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Benjamin Netanyahu addresses AIPAC the day before his speech to a joint session of Congress.

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Media Savvy

Personable rabbi goes beyond typical outreach.

Shelli Liebman Dorfman
Contributing Writer

Rabbi Herschel Finman was almost a Buddhist. It was at the top of his list as he seriously investigated other religions



Rabbi Herschel Finman

and philosophies while surrounded by siblings making highly unusual choices in a family of traditional Jews. “By the end of the 1970s,” Finman said, “I would have three brothers, one a Buddhist, one a macrobiotic hermit, one a hippie rabbi; and three sisters, one a junkie, now clean and working as nutritional expert; one a member of a nefarious Christian cult, now, thank God, married to dentist and working as a colonics expert; and one a punk rocker,

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Local couples find closeness, satisfaction with decision not to have kids.

Barbara Lewis | Contributing Writer

First comes love, then comes marriage, Then comes baby in a baby carriage.

For centuries, that’s been the normal progression, but the times they are a-changing.

Many couples are postponing parenthood or choosing to forego it altogether. They’ve even coined a new term for their condition: *childfree* as opposed to *childless*, which implies their life is missing something.

Michael Hildebrandt, 35, and Jessica Camp, 33, of Fenton are among them. They’ve never wanted to be parents and are very happy with their childfree life.

Having children “was never on my agenda,” said Hildebrandt, a nurse at the University of Michigan Health System in Ann Arbor. “It’s just not something I want to do. It doesn’t fit into the lifestyle I want to live. I could never see myself with kids.”

His wife agrees, though her medical history contributed to

her decision. She’s an only child; her late mother had numerous miscarriages before she was born and suffered clinical depression. Camp has health concerns of her own that would likely have made it difficult to conceive and carry a child, and she didn’t want to repeat her mother’s experience.

“I knew I probably wouldn’t be able to have kids,” said Camp, an associate professor of social work at University of Michigan-Flint.

Discussing one’s intention to be childfree is a delicate subject when dating.

“I would always bring it up early in a relationship,” Camp said. “It’s a tough topic of conversation. Some guys I dated just expected I would have kids and stay home.”

For some, the decision to be childfree includes concerns about overpopulation.

“I feel there are enough people in the world and too many of them are having kids that shouldn’t,” said Miles Stearn, 39, a ceramics artist who lives and works in Berkley.

“I didn’t feel it would be responsible bringing a life into this world, not knowing for sure if they would end up happy.”

Stearn feels many people have children to accomplish what they themselves cannot.

“I really don’t feel it’s fair to have kids reach for the stars when most people are too scared to do it themselves,” he said. “Unless you can accomplish something, you get lost to time.”

He and his wife, he says, “are living our dreams, not trying to rear a child to live theirs.”

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Media Savvy

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safety pins in earlobes, the whole works, now a working mother.”

His journey to the rabbinate began when a chemistry teacher explained quantum mechanics by telling him, “That’s the way God wants it.”

“Something hit me,” he said. “Was it possible that science could not answer all my questions? Was there indeed something more?”

Before finding his calling, Finman spent five unfulfilling years in Hebrew school, briefly considering and nixing Christianity and then Hinduism. By the time he was 17, he was studying Buddhism.

“My eldest brother went off to Thailand at age 19 to learn the secrets of Buddhism,” he said. “He kept a 32-volume set of Buddhist philosophy in my mother’s garage. I began reading it and became enthralled. Its simple complexity hit a chord with me, and I wanted to follow in my brother’s footsteps.”

A friendship with new neighbors in his hometown in New Jersey altered the plan and changed the course of his life entirely.

Now a Chabad rabbi in Oak Park, Finman spends much of his time teaching Torah, Kabbalah and other Jewish topics through one-to-one sessions in homes and offices, by phone, through Web conferences, lunch-and-learn classes, online and on-air as facilitator and founder of *The Jewish Hour*, Michigan’s only Jewish radio show.

“I like to refer to *The Jewish Hour* as the largest Torah class in Michigan,” he said.

A Winning Show

Last week, he celebrated the 19th anniversary of the program — Sundays from 11 a.m.-noon on WLQV-AM 1500 and online at faithtalk1500.com.

And last year, competing among entries from North America, Finman received a first-place American Jewish Press Association (AJPA) Simon Rockower Award for Excellence in a Multi-Media Story. The first-time win was for *The Jewish Hour*’s airing of “Ephraim Zuroff — The Last Nazi Hunter,” an interview with the director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, who coordinates Nazi war crimes research worldwide. The interview can be heard on Podcast, iTunes, stitcher.com and jcastnetwork.org.

