
 AN INTERVIEW WITH

Dr. Leah Adams

One of the questions I am most frequently asked is, “Where do you get your ideas from?”

My standard answer? “Everywhere.” No matter where I am, whether at a *simcha*, my exercise class, or even in the supermarket, I keep my eyes and ears open. Often a good story will come your way when you least expect it.

In the case of this week’s interview, inspiration came in the form of a request, which I regretfully declined. I had been at the Northern Metropolitan Home for Adults, visiting my good friend Chaya Friedman, when a lively lady with a warm smile introduced herself. Dr. Leah Adams, also a good friend of Chaya’s, is a frum psychologist who’s worked in *Hamaspik*, *Yedei Chesed*, the Northern Metropolitan, as well as in private practice. She is also the mother of a large, blended family, a proud grandmother, and a *baalas chesed* involved in numerous activities. Her costume *gemach*, containing racks of all types of costumes under the sun, is another Monsey landmark.

After being introduced Dr. Adams, she got to the point, inviting me to be a guest on her weekly Jewish radio talk show, which airs Wednesdays from 1-2 p.m. Although due to schedule constraints I was forced to decline, I was intrigued by the idea of her show, and

the

personalities she’s interviewed. “Let’s make a deal,” I said to her. “Instead of you interviewing me on the show, how about if I interview you?”

And so the seed for this interview was born.

During subsequent conversations with Dr. Leah, one of the busiest women I’ve ever met, I learned just how many roles she juggles with aplomb. Mother-stepmother. Grandmother. Psychologist in private practice. Talk-show host. Owner of a busy *gemach*. And that’s only the tip of the iceberg.

Our interview took place on the phone, in bits and pieces, during an afternoon snowstorm that stranded our respective kids in their schools until late in the evening. Dr. Leah was relaxed, witty, and easy to talk to. She was born in New Orleans, where her father, Rabbi Chaim Lipman Zev Rabinowitz *zt”l* was in

Rabbonus.

The family later moved to Cleveland Ohio, where she attended the Hebrew Academy. As Dr. Leah explained, “In those days there was one day school, and so my class was comprised of girls from all different backgrounds. This fostered a sense of tolerance and acceptance, a feeling that we all belonged no matter the differences.”

This attitude has served Dr. Adams well as she has been involved with all types of people through the years. “Though we all have our differences, I work on the premise of our sameness as human beings.”

While she was still in *Yavne* High School, Leah was known as the ‘logical problem solver,’ the girl to whom everyone turned when they had a problem. Thus, after she returned from seminary in Eretz Yisroel, her



“The other key is this: We often measure accomplishments based on how close they reach one hundred percent. There is a flaw in that thinking, because, in reality, achieving anything above zero is an accomplishment. As soon as I recognized this, I saw everything in a different light. If you have a child who was not able to feed himself and now holds food in his hand, don’t see this as below a certain standard, see it rather, as a step up from whatever this child was doing before.”

Leah got married and gave birth to her first two children while still in the psychology doctoral program. In fact, she graduated a week after her second son’s *bris*.

She described it as a juggling act, which, as a working mother, I can totally relate to. “I’ve always been a hard worker, but taking care of young children, while finishing the intense program, was a challenge.”

Yet Leah’s greater challenge, becoming a single parent with four young children, was one that she handled with inner strength. When the *shidduch* with her husband, Avi, a hands-on father of five children was suggested, she was eager to share the responsibility of raising a large, blended family. *Boruch Hashem*, she took the plunge thirteen years ago, and - with what could only be described as ‘Heavenly humor,’ she and her husband were blessed with twins!

Their family, consisting of ‘his,’ ‘hers’ and ‘ours’ is so close-knit, strangers have a hard time believing that they are, indeed, a blended family. Today, four of the children are married, and bring their parents much *nachas*.

“Our family life resembles the book ‘*Cheaper by the Dozen*,’” Leah laughs.

Leah’s sense of humor and delightful relationship with her children - all of them - is evident as she interrupts our conversation to banter with them, discuss who’s getting the car, or when supper will be ready. “Every child is his or her own world, and we have to understand that,” Leah explains. “What works for one child won’t work for another. In my professional capacity, sometimes I see parents who try to put their children into a mold which isn’t meant for them. You can’t force children to flourish in an environment that isn’t conducive to their growth.”

