



Estie Florans

The Classroom Was Calling

*Rebbetzin Malka David reflects on her
new teaching experience*

It had been almost fifty years since she had taught *limudei kodesh* in a girls' high school when she got the phone call. Would she consider returning to teach?

"I need to clarify," Rebbetzin Malka David explains. "I'd been working many years, so although I hadn't taught high school for over 46 years, it wasn't as though I was suddenly returning to work."

Indeed, she had never stopped working, whether it was in her home as a busy wife, mother, and Rebbetzin or through her evolving positions at Yeshivah Tiferes Elimelech. But, she admitted during our interview, it had been a difficult decision and a fearful leap into... something remarkable.

I was fortunate to speak with Rebbetzin David the evening before Taanis Esther, when I caught her in between her Tiferes Elimelech job and the two high school Purim *chagigos*. I discovered that it truly is never too late to start over, that renewal is achievable and gratifying at any age, and that it's restorative for those experiencing it.

Born in Shanghai, China, Malka Krawiec (pronounced Kravitz) was raised in Seagate, the gated community at the southwestern tip of Brooklyn, which is surrounded on three sides by water and lies at the far western end of Coney Island. That physical isolation was reflected by the Jewish resident's sense of separation from the larger *frum* community during the late 1940s and

early '50s.

This gave the family many opportunities to be involved in *kiruv*. "I was raised with a sense of *achrayus*, responsibility for another Yid, to be tolerant and understanding of others. We had some *frum* neighbors, but there were more *frum* people living in Coney Island."

"Coney Island of the famous Cyclone rollercoaster and Wonder Wheel?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes. There were three or four shuls in Coney Island at that time, and two shuls in Seagate. Many of my neighbors in Seagate were Jewish but not *frum*, and then there were those in Coney Island who were religious but not necessarily of the same mindset as my parents. I

knew I was different. My father had a beard when it was unusual for someone to have one, and my parents were always vigilant about our *chinuch* and sheltering us from secular influences.”

Rebbetzin David’s father, Rav Mendel Krawiec, zt”l, a *talmid* of Kletzk, became *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivah Rabbeinu Yaakov Yosef (RJ). Her mother’s father ran the *Vaad Hayeshivos* in Europe working under Hagoon Harav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky zt”l. Her mother grew up closely connected to many of the European *Gedolim*: Harav Baruch Ber Leibowitz, zt”l, Harav Shimon Shkop, zt”l, and the Chazon Ish, zt”l. These strong roots enabled her parents to be steadfast in their children’s American upbringing.

She attended elementary school locally. Her parents’ diligence led them to send their daughter to Rebbetzin Kaplan’s Bais Yaakov of Williamsburg for high school, even though it meant traveling an hour and a half each way.

Rebbetzin David adds, “Girls came from all over: Washington Heights, the Bronx, Boro Park, and the Lower East Side.” One of her neighborhood friends who traveled with her to Williamsburg was Rebbetzin Feige (Stein) Twerski, currently of Milwaukee.

Rebbetzin David speaks about Shabbos in Seagate and Coney Island, and her group of Shabbos friends. “Our *frum chevrah* used to get together Shabbos afternoons. We ran a *Bnos* group for the younger girls. There was me, Debbie (Bernstein) Miller, Reyna (Feller) Hisiger, Miriam (Levine) Brier, Cheryl (Woller) Knobel...”

She graduated high school in 1960 and continued on to the seminary at Bais Yaakov of Williamsburg.

While in seminary, Rebbetzin David gave a model lesson at the Crown Heights branch of Bais Yaakov of Williamsburg, known as the Bais Yaakov of Rogers Avenue, where Rabbi

Yaakov Davidson was the *menahel*. She ended up substituting there and was subsequently offered a permanent teaching position at the school. Her future sister-in-law, Rebbetzin Beruriah David, was already teaching there, as were Rebbetzin Shulamis Prager, Rebbetzin Yona Lederman, and other well-known educators. She was only 18 years old and the only teacher who was single.

“I taught ninth and tenth grade *Chumash* and *Navi*,” she notes, “and in the afternoons I did bookkeeping in an office belonging to a



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anymore...”*

chassidische family, a block away from my teaching job.

“In the beginning, my students tested me, the young teacher straight out of seminary, wondering what I could offer them,” Rebbetzin David speaks of the challenge of teaching high school girls. “They were good, *frum* girls, coming from schools that had high learning standards.”

She taught there for two years until June 1963, when she married Harav Hillel David, *shlita*. Rebbetzin David’s husband learned in *Kollel Gur Aryeh* of Yeshivah Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin in East Flatbush, where they lived.

