

The Education OF PROFESSOR STEPHEN LINENBERGER

Stephen Linenberger, a non-Jewish doctoral student from Bellevue, Nebraska, never imagined that one day he would change his dissertation topic to focus exclusively on the altruism of the Orthodox Jewish community. A graduate student in the social sciences, the Nebraskan barely knew anybody Jewish, let alone Orthodox. But a fortuitous combination of circumstances brought him into contact with a whole new world of people whose lifestyle became the subject of personal inspiration — and academic investigation

Finding inspiration in unlikely places. Professor Linenberger discovered a unique emphasis on *chesed* in the Orthodox Jewish community

Barbara Bensoussan

It's a peculiar quirk of human nature that we tend to be our own worst critics: the musician who hears only the mistakes in his performance, the teenager who feels irredeemably ugly at the appearance of a single pimple. We Jews, with our high standards and ideals, can be particularly hard on ourselves, as we bemoan the warts of our own society: too much *lashon hara*, too much *gashmius*, not enough *tzniyus*, etc. Yet focusing on our flaws sometimes prevents us from seeing the bigger picture. In the same way the musician's listeners may have barely noticed his mistakes amid an otherwise beautiful performance, sometimes it takes an outsider who has never encountered our community to put things in perspective for us.

When Stephen Linenberger, a non-Jewish doctoral student from Bellevue, Nebraska, first encountered the Orthodox Jewish community, he found a whole new world of people whose lifestyle struck him as so unique and appealing that he felt inspired to examine it more closely. Having already decided to study the topic of altruism, and its relationship to the subject of

leadership, he was intrigued to find something he had never read about in the social science literature: a community in which children imbibe values of *chesed*, good *middos*, and *mesirus nefesh* for others along with their mother's milk and matzoh balls.

An Unlikely Shidduch Our story begins in 2004, when Rabbi Pesach Lerner of the National Council of Young Israel began casting about for a solution to help his rabbinical students obtain advanced degrees.

"Our students would receive *smichah* and begin applying for rabbinical or educational positions, but we were finding that those who didn't have master's degrees were at a disadvantage," he told **Mishpacha**. "But most of them didn't have time to enroll in a full-time MA program, and many were scattered in various cities across the United States and Israel. So we thought about doing a program that could be carried out largely through



A world filled with *gemachim* and organizations to fill every need



that in the Orthodox community, altruism seems to be simply woven into the fabric of the culture.”

Upon further self-examination, he realized that this sort of approach resonated with him in part because he had witnessed a similar mentality in the home of his paternal grandparents. “My grandpa was the closest thing to a rabbi I knew,” he says. “He was

never prejudiced, and judged each person on his own merits. He was always up for a debate, just like my students, and he was a history buff. My grandma was a loving, pious person who had lived through the Depression in a close-knit community of large families. She used to talk about how everyone in a community ought to pitch in and help each other out.”

Linenberger says that in his youth, this sort of talk sounded old-fashioned to him; it painted a kind of Norman Rockwell image that was both quaint and antiquated when contrasted with the individualistic, looking-out-for-number-one culture of modern America.

“I used to work in retail sales, and the marketing approach says you should grab whatever you can for yourself to climb the corporate ladder,” he says. “But deep down, that didn’t sit right with me. When I encountered the Orthodox community, I thought to

myself, ‘This is just like my grandparents!’”

The image of his father’s selflessness also fueled his connection to people for whom *chesed* was a way of life. “My dad was a janitor in a grade school, a sociable person who touched many people’s lives,” Stephen remembers. His mother, who grew up an orphan, struggled with depression and alcoholism, and when his parents split up during his teen years, he says, his father went through incredible suffering to raise his children well.

“My dad, my grandparents, and my uncles were my role models, people who lived unselfishly and avoided conflicts,” he says. “They were the best part of my childhood.” After being in close contact with rabbinical students who “know Biblical leaders inside and out,” he is now able to couch those family influences in Torah terms: “I identify myself and my father’s side a lot with Aharon, who was the peacemaker.”

