

Raise

Me Up

Malka Winner

A glimpse into the life of Mrs. Naomi Knobel, singer, songwriter, mother and longtime secretary of Harav Mordechai Eliyahu, *zt”l*.

You raise me up so I can stand on mountains

You raise me up to walk on stormy seas

I am strong when I’m on Your shoulders

You raise me up to more than I can be...

As I hear the words of this stirring song’s chorus, my eyes prickle with tears. The singer’s voice is so strong, so clear and powerful, and yet when I think of her story, I wonder how she can sing it. Losing a husband — the father of her children, true life partner, best friend, and devoted companion — is, in Naomi’s words, “a devastating nightmare.” Just getting up in the morning and facing the day takes incredible energy and willpower, pulled from seemingly nonexistent stores. How much more so to stand onstage, smiling widely, encouraging the audience about

staying happy and strong, singing and dancing and conjuring up happiness out of nowhere when you’re suffocating inside.

Prelude and Progression

As a young girl growing up in Monsey, Naomi always knew that one day she was going to live in Eretz Yisrael. After all, it was her father’s dream and he spoke about it constantly, with true longing. One day, when Naomi was about nine years old, that dream came true: The Oppenheimer family moved to Eretz Yisrael with six young children. It was right before the

Yom Kippur War, a tense and tragic time in Eretz Yisrael, but they were ready to meet the challenges. Perhaps that was her first initiation into a life of relinquishing control to the One Above.

After completing her seminary studies in Ofakim, Naomi landed a job at a *frum* bank in Yerushalayim. The position was a high-pressured one, with many demands and responsibilities. But it was also rewarding: Naomi met numerous kind and interesting people, among them a young woman named Ora Ben David, who came to work at the bank for a summer internship. At the end of the summer, Ora wanted to stay on and continue working at the bank, but the management had only agreed to a short contract with her. Naomi saw Ora’s strengths and went to bat for her friend, really pushing for her to keep the job.

Naomi’s *hishtadlus* helped bring results for Ora, which later led to something for Naomi: a job working as the secretary for the Rishon LeTzion, Harav Mordechai Eliyahu, former Chief Rabbi of Israel, *zt”l*.

Divine Orchestration

After Rav Mordechai Eliyahu completed his term as the Rishon LeTzion (a title that Sephardic Rabbanim maintain throughout their lives), he found himself busier than ever. Hundreds of people sought his advice, help and *brachos* on a daily basis. His male assistants accompanied him on trips and appointments, sat in on meetings, and so on. The Rav needed someone to man (or *wo*-man) the desk and the phones, to organize appointments, and be a steady presence in the office.

He and the Rabbanit also liked the idea of having a woman in the office to be an ear for the many women who came to seek the Rav’s advice and blessings. She could be a go-between for sensitive questions, which some women might not feel comfortable presenting directly to the Rav. Not only that, with so much correspondence coming in from around the world, Rav Eliyahu and his wife thought it would be a good idea to hire an English speaker who could handle translation and all English communication.

Ora — Naomi’s friend from the bank — and her family were very close to the Eliyahus. When Ora heard they were looking for a female, English-speaking secretary, she had the perfect candidate to recommend: Naomi Knobel.

When Naomi went for her interview with the Rabbanit, she discovered even more *hashgachah pratis*. Rabbanit Tzviya had actually worked at the same bank years before. “If you can handle the pressure over there,” she told Naomi, “you can

She could be a go-between for sensitive questions, which women might feel uncomfortable to present directly.





certainly handle our busy office.” And that is how an American Ashkenazi woman became the secretary to the Rishon LeTzion.

Resonance and Counterpoint

Naomi recalls that her first month on the job was in Elul. She showed up at the office at Mercaz Ruchani Heichal Yaakov, the five-story building in Yerushalayim’s Kiryat Moshe neighborhood where the Rav’s offices, shul, Beit Medrash Darchei Horaah Lerabanim, and publishing house are located, and discovered hundreds of people outside the door, waiting in a line that snaked around the block. Some had even spent the night there, hoping to be among the first to get the Rav’s *brachah* in the morning.

“*Slichah, slichah*,” she said, as she maneuvered her way to the door. All around her, people started mumbling and grumbling, complaining that they had been waiting for hours and who was she to push her way right in. “I work here, I work here,” she explained over and over again, finally getting inside.

