



OPINION

Point of View

16 | RABBI MOSHE GRYLAK

Outlook

18 | YONOSON ROSENBLUM

Text Messages

20 | EYTAN KOBRE

JEWISH GEOGRAPHY

23 | BINYAMIN ROSE

THE MIX

Ten Questions

76 | RACHEL BACHRACH

LifeLines

78 | C. SAPHIR

Second Thoughts

82 | RABBI EMANUEL FELDMAN

The Successor

84 | DOV HALLER

Concentric Circles

87 | ESTHER SENDER

Playing It Safe

32 | MICHAEL EISIKOWITZ

"It takes a community to protect a child, and it takes a community to allow abuse," says Debbie Fox, founder of Safety Kid in Los Angeles. Eli and Shani Verschleiser, a dynamic couple from Flatbush, want to make sure their own city's schools are safe, and have brought Safety Kid to yeshivos and Bais Yaakovs in Brooklyn.

Ordained in Cyberspace

42 | YISROEL BESSER

Reb Dovid Engel is a young Gerrer chasid who travels the world — by air and by cyberspace — to inspire doctors, lawyers, stockbrokers, and just about any committed Jew to become a rabbi.

Bedside Bloodletting

54 | AVI FRIEDMAN

Leeches? Isn't that so Dark Ages? Apparently not, according to Hadassah Hospital's Dr. Kosta Y. Mumcuoglu, who uses the parasite to help accident victims in danger of losing a finger or toe.

So Little, So Much

64 | DOVID SHAPIRO

The sudden passing of Reb Uri Weinberg last year left his many friends around the world — especially those who knew him from Yeshivas Mir-Yerushalayim — feeling as though they lost a grandparent or close friend.

INBOX.....	14
INNER CIRCLE.....	30

“It takes a community to protect a child, and it takes a community to allow abuse,” says Debbie Fox, founder of Safety Kid in Los Angeles. Eli and Shani Verschleiser, a dynamic couple from Flatbush, want to make sure their own city’s schools are safe, and have brought Safety Kid to yeshivos and Bais Yaakovs in Brooklyn as well. With parents and educators involved, they want to make sure there are no holes in the safety net



Mishpacha

Playing It Safe

BY *Michal Eisikowitz*
PHOTOS *Meir Haltovsky*

Quick-witted and fiercely independent,

Eli Verschleiser has zero patience for bureaucracy, dawdling, or even public recognition. Recipients of his incisive, no-fluff, arriving-within-seconds e-mails get the gist quickly: this is a man who gets things done — and fast.

Born and bred in Lakewood, and today the president of United Realty Trust, Inc., a public company on Wall Street, this well-spoken father of four has built a reputation as a savvy investor, doing deals with moguls the likes of Donald Trump.

But behind the shrewd businessman lining is a golden heart fueling a fiery passion for helping out those less fortunate, and he and his wife Shani have become particularly drawn to tackling underdog causes and stuffed-under-the-rug initiatives that promise little glory. For years, the Verschleisers have been mainstays of Our Place, a Brooklyn-based center for Jewish teens struggling with substance abuse and related issues.

This past year, the Verschleisers have added to their *chesed* repertoire perhaps their most ambitious — and timely — project yet: Magenu, the Brooklyn children's safety initiative.

As part of their multifaceted vision, they've brought the nationally renowned Safety Kid program — painstakingly refined for the *frum* community by Los Angeles mental health professional Mrs. Debbie Fox — to numerous Brooklyn yeshivos.

"Our goal is clear," says Shani. "We want to empower every child in Brooklyn to stay safe."

Eli, a quintessential empathizer who himself had been in and out of half a dozen schools as a teenager and can intimately identify with those feelings of failure and hopelessness, says

he gravitated toward the often emotionally wrenching work at Our Place, which is both "incredibly rewarding and incredibly painful. It's gratifying to help guide troubled kids through their maze of pain to a healthier place. But we've also watched dozens of our boys and girls overdose — and even lose their lives. And whether in the middle of the night with barely a minyan, or in the middle of the day with crowds of hundreds, the pain of burying these teens is excruciating."

