

Five years ago we moved to a new city. It was a safe, friendly city, with a small Jewish community. So small, in fact, that from the big cities' perspective, they doubted it was even a community at all! But that's how they are in the big cities, so arrogant, and that is why we left the big city. We wanted to live somewhere less complicated. Somewhere cheaper, without the traffic, the pollution, the crime... But nothing in this world is perfect, so we learned.

When we moved to town, the community was indeed small but chugging along. The long-standing shul was called Young Israel. By big city standards, it was a small structure. When you walked in during the services, there were plenty of seats. Lots of seats to choose from. Everyone really had his or her own row, actually. Alas, the Young Israel had once been much bigger, we found out. It once boasted being so packed that "you couldn't find a seat!" they insisted. "People would walk from an hour away just to come to this shul!" they would cry. "A big, vibrant community it used to be!" they would moan. What happened? The demographics seem to show that as the children grew up, the pull of the big city was too strong. The young ones grew and left to stake their own. The empty-nested parents they left behind yearned for their grandchildren and soon followed their lead. Others just moved to Florida.

The congregation at the Young Israel was friendly and accommodating, but they identified what must be the cause of their ebbing membership: eight years earlier, you see, a kollel had started one and half kilometers away. This kollel, the Young Israel claimed, was siphoning off congregants and cutting off the Young Israel's ability to grow.

The claim that the kollel was the poison in the Young Israel well water was hard to substantiate. We knew that we had moved to this city knowing there was a kollel. Dare we tell the grudging Young Israel members that we moved into the house right behind the kollel because it meant that the kollel would be right behind us? It was, a draw for us. We certainly didn't move to town for the Young Israel. As I talked to people in the area – and all many Jews seemed to live in my area – it seemed no one had moved to town for the Young Israel. Most, if not all, had moved to town for the Kollel. Who, then, lived near the Young Israel? It turns out no members actually live near the Young Israel.

By Young Israel's description, we would be led to believe that the Kollel has hundreds of ex-Young Israel members! Going into the kollel, though, you were likely to find on their busiest day roughly two dozen

people. That's it. If Young Israel would get their wish for all of them to migrate over to the Young Israel, every one of them combined would still have their own row in the chapel.

Getting to know the people at the kollel, it seemed this is where they wanted to be. They all felt that if there were not a kollel, they would see no reason for them to stay. So the kollel continued to mind it's own business, and the Young Israel continued to resent it's existence for standing in the way of their success.

The Young Israel was not your "typical" Young Israel. What do I mean by this? Firstly, it wasn't affiliated with the Young Israel movement. This "Young Israel" was not a paying franchisee. For many years, actually, this non-Young Israel but called Young Israel shul has at the helm of it's congregation a Chabad rabbi. A very out of the box Young Israel indeed!

When that rabbi left, the Chabadniks did too. The job of rabbi of the shul was given over to a humble, brilliant and much beloved Torah scholar. So humble in fact, that he felt himself unprepared for the post. He resigned just months after taking the position, feeling he would be unable to build the shul to it's previous stature. Being that the rabbi was much beloved, the congregation scrambled to encourage him to continue as their leader.

While they begged him to remain, however, the Chair of the Young Israel board other intentions. The Chair got himself over to another rabbi in the community and offered him the job. No process, no job post, no search committee, no vote, no trial period. The Chair felt this was the man for the job. Together they signed a contract. Mazel tov.

The only problem was that the community had succeeded in convincing the rabbi that stepped down to continue! Too bad, said the Chair and the new rabbi. The old rabbi resigned and the new rabbi has a contract. It's in writing. Nothing can be done. This rabbi ended up leaving town. He landed on his feet and, because he was also brilliant and beloved, is now the head of a successful kollel in another city.

The new rabbi came from humble roots. His father had been incarcerated, for one. But he did well when he married the daughter of a very rich man. It is hard to be humble, I imagine, when you have a rich father-in-law; everyone thinks you will gain them access to his treasury.