At first she didn’t have much interaction with Maran Harav, as he was referred to there. But as she spent more time in the office, she got a glimpse of who he was, way beyond his identity as founder and president of the *beis medrash*, Rav of the shul, and, of course, Rishon LeTzion. “For me, the Rav was a larger-than-life figure,” she recalls. “Even if he would just walk by, it made me feel good. He had this presence; he was a huge personage — the whole world was looking at him.”

But it wasn’t just the Rav who impressed her. It was everyone in the office. “No one was analyzing you or sizing you up. Everyone felt part of things there. It didn’t matter what you wore on your head, *if* you wore anything on

your head, what background you came from, or where in the world you were from. There was just this tremendous *ahavas Yisrael*.”

She recalls a time that a well-known political figure came to visit the Rav. He was not an observant Jew and didn’t typically wear a *kippah*. He was accompanied by Nus Natanzon, head of the regional council in Yehudah and Shomron, as well as Harav Yosef Efrati, Harav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv’s main assistant. There they were — a bareheaded man, a *kippah srugah*-wearer, and a black-hatted *chareidi* — and they were walking arm in arm as they headed into Rav Eliyahu’s room, joking and smiling together like the best of friends. “That moment totally encapsulated what the office was — and still is,” Naomi says. “Everyone respects each other.”

On Staff and In Tune

Naomi typed all the Rav’s letters and *haskamos*, exams for the *beis medrash* (where the Rav’s son Yosef was and is the *Rosh Beis Hamedrash*), and the hundreds of *she’eilos* and *teshuvos* that came in and out of that office. She set up all the Rav’s appointments and handled his engagements, and she worked as the secretary of the *kollel*, including typing the Rav’s *marei mekomos*.

“A few years after I started, it was so overwhelming that we brought in an additional secretary whose job it was just to answer the phone, take questions, and record and number the faxes so we could get back to them. It was a full-time job, so I was able to be more involved with the Rav’s needs, like his schedule, the appointments, and so on, though I was on the phone plenty myself,” Naomi recalls. “There were always different projects going on that needed my attention. There was never a minute to breathe. And I absolutely loved it.”

With time, she learned to handle all those things with aplomb. But in the beginning, there were some flub-ups and embarrassments. “I once got a call from someone who identified himself as ‘Mordechai’ and asked for the phone

number of someone in the office,” Naomi recalls. “I looked through the phone numbers on file and didn’t find it. I told him there was no one there by that name and that was that.”

Only after ‘Mordechai’ hung up did the new secretary realize who she had just spoken to — and practically hung up on. She found the requested phone number and relayed it through a family member. First thing the next morning, she asked Rav Eliyahu for his forgiveness, apologizing for being unhelpful. But he ended up asking *her* for forgiveness, saying he shouldn’t have put her in that uncomfortable situation in the first place.

About a year after she started working for Rav Eliyahu, Naomi found herself in a difficult personal situation. She decided that she wouldn’t share the details with him, she would simply ask for a *brachah*. It was her first time speaking to Rav Eliyahu about something personal. Although she was smiling when she asked for his blessing, he sensed that her heart was troubled. “Don’t worry,” he reassured her. “Everything will be okay.” Naomi walked out of his room and couldn’t hold back the tears. How had he known what was going through her mind? “I walked out of there feeling like, ‘This person has *ruach hakodesh*. He’s so close to Hashem.’”

Such things became de rigueur. Rav Eliyahu always seemed to know what was going on with people even before they asked.

All through the years, Rav Eliyahu was there for her, through every little thing, even things she never spoke about. Naomi knew that he cared about her — and about every Jew who came to seek his counsel. As an aside, she adds that her favorite moments were seeing his genuine happiness whenever someone would call to share the outcome of his *tefillos* and *brachos*.

“If you ask anyone — a Rav or Rebbetzin or whomever — for help, to *daven* for you, for anything like that,” Naomi says, “they’re so happy to hear how things work out. They often hear the beginning but never know the end. Reach out to them and share your story’s ending.”

Naomi continues to work in the office today, and still loves her job. “I was offered better and higher paying positions over the years,” Naomi explains. “But I wouldn’t trade this for anything.”

