

Ami Business



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Fishel Gross

O'Fishel Kosher Caterers



I enjoy the art of business, but what I really enjoy is the 'business' of chesed."



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Fishel Gross
O'Fishel Kosher Caterers

Age: 63

Industry:

Catering & food services

Established: 1981

Offices: Baltimore, MD

Employees: 40+



BY NESANEL GANTZ



S

peaking to Fishel Gross for this column was a unique experience. The well-known caterer from Baltimore was kind enough to speak to me in the days leading up to his daughter's wedding, which took place a week before Pesach; we even spoke on the morning of the wedding.

While we were speaking, Fishel had to stop several times to give instructions. I heard him say things such as "Prepare the pallets" and "Make sure there is enough for everyone." It turns out that he was talking about giving food to those in need, including shipping four pallets of matzah to Ukraine.

From humble beginnings making pizzas during *bein hazemanim* to becoming a household name, Fishel's road to business success had its ups and downs.

Yet most of Fishel's time is invested in his many *chesed* projects. Though some are well-known public programs, he keeps most of them private. Fishel's "umbrella brand" of *chesed* is called Mitzvah Motivators. The community programs include the Summer Masmidim project, *brachos* contests, Friday night cholent and learning, and much more. Other projects of his have no name, such as inspiring people to join *Daf Yomi*, giving away copious amounts of food to the community, or quietly helping many individuals.

Our conversation included lots of easily applicable, on-target advice on how to grow a business, treat employees and delegate. Yet it is Fishel's tangible excitement for helping *Yidden* that is truly inspiring.

—Nesanel





Fishel with Shmuel Fein

“Starting the day that my father and Uncle Al were shipped out, my grandmother fasted every Monday and Thursday. On V-J Day in 1945, one of my uncles told my grandmother, ‘Ma, we won the war! Come eat breakfast!’ to which she replied, ‘I sent two Yiddishe boys to the army—I want to see two Yiddishe boys come back.’”



I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My father, Chaim Shmuel (Sidney) Gross, was born in 1919. Sadly, he became a *yasom* at the age of three when his father, Reb Yitzchak Mordechai Gross, was *niftar* during *Kol Nidrei* in 1922. My father was born shortly after the Unsdorfer Rav, Rav Shmuel Rosenberg, was *niftar*, and he was named for him.

“They lived in Duquesne, Pennsylvania. My grandmother Sarah was a special woman and probably one of the few women to wear a *sheitel* in the entire state at the time. Although my grandmother tried her best to make ends meet, she and her seven children were very poor.

“My father and his brother Avrumy (Al) were some of the youngest kids at the time to obtain a peddler’s license. They would go door-to-door selling shoe polish and other knick knacks. Another of my father’s brothers, Uncle Oscar, quit school when he was 13 so that he could help support his mother and siblings.

“My grandmother was a strong-minded woman. When my father was young, she asked a neighbor if he could help build them a *sukkah*. Not only did she want her boys to eat in a *sukkah*, she wanted them to

see one being built as well.

“Every day after public school, my father went to *cheder* and learned under a *rebbe* named Rabbi Baruch Shimon Weiss. As young adults, my father and his brother started a furniture business in Clairton, Pennsylvania. In 1943, shortly after Pearl Harbor, my father received a letter in the mail from the US Army. It said that he should sell his merchandise and join the army. They made him sell his store.

“My uncle Oscar had a baby born on the day of the Pearl Harbor attack, and that saved him from going to the army. Another uncle, Sam (Shully) Gross, got an exemption because he was working on a defense project, but my father and Uncle Al were shipped off to the army.

“Starting the day that my father and Uncle Al were shipped out, my grandmother fasted every Monday and Thursday. On V-J Day in 1945, when America officially won the war against Japan, one of my uncles (who hadn’t been drafted) told my grandmother, ‘Ma, we won the war! Come eat breakfast!’ to which she replied, ‘I sent two *Yiddishe* boys to the army—I want to see two *Yiddishe* boys come back.’ When they came home and went straight to *shul*, that’s when she was finally willing to give up her fasting. *Baruch Hashem*,

with her unbelievable dedication, she merited to see her descendants become *bnei Torah*.

"When the war was over, my father got on an early ship back, made it to San Francisco, and from there he took a train across the country. He arrived at Camp Atterbury, which was a military post outside Indianapolis and the place where he was due to be officially honorably discharged on an Erev Shabbos in October 1945. He took his souvenir sword and rifle (everyone took those home with them) and took a cab to the only *shul* in the area. It was a *minyán* of only old men. They were shocked to see a young man still interested in *Yiddishkeit*.

"Here he was, away in the army for three years, away from his mother, and he never had an opportunity to have a complete Shabbos. Now he finally had the opportunity and grabbed it. He got back to Duquesne on Sunday, and he was back in *shul* on Monday morning with his brothers. That was the first time my grandmother ate on a Monday in several years.

"In 1954, when my father was 34 years old, he met my mother. She was *shomer Shabbos* and came from a traditional Jewish family.