“Once I became engaged, I stopped teaching, but continued with my office job. In 1964, when I had my oldest, my father, who felt there’d be a future in the Midwood section of Flatbush, suggested that we move there and open a *beis medrash*. We had *bachurim* learning there, as well as a *kollel* and *shul*. When people asked me where Flatbush was, I’d say it was someplace between Crown Heights and Boro Park. No one had heard of it then. Yeshivah Chaim Berlin arrived later; *Mirrer Yeshivah* was in the neighborhood, but further away.”

For ten years she continued being a busy wife, mother, and Rebbetzin...

Then, in September 1975, Yeshivah *Tiferes Elimelech* was established.

“Their first meeting was in our *shul* because Rabbi Rafoel Wallerstein, one of the founders, *davened* with us. Rabbi Moshe Feigelstock, *shlita*, ran the yeshivah from the Upper West Side, where he lived. Two weeks after the school year began, the school still had no secretary. I was hired temporarily to work part time, taking my youngest, then two years old, to work with me each day until they could find a permanent secretary. I brought along a two-ounce jar of coffee to keep there, figuring that by the time I’d run out of the coffee, I wouldn’t be at *Tiferes Elimelech* anymore...”

Rebbetzin David is still there... 37 years later! We both laugh.

She continues. “My job evolved from secretary, to administrator, to fundraiser — coordinating the dinners — to managing the buses and ordering

books, until 25 years ago, when I officially became the English principal of grades one through four.”

“Was this different than teaching Bais Yaakov girls?” I ask her.

“It was a different world,” she responds immediately. “But I had much *siyatta diShamaya* and I worked with phenomenal *rebbeim*, *menahalim*, and teachers.”

Rebbetzin David didn’t have a secretary, worked six days a week, and was there bright and early in the morning when the first buses came in. Twelve years ago, when the school moved to a new building, a full-time secretary was hired, which eased her workload and hours. She continued doing what she was doing, utilizing her skills in *limudei chol* while still connected to the *limudei kodesh* department, unifying both sectors and fortifying future *bnei Torah* to be 24/7 *ovdei Hashem*.

It is her goal that each student learns to apply the teachings of Dovid Hamelech to her own life.

Her father, who had influenced her tremendously, passed away 20 years ago. When her mother had a stroke in Adar seven years ago, Rebbetzin David devotedly spent time with her mother on a daily basis, visiting her each morning before going to her job in

Tiferes Elimelech. That time spent together was enriching for both of them, and when her mother was *niftar* four years later, Rebbetzin David felt a deep void.

Suddenly, this busy bubby, Rebbetzin, and principal had some free time, and she missed her mother terribly.

It was sometime during the next few months, when Rebbetzin Vital Kalmanovitz was in the process of opening a new high school, that Rebbetzin David’s good friend, Rebbetzin Tzippy Weichbrod, principal of the Ateret Torah Elementary School, suggested, “Malka... why don’t you apply to teach in this new high school?”

“Come on, why would anyone hire me? I haven’t been in it for so many years!” was her response.

During that year, one of the teachers at Tiferes Elimelech unexpectedly left and Rebbetzin David filled in, teaching

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the class until a permanent replacement could be found. This required preparing and being in the classroom on a daily basis, something she hadn't done for a long time.

Something must have been percolating in her subconscious, because shortly afterward, when Rebbetzin Kalmanovitz's daughter walked into the school's office to register her twin boys and they got into a conversation about her mother's new school, Rebbetzin David found herself saying, "I have *cheishek* to teach high school girls..."

The next day she got the phone call from Rebbetzin Kalmanovitz, inviting her to join their staff.

"But I didn't have the confidence and I was really afraid," she admits. "On one hand, my husband and children encouraged me to do it — I would teach *Tehillim*, and it would only be once a week. I had the time, so why not? Yet, there were those who warned me that I'm older now, the girls of today are different and might behave disrespectfully.

"One week later I called Rebbetzin Kalmanovitz to tell her yes. I felt that it would be a *zechus* for my mother, who would never leave the house without saying her daily *Tehillim*, and it would fill an emotional void for me..."

Rebbetzin David spent the following summer delving into *sefer Shmuel* in order to learn as much as possible about Dovid Hamelech, the author of *Tehillim*. Then, with the help of several *sefarim* and tapes of the Rav's *shiurim*, she probed further into the words and depths of *Tehillim*, preparing the *perakim* she'd be teaching.

Rebbetzin David set three conditions in order to teach this *Tehillim* class: No homework; complete a *perek* each week; and only two tests per year, with an open *sefer*.

She aims to present a central theme to each *perek*, and tries to end each lesson with a relevant story or parable.

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It is her goal that each student learns to apply the teachings of Dovid Hamelech to her own life.