Striking a Chord

Naomi had been singing and performing all over Israel since she was young, leading girls’ choirs and singing with a popular girls’ band until her marriage. She also arranged music, played guitar, and sang on the first *frum* children’s tape released in Israel, a project she participated in while in Ofakim. In fact, her husband was suggested to her by a co-performer who knew of his great love for music. But the music was put on hold for many years while she raised her

children and did “real” jobs.

When Rav Eliyahu heard about her love for music, he urged her to get back into it and to share her gift with others. His encouragement was a main impetus for restarting her musical career. But Naomi has many stories about how the Rav personally intervened to help her even beyond that — through *tefillah* and blessings and in practical ways. From dispatching his driver to take her to the hospital when she was having a baby to sending his assistant, Chaim Suissa, to the States to represent him at her daughter’s wedding, Rav Eliyahu was there for her in so many ways.

One time she mentioned to Rav Eliyahu that she was planning to fly to America to visit one of her daughters, who had gone to the States for the summer and ended up staying. When she shared her plans, Rav Eliyahu looked down and then started shaking his head. “There’s no need to go now,” he said. He offered no additional explanation,

When she asked Rav Eliyahu’s forgiveness, he apologized to her for making her uncomfortable.



“The Rav was a larger-than-life figure. When he would walk by, it made me feel good.”





her son's head, saying the words usually reserved for Erev Yom Kippur. Then she called back.

"There's no surgery today. Go home," the Rav told her. He hung up.

To make a long story short, after a very difficult experience in the hospital trying to get a second opinion and repeatedly being refused, she was forced to sign her son into surgery. She called the Rav back. "Do what you want," he said, "but there's no surgery today. *Brachah v'hatzlachah*. Go home."

By this time, Naomi was completely hysterical. On the one hand, the Rav was telling her there was no surgery, and on the other hand, the orderlies were wheeling her son into the operating theater, telling her she could be arrested if she didn't let the doctors perform surgery right away. Then the surgeon walked in and looked at Naomi's son, who had not yet been sedated, and pressed on the boy's abdomen. The boy didn't react. In fact, he was smiling.

The doctors and nurses looked at one another. "*Ein nituach hayom. Habayta!* There's no surgery today. Go home!" the surgeon announced. He had used the exact same wording as Rav Eliyahu.

Another hospital situation merited the Eliyahus' personal intervention. Naomi had been admitted to the hospital for an induction, and the Rabbanit repeatedly called the nurses' station to check up on her. When it became clear that there were complications necessitating a surgical birth, the Rabbanit called Professor Arnon Samueloff, head of obstetrics in Shaare Tzedek, and demanded that he be the one to operate on Naomi. Professor Samueloff was on the highway, heading to Tel Aviv for a conference, but the Rabbanit's persistence won out and he actually returned to the hospital to perform the surgery.

The next day, the Rabbanit came to visit Naomi and the new baby, handing her an envelope. "Here's money to pay for the doctor," she said simply. "I told him to do it, so I will pay for it." She gave the new baby a blanket, a gift that Naomi still cherishes. "The kids want it for their children," she says, "but I won't let it leave the house!"

Impromptu Interludes

Over the years, Naomi got so much *chizuk* from the Rav — even when she didn't know she needed it.

The Rav visited Jonathan Pollard several times in the

but as soon as he said that, Naomi knew she should cancel her plans — and she did.

Several months later, she decided to try again to visit her daughter in the States. But this time, she asked the Rav first. "Of course you should go," he said. And then he even gave her some money to help pay for the ticket — which he did through his assistant so as not to make her uncomfortable. While she was there, she learned that if she had gone the previous time, it wouldn't have been good at all. Her daughter had needed that time to work through some issues on her own.

Another time, Naomi found herself in the hospital with her young son on Erev Shabbos, with a suspected case of appendicitis. She called the Rav from the emergency room when she learned that her son was going to be having surgery. "I said, 'My son is being operated on and I want a *brachah*.'"

"Do *kapparot* on his head," the Rav said. "Then give the *tzedakah* right away and call back." He asked for the boy's name and hung up.

Naomi took some bills in hand and swung them over



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What is The Role of Sod Haadam?