The Verschleisers see Magenu as the harbor for teens before they find themselves in trouble, needing a refuge like Our Place. Drawing from years of experience, Eli's colleagues at Our Place estimate that 75 percent of the teens-in-crisis were abused in some way — and other teen professionals offer even higher estimates. According to a study commissioned by the US Department of Health and Human Services, about 80 percent of 21-year-olds who were abused as children meet criteria for at least one psychological disorder. And a longitudinal study by Australia's Institute of Criminology, spanning 45 years and surveying over 2,700 victims, found that people who have been molested as children are five times more likely than others to commit a general offense as adults.

"These kids will carry the emotional baggage for the rest of their lives," Eli says. "I'm excited to at last be proactive and not just reactive, working to preserve lives and futures before they are permanently marred."

Eli explains that apart from the victim himself, molestation rips apart entire families. An abused child is likely to go on and abuse others — often his own siblings.

“It’s a ripple effect; the anguish and suffering spreads,” Eli says. “The home is transformed into a dysfunctional one by one person. And since experts agree that about 30 percent of abused children will later abuse their own children, the horrible cycle of abuse can continue for generations.”

Work in Progress No strangers to personal struggle, the Verschleisers’ own adolescent experiences have also, perhaps, placed them in a position to understand and reach out to others in need.

Shani, a Flatbush native whose parents divorced when she was ten, describes her mother as a rock who shouldered the burden of raising and supporting her three children with equanimity and grace.

“My mother didn’t have an easy life, but I never heard her say a bad word about anyone — or anything. She showered us with love,” Shani says of the lessons she learned about struggle, bravery, and making the best out of any situation.

Eli, a misunderstood troubled teen, dropped out of school in tenth grade, embarking on a journey of self-discovery that would take him cross-country — New York, California, Florida — and then eventually to Israel.

But even in his “troubled” state, Eli was always a leader and go-to person. Whether in Miami or Yerushalayim, his apartment was the official “party place,” the open home where anyone could hang out and feel welcome. That trait came naturally.

“It was in my genes,” he says, mentioning that his grandfather Jack Verschleiser *a”h* was known as the “Jewish mayor of San Francisco,” and his father Reb Yisroel — a retired Agudah employee — similarly made a career in giving, first working to help Iranian Jews in the 1970s and then cofounding Project RISE, which extended physical and spiritual support to Russian Jews behind the Iron Curtain.

By age 22, Eli was on more stable ground. “Since then, every day is a turning point for me,” he says. “I think we all have to see ourselves as works in progress.”

Back in the Big Apple, a resourceful Eli — novice though he was — made his way into the real estate business, investing a minimal amount of money in a commercial property while quickly learning the ropes: how to take a shell of a building, convert it, rent it out, and refinance it.

As he rapidly climbed the corporate ladder, Eli soon encountered another major life twist: finding his *bashert*. In a most unlikely manner.

“I was sitting in my office,” he remembers. “There was this woman from Yad Batya L’Kallah who had left at least a dozen

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Learn the Warning Signs

Safety Kid does not focus exclusively on inappropriate touch. The program deals with a broad spectrum of general safety issues, like how and when to call emergency responders, what a child should do when lost, how to find a “safe helper” (ideally, a mother with children), and how to figure out who is a “trusted adult.”

“These are rules that might save your child’s life,” says Sarit Rubenstein, Magenu’s school liaison. “Both in a physical and emotional sense.”

Although the issues are hair-raising and could be a cause for nightmares if not presented properly, Safety Kid was designed to be engaging and nonthreatening.

“It’s fun, it’s light, the kids enjoy it,” says Sarit. “They acquire the concepts without becoming scared. My own daughter knows the Safety Kid program inside out. And yet she is so physical — she’ll go on for ten minutes about how she loved when Morah hugged her. She can sense what is appropriate and what is invasion.”

“Our kids were very engaged,” says Lev Bais Yaakov preschool director Mrs. Michele Scholar. “The program is tailored to their level, with lots of visuals, chants, and group activities. The kids walked out with real skills: concrete, easy-to-remember ways to handle questionable situations.”

On the evening before their kids are to meet the lovable Safety Kid mascot, parents attend a two-hour workshop to understand what their children will be absorbing the following day.

Delivered by a mental health professional specializing in abuse trauma, the workshop provides parents with practical and easy-to-access information, like identifying grooming behavior; safety at home, public places, and camp; and recognizing warning signs of possible abuse.