This rabbi was hired to be the part-time rabbi of the Young Israel. He worked during the week as a teacher at the elementary school, and his shul

responsibilities – at least in his eyes – were to be present on Shabbos in shul during the services. He did this job.

The issue was more in the job that he didn't do. He wasn't one to regularly make appearance in shul during the week for prayer, and never to be found for Torah study during the day or evenings. He didn't teach classes or tutor one on one... except for the 20-year-old girl he tutored an awful lot. But who are we to judge other people, it's true, but just as it is safe to think that a basketball player plays basketball when he isn't in the game, and an artist draws when he isn't commissioned to do so, so too it is most expected for a congregational rabbi to be in the services, and learning and teaching Torah daily. But he is married to a rich man's daughter and we mustn't upset him.

As many small Jewish communities do, and this one was, the community was shrinking. People were moving out and not being replaced in the same numbers. It didn't help that the funding of the kollel continued to be cut. It didn't help that the Young Israel building was falling apart and looked quite rough around the edges. I personally didn't mind the ascetics, but I did mind the smell from the gas leak, the leaking ceiling in the bathroom, oh and also the fact that the heat no longer functioning in the women's bathroom.

But the people were really so nice! We were keeping the community alive by our bootstraps! We were all on deck making it happen, and it was a good feeling. My husband and I and our friends and neighbors all felt we had much to offer! We saw our friends struggling in the rat race in the big city. We wanted to entice them to move here.

We decided we should start a campaign to recruit families from other cities to move to our fair community! We had meetings! We got together and we made lists! We listed all the good things about living here! All the headaches we don't deal with that they have in the big cities! We felt confident! We envisioned ads and a website and a three-fold pamphlet in our future! We had a budget! We contacted a graphic designer, we contacted contacts, we had momentum!

Then came the day of the Annual General Meeting for our Young Israel. All the shul members were present, including us. The rabbi and his wife were there, too, oddly. They were not paying members; they were employees of the shul, of this small shul with a precarious future.

The shul's senior South African accountant gets up and presents a bleak report from behind his bifocals:

I belong to a sailing club. It's so nice, so alive, so much going on. There are programs for kids, programs for seniors, for couples, for singles, there is something for everyone! Summer camps, spring break camps, so much socializing. This shul, on the other hand, unfortunately, is not like my sailing club. The shul has shrinking membership each year. We are losing money every month. We cannot cover our basic expenses and we have outstanding costs and no way of paying them. We need a drastic change. We need to get things back to when we were bursting at the seams. People used to walk here from an hour a way! You couldn't find a seat!

This turned into the elegy we had heard so many times before. It seems you just can't return home.

And then a voice from the small crowd: Maybe we need a new Rabbi.

That night the Rabbi sent his resignation to the board. The board called an emergency meeting! What do we do? This is good, right? Wow, we couldn't have asked for a better outcome! The shul is in need of new direction, and now we can do that without the fall-out of firing the rabbi!

The board of the shul writes the rabbi that they are sorry to hear of his decision; the board offers to write a joint letter to the community of his choice and offers to honour him with a kiddish.

The rabbi declines and, instead, decides to tell everyone and anyone who was not at the Annual General Meeting that he was forced to resign because the shul has shamed him horribly... and also that the shul has decided to lower their standards in terms of religious practice, which would be totally beneath this rabbi's standards, so he tells them. Now remember, he is married to the rich man's daughter. Of course he is to be believed! He is rich—oh, I mean, he is so pious! He is so pious and to shame someone so pious is certainly wrong, so if we want his father-in-law's donations—oh I mean, if we want to show our piety, we must all boycott the Young Israel and support the rabbi!

The little Young Israel now loses support in the community. They try to reconcile with the rabbi, but nothing can be done. With every other rabbi in town boycotting the shul (as they rely on the donations of rich people), the townsfolk start to buy the story that the rabbi is telling them and the shul must have done something wrong.

