



RUTH ZAKOWSKI

Ruth, would you tell me a little about your background?

I came from New York, and my parents are Holocaust survivors. Girls didn't go to day schools or shul when I was growing up. I don't know how much my parents believed in God after the war, yet there were always the holidays and traditions.

After Jack and I got married and had kids, it seemed important to belong to a synagogue. When we were up in Davis, California, there was one shul for the college in Davis. Then we moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, and again there was one shul for the whole community. It was Reform, but it had to accommodate Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.

Then we moved to Anaheim. Synagogue life was always important. We had two children at that point; Aaron was five, and Rebecca was two, and so we moved to a neighborhood where we were close to a synagogue. Temple Beth Emet in Anaheim was the oldest Conservative shul in Orange County, and we lived within walking distance there.

When David Eliezrie was sent here, he had nothing. It was a challenge--especially in Orange County where so many Jews weren't affiliated. At that point there were just two shuls: Beth Emet and Beth Sholom in Tustin. Now there are over 20 shuls in Orange County.

He had his first shul in Anaheim, in several locations in the Euclid, Brookhurst, Cerritos area.

How did you first come to know Rabbi Eliezrie?

He started a preschool at the Jewish Community Center in Garden Grove. That was where I met him and then his wife Stella. My daughter Rebecca went to preschool there at the age of two years old and for the next two or three years afterwards.

I always liked the Eliezries, and we're still very close. Even though I belonged to Temple Beth Emet, and even though it was something very different than what I was used to, I always supported, and on occasion would come, to David's shul.

The Eliezries are almost family. Jack and I and my family have influenced his children and he's influenced my children. My children saw more Yiddishkeit at their house, and their children saw a more secular leaning at our house.

Our house has actually become more and more kosher as my son became more and more observant. So, even though both of my kids got raised at Beth Emet, which is Conservative, David had a big influence on both of my children. The preschool was important, and eventually Rebecca went

through third grade at the Hebrew Academy. My son Aaron went to the Hebrew School when they had it at the old yellow house and experienced being in an Orthodox shul. David guided him and took an interest in him. Our families are still friends.

Let's talk more about Rabbi Eliezrie. How would you describe him as a rabbi and as a teacher? What's special about him?

He truly cares. I have seen so many people come in and out of his shul through the Eliezries' house. They are so open, and so caring about people. They turn no one away. It amazes me how they can open up their house, and the family, to these people. It's usually people in need and searching for something, and once they've got their life back together and everything's good, they leave. I always think how hard that would be for David, but it doesn't seem to be an issue at all for him. He just cares about helping.

The Eliezries care about Judaism, but they're not preachy. The Chabad philosophy is that they want you to do one more mitzvah than you did before, so they're happy with the

baby steps in addition to the leaps that they see.

I've seen so many people grow from non-observancy to being observant, and to where Yiddishkeit becomes meaningful in their lives. It's really been a privilege watching it. I know we've all grown, you know, just being associated with them.

He's a good teacher. And he cares about you; I think that's the biggest thing.

A couple of years ago Rebecca was in India, and she had some serious problems there. Stella and David were there to help us. They know everybody everywhere. It was a 36 hour ordeal. There was never any question - they were there for us and for Rebecca. We really appreciated their help.

Spiritually, I already know who I am, but they've been there for our children. I told David that Aaron's going on a journey which is hard for me. I've got a kid that's now Orthodox. And if that's the journey that he wants to take, that's fine, but you can't take him there.

Aaron lives in New York now, and he's lived in Israel. When he was at home, he came here for shul, and he would walk two miles on Shabbos.

When my kids were young, we could be doing Little League, and soccer on Saturday, and then we would come from our soccer game to the Eliezries' house, and the kids would play with them for the rest of the afternoon. So we had the best of all worlds.

Is there anything else that you want to say about Rabbi Eliezrie?

David has so much energy, and such conviction in what he does. He knows that he's doing God's work, so he has no qualms about asking anyone to help further his goals. He can do that because he has a strong belief that what he's doing is for people's benefit, whether he's going to go out there to build a shul or whatever type of fundraising he has to do. He's always guided by knowing that it's the right thing to do. For years and years, he ministered to people in the jails. For him, a Jew is a Jew.