“Long-term damage is usually the result of prolonged abuse,” says Safety Kid creator Debbie Fox, drawing on her

two decades of dealing with cases. “If parents can focus on early intervention, they will be saving their child from life-long ramifications.”

School administration has a separate workshop, showing how to utilize effective screening and hiring practices for new staff, as well as implement regulations that will engender security — while not feeling oppressive.

“These rules protect teachers as much as they protect children,” says Sarit Rubenstein. “If you keep to healthy boundaries, you’ll be spared from sticky, misconstrued situations.”

In the two-hour teacher-training workshop that follows, *rebbis* and *morahs* learn how to recognize signs and symptoms, handle a disclosure of alleged abuse, execute one’s mandated reporting duty sensitively, and abide by safe guidelines in school.

To underscore the importance of heightened teacher awareness in both the classroom and home setting, Shani Verschleiser recounts a documented, horrifying episode that took place in a preschool classroom: a child abused a fellow classmate every day for an entire year — right under the teachers’ noses.

“At recess time each day, a child was touched inappropriately inside the classroom playhouse,” says Shani. “By the year’s end, she was deeply scarred. The teachers had been totally unaware. After all, recess is their break, right?”

Wrong. After sitting through the workshops, Shani says, teachers will realize that recess is anything but a breather. It is precisely during free, unstructured time that most incidents take place.

And alarmingly, the “predators” are often peers — usually, children who themselves have been victimized by an adult beforehand. According to a 2009 report by the Department of Justice, more than one-third of the incidents of molestation in America are committed by other minors.

messages asking for a donation. I admire persistence and guts — so I finally decided to call her back.

“‘What would you like me to contribute?’ I asked. ‘A toaster oven for our Chinese auction,’ she said. ‘Well, you’re pretty tenacious for just a toaster oven. Tell you what — I’ll send a check for \$180.’”

The woman then proceeded to tell Eli how she remembered him from way back, and she had the perfect girl for him. “You must take her number down,” she insisted. “If you don’t meet her, I’ll keep calling you.”

“You’re wasting your time,” he said, shaking his head. “But I’ll humor you; I’ll write it down.”

Four weeks later, Eli took a wild card and called the number. The rest, as they say, is history.

From the very beginning of their marriage, the Verschleisers took on Our Place as their special project. That meant a houseful of teens-in-crisis for every Shabbos and Yom Tov, for every meal, while the

outside world had already written them off as lost causes.

Too Close for Comfort In truth, the one who first conceived of Magenu was Eli's better half: Shani.

The kind of mother acutely aware of child molestation and its shocking prevalence, Shani Verschleiser constantly talked to her kids about boundaries. After researching many programs and upon hearing about Safety Kid — the nationally acclaimed didactic series based on one of the country's finest safety programs and subsequently tailored for the *frum* community — Shani dreamed of seeing it enter Brooklyn's schools as well.

"In the Queens and Five Towns," she explains, "the program was a community effort, brought in at the parents' and schools' urging, with costs evenly distributed. In Brooklyn, we don't have that kind of cohesiveness. So wishing things were different but not taking any initiative, I pushed the comforting vision to my mind's back burner."

One spring day, though, a close-to-home, frightening incident changed all that.

Shani's pre-1A daughter returned home from a Lag B'Omer outing boasting of a "friendship" made with a "tatty" in the park. After carefully eliciting details — with her heart beating furiously — a relieved, shaken Shani understood that nothing abusive had occurred. But it was way too close.

"It finally dawned upon me," says Shani, "all the conversations we'd had, all the little reminders I'd tried to inject every now and then — they weren't enough. My daughter kept insisting, 'Don't worry, Mom, he was so nice!' Our messages had not penetrated: her image of 'dangerous' was still a full-blown monster — while in reality, the perpetrator is almost always someone a child knows and loves."

What's more, Shani realized that the educational staff wasn't prepared either.

"Though one teacher claimed she had her eye on my daughter in the park, the approach was clearly too lackadaisical. An educator trained in safety — and aware of



the horrifying scope of the phenomenon — does not allow a stranger to come close to any child."

A galvanized Eli and Shani jumped into the cause, soon creating Magenu — Brooklyn's child safety education initiative.