A TRUE STORY:

The school's annual grand performances were set for Motzei Shabbos and Sunday. It was on that preceding Friday morning, with tension mounting, that final preparations were underway to make sure that all was perfectly ready for the large crowd that was expected. As the director entered the auditorium for one more check-over, she realized to her great dismay and concern that the stage-related electricity was non-operative, disabling the lighting, sound system, curtains, microphone, and special effects... and therefore, in essence – the entire production!

In near panic, the frenzied search began:

Staff member scoured all about – to no avail;

The custodian was hurriedly summoned – in vain;

An experienced, fully accredited electrician was brought in to rummage through wires – his efforts proved futile;

And finally, a highly professional electrical engineer with a specialty degree in stage electronics was ordered – with no results to compensate for his exorbitant fee.

Finally the director, utterly lost and helpless, sent a tearful plea-prayer Heavenward... And then a thought suddenly crossed her mind:

She dashed over to the main switch, flicked it on – and – sure enough, everything came back to life!

Dumbfounded, she stood there limply at the front of the empty auditorium, and thought: "So many professionals... so much money... so much strain... so much pain... so much focus upon the small components... yet none of us thought about turning on the main switch!"

So much strain, so much pain, so many symptoms – so much fuss over the details.

Sod Haadam targets the main switch and restores life.

What is Sod Ha'adam?

Sod Ha'adam reveals the secret of understanding the nefesh of a Yid. The lessons in Sod Ha'adam encompass the totality of our beings – the physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual parts – and proves how they are all inseparably intertwined. Its basic premise is the untainted truth: that the core of every single Yid is pure and wholesome. We are each infused with our very own unique inner powers and individual greatness. When negativity develops it's because our core is blocked.

Sod Ha'adam reveals the secret of reconnecting to our core, and allowing new channels to open, to life, to healing. As the growth process begins to take root, various diagnoses and negativity of all kinds - fade away... And one's true natural magnificence is able to emerge. Our radiance bursts forth, spreading new light to ourselves and to those around us.

Sod Ha'adam reveals the secret of how we can so realistically obtain what our neshamos know we need in order to live lives of true happiness and deep satisfaction. It is the gift of living life, alive – for ourselves and our loved ones. It's the way Hashem intended for every Yid to thrive and shine.

How is Sod Ha'adam Experienced?

It's not only about learning eye-opening, brand new concepts and knowledge; it's about **becoming**. It's about becoming newly connected to our own selves first, in a way that we never even knew existed, and then extending that deep connection to our husbands, children, students and everyone else around us.

The science of Sod Ha'adam penetrates our minds and then revives our hearts. It peels away the imposed and self-inflicted negativity to release the wellspring of richness, wholesome goodness, vitality, purity and joy that is always alive within the essence of a Yid.

Through the Sod Ha'adam process of inner work, the walls of numbness are thawed, the voices that doubt our values and worthiness and others are quieted, the waves of confusion are stilled. And one is empowered, energized, revived by the emes.

Why Sod Ha'adam?

Sod Ha'adam is unique in that its teachings are all culled from the best possible source - the Torah Hakedosha - 'Authored' by the highest Authority on mankind: our Creator. Hashem created us, He knows us best – knows precisely in which way we'll be and feel and perform our best. The Sod Ha'adam course is not based upon an existing method, but has been exclusively and personally established upon foundations of Torah Hashkafa. Sod Ha'adam's revolutionary science of inner work has been tried and tested with incredibly transformational results. Many years of rich experience in chinuch and healing provide endless reservoirs of captivating true stories that make the unbelievable – irrefutable. Sod Ha'adam is a **journey on the path of truth**.

There's no way for me to describe it. I told my husband, "This is the biggest gift you ever gave me. There's nothing else I need. This is everything... I am a new person."

– Mother, Teleconference Participant

I have read just about every book on psychology and mental health. I know it all. But this is the emes.

I can't stop the tears... Rebbetzin Tukachinsky touched my neshamah. Bring this to all the women, the schools, to the men, the yeshivos."

– Founder of a Special-Ed school, and Public School Teacher

I got all my teachers to sign on their contracts that they'll take the Sod Haadam course. There is no way a teacher can walk into the classroom without having heard this. Teach it to the teachers, teach it to the mothers. We'd avoid so, so many problems..."