Stephen says he has always been a spiritually oriented person. “I even considered the priesthood at one time,” he acknowledges. “But I couldn’t believe in the religion enough. I think when my dad died he was disappointed that I had become so secular, since he always saw me as a spiritual person.

“I think it’s because of him that I’ve been so open to learning about Judaism,” he continues. “You know, if you look at the Linenberger family history, it seems that we originally came from Germany and were brought to work in Russia, because of a special expertise in farming. There’s a pretty good chance there was Jewish blood in there some generations ago — who knows?”

“But sometimes I do feel like it’s my dad up there directing me towards all this — it’s such a strange, transcendent thing the way all this came about. I think about it all the time.”

“Suddenly everything was up for debate!”
Linenberger driving home a point in classic *yeshivish* style



correspondence, but would be supplemented by several intensive week-long seminar sessions.”

Rabbi Lerner began shopping around for a university that would partner with him to provide accreditation, while simultaneously accommodating the needs of his students. After several dead ends, *Hashgachah pratis* brought him to Bellevue University in Bellevue, Nebraska, which offered master’s degrees in leadership studies.

Leadership studies? I ask. That’s not a specialty I’d ever heard of in my day. But Rabbi Lerner sets me straight. “Leadership studies has become a popular option for people pursuing careers in business, the clergy, and education,” he says.

As part of the deal that was struck with Bellevue, the university would send instructors to the New York area to give intensive, week-long classes twice a year. The result was a program that former student Ahuvah Heyman characterizes as “a *real* degree, one that is both affordable and realistically doable.” (Mrs. Heyman was already the mother of eight children when she undertook the program.) One of the doctoral students at Bellevue, Stephen Linenberger, had already been teaching for some time, and volunteered to come on board to teach some of the courses. He had no idea what he was about to get into.

O Brave New World Stephen Linenberger grew up, by his own admission, “thirty-five miles from the center of the US,” he says. “That’s Washington, Kansas.”

He has the open, friendly manner of a Midwesterner. We meet in a Boro Park coffee shop, where he is instantly recognizable as the only patron without a yarmulke. Dressed in a neat denim shirt, sweater vest, and wire-rimmed glasses, he presents as a typical academic, Nebraska-style. He seems to be basking in the ambiance, as the restaurant fills with *frum* mothers with their children, businessmen meeting for lunch, and women of a certain age having coffee with friends, all of them speaking much louder and faster than anybody ever does in Bellevue, Nebraska.

In his years working in retail and then in universities, Linenberger

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had met quite a few different types of people in his life, but there was one species he had never managed to encounter: the *frum*, Eastern Seaboard, yeshivah-educated Jew.

Still, he was open to the idea of teaching a group of Jewish students, most of them rabbinical students, although he wasn’t quite prepared for what he found when he walked in the door. “It definitely was a culture shock,” he admits frankly. “They questioned and debated *everything!* I had always heard that Jews were People of the Book, but now I saw what it meant.

“I thought, *what can I possibly teach these people that they don’t already know? What I have is so basic!* But they really got into the subject matter, and I found that they questioned things in a very scholarly way — not the sorts of silly questions I sometimes get from undergraduates in Nebraska.”