"My parents moved to Pittsburgh because it had a Hebrew day school and, in general, it had a stronger Jewish environment. My father started a Shabbos afternoon *shiur* that went on for many decades. My mother would bake cakes for it. Some of the people who originally went to the *shiur* were not *shomer Shabbos*, but as one of them said: 'I am not *shomer Shabbos*, but I am *shomer Shabbos* when I am at the *shiur*.' Many of them advanced in their *Yiddishkeit* because of my parents' influence.

"My father restarted his furniture business in Glassport, Pennsylvania (a suburb of Duquesne), and called it Gross Home Furniture. I'm not sure how well that name would go over today [laughs]. His clientele included steel workers and union workers, and he sold on credit. It was a small business, but they had *parnasah*.

"I am one of six children and the only boy in my family. I went to Hillel Academy, where there were very few *shomer Shabbos* kids at the time. In fact, only five of the 25 kids in my class were even marginally *shomer Shabbos*. We even had school on Chol Hamoed. I told my father that I didn't like that

it seemed as though the school didn't recognize the importance of Chol Hamoed. My father replied, 'For many boys, the only time they will shake *lulav* is when Rabbi Binyamin Nadoff [the assistant principal] goes around school with a *lulav* and *esrog*. For that alone, it's *kedai*.' Indeed, he was right. Many boys made a *Shehecheyanu* when shaking the *lulav* on Chol Hamoed.

"For high school, I went to Scranton *yeshivah*. I had my *bechinah* on a Friday afternoon, and when I arrived for the test, there was a group of boys playing baseball. I went three for five at the plate, so I figured that was the place for me.

"In Scranton, I had a short-lived food business. I had access to the kitchen, and I created a small business after *seider* selling burgers. We were 16 years old; what did we know? I remember one *bachur* mixing three eggs in a bowl and calling out, 'How do I make a sunny side up?' My 'business' lasted for a few days until the *rosh yeshivah* found out, and then we had a 50%-off sale to liquidate our frozen assets.

"I was an average learner, but I enjoyed learning and still do. After high school, I went to Eretz Yisrael and learned in Yeshivas Be'er Yaakov for one *zman*, but then I met some *bachurim* from Yeshivas Mercaz HaTorah and I felt that was a better fit for me, so I switched.

"My parents wanted me to go to college and continue learning, so I went to Ner Yisroel in Baltimore, where they had arrangements with a night college program. I became close to Rav Yissocher Frand; later, he was *mesader kiddushin* at my *chasunah*. Interestingly, he is very meticulous about all the weddings where he is *mesader kiddushin*. He numbers all the *kesubahs*. Ours is numbered 001.

"I attended Towson University at night and got my business degree. I actually went for my MBA as well at the University of Baltimore, and to this day, I am three courses shy of obtaining it. I joke that if I ended up getting my MBA, I might have to take a pay cut.

"My first real venture into the food industry began on July 4, 1976. I had graduated high school and it was *bein hazemanim*. A local guy in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood opened a kosher pizza shop, the first one in Pittsburgh. That day, my parents wanted to take us to the bicentennial fireworks. On the way, they stopped outside the pizza shop and told me I

"Hashem decides who becomes successful, but one thing I was always good at was recognizing where I have a shortcoming and then hiring others to help me in that area."



With Rav Moshe Heinemann, the rabbinic administrator of the Star-K



should ask the owner if he needed workers. I sheepishly got out of the car and did as I was told. Sure enough, he was hiring.

"I was going to work behind the counter, but then he lost some employees. When a restaurant is missing workers, the first thing to suffer is the dishes; they remain piled up. I had never washed a dish before in my life—I have five sisters. I found myself sweating in the basement, washing dishes with hot water and no air conditioning. After two hours, I asked my boss if I could have a drink of water, and he said I could take a cold Pepsi, for free.

"Contrary to popular belief, *halachah* does not require a restaurant owner to allow his employees to take all the food they want, but his generosity taught me a lesson in how to treat employees.

"I was soon working the counters, and I asked the boss if I could make my own pizzas for my family. A pie cost around \$3.50 back then and he allowed me to use the ingredients for \$2. If you've ever made real pizza before, you know how your first attempts looked. My first pizza was oblong and full of holes, and the next one was a rectangle. I spent the summer perfecting my pizzas and bringing them home to my family.

"I believe that you can learn solid business lessons from every venture, every job, every step of your life. Because of my experimentation with making pizzas on my own time and dime, I became pretty good at it and I was given that job. The minimum wage

was \$2.30 an hour, yet I would routinely earn more than \$5 an hour. How? When the shop wasn't busy, I would serve the customers myself, and they would give me a tip here and there. It added up.

"Hashem decides who becomes successful, but one thing I was always good at was recognizing where I have a shortcoming and then hiring others to help me in that area. One of my shortcomings was that I had no idea how to type, and my handwriting was almost illegible. This was a problem in college because we had to hand in reports for class, either typed or handwritten. So I would take my notes down to a secretarial services company, and for a couple of dollars per page, the secretaries would type up my notes. Along the way, they would fix my spelling and grammar, and I ended up having the most professional-looking reports in the class.