He's very dynamic. I remember in the beginning for Purim there wasn't any place to

have a Purim party at the old shul, so he had it at the Yorba Linda Community Center and drew a huge crowd from the larger Jewish community.

Another time, he put together a Jewish Law Conference. He brought together lawyers from all over Southern California. Somehow, he arranged to even bring the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia! Now that was very impressive!

Now he has raised his children to carry on his work. Their daughter Naomi is married to Levi, who is an ordained rabbi. So here are two very capable people who add to the shul. His middle son Shuey grew up in this community and has now been ordained and is now trying to build up a community in Tustin. So Chabad grows and David's vision and commitment spreads.

Do you think Rabbi Eliezrie has an impact beyond this shul?

He does things for the entire Jewish community, such as insisting on certain standards for kashrut and Shabbos at the JCC. He never wavers from his beliefs and

his principles, and he forces the more liberal institutions here to have similar standards. For instance, if you're going to say something is a Jewish institution, it shouldn't exclude Orthodox people by not having a kosher kitchen or by doing things to desecrate the Shabbat.

On a national level, he's also made institutions like the Jewish Federation more aware of how to deal with Chabad, which is a very growing, dynamic movement. He's constantly facilitating more communication between Chabad and other Jewish groups. He attends meetings in Washington and New York all the time, because he is someone who can speak to many different levels of Jews. They can talk to him and he understands them and where they're coming from. In that way, he makes sure that they'll be more inclusive of all Jews.

He writes articles regularly in national Jewish periodicals and sends letters to the editors in the *Times* and *Jerusalem Post*. He is very articulate and writes very eloquently.

I think he's well-known for his astuteness in terms of publicity and marketing and he's frequently asked to consult on such things at

the national Chabad level. Often, they'll pull him in because he just is able to communicate well to a more secular Jewish, or the Gentile community, whether it's politicians or leaders.

In what way are you involved in the shul?

Even though we belong to another shul, we belong here, too. Even though we're not Orthodox, and this is not the way that we daven, we feel comfortable enough in this shul to stay affiliated and to belong here.

Back when we were in Anaheim 20 years ago, we started coming to David's Sukkot celebration. It's like *the* event. Years ago it was much larger, but even here, this place is packed. The Chabad services are up lifting. There's always dancing and music. David is always up, and many of us are just not used to seeing that in all rabbis. He's the first one out there and the last one to leave.

How does the rabbi help people who are not Orthodox feel comfortable in this shul?

He does worry about it. He wants us to feel comfortable here. Every so often, he'll put in an English prayer. Or he'll slow down so we

can catch up with him. I think they call out page numbers more, so that we can catch up with them, so we know where to flip our pages to.

David does great sermons! Whether it's about a Lubavitch rabbi or whatever, he brings up meaningful topics that everyone can relate to in their daily lives. You walk away feeling inspired after hearing him. At the end, he announces upcoming events and encourages people to attend them. Also, he's got so many goals for this community, yet he always makes the time to prepare a sermon for Shabbos and even research commentaries for the Torah study in the morning.

Any Jew who happens to be in this area and needs a place to go for Shabbos, this is where they go. For example, if someone has a conference nearby and they observe Shabbos, they can call David. And they always have a place to stay at their house.

Could you say something about Stella Eliezrie?

Stella has ministered to so many people - especially women coming to her to talk about children's issues or anything else. It's

constant. I've watched this and thought, "Oh God, Stella, how do you do this?"

Stella is such a loving woman. She grew up Conservative, and so she became a Baal T'shuvah. She's extremely smart, extremely knowledgeable and educated in terms of Judaism. She's very giving and very supportive.

Before they started the community Passover Seders here in the shul, they would invite up to forty people to their home for both nights of Pesach. I don't know how she did it!

Is there anything that you remember about the old, yellow shul years ago?

The old yellow house was just a transition to the next step of development. It was the beginning step in David's vision for our community. It symbolizes what you can build from modest means



Before construction begins, an empty lot filled with expectations for our new building.



Rabbi Eliezrie surveying the lot during grading, prior to excavation for the foundations of the new building.



Preparation for the new foundation



The concrete slab for the new building, just after being poured