Rebbetzin David clarifies that she teaches specific *perakim* throughout the year; obviously not the whole *sefer*. She mentions that she isn't a storyteller by nature and that her *hatzlachah* comes from *siyatta diShmaya*, consultations with her husband, the Rav; from the *mechanchim* at Tiferes Elimelech whom she is always learning from, as well as her own daughters.

When she first started, she'd test various ideas on her daughters... and every Wednesday (the day she taught) when she'd walk through the door, the phone would inevitably ring. "Ma, how'd it go?"

Rebbetzin David emphasizes that she constantly experiences unbelievable *siyatta diShmaya* with thoughts and

stories cropping up in her mind, on the way home from Tiferes Elimelech or in the middle of the night, that relate to the *perek* she is teaching. She makes sure to ask the Rav for a *brachah* each time she goes to teach a class, and never enters the classroom without first saying a *perek* of *Tehillim*.

She recalls the important directive Rav Feigelstock imparted throughout the years at the *chinuch* meetings at Tiferes Elimelech: not only to say the right things to the students, but to also avoid saying the wrong things.

"How long do you prepare for each lesson?" I ask.

Long pause. "I prepare over a period of time."

"How about discipline?" I want to know. "How does disciplining girls compare to dealing with boys?"

"With the boys, I could be busy

breaking up fights. You don't have that with the girls."

"Do you feel that there is a generation gap between yourself and the girls?"

"Not really. I tell the girls that I'm a bubby, an *eltera* bubby. I share with them many life experiences, some things that I've observed as a Rebbetzin... Of course, there are differences between the girls 46 years ago and today.

"For example, when we were discussing a *kapitel* *Tehillim* that speaks of Yerushalayim and I asked which girls had been there, around half the class raised their hands. This was a shock to me. To an extent, life is easier for girls nowadays, going to places that were inaccessible years ago.

"Yet, the girls also have a certain *temimusdig'keit* that I didn't see years earlier. They say *Tehillim*, they're involved with learning the *halachos* of *shemiras halashon*, and they display a



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real connection to *ruchmiyus*. I really like the girls,” she says. “I treat them with warmth and respect and they respond in kind.

“And yes... teaching the girls *Tehillim* has filled that hole in my heart,” she says softly. “Of course I still miss my mother, but I’m learning so much. At my age, it’s keeping my brain active. I don’t read notes when I teach, so I have to mull it over in my mind until I know it well. I’ll wake up in the middle of the night, figuring out how I’ll explain something, and even though I’m sometimes tired, the *Eibershter* gives me the strength to continue.

“Like today, while I’m talking to you, I finished putting up my *holepshes*. I’m soon heading out for another Purim *chagigah*. I came home from work at ten to five today. You could imagine how the afternoon is in *yeshivah* with the boys having a masquerade in the morning,” she chuckles. “So each night, I thank

Hashem for getting me through the day.

“I always say *Tehillim* before walking into the classroom,” she reiterates what she told me earlier, but this time adds, “and I advise the girls to do the same... to pick their own *pesukim* so that if they have the need, they’ll be prepared with some that they know by heart.”

I ask her if she could share with us some of her specific *pesukim* and her response is immediate. “*Esah einai el heharim*’ or *‘liyshuascha kivisi Hashem.*’ If I’m walking on an icy street or in a neighborhood that makes me feel uncomfortable, I’ll say, *‘Habotei’ach baShem chessed yesovivenu,*” Rebbetzin David’s voice fills with enthusiasm. She says “In *perek 16, ‘Michtam l’Dovid, shamreini Kel ki chasisi bach’*” — her passion for *Tehillim* echoing through the telephone wires as she explains the words to me. “*Michtam* is a crown. How did Dovid get that crown?

By saying that *passuk* seven times, *‘shamreini Kel ki chasisi bach’* (protect me, Hashem, because I take refuge in You.) The words encircled Dovid like a crown. Isn’t that beautiful?” she exclaims.

“My father said in the name of Reb Chaim Brisker, *zt”l*, that when a person is in a fearful situation, he should say *‘liyshuascha kivisi Hashem, kivisi Hashem liyshuascha...’* If I’m nervous about bad news and especially anxious, I’ll say *passuk 7 in perek 112, ‘Mishmuah ra’ah lo yirah, nachon libo batu’ach baShem...’* I’ll say it over and over again until I feel calm. This is what I tell the girls. Prepare yourself with your arsenal of *pesukim*. In fact, the first day I walk into class, I take out my pocket *Tehillim* and I tell the girls, ‘I want to introduce you to my best friend.’