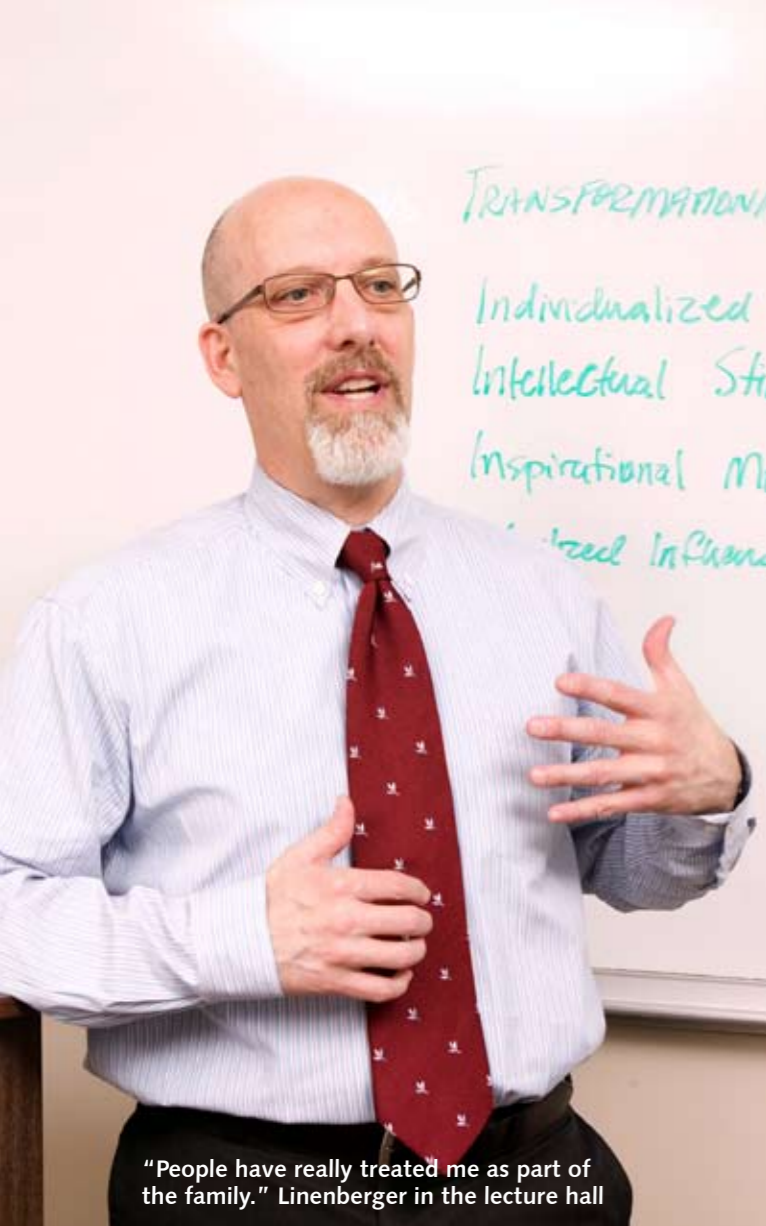
Former student Golan BenLulu, who later became director of student affairs and a twelfth-grade *rebbe* at the Jewish Educational Center in Elizabeth, New Jersey, says that his group’s lively discussions made the academic concepts “come alive.”

“Instead of giving our professor random comments beginning with ‘I think,’” BenLulu says, “we would bring in challenges based on Chazal. We would take Stephen’s concepts and try to fit them into *our* worldview.”

His friend and classmate, Yehoshua Marchuk, currently director of student activities at the Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns

and Rockaway, comments, “When we began learning the material with Stephen, we were able to show him: *these ideas are not new!* He realized there was a whole world of wisdom out there about human behavior that he had never encountered. It gave him an appetite to learn more and more. Beyond that, what really impressed him was that within our community, behaviors like leadership and altruism exist not just in theory, but in daily practice.”

Linenberger was introduced to a whole world that was filled with concepts like *bikur cholim*, *chevra kadisha*, and *kimpaturin* homes; *gemachim* for every conceivable need; organizations to help poor



"People have really treated me as part of the family." Linenberger in the lecture hall

a tremendous *kiddush Hashem*." So Yehoshua took Linenberger to Yeshivas Darchei Torah in Far Rockaway and showed him his son's pre-1A class, where the *rebbe* is a Stoliner chassid. "The kids sang songs in Yiddish, and Stephen just loved it," Yehoshua says. "He said, 'This is the best concert I've ever been to!'"

"People have really treated me as part of the family," Stephen says gratefully. "I've developed deep, really great friendships." These friends were eventually helpful to him in negotiating his rocky relationship with his mother and, ultimately, her death. "We had our conflicts. As an addict, she wasn't pleasant to be around, and sometimes she was very inappropriate around my kids. One of my Jewish friends guided me through some of the rough times; he told me that, under certain conditions, I could break off contact in a diplomatic way. So when things just became too hard, I told my brother, 'I can't do this right now. Call me if you need me.'"

