The Contemporary Rebbetzin

WHAT’S IT LIKE TO BE A REBBETZIN IN 2017?

By Avigayil Perry

It was the chicken soup that made all the difference.

Fifteen years ago, when Rabbi Daniel and Batya Friedman moved to Edmonton, Canada, where the weather can plunge to a bone-chilling twenty degrees below zero, there was no Friday night minyan at Beth Israel, the local Orthodox shul. Drawing upon the recent influx of tradition-minded South African Jews, Rabbi Friedman, who was hired to lead Beth Israel, quickly established a minyan. To lure people in, he started offering piping hot, homemade chicken soup along with freshly made potato kugel—courtesy of his wife.

It worked.

The Friday night minyan grew and, after a few years, even thrived. But the early years were difficult, confesses Batya Friedman, who prefers “Rabbanit” over rebbetzin. To attract daveners, the minyan was called for 6:00 PM—even when Shabbat came in as early as 4:00 PM. Rabbanit Friedman would gather her young daughters—a toddler and a baby at the time—and wait in the shul for the minyan, and then the meal, to start. As the hours wore on, her children would grow tired and cranky. Then the rabbi and his family would have to walk home in the bitter cold. “Those were challenging times,” she says.

In the life of a rebbetzin, the sacrifices are often steep. Back in the 80s and 90s, when Rebbetzin Judi Steinig, a rebbetzin for more than thirty years, was busy raising her children, her husband served as the rabbi of the Young Israel of Bayside, a small, struggling shul in Queens, New York. But it didn’t make sense for the couple to move to Bayside—and so they occupied two homes. During the week, they lived in a larger house in the Bronx, where their kids had more room to play and friends in the neighborhood, and for Shabbat they would move to the tiny apartment above the shul. “We were packing every week,” Rebbetzin Steinig recalls. How did she handle such an exhausting routine? "You rise to the challenge.”

To better understand the challenges

Avigayil Perry lives in Norfolk, Virginia, with her family and writes for various Jewish publications.
From left: Rebbetzin Karen Hochberg, Rabbanit Batya Friedman and Rebbetzin Lori Palatnik.
What a rebbetzin does when she’s in her twenties will often be very different from what she does when she’s in her forties or fifties.

Of contemporary rebbetzinhood, I interviewed rebbetzins from across North America, some just starting out, others with decades of experience. But irrespective of their different life stories and circumstances—one truth emerges: rebbetzinhood entails a certain amount of mesirut nefesh, self-sacrifice. And yet many of the idealistic, high-energy and impassioned women interviewed say they wouldn’t have it any other way. They simply cannot envision living their lives any differently.

**A Fulfilled Life**

Lori Palatnik is the well-known writer, educator, speaker and founder of the Jewish Women’s Renaissance Project (JWRP). Known as “Birthright for Moms,” the JWRP seeks to empower and inspire Jewish women through its eight-day-long, life-altering trips to Israel. JWRP has brought thousands of women and hundreds of men to Israel each year from nineteen different countries. Rebbetzin Palatnik’s weekly video blog, “Lori Almost Live,” is viewed by over 50,000 people each month.

As a child, Rebbetzin Palatnik, now in her fifties, dreamed of becoming a stewardess, actress and lawyer. In becoming a high-profile rebbetzin, she does, in fact, work as a stewardess (she brings groups of women to Israel every year); an actress (she appears on television and radio), and a lawyer (she advocates for investing in Jewish women through her work at the JWRP). Becoming a rebbetzin has fulfilled her in the most optimal way. “I feel so blessed. I love what I do,” says Rebbetzin Palatnik, who currently lives in Rockville, Maryland. “Hashem made all my dreams come true, just not in the way I expected.”

Karen Hochberg is another rebbetzin who seems tailor-made for the job. Having occupied the rebbetzin role for more than forty years, Rebbetzin Hochberg feels grateful to have served in two very “wonderful” shuls throughout her career: Montefiore Synagogue in Lowell, Massachusetts and the Young Israel of Jamaica Estates in Queens, New York. “I love meeting..."
Should Rebbetzins Be Paid?

Generally speaking, shuls pay the rabbi and rebbetzin a “two for one [deal], expecting both the rabbi and rebbetzin to work, but only paying the rabbi’s salary,” says Rebbetzin Lori Palatnik. But thirty years ago, realizing the toll teaching a number of classes a week was taking on her and her family, Rebbetzin Palatnik decided to do something truly revolutionary. She asked for a salary.