"Remember, this was night school. My classmates were people who worked for utility companies, at supermarkets or in lower management; they were all people who wanted to advance themselves. *Mikol melamdai hiskalti*; I gained more from the people in the class than the professors. I didn't get super grades, but I did well enough to get by. During the year, I learned in *yeshivah* by day and went to college at night, but during the summer time I crammed it in by doing a dual bachelor's degree in business and personnel management. I took 21 credits in one summer.

"When I was in Ner Yisroel in 1978, I was out of

One of the rebbeim said to me, "Fishel, I am making a bar mitzvah for my son. Can you arrange for some bachurim to be the waiters?" I said, "Waiters? We will cater it!" I had just overheard my mother mentioning what she planned to cook for Yom Tov. I said I knew how to cook chicken à l'orange and rice pilaf. He was impressed.

money and needed to make some cash. I knew how to make pizza, so I spoke to the *hanhalah*, and they allowed me to sell pizza to the *bachurim* on Motzaei Shabbos. Some *bachurim* helped me make signs to advertise. I called the Star-K, and surprisingly they were willing to give their *hashgachah* pretty easily, or so it seemed to me. The first Motzaei Shabbos, as we began making the pizza, Rav Moshe Heinemann walked in on us 19-year-olds and asked, 'How is my *hashgachah* doing?' He then made sure that everything was indeed up to his standards.

"One day, one of the *rebbeim* said to me, 'Fishel, you are good with food. I'm making a bar mitzvah for my son. Can you arrange for some bachurim to be the waiters?' I said, 'Waiters? We'll cater it!' He asked me if I knew how to cater, and I said 'Sure!' I didn't know the first thing about it, but I knew how to talk a good game. I was fortunate that I had just overheard my mother mentioning to someone what she planned to cook for Yom Tov. I said that I knew how to cook chicken à l'orange and rice pilaf. He was impressed.

"I called my mother and said, 'Ma, how do you make chicken?' She gave me clear instructions, and for the next few days we *bachurim* sat and cooked after night *seider*. The bar mitzvah came out beautifully. We ended up doing several affairs, all after *seider*, and our 'payment' was a set of *Shulchan Aruch* or sometimes \$50. We weren't earning anything major, but we did gain experience.

"After some of our 'catering' in Ner Yisroel, Rabbi Herman Neuberger asked me to stay in *yeshivah* and be in charge of the kitchen. I was paid \$250 a week plus room and board and 'hospitalization,' which was how they referred to medical insurance back then. I worked there for a year, and I recall making a special *Shabbaton* to celebrate a *chamukas habayis* of a building.

"*Baruch Hashem*, we ended up getting a lot of catering opportunities, mostly on Yeshiva Lane. After working as the food service director for a year, I had an idea for a pizza business, and it took off.

"It was 1980, and my idea was to create pizza kits that could be sold in stores. Each kit would include two pizza crusts, and there would also be separately packaged cheese and sauce. I found a small factory to make the kits, and I connected with Moish Semel, z"l, of Quality Foods. Remember, this was before

frozen pizza was common in local grocery stores. I continued operating under the Star-K and have been with them for over 40 years, since the day Rav Heinemann walked in to check on us.

"I got local stores such as Jack's Grocery and Lieber's Delicatessen to carry my pizza kits. We also offered ready-made frozen pizza. I called the company 'Fishes Dishes,' and our slogan was 'Your wish is our dish.' I had our logo made for only \$35; today it might be a bit more. We did some catering too, providing pizza at small parties and fundraisers.

"Soon a competitor cropped up on the market with fancier packaging. He charged less than we did. I couldn't figure out how he was making money, and sure enough, he went bankrupt a few months later, but we had already begun to pivot.

"We still did some pizza on a large scale. For example, there was this event called the Jewish Festival, and we sold pizza there for a dollar a slice. All the vendors sold soda for 75 cents, so we made massive batches of iced tea and sold them for 25 cents a cup. We couldn't make enough. Where did all this tea come from? Before the event, I called Lipton and convinced them to give me lots of tea for free, and in exchange, I displayed their sign in front of my booth.

"I was in the pizza business for a few years until we slowed things down, and then I got a part-time job at Jack's Grocery, which was a forerunner of Seven Mile Market, one of the biggest kosher supermarkets in the world. There were just a few of us workers at that point. I only worked there a couple days a week, but I learned from Mr. Boehm how to cut brisket and from Mrs. Boehm how to treat customers appropriately.

"I still did some catering, and that took up the rest of my time. I had to buy paper goods and frozen goods, rent a van, and somehow put on *Shabbatons* for NCSY several times a year. I was a one-man operation, but I got some people to help; this was the beginning of the catering business. I would buy ready-made provisions, frozen chicken, and baked goods, and on Friday afternoon I would mix up the chicken with some spices and pop it in the oven at the *shul*. And of course, I would throw together a cholent.

