

# A Shul With A Story

BY JUDY WALDMAN

## aish St Louis

# CHANGING THE WORLD, ONE JEW AT A TIME



Challah Club



Aish Hebrew School



This is the story of how one person can change the world. It actually encompasses stories of many individuals who not only changed the world of Torah, they showed us how love for our fellow Jew could change their lives as well.

Outreach is the term we use to summarize efforts to bring the beauty of Torah to the non-observant, to draw them into a life of sweetness and goodness to which they were not previously exposed. Aish HaTorah doesn't just define outreach, it helped create it.

Rav Noach Weinberg, *zt"l*, founder of Aish HaTorah, was born on the Lower East Side of New York. He learned in Yeshiva Chaim Berlin and subsequently received *semicha* from Ner Yisrael in Baltimore. His college degree was from Johns Hopkins University and his graduate degree from Loyola Graduate School.

Rav Weinberg's concern for the assimilation of Jews was noted as early as 1953 when at only 23 years of age, he made a trip to Israel to discuss the issue with the Chazon Ish, who unfortunately was *niftar* while Rav Noach was still en route. Rav Noach worked as a salesman for his brother's dry goods company and in his travels throughout the United States, became more aware of the Jews in small towns who were distant from their heritage and religion. In 1966, Rav Noach opened up a yeshiva in Jerusalem, the first of its kind, for outreach. There were many attempts before he and four others founded what would become known as Ohr Sameach. In 1974, Rav Noach founded Aish HaTorah with the goal of creating a place where men could be given a basic Torah education coupled with training to become "*kiruv* soldiers" to help prevent the scourge of assimilation and intermarriage and to help

non-observant Jews connect with the beauty and wisdom of their heritage. The first class of Aish HaTorah had five such soldiers, all *ba'alei teshuvah*. One of these five was Kalman Packouz, *zt"l*.

Rabbi Packouz was born into a multigenerational American family from Portland, Oregon (see "A Shul With A Story: Portland, Oregon" 6-28-19). After graduating college, Kalman decided to travel the world before attending law school. It was his visit to Israel that changed his life – and the world. After working on a kibbutz, Kalman's search for the meaning in Judaism led him to a meeting with Rav Noach Weinberg in Jerusalem. The first of Kalman's long list of noted accomplishments was that he wrote the first book Aish published: *How To Stop An Intermarriage*. That was in 1976 and 6,000 copies were sold. In 1978, Aish published Kalman's revised book entitled *How To Prevent An Intermarriage*.

Kalman wasn't just studying, writing books, or fervently working on outreach, he was also Rav Noach's assistant administrator. Rav Noach had a special ability for finding each student's talents and actualizing them for future outreach – each student was made a lieutenant with specific goals. Kalman's devotion to helping Rav Noach's administration became a job training that served him well in his subsequent work for Aish. While Rav Noach instilled in his soldiers his teachings, his "48 Ways," and supported their self-discovery, he specifically trained his students to be part of the international outreach movement to bring all Jews back. These soldiers were going out to save the world and Rav Noach was strategizing the how, where, and when.

Businessman Kenneth Spetner from St. Louis reached out in 1978 asking for help in stemming the rise of assimilation and intermarriage in his hometown. And it was then, with the creation of the first Aish HaTorah Outreach Center, that everything changed.

Rav Noach asked for a volunteer to go to St. Louis – Kalman Packouz and his wife Shoshana offered to go, along with Chaim Willis whose wife Shelley was from St. Louis. Rav Noach gave Kalman and Chaim six months of training in a *semicha* program and sent them off to teach the not yet observant about their heritage and their religion.

Chaim Willis came from a secular background and, after graduating college from the University of Michigan with a major in Chinese, traveled extensively in Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. While in Jordan, Chaim found out he could get a visa to visit the West Bank of Israel, and that was the beginning of his real journey. At that time, Aish had only been functioning for about nine months and had thirty students. In their first meeting, Rav Noach asked him: "What do you think about Judaism?" Chaim responded by saying that it's a nice culture, to which Rav Noach countered, "When G-d gave the Torah at Mt. Sinai, G-d didn't give a culture, He gave a religion."

Four years later, Rabbi Willis was on his way to lead Aish of St. Louis.

Kalman was the fundraiser and director and Chaim primarily the teacher, but they were both Rav Noach's *kiruv* soldiers. They went to the campus of Washington University and set up tables to engage the Jewish students in conversation, they gave classes at the Hillel