Leah was involved with a local school that opened for young women who needed a less-intense school environment, and has contributed her time and talents to their after-school activities. She states unequivocally that the most important values to teach children and young ladies, regardless of their background or needs, is *hakoras hatov*, or appreciation for all that is done for them. “Only a child who is taught to appreciate what they are given can grow and benefit from what they have been given,” she stresses. I couldn’t agree more.

decision
to study
psychology
was self-
evident. “I didn’t

go through the angst
of some of my friends,
who were trying to decide what

to major in. I knew I wanted to be
a psychologist. The only thing I hadn’t

learned yet was the key to wisdom, which is
silence! In order to be successful in this line of work, you
have to talk less and listen more.”

In the summertime, Leah worked at Camp
HASC, with the special-needs population. “A
roommate of mine at Stern had worked at Camp
HASC. She loved it so much, and was so excited to
talk about her experiences that I had to apply.”

It was this early experience that set the stage for
Leah’s involvement with the special-needs population
in her professional career. She has worked for *HASC*,
ARC, *Yedei Chesed*, *Hamaspik*, and *Chesed 24/7*,
and hosted special-needs children in her home.

“People sometimes ask if it is difficult or painful to
work with someone who is profoundly handicapped,”
Leah remarked. “I have found two attitudes that are
the keys to happiness in this field. First of all, if ‘all’
I do is make someone smile, even once, from a new
found happiness, then I feel that I have accomplished
something that Hashem wants me to do.

Over the years, Leah’s work as a psychologist
has run the gamut, from the elderly and frail to the
very young. “The challenge in working with elderly
individuals in nursing homes is that we meet them at
a time when they have lost their independence, and
with that, many have lost their *joie de vivre*. I worked
on reminding the staff that each individual had their
own life story. . . that many of the residents had jobs,
families, hobbies, worries and joys much like the rest
of us. Their lives were likely filled with all sorts of
experiences and ideas, besides for medical concerns.

“When you are able to visualize the elderly
residents in this manner, it is easier to respect them, to
relate to them as people, and easier to empathize with
their pain. Just asking someone for their opinion can
be very uplifting. Just think, in the facility individuals
must follow a set schedule for medications, bathing,
therapy and meals. They must eat what is being
served (maybe a choice of two) and don’t have the
opportunity to peruse the aisles of the grocery.”

Dealing with special-needs children is another
challenge, one which Leah finds particularly
rewarding. “Several years ago, I received a phone call
from a local Jewish agency about a child in Blythedale
Children’s Home,” she recalls. “They got my number
because I had provided respite care for another child
on a feeding tube. They told me there was a baby
with Down Syndrome, who was on a feeding tube,
and needed a home. Would I be willing to take care
of him temporarily?”

Leah didn’t think twice. The infant boy remained
in their home for a short while, and was lovingly
cared for. However, his multiple medical needs caused
him to be hospitalized for an extended time. “I still
remember his sweet smile,” Leah says. “That little boy
needed love, and we were fortunate to be able to give
it to him.”

Since that experience, they’ve provided respite care
for a number of other children, and were actually
approved by the State as a ‘two bedded facility,’ able
to accommodate two foster children at once, when
their twins, a boy and girl, were born! Today they are
adorable eight and a half year olds (going on 47,) who
fill the Adams home with light and joy.

Today, Leah works a psychologist in private
practice, with one caveat: unlike many other from
psychologists, she accepts most insurance plans,
because she wants to make this vital service affordable
for those who need it most. “Just because you are
charging for something doesn’t mean it’s not a *chesed*,”
Leah stressed. “Sometimes the biggest *chesed* you can
do is help someone maintain their self-respect, by
paying an affordable fee for the service they need.”

Some people have a financial portfolio and a stock
broker. Dr. Adams says she has a *chesed* broker. “A friend
of mine is a tremendous *baalas chesed* and finds out
ways that people need help. She keeps me in the loop

and calls me with assignments.

"Olam Chesed Yiboneh, the world is built on chesed. We benefit from the system in some ways and put back into it in other ways. It's a system that works by recycling kindness. For example, my husband and I met through the kindness of some shadchanim and so, after we got married, we did shadchonus for a while. At one point my husband was hospitalized and received blood and since then, we donate blood regularly."

She is proud of her children's pursuit of *chesed* and encourages others to get involved too. Her advice? If you have some free time one day, call various charitable organizations to see if they need help. "People are afraid to commit themselves but even if you have a few hours, just one time, it can help." She also adds, "When you make a *simcha*, remember to call the food banks or local yeshivas afterwards to donate the extra food."

The power of unity is in evidence every Sunday morning at Dr. Adams' home. For over ten years, she has had a *Tehillim* group comprised of neighborhood women. "It is very empowering to sit and daven with the group and realize that we can make a difference in the lives of *cholim* or those seeking a *shidduch*. While each of us on our own would find it difficult to finish the *sefer*, together we manage to do it almost every week."