"At one point in 1984, I had the opportunity to open a concession stand in the basement of the local JCC. I named it O'Fishel, and I paid \$100 for the logo. We served *fleishig* comfort foods such as hamburgers,

It was 1980, and my idea was to create pizza kits that could be sold in stores. Each kit would include two pizza crusts and there would also be separately packaged cheese and sauce. This was before frozen pizza was so common in local grocery stores.

hot dogs and fried chicken.

"We originally signed a two-year contract with the JCC and were doing great business, but they didn't want to renew. We had lots of *frum* families with little kids coming in to eat, and it wasn't the image the JCC wanted. They hired a company with grandiose ideas for a French-themed restaurant. They lasted a couple of months.

"We bounced around between a few *shuls*, using their kitchens as our base, until we opened our own little store on Reisterstown Road in 1988. Now we had a real base for our catering business, and we also sold paper goods.

"When I started the takeout business in the store, I would cut myself a check every single week, as my father had instructed. There were many times when I didn't have enough money to cover my check, but I wrote it anyhow. And whenever we did have enough money, such as after a nice-sized event, I would cash it. When young people ask me for advice, I reply, 'Are you taking a salary? You need to pay yourself something.' Making sure you pay yourself first is an important part of growing any business, for many reasons.

"We had our O'Fishel store for a total of 11 years. Besides the catering business and the paper goods, we sold lots of Shabbos takeout food. But after only a few months, a large supermarket opened nearby and our takeout took a big hit. In business, just because one part of your company isn't doing well, that doesn't mean you give up on your entire model; you pivot.

"We began focusing more on growing our catering and other food services. We catered school lunches as well as many office parties. Slowly but surely, we moved into catering large-scale events such as bar mitzvahs and weddings.

"By 1999, we had outgrown the kitchen in our store and needed to find a new base. We moved our operations to a large space in the Liberty Jewish Center (now known as Moses Montefiore Anshe Emunah), and we have been here for 23 years now. This is where we cook all our food, and there is a nice hall here where we host weddings.

"Up until 2020, things were looking great. The catering business was doing well, and I invested more and more money in the business, but then everything ground to a halt.

"I was in Eretz Yisrael for a *szvum* when I received several calls from America about some of our events that were already booked. All of a sudden, people who had booked weddings for 400 people now wanted only 200. Then events for 200 people were cut to 100. Many went down to the bare minimum

necessary, just immediate family. Slowly but surely, every event was trimmed down due to COVID, until it came to the point where the *chasan* and *kallah* would walk by people's houses to receive *mazal tov*s. It was a really tough time. We had thousands of dollars in deposits, and many people wanted their money back, which wasn't so simple.

"COVID hit everyone, but some people felt that all caterers should refund entire deposits, no questions asked. However, for many of these jobs, we had to put down deposits ourselves for the venues and vendors. For some events, we had invested in new dishes specifically because that was what the client had asked for. We also held some large and expensive tastings. We had already spent time and money preparing for these clients' events.

"The same concept applied to real estate. I believe in diversification, and I had invested significantly in real estate over the years. Suddenly, tenants didn't have to pay rent because of the government-mandated eviction moratorium, but landlords had to pay for utilities as well as their mortgage. To many tenants, the eviction moratorium was translated as, "I don't have to pay rent." But *baruch Hashem*, overall, the real estate business brought in steady income.

"I also had a little Amazon business, more of a side hustle, selling a few odds and ends. When the pandemic hit, Amazon put a freeze on Fulfillment by Amazon (FBA) for all non-essential items. The stock market also took a dive. So I had four strikes across all my business portfolios.

"Our catering business was essentially shut down. All major *Kiddushim* and school groups were canceled. My son Simcha, who had joined the business back in 2010, didn't want me to come to work because of COVID, so I was stuck at home working the phones.

"We had several freezers' worth of products, and these things don't last forever. We started cooking the items in our freezers and offered to deliver ready-made trays of food. People were very appreciative as they were scared to go out. We started putting together packages for Shabbos, and we became very busy with that. We also donated lots of food for those who could not afford it and business started picking up. Yes, there is a direct correlation between the two; it's called the 'golden dove' way of doing business, and it has changed my life.

"The pandemic helped me become more focused on learning. I didn't have to get up early to go to *shul*, so I stayed up every night to listen to Reb Eli Stefan-sky give his *Daf Yomi shiur* live. He gives the *shiur* at

"I would cut myself a check every single week. There were many times when I didn't have enough money to cover my check, but I wrote it anyhow. When young people ask me for advice, I reply, 'Are you taking a salary? You need to pay yourself something.'"

7:15 a.m. in Israel, which is 12:15 a.m. here. I was also able to learn with my grandchildren daily.

“Part of the beauty of Reb Eli’s *shiur* is the camaraderie as people schmooze and banter before and after the *shiur* on Zoom. Members of the *shiur* started talking among ourselves. *Baruch Hashem*, there were people who still had money, and we decided to help those in the *shiur* who needed help for Pesach. People from the *shiur* generously gave so much money to assist others.