The six-month break he took made all the difference in being able to approach her properly when the end drew near. "By then, I was able to ask her forgiveness," he says. "She just waved it off, and at the end, she smiled at me like I was a new baby."

He credits Rabbi Lerner and his other "rabbi friends" with showing him the right path. "They told me, 'Your mother needs to feel she accomplished,'" he says. Jewish *chochmah* guided him through other life issues as well. For example, Stephen told his wife Caroline that perhaps they should start thinking more about giving to other people, and to reevaluate how to strike a balance between hovering and independence where their son was concerned.

When his students began preparing for Rosh HaShanah, says former student Ari Glazer, Stephen spoke to him to ask about the ways in which he himself might change and improve in the coming year. Stephen also expresses an admiration for the way Torah Jews have a firm sense of boundaries where relationships between men and women are concerned.

New Thinking About Altruism We have all, especially in our post-Holocaust generation, been impressed at one time or another by the accounts of altruistic people: the Oskar Schindlers and Raoul Wallenbergs of this world. More recently, one can point to the people who go off to work for the Peace Corps in remote underdeveloped villages, or the organizers of campaigns to fight poverty or cure intractable diseases. But how is it that some people seem driven to behave altruistically, while others only seem to have their own self interests at heart?

Stephen Linenberger developed an interest in altruism in the context of research on leadership. "We know that altruism — the desire to help others — is one aspect which motivates people to pursue leadership," he explains. "What we call 'servant leadership,' or leadership that is sought out of a genuine desire to carry out the will of the people, is very different from leadership in which the leader simply wants to impose his will on the public."

His student Jon Green puts it in Jewish terms: "A servant leader ultimately wants to serve Hashem, and so he puts the good of the *kehillah* and the will of Hashem before his own personal goals."

"Hashem created the world from selflessness," says Chaim Lando, who wrote a paper for Linenberger's course on servant leadership in the Jewish community. "The human behaviors which are most satisfying are those which imitate Hashem, and a leader who is selfless will draw respect and honor from his followers, because of the G-d-like aspect of his actions." Linenberger's students pointed out to him early on that Moshe and Aharon are the quintessential servant leaders of Jewish tradition.

The academic research was lacking data as to what motivates people to become servant leaders — i.e., which variables distinguish between people who seek leadership altruistically, and those who seek to dominate for their own ends. Most of the social science research into altruism began in the 1960s, conducted largely by

Jewish researchers interested in what had differentiated "good" people from "bad" people during World War II.

Stanley Milgram, for example, did a famous experiment on compliance with authority, in which students were asked to administer increasingly lethal levels of shock to a fellow student, to see if conformity and fear of authority would win out over empathy with the imaginary victim. Other psychologists did experiments of the sort in which a student would drop an armload of books, and see which variables would affect who came running over to help.

One of the factors that seemed to drive altruistic behavior was empathy — the degree to which a person can identify with another person's suffering. "Researchers Oliner and Oliner," Linenberger says, "conducted a series of interviews with people who had rescued Jews during the Holocaust. They found that many of the people who rescued Jews did so because they identified with them strongly. They were people who felt themselves to be on the fringes of mainstream society." Oskar Schindler, for example, was an Austrian-born businessman who bore little love for the Germans and was known to lead a rather licentious life; this marginality gave him a certain empathy for the even more marginal Jews.

Stephen cites another example of empathy-based altruism, this one from American history: "There's a story that President Lincoln was on his way to a late-night cabinet meeting one rainy night. The carriage passed a pig who was trying to move her litter of piglets up the hill, but kept getting stuck. The president asked the driver to stop, and got out and freed the pig and piglets so they could continue on their way.

"His companion remarked, 'Mr. President, that was a very unselfish thing to do.' But the president replied, 'No, it wasn't really selfless. Because if I hadn't done it, I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight.'" Lincoln was able to recognize that altruism based on empathy is really, in the end, an attempt to make oneself feel better as much as it is an attempt to help another.