So a breakaway shul starts. Only in starts an hours walk away! The new shul is started by the rabbis who run the boys high school, because they too really want to father-in-law's money—I mean, to support the shamed pious rabbi! They start their new shul in a neighborhood that already had a shul, and boy in this second neighborhood not impressed. Now people who want to support this cause jump ship to support the new minyan. Our Young Israel isn't happy, the other neighborhood's shul isn't happy.

Weeks pass and the Young Israel needs a rabbi. They offer the job to two or three local rabbis. Anyone who relies of charitable donations wont touch the position as they don't want to betray the father-in-law. They decide to offer the job to a good-hearted, spiritual, sefardi scribe. Again, not your typical profile for the leader of a Young Israel, but why break tradition now? He is good, the board thinks; good hearted, capable, likeable. He can teach the Torah and if they find a mistake in the Torah, he can fix the Torah because he's a scribe! Jack of all trades! And local! A search committee for a new post would take months, maybe even a year and who knows what will be left of our shul if we don't do something now!

The Board offers the scribe the job. He says he will not get involved until things are resolved with the previous rabbi. They assume him that they have tried and the relationship is irrevocably damaged. The scribe decides he wants to take on this task. he decides he can feed his family and lead this congregation!

Inside the walls of the congregation, the people loved him! He was approachable, encouraging, listening, participating, helping and present. Outside the shul, however, he found himself ostracized from all his peers. They felt he should not have taken the job. But they have to feel this way whether they feel this way or not. At the elementary school were both the rabbi and the scribe work during the day, the scribe is finding no support.

Oddly, the Sefardi Association for whom he works most minimally decide they do not like that he has taken another rabbinic position, and decide to punish him to reducing his salary. No good deed goes unpunished.

The High School Shul participants are few in number but they are numerous enough to be a drain on the other shuls. They are also investing time to recruit people away from the other minyans, because theirs in much more superior as it supports the pious rabbi who was shamed, as the story goes.

One day one of the high school principals calls up the scribe.

We have found an error in our Torah scroll and we want you to come and fix it.

No problem, says the scribe, I can come. My charge will be \$40.

No, we don't think we should have to pay this fee.

....Um.

Well, you see, the Torah is really a Young Israel Torah. It belongs to your shul, so really we are just borrowing it and it's your responsibility to fix your property.

How do you have our Torah?

The previous rabbi told us we could take it.

Hmm... so you have taken one the Young Israel Torah's... in order to make your own shul for the members who are boycotting the Young Israel?

The scribe calls the Young Israel Board to tell them that their own Torah is being used by the breakaway minyan. But there is a glitch, as always, a conflict of interest. The Young Israel board member charged with dealing with the situation is also a board member of the high school.

The morning of my fifth child's circumcision was a busy one. We had guests from Montreal and Toronto who had come in the night before and others who had driven in early that morning. My husband, Shaul, left to go to shul before me for morning services. I was to follow with the five kids and some guests once everyone was brushed and polished and photo ready.

A circumcision in our small Jewish community is lots of fun. It is common for many families to come and bring their kids. A typical morning services at shul would have no kids, but on this morning the shul was loaded with kids ready for bagels, danish and candies.

About ten minutes after Shaul leaves the house I get a phone call from him:

Ronja, do you remember So-and-so?

Um, yeah... the... convicted pedophile?

Yes, So-and-so the convicted pedophile is in the shul, Ronja. What do I do? I want to ask him to leave. Can I do that? The shul is full of kids, no one is watching them, he needs to leave.

Yes, absolutely! Get him out of there! I love you, thank God you are there to identify him! See you soon, bye.

Wow, I am shocked... and confused... and angry. Why is he here? We knew him from Toronto, where he is a known entity. No one will let him come to their shuls, and since everyone knows him, he is kept far away from children. In Ottawa, no one knows him. What is he doing here?

Shaul hangs up the phone and goes to So-and-so.

You need to leave. There are lots of kids here and you need to leave.