“My first donation was for \$1,000. On Chol Hamoed, we got a call that the state of Maryland was giving out emergency funds due to COVID, and we were getting \$10,000. My only regret was not giving \$100,000 at the *shiur*. Maybe then we would have gotten a million from the state [laughs]. That \$10,000 payment from the state was a golden dove, and *baruch Hashem*, I have seen many such golden doves from helping others.

“We were fortunate to give away lots of food to help people with Yom Tov. Around the same time, Amazon opened up our ability to conduct sales on one of our products: non-surgical gloves. I cannot share the amount we sold, but let’s just say that we could not get a hold of enough gloves.

“As 2020 wore on, a friend of mine became involved in the government lunch program where they gave out food due to COVID. He needed some help providing Shabbos food as part of the program, and I helped him out for a few months. It got me thinking. I knew there must be many people who were home and not able to get out to get food. I said to Simcha, ‘Let’s make food and we’ll give it out for free.’

“We decided that every family would get a pan of spaghetti, a pan of meatballs, some cake and bread—food to feed a family. *Mi kamcha Yisrael*. We had the *zechus* of providing the food, but so many people stepped up to the plate to help us!

“We got many letters from people expressing their appreciation. Some said that they were working from home and it was such a challenging time balancing everything, and the food had really helped. Others wrote to us sharing that receiving this food had given them a much-needed break from cooking, or now because of the food they received from us, they had an extra 30 min-

utes free to spend with their kids. We did this on our own dime, and it went so well that we decided to continue.

“As the word spread, the demand increased as well. We needed someone who could provide for large quantities, like 1,000–2,000 people, so I called Moshe and Dovid Yehuda Fink of David Elliot Chickens and I asked, ‘Can I get some chicken breasts to make a large batch of chicken lo mein?’ They had an abundance of cornish hens because there were no *chasunahs*, and they donated 4,000 to the cause. We bought new ovens and we gave out chickens to many people.

“Recently, we have been focused on helping to provide the food for government packages. We had to purchase equipment to cook all the food, and *baruch Hashem*, it has kept us busy, in addition to the regular catering business.

“We are always open to new ways of doing business through food services. For example, although we cater in all venues in Baltimore, we have an exclusive at the Delta Hotel by Marriott in Hunt Valley. We have many clients who go on annual outings and request 500 meals every year. We are always on the lookout for different ideas. In 2017, we organized a program called the Kosher Eclipse in St. Joseph, Missouri. Over 250 people attended.

“I enjoy the art of business, but what I really enjoy is the ‘business’ of *chesed*. We have had the great *zechus* of starting several Torah-based programs under the Mitzvah Motivators moniker. These programs get kids and adults to increase their Torah learning, make *brachos* out loud and more. Those are some of the best business moves we ever made.”

You have been catering weddings in Baltimore for over 40 years. How did you break into what seems like an exclusive field?

I’m assuming you mean aside from providing great food at a great price with great service? [Laughs.] When we started off, we were a lot more than just a caterer; we would help our clients with many other aspects of the wedding, too. For example, my wife grew to become the personal assis-

“My first donation was for \$1,000. On Chol Hamoed, we got a call that the state of Maryland was giving out emergency funds due to COVID, and we were getting \$10,000.”



Left:
Three generations
together



tant to the *kallah*. She would help with the gown and continue helping throughout the wedding. People really loved her.

It was also an organic growth. We started with small parties, and then we did small weddings. We kept prices reasonable. We initially rented all our utensils, and then we bought our own.

What were some of the largest affairs you ever catered?

We have done the Maccabee games, providing food for an event in Baltimore that featured over 2,000 kids and even more adults over a three-day period in 2002. We have done many conferences and events for over 1,000 people, but the Maccabee games event stands out.

How do you manage all of your business ventures?

I have a few very good people who I put in place to help manage things for me. My staff is extremely dedicated. I also make it my business to stay out of my employees' way—sometimes [laughs]. People believe that they have to comment on every little possible thing and correct everything they see that is wrong. In general, in a larger company, employees have too many bosses, too many people telling them what to do. If someone needs a word of correction here and there, my son Simcha is better at speaking to people than I am.

For my real estate business, my brother-in-law and partner David Snow manages it all under the name Snowfish Properties. I have someone else who man-

ages our Amazon business, though lately I have been more focused on our food distribution.

Can you share something that you do to foster customer loyalty?

We have something called the Five or More club. If a family makes five or more *simchahs* with us (which can range from a bar mitzvah or wedding to a *bris*), they become a member of this club. Once a year, around Pesach time, we have an all-you-can eat buffet where members of the Five or More club come and eat for free. We give out prizes, too. People love it because it's a great help to be able to go out right before Pesach. When your wife has already cleaned the house and the pizza shop is packed, what could be better?

It's a real point of pride for us. If you get booked five times by the same person, you must be doing something right.

