

FEATURE



Thursday Lunch & Learn



The Pursuit of Perfection

House, and Kalman created the Jewish Computer Dating Service, another first.

Rabbi Willis is proud of their three biggest accomplishments. As he noted, "Number 1: we survived! We were the first Aish branch; if we had failed, it would have been a failure for Aish. Fundraising was difficult, we encountered political and territorial issues, and there was no one to learn from, no role models. The success for Aish was a critical one. Number 2: We were able to be *makarev* people. It showed that people who started out with no knowledge of Judaism were able to reach out and show the possibility of change to others. Some of those that became observant left St. Louis and are now in Baltimore, Detroit, Passaic, and other Jewish centers." Rabbi Willis is still in touch with many of them today.

"The third accomplishment was that Aish St. Louis not only proved successful, it set up a basis for other Aish centers. It established something permanent." And that permanence is reflected in St. Louis today.

The history of the Jews of St. Louis began with Joseph Philipson who moved from Philadelphia in 1807 to open a general mercantile store. His brothers soon followed. Unfortunately, they left no descendants in the city. It wasn't until 1836 that the first *minyán* was formed. Bais Avraham was established in 1894 with twenty-four families and was followed in 1901 with the establishment of Nusach Hari B'nai Zion by Russian immigrants growing the population to forty families. In 1905, the Jewish population of St. Louis was about 40,000 out of a total population of 575,000. Currently, in a city of three million, about sixty thousand are Jewish.

Metropolitan St. Louis boasts six Orthodox synagogues. Approximately thirty percent of the Orthodox community today is involved because of Aish HaTorah's non-judgmental approach to inspire. Aish HaTorah has also lit the fire of Judaism for those who are not yet observant, but are involved in other Jewish community organizations.

Rabbis Packouz and Willis were at Aish of St. Louis from 1979-1982 and were followed by Rabbi Dov Heller, another Aish success story. Dov Heller was a secular Jew who got involved in Christianity, so involved that he became a lay pastor who enrolled as a

student at Harvard Divinity School. On a trip to Israel, Rav Noach convinced him of his mistakes and Dov Heller became a *talmid*. He was followed by Rabbi Elazar Grunberger who was there for twenty-five years.

For the past twelve year, the director has been Rabbi Yosef David, whose outreach background included The Heritage House Kiruv Institute, involvement with the community and college while at the Cincinnati Kollel, and a founder of the community *kollel* in Memphis.

Along with Rabbi Shmuel Greenwald, the Director of Education who has been at Aish St. Louis for almost twenty-five years, Rabbi David tries to connect and inspire community members, young to old, primarily focusing on suburban families.

Aish HaTorah of St. Louis offers programs for all ages. The monthly Friday night *Shabbat* dinner with a Learner's Service usually has about sixty participants. A *Tefillin* breakfast is offered monthly covering topics like *Shema* – it has 10-15 attendees. The children's Sunday School has thirty-five students. The adult Sunday School, held simultaneously, is a productive use of parents time and gives the message that learning is important for the parents too.

Rabbi David says, "What we try to do is educate and inspire – we don't judge; what you do with it is up to you. My goal is to put myself out of business. If every Jew is inspired, learning, and growing, then I would no longer be needed at Aish."

Rebbitzin Mimi David is Director of Women's Education and offers classes on the holidays, *mitzvot*, holds a lunch and learn program, and leads an Emenah Workshop. She takes ladies on an educational and inspiring trip to Israel, and so far, over two hundred and fifty women from St. Louis have participated.

Back to the original *kiruv* soldiers. Rabbi Willis returned to Jerusalem for a few years and then moved to Johannesburg, South Africa where he has been the Director of Aish for twenty-one years. In 1982, Rabbi Packouz and his family moved back to Israel where Kalman became the Executive Director of Aish, a position he held for eight years.

In 1990, Kalman and his family moved to Miami Beach where he opened the regional office of Aish

HaTorah. In 1992, he wrote his first "Shabbat Shalom Weekly." The newsletter was a compilation of Jewish facts, commentary on the *Parsha*, and chock-full of humor, stories, wisdom, witticisms, and touchy-feely stories with a message. In the beginning, Kalman had fifty initial fax subscribers. Always on the cutting edge and embracing technology, Kalman expanded to the e-newsletter. Today, the Shabbat Shalom Weekly reaches more than 300,000 subscribers – and for many, it is their only Jewish connection.

Aish HaTorah created a website in 1997. When Kalman Packouz invented Window on the Wall, Aish HaTorah's 24-hour webcam, USA Today featured it as Internet Site of The Day, putting the Aish website on the international map. Window on the Wall has been featured on CNN, MSNBC, and in the New York Times. Not only does the webcam show the *Kotel* in real time, live action, one can type a note on the Aish website and an Aish student will print it out and place it in the Wall. To date, it has generated more than twenty million visits.

Rabbi Kalman Packouz, who was *niftar* this past November, was a kind, gentle, and sweet man, a techno-inventor who was always optimistic and showed his *emunah* in his smile. He believed in expressing gratitude and influenced others to always find the good in everything and everyone. Kalman had so many one-liners for living a Torah life; one of my favorites is "Being kind is more important than being right." Kalman's unconditional love for every Jew was felt throughout the world. He didn't just change the world one email at a time, one webcam click at a time, he did it one smile at a time.

Rav Noach and his *kiruv* soldiers have proven that one man can change the world. Just ask the Jews of St. Louis.

Judy Waldman is a freelance writer who writes for magazines, newspapers, and websites. She is also available as a motivational speaker. She can be reached at jwfreelancewriter1@gmail.com.



The Jewish Women's Society of St. Louis led by Rabbi David's wife, Mimi.