Even more remarkable—she got it. When rebbetzins are paid, says Rebbetzin Palatnik, “shuls get more out of them, and [the rebbetzins] feel more empowered and appreciated.” Her advice to shuls: “A wife is a rabbi’s number-one partner. Invest in her.”

Some rebbetzins admit that if their shuls would provide a salary, they would quit their jobs and throw themselves wholeheartedly into their rebbetzin career. Chamie Haber, for example is a thirty-seven-year-old mother of five and part-time preschool teacher.

She also serves as the rebbetzin of Congregation B’nai Israel in Norfolk, Virginia. In her unpaid role, Rebbetzin Haber gives shiurim to women, organizes speakers and occasionally meets with congregants seeking guidance and advice. “I have the zechus to counsel people and help them with issues they struggle with. Unfortunately, as much as I think about them and want to meet again, often, I just don’t have the time for the follow-up.

“Communities that pay their rebbetzins so that they don’t have to work outside of community leadership show that they value and understand the role of rebbetzin.”

While most rebbetzins do not get paid, some feel changes are happening. There is a greater recognition that a rebbetzin might have an all-consuming career and simply cannot devote time to the congregation. “There was always an unstated expectation that a rebbetzin needed to be actively involved in her husband’s career,” says Rebbetzin Meira Davis. “Nowadays, this is no longer taken for granted.” There is also a growing realization, she says, that if a rebbetzin is giving classes, she should be paid for her time.

The OU’s Heshe & Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (OU-JLIC), launched in 2000, hires educator couples to serve as role models for Orthodox students on campus. Now on twenty-three campuses, these educators, with each partner receiving a salary, share similar duties including teaching, organizing programming, and counseling and learning with students. While it’s still early in the process, with the OU-JLIC “campus rebbetzin” getting both recognition and compensation for her role, she is perhaps starting a new trend in Orthodox life.

Despite the sometimes contentious debate surrounding compensation for rebbetzins, somewhat surprisingly, there is no real consensus among rebbetzins about the issue. Some, in fact, prefer the freedom that comes from not being on the payroll. “The fact that I’m not paid gives me flexibility,” says Rabbanit Batya Friedman. “If I can’t give a shiur, I don’t have to. I need the flexibility.”

people,” says Rebbetzin Hochberg, who exudes warmth. “Relationships color our whole lives . . . and we women thrive on them. As a rebbetzin, I’ve had the opportunity to create so many fulfilling relationships.” In many ways, Rebbetzin Hochberg’s congregants have become her family. And despite the fact that she and her husband left Lowell nearly three decades ago, they remain very close to many of their former congregants.

Rebbetzin Hochberg recalls that when their daughter got engaged, their soon-to-be son-in-law asked if they could have a small wedding. “Sure,” said Rebbetzin Hochberg, “only immediate family—just 840 people!”

The Balancing Act

One of the more obvious challenges facing the typical rebbetzin is the struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance. “Forty years ago, husbands tended to be the primary breadwinners,” says Rebbetzin Hochberg. “Today’s financial demands don’t allow for this reality. It’s a given that most rebbetzins are going to pursue a career.”

“Juggling is the number-one issue many rebbetzins struggle with,” concurs Rebbetzin Steinig, who currently serves as the associate director of community services at the OU. In addition to the usual tasks of running a home and raising children, a rebbetzin might be managing her career while finding time in the day to make a shivah call to a congregant, visit an ailing shul member or teach a kallah class to a young bride.

“I give these young rebbetzins a lot
Top, from left: Rabbanit Batya Friedman says: "As a rebbetzin, I created my own job description.” | A rebbetzin for more than thirty years, Rebbetzin Judi Steinig helps organize programs across the country exclusively for rebbetzins. | Rebbetzin Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt juggles being a mother, an editor at the Forward, an adjunct professor of journalism at Stern College and a rebbetzin. Notwithstanding her full schedule, she “wouldn’t trade her job as rebbetzin for anything.”

Bottom, from left: A mother of seven, Rebbetzin Ruchie Koval copes with her non-stop schedule by delegating. "Some women . . . do everything on their own and they burn out." | "As a rebbetzin," says Rebbetzin Karen Hochberg, "I’ve had the opportunity to create so many fulfilling relationships." | Rebbetzin Lori Palatnik, founder of the JWRP, otherwise known as "Birthright for Moms."
of credit,” says Rebbetzin Hochberg. “Many of them have young children and demanding professions, some are doctors, dentists or lawyers. It’s wonderful that they also strive to help their husbands build a community.”

