

the *Heart* has no LIMITS



He's the busy leader of a *chassidus*, but somehow his day stretches along with his devotion. Rav Aharon Yosef Horonchik, the Radoshitzer Rebbe, is also the guardian angel for hundreds of couples going through their own challenging journeys to parenthood. He's their emotional support and medical advisor, but most of all, he's their rock of faith

BY **Dovid Sussman**
PHOTOS **Elchanan Kotler**



It's close to midnight on a Motzaei Shabbos,

but the exuberant dancing in the hotel ballroom shows no sign of abating. Lively music is pumped through the loudspeakers as a large group of men join hands in a circle, together with the Rebbe of Radoshitz, Rav Aharon Yosef Horonchik. The men in the room, a cross section of Orthodox Jewry — chassidim, Litvaks, and Sephardim alike — are a circle of love and support, while on the other side of the *mechitzah*, their wives are soaking up the emotional fervor and inspiration of the evening.

And for a short time, these men and women can forget the pain, the anguish, and the echoing emptiness that are their constant companions.

This Melaveh Malkah is the climax of every Shabbos retreat run by the Radoshitzer Rebbe through his organization Magdil Yeshuos, where couples can enjoy a short respite from the challenges of childlessness that are a constant shadow to their lives.

And for these couples, there is no one who understands them like the Rebbe and the Rebbetzin. For the first 13 years of their own marriage, they were in the same place.

The Rebbe's spartan headquarters on a quiet side street just a stone's throw from the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem's Central Bus Station is adjacent to the Radoshitzer beis medrash, a facility of equally modest size. From this tiny room, Rav Aharon Yosef and Rebbetzin Shifra Horonchik preside over an organization that has assisted countless couples struggling with infertility, offering them practical guidance and emotional support. They are in constant contact with about 500 couples still waiting to be blessed with children — in addition to the many who have already benefited from their assistance in receiving their long-awaited salvations.

The Radoshitzer Rebbe — father figure, faithful friend, sagacious guide, and loyal confidant — is as unpretentious as his office. He wears the glossy *beketshe* of a chassidish rebbe, but his unassuming manner can make you forget you're talking to a distinguished sage. He's affable, down to earth, focused, and incredibly energetic — especially impressive considering he subsists on an unfathomably small amount of sleep.

It's the Rebbetzin, her husband's partner and most enthusiastic advocate, who helps fill out the picture of this unpretentious chesed machine. They are a team, a sort of power couple on a holy mission,



"I spent my days and nights in the beis medrash," says the Radoshitzer Rebbe. "I don't think anyone would have imagined that I'd find this other calling"

and the Rebbetzin emphasizes that the Rebbe spends many days traveling around the world to drum up funding for his organization.

The Rebbe interjects, "Everything that the Rebbetzin says about me is true many times over for her. There's nothing that gives her more simchah than being able to help another childless couple."

Chesed Inheritance The *chassidus* of Radoshitz was founded in Poland in the 19th century by Rav Yissachar Ber of Radoshitz, a spiritual giant who was famed, among other things, for his supernatural feats. The community was almost entirely wiped out in the Holocaust, but it was resurrected in Tel Aviv after the war by a group of shattered survivors who yearned for the spiritual fire of the Radoshitz of old.

Rav Dovid Tzvi Shlomo Horonchik, a scion of the Radoshitzer dynasty and a grandson of the famed Rav Moshe Mordechai of Lelov — his mother's father — was installed as the leader of the *chassidus* in 1984, when he was just 30 years old. Rav Dovid, whose father-in-law was the Shomrei Emunim Rebbe — a *baal mofeis* who had followers of every stripe all over the world — presided over his kehillah in Beit Shemesh for over three decades

until his untimely passing two years ago, when the mantle of leadership was passed to his son, Rav Aharon Yosef.