In general, I believe in rewarding customers with tangible rewards on the spot. I don't like raffles. Even with all of our Mitzvah Motivators programs, we give every kid a prize. I think it's better to give every child a decent prize than to give only a few children a larger prize.

When we had our store, we had a rewards card that people were able to use to get something free after a few orders. Every week, they would have their card punched and then they would get free kugels, chicken, etc. I like giving things for free; it brings people in.

Everyone I spoke to in Baltimore has heard of your company. I have seen

“COVID hit everyone, but some people felt that all caterers should refund entire deposits, no questions asked. However, for many of these jobs, we had to put down deposits ourselves for the venues and vendors.”

some of your marketing and ads...let's just say they are unique.

Thank you. I actually majored in marketing. Our ads go against every rule of marketing, but they work. The rule with ads is not to make the ad too busy—well, you can't get more busy than our ads. They're full of jokes, and for years, we even ran weekly *mazal tov* notices on our ads.

You seem to be very good at delegating. Many people, myself included, have a difficult time with that.

You have to realize one thing. If you don't delegate, it won't get done.

I like that line.

It's true. You simply will not accomplish everything you need to get done on your own. I delegate everything. Believe it or not, these days I don't cook either, but I can tell if something is wrong with a dish. One of the reasons that people don't delegate is that they think they can do things better and faster than the other person. Here is the kicker: so what? Even if it takes longer or isn't perfect, it will actually get done.

How did Mitzvah Motivators begin?

In 2000, I heard a *shmues* from Rabbi Mordechai Shuchatowitz about how to increase Torah learning, and I came up with an idea of how to encourage kids to learn more. They would learn a *mishnah* a day with a *chavrusa*, and they would get rewarded with something different every week. We launched it, and that was the start of Mitzvah Motivators, which now has many different programs.

We then made a massive banquet for the kids in our Summer Masmidim program, with moon bounces, food and lots of prizes. Kids of all ages came and walked away with great prizes, but also a motivation for learning Torah. There are young adults who approach me often and tell me that they began our program 20 years ago, and they still learn *mishnayos* every day on their own.

We started a program to encourage kids to say *brachos* out loud. We called it the "Make Your Brachos Out Loud" program. On the flyer, we wrote: "Please make a *brachah* slowly and meaningfully. If someone else can answer *amein*, even better! The *brachos* made should be in the merit of the complete recovery of all *cholei Yisrael* around the world." Par-

ticipants get weekly prizes when they have someone answer *amein* to five of their *brachos* every day. We have had over 10,000 children sign up over the years.

Another program of ours is the Friday night cholent program during the winter months. Many *shuls* participate. We provide the cholent, and kids come with their fathers to learn in *shul*. Now here is the *mussar*: Look what someone will do for beans. A little barley and meat helps, sure, but the point is that for a tray of cholent, you can get 20 kids to stay up and schlep their fathers to *shul* to go learn instead of sleeping on the couch. In return, you have a mother smiling a mile wide because her husband is going to learn with the kids. They get soda and cake, and they come home with the excitement that they earned it. The Rambam says that in his time they gave kids roasted seeds. It's about how you incentivize people.

Running these programs involves everything from coming up with the idea and sponsoring some of the prizes, to recruiting other businesses to sponsor prizes and spending hours with the designer working on marketing materials. It's my pride and joy to use my business to help spread Torah and *mitzvos*.

When we run any of our Mitzvah Motivators programs, it's not only we who are sponsoring others; the participants "sponsor" us as well. The giver receives a lot more than the receiver. Again, it's that concept of the golden dove that I learned from my *maggid shiur*, Reb Eli Stefansky.

Can you elaborate on the "pay yourself first" concept you mentioned earlier?

Sure. On a basic level, you need to pay yourself because you need to make a living in order to have the *menuchas hanefesh* to grow your business. But also, you have to understand that as someone working in your business, your time is not free. If you didn't do this work, you would have to pay someone else to do it. When you pay yourself, you have an honest idea of how much your business is earning. And if you cannot afford to pay yourself, you need to reevaluate your business model.

You have lots of great quotes. Any more to share?

I think that funny quotes work well in business. I had an ad campaign that said "Make it O'Fishel Before It's Official" to encourage people to book us before the actual engagement. It was very effective; people would put down a deposit before the couple

"We donated lots of food for those who could not afford it and business started picking up. Yes, there is a direct correlation between the two; it's called the 'golden dove' way of doing business, and it has changed my life."

was engaged. They would call and say, “We are calling to make it O’Fishele before it’s official.”

How do you deal with stress?

It depends who you ask [laughs]. Stress is often short-lasting before there is a real catharsis when things work out. In my line of work, it can be stressful a few hours before a party, but once I see the guests show up and enjoy themselves, or once the main meal is served and people are satisfied, then there is a tremendous feeling of relief, a release of sorts. I’m sure there is some deep scientific wording to explain it, but I try to recognize the good feelings that often come when the small stresses are over. Looking forward to that release helps you power through the stressful parts.