– Principal of large Chassidish Elementary School, Teleconference Participant

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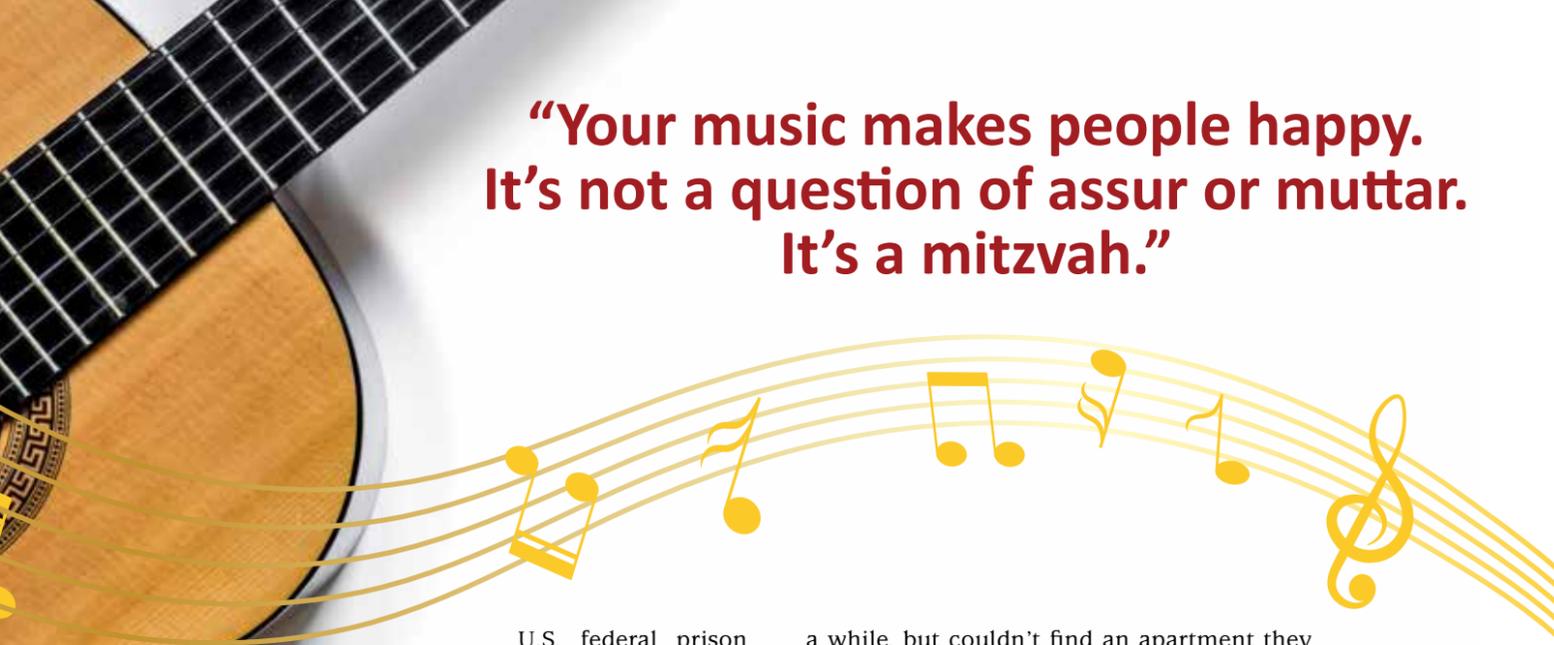
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“Your music makes people happy. It’s not a question of *assur* or *muttar*. It’s a *mitzvah*.”

U.S. federal prison system, and Naomi became acquainted with the Pollards through him. When they heard that she was coming to the States for her daughter’s wedding, the Pollards made flight reservations for her and Rav Chaim Suissa to visit at the facility where he was imprisoned in North Carolina. Several others were invited to join as well, and it turned into an official diplomatic trip.

Naomi was incredibly moved by the visit and felt honored to visit him again after his parole. She continues to remain in close contact with the Pollards. “I was so impressed by him, by his courage, brilliance, politeness, *emunah*, and love for *Am Yisrael*,” she says. “I left on a personal high after having met such an amazing, warm, wonderful person, yet so heartbroken for his and [his wife] Esther’s plight.” When she returned from that visit, she joined the Rav in a meeting with Jonathan’s wife, Esther.

