

Our Elwood Shule Farewell – Sun, 21 Aug 2022

14 years! That's a long time... and really cannot be summed up in a single address.

7.5 years as outreach Rabbi alongside Rabbi & Rebbetzin Gutnick, followed by 7 years as Senior Rabbi.

Sounds a bit biblical... our Forefather Yaakov working for Lavan... 7 years to marry Rachel, but got Leah instead... than another 7 years to finally marry Rachel...

There is no Rachel, or Leah, or Lavan in this story. But there is a verse in that episode that resonates with me at this time.

Yaakov reflects on the many years he had to work to achieve his goal.

וַיְהִי בְעֵינָיו כְּיָמִים אֶחָדִים בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֶתְהָּ: ... So Yaakov served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.

14 years is a long time, but they have flown by... Perhaps because of the love we had for this journey. And what a beautiful and fulfilling journey it has been.

Rivki and I have served this community with all our heart and soul, doing our best to meet each individual where they are on their journey and to connect authentically. Walking beside so many, through the ups and downs, the highs and lows of both personal and communal life. Celebrating Simchas and joyous moments and being present in the sad moments of pain, sickness and loss.

From Day 1, on a hot and humid February evening in 2008, when Max Singer picked me up from my in-laws (no car or house yet 😊) to attend a Mincha Maariv service at Elwood, we were embraced and supported.

We are humbled and so grateful for the way this community opened their hearts to us and made us feel at home.

Rivki & I have grown and matured immensely, as individuals and as a team, along with this community... we were young (still are), we are 24 and 25 when we began... Now we're pushing 40, thank Gd.

This journey has been a privilege, we've enjoyed every minute (😊 almost ... there were some rough patches...).

We have developed deep connections and friendships, across multiple generations, which will endure and stand the test of time - and location.

In 2008, at the 75th anniversary of Elwood Shule in all its forms, I addressed this community as Outreach Rabbi, for the very first time and said:

“We are in the process of planting seeds, which then need to be cultivated and nurtured and please G-d soon we will all reap the fruits. Is this a challenge? Absolutely. But Rivki and I are very excited about this opportunity and are committed to this challenge.”

Friends, we planted, and we nurtured, and we have been fortunate enough, thank Gd, to reap the fruits. I am so proud of what all of us have achieved and built together.

I also said that afternoon: *“...after hearing and reading so much about the rich and illustrious history of this Shule, it’s fair to say that Elwood Shule was founded by giants, by individuals and families who were dedicated, determined, and passionate about the Elwood Talmud Torah Congregation. We owe it to them to continue what they have started, not only to continue but to expand and grow.”*

I think we have. I know we have. Helsie Brustman called me this morning and said (and others have shared similar sentiments over the past weeks) *“I have no doubt R’ Chaim is looking down on you today and is so proud of you.”* That really touched me.

For 14 years we had the privilege and responsibility to reinvigorate the Elwood Shule Congregation, to reengage its members and instil and maintain the warm and vibrant atmosphere, it is now so well known for.

In 2015 in my induction speech, I referred to the name of our Shule, Beit Avraham, and laid out my vision and ethos as I prepared to take on the Senior Rabbinic role: I pledged *“To continue to build a Congregation in which any and every Jewish person feels comfortable, feels welcome and a part of our family. No matter their background or their financial situation, and no matter where they are on their Jewish journey.*

Whether you come to Elwood to pray, to socialise, to study, to celebrate... the experience should be enjoyable and meaningful, so when you leave you should feel satiated physically and spiritually! (Just like when you left the house of our Patriarch and Matriarch, Avraham & Sarah.)”

I also gave my word that day: *“that I will keep our Shule fresh and innovative, applicable to the times we live in, yet at the same time, never losing sight of where we have come from - as a people and as a community.”*

That vision and ethos guided me every day.

I did my utmost to provide inspiring, positive and uplifting leadership, with a strong emphasis on meaningful and enjoyable Jewish experiences, bringing the community together and ensuring everyone, no matter who they are, felt welcome, valued and respected.

We successfully put in place many engagement platforms, and opportunities for personal growth, opportunities to inspire, connect and belong through events, programs, services and classes, encouraging our members and friends to be a part of the Elwood Shule family and to be proud of their heritage.

I humbly say that we achieved that.

We also successfully brought the Shule into the 21st century, with modern methods of communication, updated database system, a strong and current web and social media presence, fresh marketing (yes, I've been the Shule's honorary graphic designer 😊), while always honouring the past and the strong Elwood history and traditions.

I couldn't have done it alone. Rivki & I are extremely grateful to the current President Mark Kuran and Board of Management and Ronny and Jack, and to all the past Presidents (Fred Antman, Jack Lipson, Alex Livshiz and Zev Degen) and Boards (VP Alex Haber, Mandi Kuran) for their support, encouragement, and teamwork, and for their overall unwavering dedication and commitment to the wellbeing of Elwood Shule. Thank you.

I'd like to take a few moments to highlight the significant role that Rivki has played on our Elwood journey.

Even though Rivki wasn't employed by the Shule, she devoted herself to our community.

How she did it / does it, I don't know! I just thank Gd every day!

She was the unofficial/official Shule photographer at practically every single event we've had over the 14 years. She manned the front table before each event, welcoming our members for many, many years.

She gracefully hosted shabbat meals, taught Bat Mitzvah girls and spiritually and practically helped prepare every Elwood bride for their wedding and marriage.

She assisted in the planning and the smooth running of all our events, attended countless lifecycle and Shule services, ran mummy & me in the early years, babies who later joined our Hebrew school and celebrated their Bar & Batmis in recent years at our Shule. She taught in our Hebrew School for many years, ran our children's programs over the chagim and launched and drove the Elwood Sisterhood Bookclub and other women's programming.

She also frequently listens to, supports, and counsels the women of our community, with genuine care.

All this while running our home, teaching, studying – completing her studies! - and backing me totally in my often-challenging role.

Thank you Rivki, for being there for me, for us as a family and for your selfless devotion to our Elwood community. We love you!

To our children... We moved to Elwood as parents of two really young children, and then had few more, ka"h.

You've all watched them grow up. They gave so much to our community, with their talent, their presence, and their cute and smiley faces.

It's not easy being the children of a Rabbi & Rebbetzin. There are, rightly or wrongly, unique expectations, they are thrown into the spotlight in more way than one and engage in experiences that most of their peers don't ever experience.

We thank our dear children for their support, willingness (most of the time 😊), patience, love and for often giving up their father for the needs of the community. We love you and you continue to give us so much nachas.

In conclusion, thank you for the love and support showed to me and my family for so many years, and for being part of this significant segment of my rabbinical career.

Thank you for trusting us, thank you for growing with us, thank you for inviting us into your lives.

Thank you for your compassion, your friendship and understanding.

Thank you for bringing your energy to our events, programs, and services, throughout the years.

We leave with a treasure trove of memories and moments that we will cherish forever. Personalities and characters, both here and who have since passed on, who will be forever etched in our memory...

We are deeply grateful to each and every person that makes up our Elwood Shule family, you will always hold a very special place in our hearts.

I wish the Shule only the very best as a new chapter begins in its illustrious story - with continued success, fulfillment, and growth, in good health, well into the future.

...I'm not changing my phone number, and I will always be happy to hear from you.