"It began with my father delivering *shiurim* at his grandfather's shul in Bnei Brak," the current Rebbe relates. "Some of the people who attended his *shiurim* were elderly chassidim who had been part of the Radoshitz community in Europe, and they asked him to renew the *chassidus*. He opened a beis medrash in Bnei Brak in 1987, after the passing of his grandfather, the Lelover Rebbe, but he didn't stay there for long. His natural drive was to seek out a place where there was a void and to step into it. So he relocated to Beit Shemesh, where his presence made a major difference."

Rav Dovid's beis medrash is still there. Rav Aharon Yosef was 16 when his family moved to Beit Shemesh. From his illustrious forebears, Rav Aharon Yosef absorbed many important qualities, but the defining trait of his forebears, he says, was *ahavas Yisrael*. "They taught us to fight fire and water alike for the sake of helping other Jews," he says. His father, Rav Dovid Tzvi Shlomo, was known as a man of great compassion and warmth, a living example of selfless dedication to others.

"Someone once approached my father

before Pesach, revealing that he had no funds to make Yom Tov," the Rebbe remembers. "My father immediately wrote out a check for 2,500 shekels — despite not having a shekel at home for his own family. When another Jew needed his help, he didn't think twice.

"For a while, my father had a number of *mosdos* in Beit Shemesh, but someone took those institutions away from him and caused him tremendous suffering," the Rebbe relates. "He suffered a huge financial loss, as well as devastating heartache. Years later, though, this man had a dramatic reversal in his fortunes. He lost everything, and even had to flee the country. One day, he called to ask my father *mechilah* — and of course my father forgave him. When my brother heard about it, he was quite upset, but my father declared, 'He's a Yid, and one must always forgive a Yid.'

"A different person who had caused him much pain once suffered a heart attack," the Rebbe adds. "When we heard, someone in the family said, 'Finally he's being punished for what he did.'

"My father was horrified. 'No Jew should suffer on my account, even for a moment!' he exclaimed. He disappeared into a side room and began to daven. He wouldn't eat, drink, or talk to anyone until he heard that

the man had begun to recover.”

It took years for Rav Aharon Yosef to realize how his father’s example was preparing him for the mission ahead. Following his marriage to Rebbetzin Shifra, daughter of the Stropkover Rebbe, Rav Aharon Yosef, a budding *talmid chacham*, began married life heading a kollel in Beit Shemesh under his father’s aegis, and later became a rosh yeshivah for his grandfather in Shomrei Emunim’s newly opened yeshivah in Jerusalem. During those days, Rav Aharon Yosef’s life revolved around only one thing — learning Torah.

“I was always perceived as a closed-off type of person,” he muses. “I spent my days and nights in the beis medrash. I don’t think anyone would have imagined that I’d be spending my time doing the sort of things that I do today.

“The truth is, though,” he continues, “that I was always dedicated to the bochurim. Whenever I saw a bochur was struggling, I always did my best to develop a close relationship with him, to encourage him and to give him *koach*.”

The Rebbe’s life seemed to be following a predictable trajectory — he was an outstanding Torah scholar and a premier educator, and his wife, a Bais Yaakov principal. But there was one thing missing from their lives: They were not blessed with children of their own.

Alone Among Friends For 13 long years, the home of the Radoshitzer Rebbe and his wife remained empty and silent. Today, the Rebbe candidly admits, those years of anguish provided him with a keen understanding of the hardships and struggles that face other such couples.

“Everything about it is very difficult, of course — the medical treatments, the injections, the procedures,” the Rebbe relates. “But I think that what is most painful is the sense of isolation. This is especially true for women, who feel increasingly isolated watching friends and relatives raising families, showing up at simchahs and events with babies and talking about



The Rebbe leads a chassidic kehillah, but he’s there for Jews across the spectrum — their differences pale in the face of their shared struggles



their children, while these women continue showing up alone. Wherever they go, they’re looked at as the *nebachs*.”

Based on her own experience, the Rebbetzin asserts that the key to interacting with a couple contending with infertility is to act normal. No one, she says, wants to be pitied.