When Rebbetzin Steinig had young children, she worked as a freelance editor while tending to the needs of the small shul. “There was no secretary, no executive director,” says Rebbetzin Steinig. “My husband and I had to do everything.” Serving in a small shul can be tough since the rabbi and rebbetzin handle everything, from party planning to marketing to fundraising. Rebbetzin Steinig recalls the year the shul honored her and her husband. As they were preparing to leave for the dinner, her ten-year-old daughter turned to her and asked, “What time do we have to be there?” She told her daughter the dinner was starting at 5:00 pm and that they plan to be there ten minutes early. Accustomed to setting up every kiddush and shul event, her daughter was aghast.

“But who’s going to set up the tables?” she asked.

Of course, larger shuls present a different set of challenges. “You can have simchas almost every night of the week,” says Rebbetzin Steinig.

Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt, a twenty-five-year-old mother, serves as an editor at the Forward and an adjunct professor of journalism at Stern College. She is also in the midst of writing a fiction novel. “I struggle with the time commitment,” she says. Upon returning home from work, after getting her one and a half year old fed and into bed, her day is far from over. On most evenings there is an event to attend with her husband, Rabbi Benjamin Goldschmidt, assistant rabbi at Park East Synagogue in Manhattan—whether it be a simchah, a visit to a shivah house, a funeral, a philanthropic event held at the shul or an appointment to teach a kallah class. Shabbat is hardly a break—Rebbetzin Chizhik-Goldschmidt is expected to host young couples for a meal. “People think that I get to go to lots of parties and dress up all the time,” she states. “While I truly love what I do, I am always on, always smiling.”

Rebbetzin Chizhik-Goldschmidt manages by planning one day and one week at a time. They only host guests for Friday night, reserving Shabbat lunch as their private family time.

“It feels like having a second child, always feeling guilty about whom I am giving more attention to—family or community,” she admits.

Setting boundaries and knowing one’s limitations is critical in order to prevent burnout, say veteran rebbetzins. “In my younger years, I said ‘yes’ too much,” says Ruchi Koval, a forty-two-year-old mother of seven who serves as the director and co-founder of the Jewish Family Experience (JFX), a family education center and Sunday school in Cleveland, Ohio. “I was much more intimidated and insecure.”

In addition to running the JFX, Rebbetzin Koval teaches four classes.

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every week. She is also a certified parenting coach, author of a popular blog, a JWRP trip leader, as well as founder and board member of Ohr Chadash, a day school track for children with autism and ADHD in Cleveland. To cope with her non-stop hectic schedule, she delegates. “Some husbands and wives do everything on their own and burn out,” she explains. She hires staff to help run her various endeavors and is a firm believer in hiring household help. She has also lowered her expectations, permitting herself to be okay with non-essentials; she cooks simple Shabbat and dinner meals.

But the way rebbetzins choose to juggle—or not to—is a highly personal choice. When Rebbetzin Palatnik assisted her husband in running the Village Shul, the first Aish HaTorah shul in Toronto, Canada, she stayed home to raise her five children, now ranging between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight. These days, working well beyond full-time, she admits: “I couldn’t have run the JWRP when my kids were little.” When she launched JWRP in 2008, she was totally consumed by the program—leading every trip, doing all the fundraising herself and taking care of basically every last detail. “I did everything on those trips except drive the bus,” she says. Today Rebbetzin Palatnik relies on talented trip leaders like Rebbetzin Koval, enabling her to be there for her family when necessary.

“When I was younger, mothering seemed so hard practically and physically,” continued Rebbetzin Palatnik. “Now it’s a different type of challenge—it’s more emotionally challenging.” Currently, Rebbetzin Palatnik is busy helping her older children find suitable life partners and navigate the stormy waters of early adulthood. “The most important decision one will make is who to marry,” she says. “Being there for my children at this most crucial juncture of their lives is important. I can outsource a lot, but I cannot outsource being their mother.”

An Ever-Changing Role

Most of the rebbetzins concede that their role is constantly changing, never static. “What a rebbetzin does when she’s in her twenties will often be very different from what she does when she’s in her forties or fifties,” says Rebbetzin Steinig. And the needs of the community will change. Rabbanit Friedman knows this well. Attracting worshippers to Beth Israel on Friday nights is no longer a struggle—even on the coldest nights; so she no longer needs to make her much-celebrated chicken soup. “Back then that was what the shul needed,” she says. “My role as rebbetzin has evolved and continues to evolve.”