Dr. Adams also lectures in numerous hotels and weekends, and has given *shiurim* in various

communities. "It's exciting to be approached after a lecture and hear how the audience has been impacted," she says.

Though she obviously has a lot on her plate, Leah is a steady writer for the Front Page Magazine, where her column, "The Healthy Mind," is published every other week.

"When Mr. Saperstein came up with the title of the column, I was a bit nervous - I'm not so sure that my mind is always the model of healthy!" Leah jokes.

One theme that resonates in Leah's articles is that we're all human beings, with our own strengths and weaknesses. No one is perfect, and it's okay to take a step back and laugh at yourself.

"I've had a lot of positive feedback about the articles. The greatest compliment that I ever got was that I am 'real', the readers feel that I relate to their lives and so they can relate to mine. Sometimes readers even contact me to write about certain issues."

It was Leah's articles in the Front Page that garnered her an invitation to host her own weekly talk show. "The director of the station called me one day, and asked if I was interested in being a talk show host. I had no idea what that involved!" With her customary enthusiasm she jumped right 'into the deep end,' last April, and it's been a whirlwind ride.

Over the past few months, she's interviewed fascinating personalities, including Ahuva Gray, a former Minister-turned-*giyores*, Devorah Heller, the *Challah maven*, Miriam Shiffer, a well known shadchan, Esther Strasser, a survivor from Hungary with a gripping tale, Perel Grossman, a humor columnist, and many others."

She even interviewed Elli and Chaya Friedman, the stars of my book, *Yes I Can!*

"My biggest challenge in preparing for the weekly show is networking, finding people to be interviewed," Leah says. "The technical aspect of being on the air and being an effective interviewer I sort of learned on the job."

Between her private practice, writing, talk show host and being Mommy to her large family, Dr. Adams has her hands full. Yet in her 'spare time,' she sings, and has performed for the RCDC senior's club and local school talent shows. Her main hobby, however, is to run a free costume *gemach* in memory of her father.

"He would be happy to see me make people smile. His *yahrzheit* is on *Tu Beshvat*, a fitting time for this article," says Leah.

"The *gemach* started small, and worked its way up. I'm a 'thrift store junkie,' and have picked up some amazing *metzias*. We've got over 20 racks of clothes, hundreds of sheitels and hats, forty pairs of shoes, ties, everything!"

The thrill of making others happy gives her a real adrenaline rush. Though Purim is a busy season, the costume *gemach* is open year 'round, as many schools come to borrow costumes before their productions. Likewise, summer camps keep her extra busy from June through August.

"Some of my costumes have done extensive traveling, to Camp Simcha, to California with Kids of Courage, to Nevada and even the Ukraine on Kiruv missions. I once lent a boy a *Kohein Gadol* costume - he had lost his father, who was a *kohein*, so this costume was especially meaningful to him.

"By the way, I can't resist a sales pitch - if anyone has costumes to give away, we would love to accept donations. After all, your friends won't necessarily think to call you if they need a costume in an emergency, but we get hundreds of calls a year. On a recent regular Sunday, I was down at the *gemach* five times!"

What is a costume emergency, you might ask?

"You know, when your child remembers to tell you after dinner, right before bedtime, that they were supposed to be a character for school the next day and you have nothing in the house and the guilt sets in... That's a costume emergency. In reality I don't like when people call too late at night, but I understand their situation."

Leah and her entire family dress up each year on Purim, and their costumes are famous in their Olympia neighborhood, which she describes as "warm and welcoming, like an out-of-town community."

"One year, my husband and I dressed up as magicians, because we 'pay the bills from nothing!'" Leah joked.

Being the mother of a large blended family certainly keeps Dr. Adams busy. "There's always something going on, B"H, a *Bar Mitzvah*, PTA, wedding, doctor's appointment, Bnos event, stitches, performance, and, of course, the never ending saga of homework! It's amazing how much has to be squeezed into a 24 hour day."

Dr. Adams credits her husband, Avi, for supporting and encouraging her. "He is often the thinker behind some of my writing, lectures and what I address on the show. He recognizes both my strengths and weaknesses, and makes a great editor of my work! In addition, my parents inculcated my brothers and I with a strong sense of communal obligation and organizational skills. My in-laws, as well, exude this sense of community involvement."

Speaking with Dr. Leah was like a 'breath of fresh air,' providing an insight into the life of a busy professional and devoted mother, who manages to juggle so many balls and make it all look easy.

Perhaps her most valuable accomplishment, I realize, is her *'shem tov'*, and her genuine desire to help a fellow Jew.