“Don’t make a point of telling them about different ideas or *segulos*, but at the same time, don’t try to hide your children from them, or pretend you’re not a parent,” she says. “Childless couples know that children exist, and they can sense when others are walking on eggshells around them.”

Then there is the shame and bewilderment of having to deal with intervention in an area that seems to go naturally for everyone else. “The first time I went to a doctor,” the Rebbe says, “it was a very difficult encounter. The doctor told me about a certain procedure, and I told him I would have to ask a *sh’eilah*. He was very offended — he couldn’t understand why I would value a rav’s opinion over his own.”

Today, the Rebbe uses his rapport with many top-tier doctors to ensure that other couples don’t find themselves confronting the same lack of understanding.

It was Rebbetzin Horonchik who initially came up with the idea that eventually developed into their organization. After their first ten years of childlessness, she decided to channel her pain in a positive direction.

“I realized that I had a choice — I could either wallow in my pain, or I could decide to do something positive with it,” the Rebbetzin says. “My inspiration was my own grandfather, the Rebbe of Stropkov, who led a life of enormous suffering. He was a Holocaust survivor who had lost his wife and children, and he was also very ill. But in spite of everything, he always acted as if he’d just won the lottery. He didn’t let his pain overwhelm him. Instead, it motivated him to work for the benefit of others. He overflowed with *ahavas Yisrael* and goodwill.”

And so, the Rebbetzin decided that she would use her own challenges to benefit

“When I saw where this was going, it was clear that this was what Hashem wanted from me”

other women. She decided to launch a support group for childless women, and took out a newspaper advertisement announcing the group’s first meeting.

“I expected only about five women to come,” she recalls. “I was shocked when 40 women showed up. We sat down, started to talk and got to know each other, and we continued talking for *seven hours*. Everyone there felt the same way: Finally, there was a place where they could share their pain and discuss feelings they couldn’t share with family and friends. Within a short time, the group expanded beyond all my expectations.”

Before long, the husbands began asking for similar opportunities to recharge their overtaxed spiritual batteries, and that’s how the idea of a Shabbos getaway was born — and how the Rebbe himself became involved. They may not have realized it at the time, but the Rebbe and Rebbetzin had reached a turning point in their lives.

“We needed someone to inspire the men on Shabbos,” the Rebbetzin says, “and I began making inquiries about inviting various rabbanim. One of the *avreichim*, however, insisted that my husband join us. When we finally convinced him to come, he warned us that he probably wouldn’t contribute much, and that he would spend

most of his time learning.”

In the end, the Rebbe surprised even himself by the impact he made.

“People truly connected to him,” the Rebbetzin remembers. “He spoke for 45 minutes at Seudah Shlishis, and was drawn to the energetic dancing at the Melaveh Malkah — it didn’t take him long to realize that this was his calling.”

Running an organization related to infertility, conferring with medical professionals, and fundraising, were definitely not part of the Rebbe’s plan for his future, but, he says, “When I saw where this was going, I realized that I had no alternative. It was clear that this was what Hashem wanted from me.”

The Rebbe became a source of strength and inspiration for a steadily growing group of couples, and he also found himself guiding couples through the complexities of the medical system, putting them in touch with the appropriate doctors and personally helping oversee their treatments. Eventually, both the Rebbe and the Rebbetzin realized they had to make their grassroots organization a full-time project.

The dramatic shift in their lives surprised everyone — especially their own families. But their commitment was only strengthened by what they considered an unmistakable sign that they were doing what was required of them.

“One year after we began, we were blessed with our first child — completely naturally, without the need for any medical intervention,” the Rebbe says. “After 13 years, we finally became parents! To us, it was a clear message from Hashem, a sign that we were on the right path.”

Today, the Rebbe and his wife are the parents of three children, each of whom, the Rebbetzin asserts, is a miracle in his own right.

The Right Referral Although he’s the leader of a chassidic community, the Rebbe transcends the distinctions typically drawn within our society, as he makes himself available to the entire spectrum

of religious Jewry. Sephardic, Litvish, and chassidish couples alike come together for the organization's Shabbos retreats and other programs, forming powerful, lifelong bonds with the Rebbe and the Rebbetzin — and with each other. Their differences pale in the face of their shared struggles.