“Since every community, every shul is unique, every rebbetzin partnership is unique—no two rebbetzins are alike,” continues Rabbanit Friedman, whose five girls range from two to sixteen. “The role is determined by both the needs of the community and the individual personality of the particular rebbetzin. Depending on where I was in life, I was able to give more or less.” While Rabbanit Friedman devotes herself fully to serving as rebbetzin in Edmonton, there are not too many young rebbetzins who view the role as their full-time job, notes Rebbetzin Meira Davis, who runs an annual Yarchei Kallah for rebbetzins.

And because rebbetzins are increasingly career-oriented, expectations have become less defined, more fluid. Rebbetzin Hochberg grew up in a home where her parents worked together to build a business; seeing that model influenced her to be a true partner to her husband.

“A rebbetzin has options—you can be as active or as inactive as you want to be,” says Rebbetzin Hochberg. “I chose to be active.”

“The rebbetzin’s role has always been very individual,” Rebbetzin Steinig says. “Each rebbetzin needs to consider a role that she is comfortable taking on, one that suits her personality, skills, family dynamics, profession and shul needs. One rebbetzin may excel at giving inspiring classes while another may not be comfortable teaching, but is skilled in event planning.”

At the end of the day, it all comes down to personality. Some women thrive on rebbetzinhood, others don’t.

But customizing the role to suit one’s lifestyle seems to work. It took Rabbanit Friedman, a former banker, a few years to figure out how she could best contribute to the community. Today she is a real partner with her husband, serving the shul in a multitude of ways, including giving shiurim, teaching bat mitzvah classes and engaging in her newfound passion—doing interfaith work. Rabbanit Friedman has the distinction of being probably the only rebbetzin paid by the Anglican Church—she works as the director of the Capital Region Interfaith Housing Initiative.

She also takes great pride in being able to bring the entire Jewish community together. This past Yom Yerushalayim, for example, she organized a fun-filled event that the whole community could participate in, from the Reform temple to the local kollel. “As a rebbetzin, I created my own job description,” she says.
Learning the Ropes
Most Orthodox shuls won’t hire an unmarried rabbi. “A rebetzin is often integral to a rabbi’s professional success, whether she takes a public stand or a more private role of a supportive spouse,” says Rebbetzin Chizhik-Goldschmidt. “The rebetzin’s job is usually unspoken, with no contract.” Yet there is no rebetzin degree or certificate, no official training for the position.

“I learned a lot in high school and seminary, but didn’t have training in public speaking, counseling, et cetera,” says Rebbetzin Koval. “I made a lot of mistakes along the way.” In her early years serving as a rebetzin, a woman sought her advice regarding her marital difficulties and Rebbetzin Koval provided her with a lot of reassurance; however, she felt nervous, hoping that she acted correctly in validating the woman’s concerns. “Now I have more education and training, and feel more confident, but at the time, I did not. It was very disconcerting,” she says.

Rebbetzin Palatnik shared a similar experience. “I would give advice to people when they approached me about questions regarding their teenaged kids. Then I had my own teenagers and called [those people] and said, ‘Forget everything I said.’” Sometimes, she would reach out to Rebbetzin Feige Twerski, a seasoned and well-respected rebetzin in Milwaukee, for advice. “I also learned when to say, ‘I don’t know,’” Rebbetzin Palatnik says.

A little over a decade ago, Yeshiva University’s Center for the Jewish Future launched the Rebbetzins’ Yarchei Kallah, an annual two-day conference that attracts rebetzins from throughout North America and abroad. A yearly highlight for many of the attendees, the conference gives participants the opportunity to network, enhance their skills and develop relationships with peers. Offering sessions on a broad range of relevant issues including women’s health and halachah, raising children in the limelight, and rebetzin burnout, the conferences are geared to address the issues rebetzins face in their day-to-day work. For rebetzins who are often confronted with some of the most difficult life challenges—self-mutilating teens, those grappling with

At the end of the day, it all comes down to personality. Some women thrive on rebetzinhood, others don’t.”
Coping with Loneliness

“Join the rabbinate, see the world.” So goes the expression. Indeed, many young rebbetzins realize early on that it’s unlikely they will be able to spend their entire lives happily establishing roots in one community. “A lot of women who become rebbetzins don’t end up living anywhere near where they lived before they married,” says Rebbetzin Meira Davis. Leaving the comfort of friends and family, and familiar streets and neighborhoods can, of course, bring about an intense sense of loneliness.

The early years after her move from the rich Jewish life in New York to the relatively tiny Jewish community of Edmonton were “rough,” admits Rabbanit Batya Friedman. She made local friends, but the isolation was always a shadowy presence. Moreover, since Edmonton is a “transition city” where people come for schooling or to finish a residency, even the relationships that she built tended to be short-lived.