The radio variety show includes Israeli and entertainment news, words of wisdom culled from the week’s Torah portion or



Rabbi Herschel Finman, host of *The Jewish Hour*, interviews Specs Howard (Jerry Liebman) for his “chai anniversary” show last March; he had been Finman’s first interview 19 years ago when the show first started.

related to the Jewish calendar or Chasidic stories, along with guest interviews relating to the Jewish community or a political theme affecting local Jews. Music genre ranges from Old World klezmer and New Age funk-Jewish, from artists including Avraham Fried, Zoomgalli Boogey, Theodore Bikel, Carlebach and Mickey Katz.

Brownies And Tea

The Jewish Hour adheres to the philosophy of the Orthodox, Chabad-Lubavitch — the world’s largest Jewish educational outreach organization — a connection that, for Finman, began with neighborly conversation and enticing baked goods while he was a teenage student of Buddhism.

“My grandmother had recently passed away, and my mother had rented her apartment downstairs to a young Lubavitch couple,” Finman said. “We became close friends, and I began a debate with them, Judaism versus Buddhism. We were both beginners, and the playing field was basically level. They did have an advantage: chocolate brownies.

“For three years, we spent Friday evenings feasting on brownies and peppermint tea and discussing philosophy until well after midnight,” he said.

Upon a suggestion from his host, he attended Shabbat services at a Chabad synagogue and was soon studying the weekly Torah reading and attending classes on Tanya (the main work of the Chabad

philosophy). “I did it so I would know the material well enough to argue against it,” Finman said. “All the while, I kept up my Buddhist readings, careful not to get too close. Buddhism was my journey.”

But still, he said, “These weekly classes inspired me to thinking deeply about our purpose of existence and how to achieve that goal. In one of my Friday get-togethers, I admitted to my host that Buddhism and Chassidus (Chasidic wisdom) were very, very similar and that I enjoyed the contrasts and comparisons. His response to me was, ‘If you believe they are saying the same thing, why run to Thailand? You have it right here.’ At that moment, I thought one thing: ‘Checkmate.’ I could not argue. I had to agree. I stayed put.”

His neighbor suggested he attend the Lubavitch Youth Organization’s annual weekend program in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

“That Shabbos, I was billeted with a modest Lubavitch family. In the middle of the meal, the phone began to ring. After about 20 rings, I asked the host if he was going to answer the phone, perhaps it was important. His response: ‘Maybe it’s not.’ A lightning bolt hit me. Here was the inner peace, the simplicity I was looking for. In one small phrase, ‘Maybe it’s not,’ this simple man had transcended time and space, something I had been trying to do for three years. I felt encouraged.”

A New Education

By the end of the weekend, Finman was offered a week of study in Teferus Bochorim, which he describes as “a remedial yeshivah for the newly observant,” in Morristown, N.J.

“I found the food foul and the learning incredible,” he said. “I understood there was a world underneath the Judaism to which I had been exposed.”

Describing his home, he said, “Judaism was there, and we went to an Orthodox synagogue, but we were not religious.”

After his weekend in Morristown, he went back home.

“My mother served spaghetti and meatballs with parmesan cheese,” he said. “After I ate, I went into the bathroom and threw up. I put on the tzitzit and yarmulke that I had procured in Crown Heights and announced to my mother that I was *frum* (observant). My mother’s reaction: ‘Not in my house.’ I quizzed her as to her reaction. My brothers were Buddhist, Shinto and hippie Jewish. My sisters were strung out and Christian. Why was mine different? She never answered the question.

“A month later, I was in yeshivah full time and at the beginning of my journey.”

For five years, Finman lived in Crown Heights, where Chabad Lubavitch World Headquarters is based. “I davened with the Rebbe’s minyan,” he said of the late Lubavitch rabbi, Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

After eight years in various yeshivot, Finman received ordination from the United Lubavitcher Yeshiva in Brooklyn. He and his wife, Chana, parents to seven children, spent four years in Australia before settling in Michigan.

Chana Finman is co-producer of *The Jewish Hour*, bringing with her a resume that includes her years as a professional clown.

Now, she says, working on the show is “a huge part of my life. My role has been to act as a story hunter. I travel abroad and in the U.S. to find stories. We use the Internet, too, but meeting people, going to art exhibitions and visiting museums is best.”

She also reads half a dozen books a month, in addition to those sent by publishers, in search of interview subjects and topics for her husband.