The Rebbe's work includes medical guidance and referrals; he has amassed a copious amount of medical knowledge and has developed working relationships with the foremost doctors in the field. And when a rebbe from another *chassidus* finds that a couple in his kehillah is struggling with infertility, he invariably calls the Rebbe of Radoshitz, who is known to pull strings and get appointments with top specialists, even when couples are told they have to wait months.

Today, many doctors in Eretz Yisrael have come to appreciate the Rebbe's knowledge and potential contribution to a case. With a couple's consent, those doctors are always willing to share the details of their treatment plans and to give consideration to the Rebbe's input. And his involvement also ensures that the couples won't have to contend with resistance to their religious sensitivities.

"When a couple consults with a doctor without the backing of someone on the outside whom the doctor respects, the doctor is usually only about 50 percent as understanding," the Rebbe says.

His vast experience means he can direct a couple to the appropriate medical provider. "Every case is its own world, and no two cases are alike," he explains. "A couple dealing with one type of issue must be sent to one kind of doctor, while another couple needs a different kind of specialist."

That's why the Rebbe's expertise has been able to spare many couples from inevitable heartache. "A couple once came to me after being guided by a certain *askan*, but when I examined the case, it seemed to me their problems weren't that serious. They'd spent four years running around consulting with various professionals, but with *siyata d'Shmaya*, I sent them to a

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doctor who would give them the treatment they needed — a regular doctor, not a world-class specialist. Baruch Hashem, the results were immediate."

The Rebbe averages 15 to 30 calls a day from couples seeking his guidance, but he says how they find out about him is a mystery. "We don't advertise at all," he says. That's the power of word of mouth.

And while the Radoshitzer Rebbe has learned much from the physicians he's in touch with, they've learned some lessons from him too.

"One doctor told me he was going to start treatment for one of our couples, even though medically the chances of success were slim," the Rebbe remembers. "I asked him why he would do that, and he said, 'Rebbe, I learned it from you. You're the one who taught me never to turn down someone who asks for help, and that the outcome is not in my hands to begin with.'"

Indeed, one of the key lessons that the Rebbe has instilled in the couples under his care is that they should never give up, that a Jew never loses hope — even when the doctors are ready to throw in the towel. As long as something can still be done, however remote the chances of success appear to be, the Rebbe will continue advocating for more efforts to be made.

He Runs After You Based on their own experiences, the Rebbe and Rebbetzin have made it a priority to give childless couples and opportunity for friendships and social experiences without feeling that they're the target of pity.

"Yom Tov is the most difficult times for people coping with childlessness," says the Rebbe, "and that's why we make sure to arrange an event on every holiday — a Simchas Beis Hashoeivah on Succos, a *mesibah* on Chanukah, and so forth. In fact, last year it was already Chol Hamoed Succos, and we hadn't yet arranged the Simchas Beis Hashoeivah. I already had massive debts to pay off, and I didn't know how I could possibly cover the cost of another event.

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“Then, on one of the nights of Chol Hamoed, a woman called and said to me, ‘Rebbe, that Simchas Beis Hashoeivah is the only thing that keeps me going.’ How could I disappoint her? So I went to the home of a very wealthy man and begged him to let us hold the event in his succah. We scheduled it for that very night, and we put a message on our telephone hotline. I didn’t expect a large crowd to come on such short notice, but over a hundred people showed up.”

But a festive evening is a relatively small expense for the Rebbe to shoulder. His organization also arranges Shabbos retreats at hotels both in Israel and abroad, trips to *kivrei tzaddikim*, and even weeklong vacations in places like the Swiss Alps.

“After these events, we always witness *yeshuos*,” the Rebbetzin affirms. “The success of a medical treatment often depends on the couple’s emotional state. One prominent doctor we’re in touch with tells every couple to go on vacation before they come to him for treatment.”