As far as what I do when I am feeling stressed, I have a few friends, some of whom are my business partners, and we just talk. My friend will talk about his stresses, and I will talk about mine. Most of the time, we all have the same stresses, especially related to business. Sharing similar feelings with friends makes you feel better.

Do you believe that catering is still a business worth pursuing?

I believe that unless you have the backing of a large community, or unless you have lots of money to invest, it might be very difficult. Honestly, this could be an article in and of itself, but in a nutshell, here is the issue. Today, there are many party planners who will arrange Shabbos events and seemingly save you a few dollars by not hiring the licensed caterer. Now, these party planners don’t do weddings, as that’s too big for most of them. But in many out-of-town places, it’s not *kedai* for someone to go into the catering business if he can’t get the Shabbos events. This results in people not wanting to become caterers, and families in other states end up having to travel to Lakewood or New York for what they think will be a more economical wedding. Yet, they still have to fly everyone in, and they will be missing a large number of their friends and family. I know of several prominent *askanim* who have been talking about this lately. Communities need to support their local licensed caterers.

You work with your son Simcha, and you seem to trust him. People are often wary of working with their children.

True, and there is a good reason for that, as there

is pressure in any work environment. However, being able to work with your children is also a very beautiful thing. After talking about work, I get to hear about my *einiklach* every day.

My son and I learn *Daf Yomi b’chavrusa* daily, and we haven’t missed a day since the beginning of *Brachos*. He gives me such *nachas*. Sometimes we learn before watching Reb Eli’s *shiur* live, and sometimes we learn afterward. One night, we were going to learn together, but I fell asleep in my chair until 2:30 a.m. When I woke up, my son was still waiting for me, and we learned the *daf* together. The way I see it, I’m lucky to get to work with my son and spend time with him every day.

I’ll share something personal with you. I learned with my father every day for the last few years of his life, and it was something I will forever cherish. Now I learn with my son every morning.

It’s very special, and you get to build a special *kesher* with your children that way.

Aside from the free Shabbos packages that you mentioned, I heard that you have supplied food for the community many times, including when hurricanes and storms affected the area. I find it beautiful and also interesting that on one hand, food is your business, and on the other hand, you have given away so much for free. Have you ever been afraid that not charging for your normal service could negatively affect your business?

If I thought that way, I would be wrong. If anything, all it means is that the *chesed* you do will be valued even more. Look, even the top lawyers do some cases pro bono. Everyone has something to offer. Are you a good seamstress? Offer your services to someone who can’t afford them. Are you computer savvy? You can help people apply online for government programs or book travel tickets.

People often say, “If I was rich, I would give away lots of money!” Well, what are you giving away right now? Can you drive? Then you can pick up groceries for an elderly neighbor. Can you *lein*? Tutor a kid who needs help. The farmer can’t change oil; the doctor can’t make butter. *Borei nefashos rabbos*—Hashem made it so that we have to help each other.

“Amazon opened up our ability to conduct sales on one of our products: non-surgical gloves. I cannot share the amount we sold, but let’s just say that we could not get a hold of enough gloves.”

I clicked “start meeting” and was greeted by an unexpected sight. The person on my screen was awkwardly close to the camera. He looked significantly younger than I imagined Menachem to be.

Menachem applied for a managerial position and I was supposed to be interviewing him now.

The boy on my screen introduced himself as Avi. Avi explained why yellow trucks are better than red and why he doesn’t like spaghetti. He was a cute kid and I was actually enjoying the light-hearted conversation.

When Avi’s father, Menachem, came into view he was beet red and apologized profusely. Between quarantine and lockdown sometimes these things can happen. Menachem was a top candidate. I found his new position quickly and we were able to laugh about the humorous episode. I did make a point of telling him that while I was ok with this glitch another recruiter or potential employer would not be.

There is a specific background noise I hear far too often during Zoom interviews. It is the collective sound of roadwork, honking and rolling tires. If you are looking to highlight your multi-tasking ability, interviewing while driving is not the answer.

Recruiters want to see that you are prioritizing this interview. You will not be sent to any prospective employers if your recruiter doesn’t feel you are serious about wanting a new job.

For many candidates, Zoom makes job interviews far more convenient. Don’t confuse convenience with a lack of importance.

When you are interviewing virtually here are some tips I can give you.

Tidy up: A clean background makes you look organized. A virtual background is a good option.

Prepare in advance: Test your camera, microphone, and speakers before the interview. If you have never used Zoom before test it out with a friend or family member first.

Be professional: Treat this interview as you would an in-person interview. Dress appropriately, practice answering interview questions, and be on time.

A Zoom interview is your opportunity to make an impression on your recruiter. Be mindful of the above so you can shine.

Good Luck!

Follow this column to get an insider’s view into the world of recruitment. I’ll be discussing the recruiting process, how recruiters read resumes, what to do (and what not to do!) on a Zoom interview and more. My aim is to increase your chances of having a positive experience working with any recruiter and to help you get the job you have been dreaming about.