“Currently, I’m doing research on the Jewish angle of the Detroit Institute of Arts’ Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera exhibition,” she said. “My next ambition for a story is to

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go to France. I believe the people there need to know we aren't abandoning our interest in them. Not all can immigrate.

"Herschel is the religious scholar," she said. "His ability to speak on these topics is the major force of the program."

Chaplaincy To Cyberspace

Finman refers to himself as both "a teacher and student of Judaism," with a major focus on Kabbalah and Talmudic studies, teaching mainly in adult education programs and seminars.

Since his family came to the Detroit area in 1988, he has served the community in a multitude of areas, including having been a chaplain for the Michigan Department of Corrections and, for 18 years, coordinator of the Detroit Jewish Judicial Seminar, a monthly lecture series focusing on current events and Jewish law. Currently, he is an adjunct professor of philosophy at Oakland Community College and professor of Judaic studies at the Michigan Jewish Institute. He also has close to 35 years working in medical-legal-business ethics research.

Finman began sharing Jewish-based teachings online 20 years ago when a student asked him to speak with his niece about her questions on Judaism. After the session, he emailed her a note and included a short insight into that week's Torah portion, along with a Chasidic story.

He said he realized no one else was yet doing what he had just done, so he sent the email to his mailing list of about 30 people. Requests from friends of the recipients began to pour in and the next week he sent it to 100 people.

Within a year, more than 2,000 individuals were receiving it and today more than 14,000 receive the weekly e-Parsha — sponsored by a grant from the Paul and Leslie Magy Foundation — a short, in-depth, easy-to-read analysis of the Torah portion or an upcoming Jewish holiday, along with a Chasidic story.

A short YouTube video version, YouParsha is co-sponsored by the Specs Howard School of Media Arts in Southfield and Alan and Lori Zekelman. His Chasidic YouStory follows the same format as YouParsha, but with a Chasidic story instead.

Finman is working to connect *The Jewish Hour* with community projects, including a recent Chanukah menorah-lighting program in Ferndale, where the WLQV radio station is based. He also read the megillah for Purim at the Ferndale Public Library on Wednesday.

On-Air

When he arrived in Detroit in 1988, he began weekly learning sessions with Specs Howard (founder of the Southfield-based Specs Howard School,

a broadcast and communications arts school). "Twenty-five-years later, we still meet in his office every Tuesday afternoon," Finman said.

"I arrived as his teacher, but I look up to him in so many ways, and when I started *The Jewish Hour*, he became my radio mentor," Finman said. "He taught me to speak naturally; he gave me pointers on writing and reading the news."

Specs Howard, whose "real" name is Jerry Liebman, was Finman's first *Jewish Hour* guest when he went on air in 1996. He was on again last March, during the program's "chai anniversary" episode.

That show was heard online in Atlanta by former Detroit Cheri Eisenberg.

"The rabbi's interviews are timely, enlightening and he asks intelligent, tough questions," she said. "The show has a small town feel while discussing big world issues and the local references are heartwarming to me," said Eisenberg, who grew up in Oak Park and Southfield.

The Rebbe's Vision

Beyond his radio show audience and the many who learn with the rabbi are those affected by Finman personally, like Yaakov Goldsmith of Oak Park, whom he met 20 years ago.

"It was at the beginning of my return to Orthodoxy, and it was great to find a rabbi who 'got it' or seemed to speak the language of the outside world while being very much a chasid of the Lubavitcher Rebbe," Goldsmith said.

"I love and look forward to hearing the words of the Rebbe along with Rabbi Finman's explanations," he said. "He is what an authentic *shaliach* (emissary) is, a throwback to the self-sacrifice the earlier shlichim had and displayed."

Sharing his knowledge and reaching out are paramount to Finman's drive.

"Chasidic philosophy dictates that we utilize every media the world affords to make the world a greater vehicle for conveying Godliness," Finman said.

"The Lubavitcher Rebbe showed great insight in utilizing mass media to this aim. The Rebbe encouraged radio programs, public cable access shows and the Internet to make the teachings of Chasidus much more available. I am truly humbled to be part of the Rebbe's vision. That *The Jewish Hour*, e-Parsha and YouParsha touch so many lives encourages me to continue," he said.

"I feel a tremendous sense of gratefulness with every new class, new subscriber and new participant in the projects in which we are involved." □

For details on Finman's classes, web projects or radio show, or to sponsor a Torah e-Parsha or YouParsha, go to: www.rabbifinman.com.