The guy looks at Shaul sideways.

I know who you are, and you need to leave now.

Let me just finish praying. I'll leave right when I'm done.

No, you need to leave now.

He refuses to leave.

My husband goes to the rabbi. Sadly, oh so sadly, the rabbi does nothing. Such a stereotype and a disappointment. The rabbi tells him he has been here all weekend staying at the home of our Do-gooder neighbors. All weekend? Typically, men go to shul every morning, but Shaul had not been

to morning services much that week as he was home helping me herd the kids.

Shaul goes over to the host and tells him about his guests previous criminal accomplishments. Sadly, oh so sadly, the host scoffs and ignores Shaul. This guy has kids at home. We thought he would be a little more moved that this.

My husband tries to pray while keeping an eye on the unexpected guest. He looks over and all of a sudden he is gone. Usually, on the day of his child's circumcision, the father spends the morning in spiritual prayer, preparing himself before we devote our son to God's service and enter our baby into the covenant between God and the Jewish people. My husband spent his morning trying to hunt down a pedophile. Shaul dashed around the shul, opening up offices and looking under bathroom stalls. He ran back and did the circuit again, this time finding me entering with the kids and our guests.

I can't find him. I think he left. I tried to talk to the rabbi and Mr. Do-Gooder but they weren't interested.

Bring him here, I said as I hung up our coats, I want to talk to him.

Shaul brings him over and I try talking to Mr. Do-Gooder. He doesn't speak, he roles his eyes and walks away while I am mid-sentence.

Just then, Mrs. Do-Gooder shows up with a big smile. Mazel tov, she tells me as she embraces me.

Your house guest is a convicted pedophile whom we know from our previous city has tried to re-offend--

I had never seen anyone run so fast in my life. She was gone out the door so quick I imaged a puff of cartoon smoke left behind her.

The show must go on! The guests are here! There are bagels and lox and danish and more danish and carrot cake and sheet cake -- all at 8 am -- because Shaul is so happy for our celebration and he likes cake!

We name our baby Asher, which means "happy" in Hebrew. I love the name, I love the meaning, and I especially love that the name is from my side of the family for a change from our previous three children, all names for Shaul's side.

My ninety-year-old grandmother was present, having come in from Montreal the night before with my mother and my aunt from Calgary.

You named the baby for my grandfather! Ronja, how did you know his name?

Because you've told us, Grandma. Mazel tov!

What's his name, my mother and aunt ask.

Oskar, my grandmother replies. My grandfather's name was Oskar.

Um, no no, Grandma, the baby's name is Asher. Your grandfather's name was Asher.

Uh, yes, but they called him Oskar. Oskar was his English name, Asher was his Jewish name. Hi Baby Oskar, she coos to the baby.

Grandma, his name is Asher.

But his English name will be Oskar--

No no, no Oskar. Just Asher. Asher will be his English name.

She looks confused as to why I am so confused, but there are bagels and lox and danishes and cakes to eat!

I sit down to eat and Mrs. Do-Gooder enters the room with her two daughters. I smile at her a worried smile and she beelines to the seat next to me. She sighs and pulls out her phone.

First I got the girls, she says, and now we Google!

She looks up his name and sure enough the articles are there, the convictions are there.

How can this be? Someone called me and asked if we could host him for the weekend. We didn't think we have to check up on every guest that comes our way!

Who asked you to host him?

Mrs. Here-to-help. He came in to date someone in the community but she couldn't host him because she has someone in her guest room already--

Date someone?? I ask, alarmed? Who would date him?

Well, he told me he wasn't interested in her romantically, but that he really likes her as a friend and he really likes this city and we wants to stay friends with her and visit often and get to know our community--

Uh-huh. This grown man, in his late 30s, unmarried, wants to visit our community often and get to know the locals and stay friends with this girl whom he is not romantically interested in. This makes sense to you?

I don't know, she stammers. You want to help people, you want to do favors for people, you want to trust them. Do I have to worry about every guest?