“Nowadays, the girls are more

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exposed to tzaros than the girls were years ago. Yes, there was communism, but America was a safe country. Israel won the wars of '56 and '67. Today, the world is a more vulnerable place... Then there was no 9/11, no fears of Iran... There are many more kids today who've lost parents. At the same time, the kids want to have a good time. There's all the technology,

with microwaves and instant communication and access to anything — kids today are less willing to work hard.”

“Would you say that by introducing the girls to Tehillim you're teaching them that with Tehillim you could get instant responses?” I ask.

“Yes.” She thanks me for pointing that out. “Tehillim can give you an instant sense of security and comfort...”

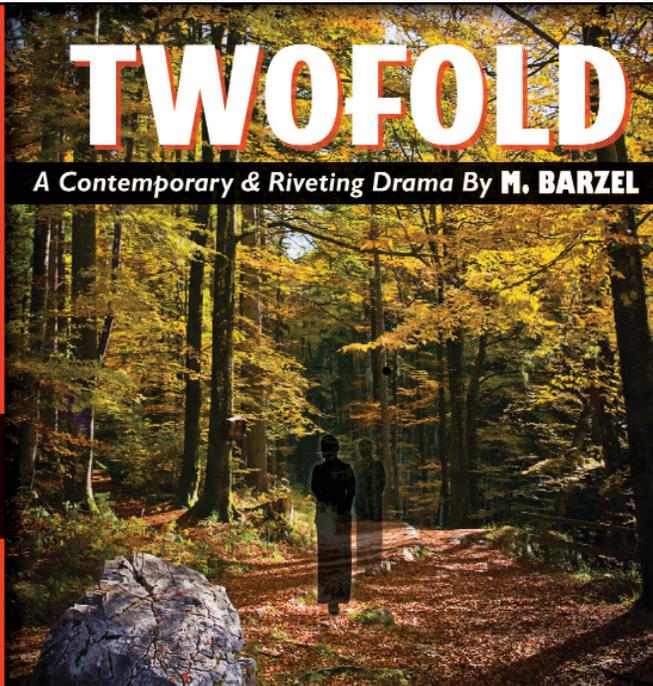
I think about that arsenal she's arming her students with in the two high schools she teaches in. Those pesukim of Tehillim are weapons to fight the spiritual challenges as well as the physical vulnerabilities we're exposed to. They are a cache of ammunition, providing refuge and strength, giving one the ability to start something new at any point in her life. I tell her that I'm grateful to have had the zechus of having her share this

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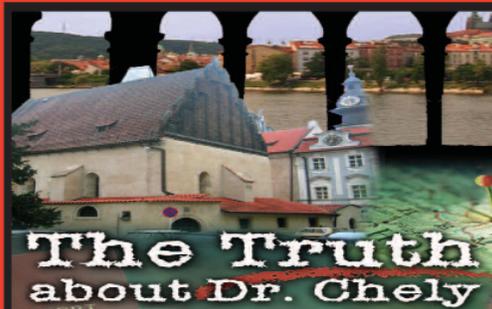
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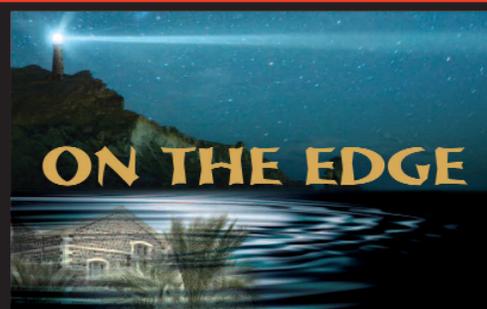


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with me and the opportunity to pass on this message.

"I have been *zocheh* to make phenomenal friends with the parents in the yeshivah and I'm grateful for the *zechus* to be working with *Yiddishe kinderlach*," Rebbetzin David shares. "I could walk in Eretz Yisrael or in Lakewood and former *talmidim* will come over. Sometimes women will suddenly approach me and say, 'Malka Krawiec?' I hear the voice, and look a

bit closer, and realize that I taught this girl 50 years ago. Some of the girls I taught back on Rogers Avenue sent their sons years later to Tiferes Elimelech and we still maintain our relationship."

"And now..."

"Now I have a new world, a group of wonderful girls... a void that is constantly filled." I could almost smell those *holeptshes* through the phone wires, and I could hear the smile in

her voice as she concludes, "I thank Hashem for it all." **B**

Estie Florans, a freelance writer of fiction and nonfiction, is the author of *Conquer the Darkness* (ArtScroll/Mesorah) *Set Me Free* (Feldheim), and the soon-to-be released *Lift Me Higher* (ArtScroll/ Mesorah), a true-to-life, contemporary novel for women and girls of all ages.

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