Rabbanit Friedman used the situation to her advantage. “My husband is my best friend,” she says. “We became stronger because of the isolation.”

Rebbetzin Lori Palatnik, who spent years working in community outreach shuls in Toronto, New York, Denver, and currently Rockville, Maryland, was keenly aware of the loneliness that is endemic to living in a mostly non-observant community. During the long Shabbatot in the summer, her kids had no friends to play with. One year on Purim she sent out 100 mishloach manot packages; she got only one back. Ultimately, however, those who got involved in her shul became her closest friends. In every community in which they lived, she and her husband brought many Jews closer to their roots. Now she attends many of their kids’ weddings. “All of those years of loneliness were worth it!” she says.

And yet, serving as the rabbinic couple in a small community can be intensely rewarding. “Out-of-town, you are often everything,” says Rebbetzin Davis. “You are the kallah teacher, you are part of the chevra kadisha. If the rabbinic couple in a small community doesn’t provide certain services, people can’t get them.” Committed to community building while raising her nine children, Rebbetzin Davis worked alongside her husband for nearly four decades to establish a strong, vibrant community in Hollywood, Florida. Their efforts paid off. When they first came, the shul consisted of forty-five families; today it boasts more than 600. “We made a difference,” she says.

Drug or other addictions or with gender identity issues—such a support system is invaluable. It’s also imperative for rebbetzins to know how to respond appropriately and to refer to the right professional. “Rebbetzins in their communities were pretty isolated. What kind of support did you have decades ago? None,” says Rebbetzin Davis, the conference organizer, who served as rebbetzin at the Young Israel of Hollywood-Ft. Lauderdale for thirty-six years.

Today, avenues of support for rebbetzins are available, with more cropping up each year. In her role at the OU, Rebbetzin Steinig has coordinated programs with Rebbetzin Davis for training rebbetzins, as well as for kallah teachers, in several venues across the country. Other training programs for rebbetzins include those run by Ner LeElef, Shalom Task Force, and the United Task Force for Children & Families at Risk, a consortium of forty social-service and mental-health agencies that provide a myriad of services within the Tri-State area.

In addition to training opportunities, the use of technology to connect rebbetzins from all over the world is a game-changer, say many veteran rebbetzins. YU launched Rebbetzin’s Café, an online forum where rebbetzins can network; and a group of rebbetzins from around the world created a WhatsApp support group. Rebbetzin Koval describes this support network as “life changing.”

“Thirty years ago, when I began as a rebbetzin, there was no support system,” says Rebbetzin Steinig. “When I was a young rebbetzin and met other more-experienced rebbetzins, I was always impressed because it seemed like they ‘had it together.’ When I actually got to know some of them, I realized everyone is struggling.”

Spiritual Satisfaction
What propels these women to throw themselves into klal work while managing demanding careers and growing families? For many, it’s the spiritual benefits.
Being there for my children at this most crucial juncture of their lives is important. I can outsource a lot, but I cannot outsource being their mother.

Rebbetzin Hochberg did not have a career outside of her shul until her special needs child reached adulthood and moved to a group home more than a decade ago. Since then, along with serving as director of community programs for the Afikim Foundation, Rebbetzin Hochberg has organized an array of chesed activities including singles events, clothing drives and an annual 5-K run/walk for Israel that has raised more than $1 million in proceeds. Each year she, along with the women of the shul, sends 150 bags of clothes to Israel. “[Being a rebbetzin puts you] in a position where you can harness the energy of a lot of people,” says Rebbetzin Hochberg. “We have the opportunity to do so much good. People really want to do good things; with a little bit of planning, we can bring out the best in people.”

Rebbetzin Davis agrees. “The opportunities to have a positive impact are endless,” she says.

Rebbetzin Davis’ elderly parents lived with her and her husband during the last fifteen years of their lives. Without even realizing it, the Davises were modeling love and respect and how to treat aging parents with dignity. To this day, members of their community say things to Rebbetzin Davis like, “I still remember how you took care of your parents.” At the time, Rebbetzin Davis was solely focusing on tending to her ailing parents, not on serving as a role model. “But people see what you do,” she says.

The opportunities for religious fulfillment, say many of the rebbetzins, make all the sacrifices, the mesirut nefesh that is part and parcel of rebbetzinhood, worthwhile.

“Being a rebbetzin makes you be who are supposed to be,” says Rebbetzin Hochberg. “It forces you to be your better self.”

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