For Magenu, the first step toward empowering children to stay safe is disseminating Safety Kid, a program that has been nationally lauded both for its cultural sensitivity and effectiveness. With the Verschleisers' help and fundraising efforts, Safety Kid was formally licensed from Aleinu, the Los Angeles organization that first developed it.

"It takes a community to protect a child," says Debbie Fox, Safety Kid's founder. "And it takes a community to allow abuse." Safety Kid's presentations are three-pronged, separately tailored for school administration, parents, and children. "By educating all three elements of the equation, we are ensuring that there are no holes in the safety net."

"We're All Good Mothers" With a clear vision for Magenu, and rabbinic advisors Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky *shlita* and Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz at its helm, the Verschleisers set out to enlist a capable school liaison. Coordinating Magenu's volunteer team of trained classroom presenters alongside Shani is seasoned community activist Mrs. Sarit Rubenstein.

A Los Angeleno-turned-New Yorker and mother of four, Sarit was the undisputed protégée of Debbie Fox for over a decade, beginning as a volunteer and eventually becoming a full-time employee for the program. Sarit freely admits, though, that upon first encountering Safety Kid, she was highly skeptical.

"I attended the meeting grudgingly," she remembers. "'Why are they making mountains out of molehills?' I kept thinking. 'We're all good mothers; we all teach our kids these basic ideas.'"

Sarit's mirage was shattered quickly.

"After two hours, it hit me: the extent of the problem was huge, and as good of a job as I'd tried to do in educating my kids, there were numerous key issues I'd never even addressed."

One example, says Sarit, is the frightening reality of in-house abuse. Though perhaps we've successfully ingrained in our children stranger danger ("Never talk to strangers!"), have we conveyed to them that people we know — and love — can act inappropriately as well?

"Ninety percent of child molestation happens at the hand of someone the child knows, loves, or trusts," Sarit says, citing the startling National Center for Juvenile Justice statistic. "Safety Kid makes our children aware of this — and shows them, step-by-step, how to react, without frightening them."

Detractors argue that children will "pick up" this stuff naturally, that there's no need to be explicit — but Sarit emphatically rejects

this notion.

"Just as you wouldn't assume that a child will learn to cross a street by osmosis, how can you assume that children will simply *know* how to deal with an abusive relative? We are talking about a danger that is life threatening. And the more I speak to parents and kids, the more I realize that children are *not* getting it on their own."

Sarit refers to a tragic case in London where the defendant claimed that the abusive relationship — which had gone on for years — was "consensual."

"I didn't know what it was — I didn't know how to say no!" the victim later cried. She had never learned the concept of okay versus not okay touch.

"There is a tremendous *achrayus* working for Magenu," says Sarit. "You only have to see one child whose life has been destroyed to know that educating children about personal safety is *avodas hakodesh*."

Count Me In The Verschleisers met with their fair share of naysayers ("It's never going to work in Brooklyn," or "These things shouldn't be taught in a public forum," or "Why tarnish our innocent children?"), but passionately forged ahead. To their surprise and delight, the going was far smoother than anticipated.

"Most schools are welcoming and receptive," says Eli. "They are grateful for our taking the initiative. And even the principals who are more hesitant at first are thanking us by the time we're done. 'We should have done this yesterday,' they say."

Mrs. Leah Zylberberg, general studies principal of Yeshiva Ahavas Torah in Brooklyn, was one of the former group.

"When Magenu approached me, I didn't think twice," she says. "It was 'count me in.'"

With several sons of her own who, over the years, described to their mother what happens all too often in summer camps and schools, and on the heels of a jolting community abuse incident, the veteran principal needed no convincing.

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Burning the midnight oil?

“If this is the kind of stuff I want my grandchildren to know,” she says, “why should my students be any different? Some schools will insist that they don’t have a problem. But I’m the first to admit that there are all kinds of problems out there, and the more information, the better.”

When safety principles are transmitted to children, they stick due to the kids’ impressionable natures, says Mrs. Zylberberg.

“You teach a child a fact and it stays there; they’ll retrieve it when they need it. I’ve found that this program is an excellent springboard for my teachers to remind their students about all kinds of safety issues — not just touch.”

Lev Bais Yaakov preschool director Mrs. Michele Scholar was similarly eager to get on board.

“I had heard about Safety Kid already and actually tried to bring it in a year earlier,” she says. “For technical reasons, it didn’t pan out. So when Magenu approached me with all the logistics perfectly planned, I was very thankful.”