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Yitzay Landau is CEO of Elevate Career Group a successful recruiting firm in the tri-state area. Elevate Career Group is here for you, don't hesitate to reach out.

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“I enjoy the art of business, but what I really enjoy is the ‘business’ of chesed. We have had the great zechus of starting several Torah-based programs under the Mitzvah Motivators moniker. Those are some of the best business moves we ever made.”

Another word for money is “*zuzim*.” In Hebrew, “*zuz*” means to move. Money moves; it comes and goes. If you flip a house, was that because of your own *chochmah*? No. Hashem gave you a gift. Today, I see many young people who make a lot of money very quickly and, *baruch Hashem*, some of them are able to prioritize.

If you come into my home, you will see that we live simply, but it’s deceiving. I also like to spend money. I spend money on *chesed* projects because I recognize that Hashem sends me lots of golden doves.

Okay, what’s this golden dove concept you talk about so much?

First, I need to give you some background. As I mentioned, when I joined Reb Eli’s *shiur*, I was amazed at the camaraderie. One of the *shiur* members had a son who tragically passed away, and I was amazed at how one *shiur* member went to be *menachem aveil* even though they didn’t really know each other outside of the *shiur*. I found myself driving to Lakewood and walking into the *shivah* house.

When I came in, the father asked me, “Are you from Baltimore?” I told him that I was, and I shared with him that I too had lost a son. Later, I met this man at the Lakewood *siyum*, and I said to him, “Let’s sponsor a learning program together *liluy nishmas* our sons.” I’m not someone who goes to *Kid-dush* club, and I don’t hang out. This *shiur* is my “club,” and I feel connected in a special way, so I take it very seriously.

Now, about the golden doves. There was a short thought that Reb Eli shared that changed my entire outlook on life, especially when it comes to giving. *Baruch Hashem*, we have had the *zechus* of being involved in many programs and participating in *chesed*

projects for many years, but Reb Eli’s *vort* gave me the *chizzuk* and inspiration to take it to the next level. It truly crystallized life for me.

A few years ago, Reb Eli’s *shiur* was in the middle of raising money to build a *mikvah* as a *zechus* for one of the *shiur* members who was childless after 20 years of marriage.

During the *shiur*, Reb Eli mentioned the story of Rabbah bar bar Chanah, who was traveling with a group of people when he realized that he had forgotten to recite *Birkas Hamazon* where he had eaten. Recognizing that if he told his friends that he forgot to *bentch* they would tell him to just *bentch* on the road, he said, “I forgot a special golden dove back at the inn.” He went back, *bentched* and found an actual golden dove.

Said Reb Eli, “Have you ever found out that your neighbor is struggling, so you sneak an envelope full of cash under his door, ring the bell and run away—and as you run, you trip over a golden dove? Has that ever happened to you?”

He continued, “Has it ever happened that you got into bed late at night and you’re exhausted, already under the blanket, when you remember that you forgot to *daven Maariv* or you forgot to learn the *daf*? And then instead of mumbling it at home, you get in your car and go to *shul*. And as you’re walking into *shul*, you trip over a golden dove—has that ever happened to you?”

“Well, it’s happened to me, and I want to tell you that it has happened to every one of us! We think we are only helping others and that it ends there, but when we help others, Hashem constantly sends us golden doves. When we make a business deal, when we flip a house, when we make a *shidduch*... that’s a golden dove! The golden dove is right here, we just have to open our eyes.”



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That *vort* changed my mindset. It's really so simple: you do the right thing, and Hashem sends you golden doves all the time. Our family has seen it with our own eyes, and those of us in the *shiur* have seen it as well.

By the way, the man from our *shiur* merited having a child the next year.

Can you share an example of a golden dove that you received?

I had a precious son, Shaya, who tragically passed away in 2014 at only 24 years old. He was a big *talmid chacham* who loved to learn and share *divrei Torah*. His favorite *masechta* was *Maseches Rosh Hashanah*.

I saw how many people's lives were changed because of Reb Eli's *shiur*, so I decided to try to bring people to the *shiur* in a unique way. We sponsored Gemaras for people joining and for the recruiters. We also offered \$1,000 for members of the *Zichron Shaya chaburah*, who would learn the entire *Maseches Rosh Hashanah Daf Yomi*, and \$5,000 for anyone who learned the entire *masechta bal peh*. *Baruch Hashem*, we had quite a few completers, including several who learned it *bal peh*. We merited seeing many people's lives change in memory of our dear son.

That one program had a ripple effect. People who were involved sponsored more Gemaras, and at least 1,000 people joined Reb Eli's *shiur* as a trickle-down effect of our one "investment." *Baruch Hashem*, almost immediately afterward, Hashem paid us back with several golden doves: grandchildren, *shidduchim* and many positive presents.

It gives me *chizzuk* to continue our programs, to give out food to those in need, and to increase our *tzedakah*. And the golden dove concept has given me *chizzuk* in recognizing how Hashem gives us all our own golden doves all the time. We just need to see them. ●