In addition to the group getaways, Magdil Yeshuos sponsors individual vacations for couples at particularly stressful times, such as after a failed treatment — or even on an anniversary, which can be a time of deep emotional pain.

“When a couple reaches their anniversary, they’re reminded that time is passing and their *yeshuah* still hasn’t come,” the Rebbe says. “We sometimes send couples abroad for a week, or to a hotel here in Eretz Yisrael.”

The funding for all this? The Rebbe has taken it all on his shoulders. He travels abroad at least once a month, although his English is practically nil. So far, it hasn’t seemed to impede him.

“I speak the language of the heart,” he says.

In spite of the crushing burden of fundraising, though, the Rebbe finds the time to remain in constant contact with every one of the couples who rely on him. They know they can reach him at any hour of the day or night.

“There are many helpful people out

there, but most of them you have to chase if you need them,” says Simchah,* who with his wife is on a journey to parenthood accompanied by the Rebbe. “But the Rebbe is the opposite — he runs after you. He’ll call you to ask how you’re doing and to tell you he’s thinking about you. One time, I had something to tell the Rebbe while he was in *chutz l’Aretz*. I planned to call him later in the day, when it was morning in New York, but my phone rang when it was four in the morning there. Of course, it was the Rebbe, who asked me, ‘What’s happening with you? I was so worried that I couldn’t sleep.’”

“I once discovered that the Rebbe, who never asked any of us for a single shekel, was trying to raise \$120,000 for a woman’s medical expenses, despite the massive burden of debt he’d already incurred. But when I expressed my surprise, he told me simply, ‘The human heart has no limits.’”

Eliezer* recalls receiving the Rebbe’s full personal attention at the most surprising times. “I was once waiting for the results of a certain test, and I was very tense,” he recalls. “The Rebbe was leaving for America, and he called me from the airport just before he boarded the plane. As soon as he landed, I received another call from him, and he continued speaking to me while he went through passport control. He excused himself for a couple of minutes to get his passport stamped, and then he resumed our conversation. He sounded as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world to have an intense discussion at a time like that.

“But that’s just the Rebbe,” Eliezer continues. “The very first time I ever talked to him, our conversation went on for eight hours, and it was the first time that I felt totally understood. I remember when my younger sister had a baby, it was a very difficult time for me — we ourselves had been waiting so long. The very first phone call I received was from the Rebbe — he knew exactly the kind of encouragement I needed.”

Say No to Despair How is it possible for one person to become so completely

enwrapped in the needs, the struggles, the hopes and the fears of so many others? Is it merely the fact that he has lived through a similar ordeal, or is there some deeper explanation?

The Rebbe’s faith, it seems, is the first component. “Every Jew, when he is confronted by a challenge, has two options. He can allow himself to be broken by it, or he can allow the experience to bring his potential to life. He can develop latent tools and abilities that he would otherwise never even have known he possessed. That is a reason to thank Hashem for a challenge, rather than resenting it.

“I’m not mitigating anyone’s pain,” the Rebbe qualifies, “and situations can be very difficult, but what personally keeps me going are the successes, the miraculous *yeshuos* that we witness. When we see couples succeeding in ways that cannot be explained naturally, it gives us the strength and the determination to continue our work.”

When the previous Rebbe of Radoshitz passed away two years ago and Rav Aharon Yosef, as his firstborn son, was designated his successor, alarm rippled through the Magdil Yeshuos community, as the couples feared that the Rebbe — who’d been so devoted for the past decade — would no longer be available for them. Now that he was saddled with the responsibilities of leading a *chassidus*, would the organization crumble?

The Rebbe of Radoshitz was quick to allay their fears.

“I learned from my illustrious ancestors that being a rebbe means helping every single Jew,” he assured them.

Indeed, although the Rebbe presides over a shul and a chassidish community, although he is now responsible for *shiurim*, *tishen*, and all sorts of other communal events, the childless couples who rely on him are still his number-one priority.

As Simcha attests, “He’s still there for us at any time of the day or night, whenever we need him.” ●