It's sad, but it's not a perfect world.

We say goodbye to our guests and pack up the remaining bagels and lox and danish and cake. We take pictures, we clean up, and head home.

Perhaps other mothers get to rest with their eight-day-old babies, but I now had to get to the bottom of what So-and-so was doing here.

I call up Mrs Here-to-help and fill her in.

Who did he come here to date? There is no one who would date him.

It's this woman, she's very nice and she really, really wants to get married--

Who is she?

She comes from a very dysfunctional family, I would say she is the most functional of all of them--

Where does she live?

In your neighborhood, in a group home--

A group home? What kind of group home?

A home for people with disabilities--

He is trying to date a special needs person? What is her disability?

She has social issues. She can't really read people well or understand social situations. She has trouble with normal routines, like hygiene, brushing her teeth, bathing, shaving, changing into clean clothes--

So she is special needs, living in a group home, she doesn't bath, shave or brush her teeth, she has social issues; who on God's green earth thought that she was suitable to be dating? She lives in a supervised facility with staff! They thought this was a good idea?

She is online, meeting people. She really wants to get married. She has a social worker to help her. She told me she had been set up with

someone that wanted to come to town to meet her and asked if I could host him. I didn't have space so I sent him to the Do-Gooders.

Been set up with someone? Who set them up?

Rabbi Old Timer

A rabbi thought that these two people would be a good match. Holy God in Heaven!

I guess we are naive to these things in our community. What do we know about these things--

Um, what do you mean? Last year the boys and girls high school shut down and the staff left town in the middle of the night because it was revealed that the principals son was sexually abusing many of the other students and many of the younger children in the community. So yes, I would expect our community to be a little more vigilant.

How quickly we forget.

Shaul ends up speaking with Rabbi Old Timer. He says he had met So-and-so who said he wanted to get married. So-and-so said that he didn't care about external trappings; he didn't care about physical beauty and charms. He is so beyond those trivialities and cares only about a person's internal qualities.... HELLO! What kind of a healthy person, of sane mind, wants to even try dating a mentally, socially delayed person.

I scold them all for having created such an unhealthy situation and for not seeing the writing on the wall. If it quacks like a duck, then it's a duck.

I decide to call the God Father of the community. An older, caring, experienced person who has been on all the boards of every community organisation over the years. He advises me to call the school and have them send out a letter that this person has been to town and is interested to come to town again and we should be aware of his past.

I call one of the board members of the school to tell her what has transpired. We agree to leave it in her hands.

Sadly, oh so sadly, the school decides to do nothing with the information. They decide that since it didn't happen on school property, they don't feel they need to get involved. Sigh.

I call a friend of mine, who happens to be a social worker who was at the circumcision that morning. She tells me that she knows the woman

whom So-and-so came to meet! She tells me she is as unfeminine and unkept and unsocial as it was described to me, and again, how very much she wants to get married.

Didn't she think there must be something very wrong with him for pursuing her?

Well, she asked him why he would consider going out with her--

And?

He said that he has a criminal past which made him undesirable himself.

He told her?? And she was still interested??

He told her that he went to prison for spousal abuse, for beating up his ex-wife.

And that's better?? She was okay with that?? Her social workers and group home staff just let her go out with whoever she wants? This is foolish, and dangerous to have her bring in people like that.

Oy, it's just going to be very hard to tell her about all this, because it's not the first time she's invited to town a convicted pedophile.

Uhhh what?? Not the first time? This has happened before? And people know about it?? They know that she is being set up with pedophiles and this happened again? The rabbi set it up (who, by the way, runs classes for children), Mrs. Here-to-help finds him a place to stay (did I mention she is a kindergarten teacher at the local school) and the Do-Gooders host him with all their kids in the house.

And on the heels of an sexual abuse scandal that rocked the community last year.

- reasons why the previous highschool closed
- merging of the two schools
- how I set up Miriam