Esther asked Rav Eliyahu for a message to give to Jonathan. The Rav answered, “*Kaveh el Hashem, chazak v’ametz libecha [Tehillim 27:14]*. Why is *kaveh el Hashem* written twice in that *passuk*? Because we must *daven* and hope, with vigor and with all our heart. Yet if we don’t experience salvation, that is not up to us, and we must not become hopeless. What is up to us is to persist and continue in our ‘*kaveh el Hashem*,’ hoping and praying to Hashem.”

At that time, Naomi was in the midst of composing a melody for an upcoming musical performance. She wanted to describe the prison visit to the audience, hoping to inspire them to *daven* for Yehonatan ben Malka. She told this to the Rav, who said, “You should use those words [*kaveh el Hashem*] in a song.” She did, and it became one of her most requested pieces — and one of the Rabbanit’s personal favorites. It gives *chizuk* to many women who hear it — and its message continues to encourage Naomi, too.

Naomi and her husband had been looking to move for

a while, but couldn’t find an apartment they liked. They had asked the Rav about various apartments and neighborhoods, but they did not find anything suitable. One day, Naomi’s husband agreed to see a particular apartment, but it wasn’t anything serious — it was more of a *chessed* to a friend of the seller. The Knobels didn’t expect it to work out. The apartment turned out to be everything they wanted — but in a location they didn’t want at all. The Knobels therefore dismissed the idea.

The next day, Naomi was sitting in on a meeting with the Rav and his assistants. Suddenly, the Rav looked at her and asked, uncharacteristically, “Where do you live?”

“In the same place,” Naomi answered, confused.

“You didn’t find something yet?” he asked.

She started to explain that they had looked here and there but they hadn’t found anything. Finally, she said that they had seen something they liked, but they didn’t want to live in that neighborhood.

Rav Eliyahu asked her a few questions and then said, “*Brachah v’hatzlachah*.”

Even though it was hard for her, Naomi knew that if the Rav said it was good, it would be good. They bought the apartment and decided to move in right away. Naomi asked the Rav if they could move in even if they only had two *mezuzos* in the meantime. He said, “I’ll come today and put up the *mezuzot*.”

The Knobels were *zocheh* to host an impromptu *chanukas habayis* on Chanukah, their moving day, when the Rav arrived at their box-filled home to install their *mezuzos*. “I would never, ever change that *mezuzah*,” Naomi says emotionally. “He was at my house for an hour. I didn’t know anyone yet, and no one came, but we hosted him in our home.” The Rav made *brachos* in her home, and then his assistant, Harav Shmuel Zafrani, took off his tie and gave it to Naomi’s husband as a gift. “Make a *Shehechyanu*,” he instructed. The video of that special evening — and, of course, the warm memories — continue to give Naomi *chizuk*, strength she didn’t know she would need at the time.

Three Elegies

When Naomi’s father passed away in 2003, she went through an incredibly difficult time, having been very close to him. Not only did the Rav instruct her on what to do at the time of her father’s *petirah*, he and the Rabbanit came to her home during the *shivah*.

Shortly afterward, Naomi approached the Rav to discuss her music, and to ask how long she should take off from it following her father’s *petirah*. He told her that she must get back to making music and singing as soon as the *sheloshim* was over. “But this isn’t my main *parnassah*,” Naomi explained.

“Women have so much to deal with, and they *need* this,” the Rav explained. “It’s a big *mitzvah* to make people happy, and your music makes people happy. It’s not a question of *assur* or *muttar*, it’s a *mitzvah*.”

That was a message that stayed with her through more trying times. When Rav Eliyahu, who was a beloved second father to Naomi, passed away in 2010, her heart broke once again. And she continued to perform, using her music as a kind of eulogy for him and what he embodied.

In 2015, Naomi’s husband was diagnosed with cancer. During that difficult *tekufah* she continued to play guitar and sing, somehow rising above the fears and pain that were tearing her up from the inside. The illness was breathtakingly fast — the disease took her husband of 30 years in only three short months, leaving Naomi a widow at 51, and her nine children — ranging in age from 15–29 — without a father. Going through that loss without her father and without the Rav was agonizing. At the *levayah*, though, she felt sure that the Rav’s presence was accompanying the *niftar*. “It gives me some comfort to think that my husband is together with the Rav now,” Naomi says.