Did she have any concerns before giving the green light? “No,” Mrs. Scholar says. “I knew the program was created with extensive thought and with the *haskamos* of a number of *rabbanim*. I knew it was done in a very fine way.”

Two years ago, when another group of community organizers attempted to bring Safety Kid into Brooklyn’s Bais Yaakovs and yeshivos, most school administrations were uninterested. What changed?

“It’s the current climate,” asserts Sarit Rubenstein. “Unfortunately, we needed to wait until Leiby Kletzky’s tragic death and until blaring, insider-abuse headlines plastered the newspapers in order to say, ‘Enough. We can’t sit back anymore.’”

Shani Verschleiser also attests to this dramatic change in attitude.

“I’ve sat for hours with principals discussing the program,” she says. “For some, we had to allay *hashkafic* concerns; for others, we had to explain that the program actually *protects*

the administration rather than making it vulnerable. But no one — not one principal — denied the need for such a program. That fact was never contested.”

Eli adds that for those detractors who argue about the financial outlay of such a program, child abuse actually costs the community thousands of dollars per victim. “It might cost \$20 per child to implement a prevention program,” concedes Eli. “But it will cost \$20,000 to treat a child in crisis — often the direct result of abuse. You do the math. Those funds should be put into prevention.”

The need for prevention is clear, and Sarit Rubenstein believes Magenu’s Safety Kid is prevention that actually works.

“A perpetrator targets vulnerable kids,” she explains. “If your child is savvy, if your child has learned about safety, if your child has been trained to check with a parent when a different adult wants to make a change in the child’s itinerary — the perpetrator is not interested. He will stay far away.”

To date, 1,944 children in 98 classrooms, 374 teachers, and 879 parents have been educated by Magenu in Flatbush, in schools like Toras Emes (Kaminetz), Lev Bais Yaakov, Ahavas Torah, Shaare Torah, Prospect Park Yeshiva, and others. The Magenu team of educators is currently booked through the end of the year, with ten more schools on the waiting list. They hope to expand the volunteer crew, thereby boosting their service capacity.

“We hope to get to Boro Park and Williamsburg too,” says Shani, who is working on getting the program translated into Yiddish, and has met with the principals in Bais Yaakov of Boro Park, as well as numerous Yiddish-speaking chadarim who have expressed interest. Bobov and Skver are already on board.

“The headlines speak for themselves,” says Shani, who has given up her career as a doctor of audiology to volunteer full time for Magenu. “We don’t have to convince anymore. Today, the requests are pouring in from parents: ‘Can you go to my daughter’s school, too?’

“Every child has the right to explore the world without being worried about personal safety. And it is the responsibility of *every* community to ensure that right.”

Where’s Your Child? Eli — a publicity abhorrer who agreed to be interviewed because he wants every Jewish child to acquire basic safety tools — notes that Magenu’s scope is wide, and Safety Kid is only the first of many initiatives.

“We are working on enhancing safety in Lakewood, Monsey, Florida, and Williamsburg in other ways as well.” The couple is involved in implementing a system that requires the school administration to be notified if a child will not be attending school.

“Past sixth grade, children don’t take the school bus anymore,” Shani explains. “So you say goodbye and you never really know if your child got to school. In the case of a child gone missing, the first few hours are crucial. We’d like to make it standard that parents must inform the school if their child will be absent — and if a child doesn’t show up (in the absence of a phone call), the school must contact the parents immediately.”

Since Magenu’s launch, Shani has begun receiving calls from parents of all stripes, asking her to address an array of safety deficiencies, like schools that habitually leave their doors open or yeshivos that hire substitutes with almost no background checking.

“Once you put yourself out there, you realize how much people need and want,” she says. “Many parents are scared, but they don’t want to rock the boat. They want me to be the representative.”

In the meantime, however, bringing Magenu’s Safety Kid to every Brooklyn school remains the Verschleisers’ top priority.

“Hashem runs the world; nothing is foolproof,” Shani admits, “but we have to do our part. Los Angeles has done it, Queens has done it, the Five Towns have done it.

“It’s time for us to show the world that the rest of the *frum* community, too, has the courage to protect its children.” ●



So are we.

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you see
what we're
doing
this time

Mishpacha
JEWISH FAMILY WEEKLY