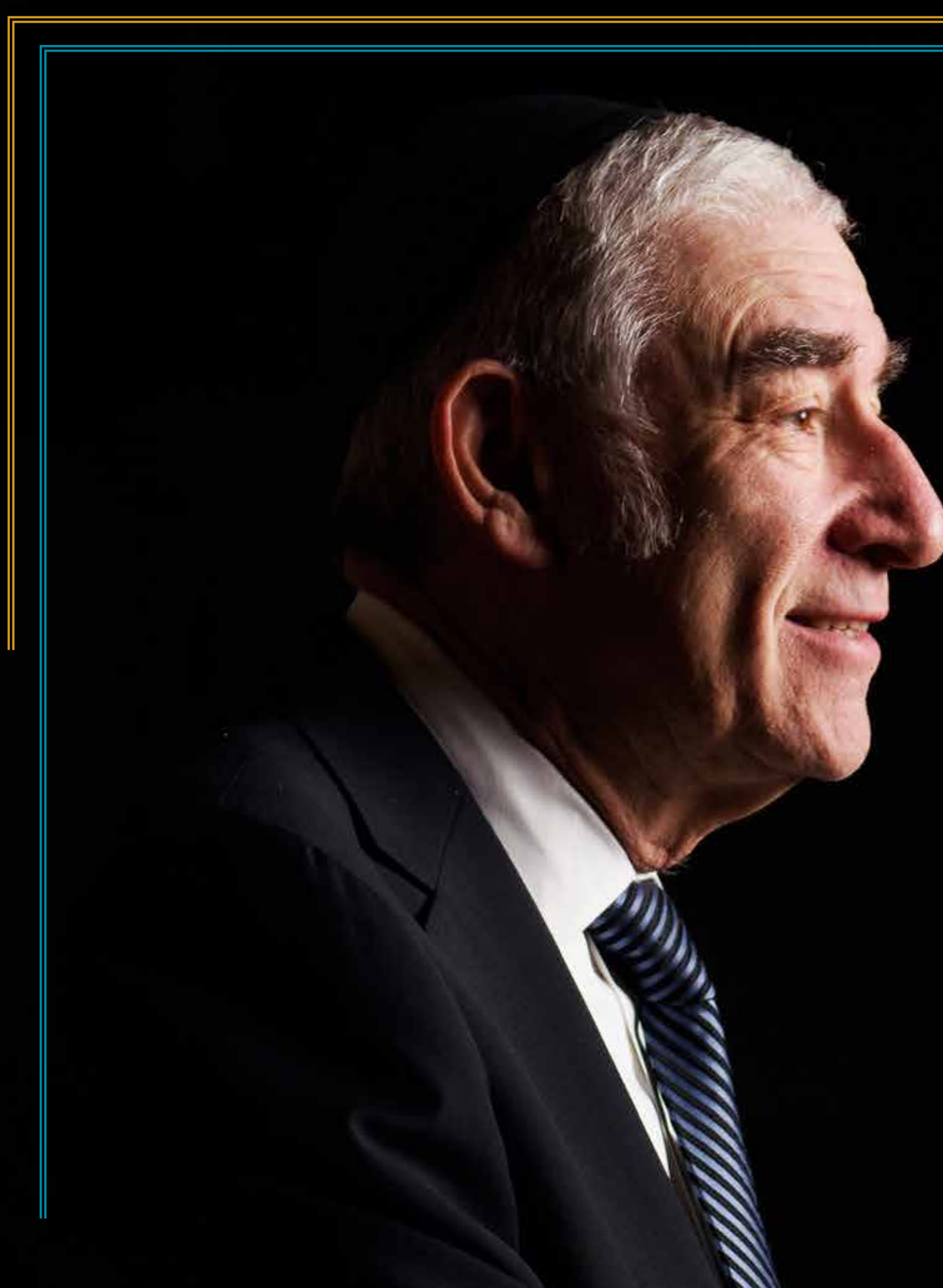
days in a row — that provided enough rainwater to render the mikveh usable. “We watched the rain with tears in our eyes,” Shevi says. “It seems like whatever we undertook, Hashem helped us out.”

They gave freely to everyone around them, but their porous

home wasn’t simply a one-way *chesed* station. Like loving family, their kehillah repaid their devotion. When Shevi’s mother was ill, people came by to play Scrabble with her; when her father was bedridden, men would stop by after shul to wish him good Shabbos and sing *zemiros*. When the Yudins had a minor accident during a trip to Monsey and were sent to the nearest hospital to get checked out, they arrived to find 15 concerned congregants who had shown up to make sure they were okay.

Given the chance to choose his career all over again, Rabbi Yudin says he’d jump right in. “Are there pits in the cherries? Of course there are. But no two days are the same. You constantly have to be on call and on your toes. But it’s an opportunity for service and partnership with Hashem, which leads to both personal and communal growth.”

Ever the Torah teacher, he can’t resist a *mashal*. “Moshe Rabbeinu was renowned for his modesty,” he relates. “Yet how is this possible, when he’s the only person who spoke to Hashem *panim l’panim*? The answer is that the more you know, the more you don’t know. The little that Moshe saw of Hashem, the more he understood how much he wasn’t able to know. The more I learn, the more I accomplish, the more I see what else I could have done.” ●



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