She adds that in the years leading up to the Rav’s *petirah*, he would often remark to Naomi, seemingly out of the blue, “Your husband’s a good, good man.” At the time she thought it was strange, as she and her husband shared a wonderful marriage, *baruch Hashem*. She figured the Rav was just trying to give her a little boost of confidence in her spouse. Now, she realizes that he was giving her injections of *chizuk*. “After all,” she explains, “what more could a woman want than to know that she had been married to a truly good person?”

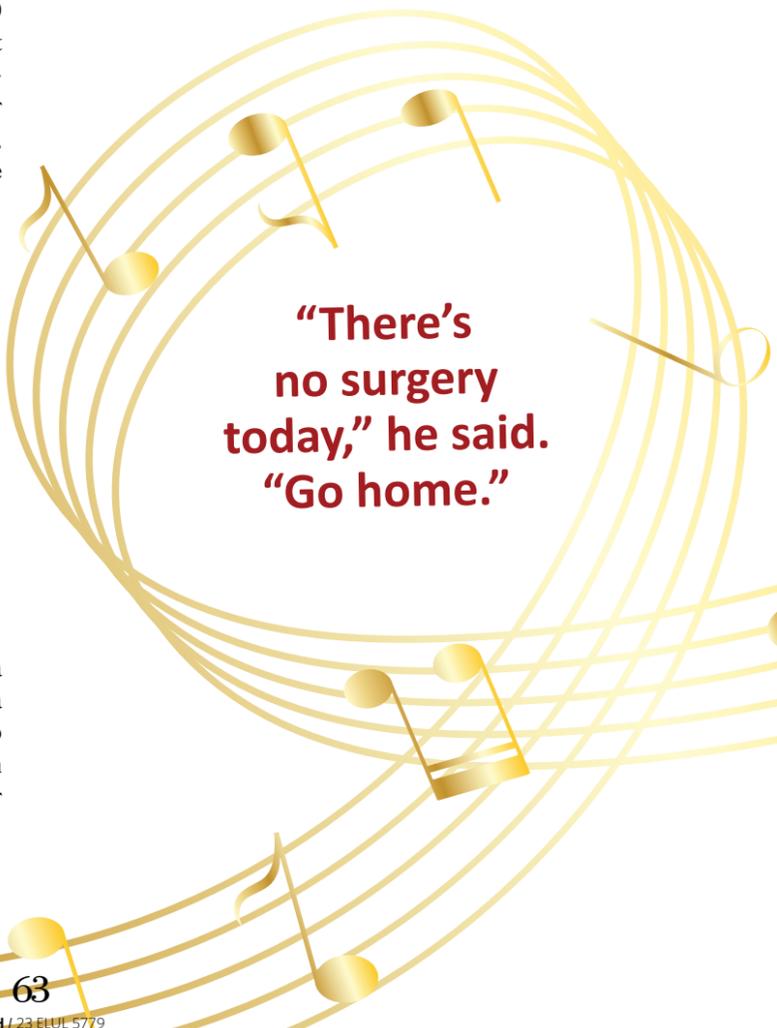
True Harmony

When you speak to Naomi, you get the impression of a genuinely joyful person. Naomi explains that she received a personal mandate from the Rav. “He told me it’s a *mitzvah* to make music,” she says. “He knew how hard it is for women to feel happy in this generation; he said it’s important for women to find joy.”

Inspired by the Rav’s message on the importance of inner *simchah*, she and her husband, *z”l*, used music to bring much happiness into their own home, even as Naomi was sharing it with women around Israel at the hundreds of performances she has held over the years. Every one of her kids developed a personal musical talent, and each one has a love for music that includes singing and playing an instrument. One plays guitar, another the piano, one enjoys the flute, while another prefers drums. One of her children also performs, while another composes, and another is a music teacher. Her girls often join in her performances and accompany her to sing and play for sick women in the hospital.

Her children’s friends consider their home to be *the* place for *kumzitzes*, and they seek out the Knobel home as a fun, happy, happening place — quite an accomplishment in any home, and especially one where sadness, gloom, and despair could easily reign. It seems that the Rav’s directive was not only meant to help the thousands of women who have felt Naomi’s warmth and light at her performances; the Rav’s encouragement, *brachah*, and personal mission obviously deeply changed Naomi, too. ●

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Naomi will be writing a series in *Binah* on her inspiring musical experiences.



“There’s
no surgery
today,” he said.
“Go home.”