In an ironic twist, the professor became a student — of his own students' lifestyles

He attended the weddings of two of his students, as well as that of Rabbi Lerner's daughter last August. "I'm a music buff, and the bands just blew me away!" he enthuses. "[My son] thought this was just amazing. He doesn't stop talking about it"



In an effort to dissect the origins of altruism, Linenberger decided to interview Jewish kids

Yet another factor that seems to play a role in determining whether or not a person will act altruistically is context. In one study, Stephen recounts with some amusement, students in a seminary for the priesthood were asked to write a sermon about the Good Samaritan. After finishing, as they were leaving the building, a research confederate disguised as a homeless person was sitting outside begging for money. Despite having just spent half an hour writing about altruism, the students ignored the “homeless person”! They were no longer in a context where they were tuned into altruism. (By contrast, Linenberger says he is amazed by the way his Jewish students faithfully produce a few coins or dollars whenever they encounter beggars in New York.)

“The Catholic take on the world, the view I grew up with, is quite different from the Jewish one,” Stephen comments. “There’s an ethic that says that poverty is good, and an almost transactional view of reward and punishment. There’s a lot of emphasis on comparing yourself to religious figures and trying to perfect yourself by imitating them. Altruism is done from a sense of self, from a striving for self-perfection.”

But the Jewish point of view struck him as very different. The emphasis on individual self-perfection or empathy as the basis for altruism that he had found in academic research was not important to his new Jewish friends. “In their estimation, empathy-based altruism is too dependent on personal reaction,” he says. “But Judaism isn’t so concerned with personal reaction; altruism is not about one’s ego. Even if people believe that they will be rewarded in the Next World for good deeds, the emphasis is on action in this world, and on doing what’s right.

“I saw two things emerging in my research,” he goes on. “The first is a deep sense of interconnectedness among Jewish people. I believe it was Milgram who first posited that there are six degrees of separation between any two given people in the world [in other words, it takes only six personal connections to link two people anywhere in the world]. In the Jewish world, I think it’s more like two or three degrees of separation! Because people are so tightly



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connected, a greater sense of responsibility is produced.” (In other words, without knowing the Hebrew term for it, Linenberger discovered the principle of *kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh* — all Jews are responsible for each other.)

The second principle that Linenberger believes contributes to Jewish altruism is “a sense of doing the right thing.” His students, who have spent most of their lives learning Torah precisely in order to be able to do the right thing and behave in the right way, exemplify an ethos of continually being aware of the moral weight of our actions, and evaluating their consequences for ourselves and others. His students helped him by introducing him to several relevant Jewish texts; one class presented him with a copy of *Pirkei Avos*, another with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s *To Heal A Fractured World*. Ahuvah Heyman gifted him with Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis’s *A Committed Life*.

The Dissertation Study Linenberger had already decided to focus his dissertation research on altruism, but when he encountered the Orthodox community, he realized he had before him a natural environment in which altruism is practiced as part of the daily rhythm of life. It occurred to him that if he could study this community, and in particular how its children were shaped into becoming altruistic adults, perhaps he would be able to extrapolate principles that could be implemented within the wider family of man. (In a sense, this makes him a *shaliach* — messenger — of *ohr l’goyim*, taking the light of Torah and propagating it to non-Jewish communities.) He decided the best approach would be to conduct structured interviews with Jewish children, and drew up a list of fifteen pilot questions that he eventually cut down to eight. Once the interviews are completed, they will be analyzed as the data set for his dissertation.

Linenberger has already begun his interviews, sometimes speaking to the children of his former students around their dinner

tables. He asks the children to try to remember the first time they understood that another person was in need. He asks them to describe people in their lives who have served as moral exemplars. “Some of those responses are very moving,” he says.

Stephen was surprised to find that when he asks the children, “How do you feel about the person you’re helping?” they often seem stumped. “They’re action-oriented,” he says. “They take themselves out of the picture. It’s not about some primitive response to the person in need, an ego-centered evaluation about whether I feel like helping. It’s about responding to a need. It’s almost as if, contrary to what the research always supported, the disregard for empathy heightens altruism rather than suppresses it.” These children are not devoid of empathy—on the contrary, they are capable of deep empathic responses—but their own personal responses take a back seat to a focus on doing the right thing.

Linenberger hopes to continue his research over the summer in Jewish camps (first obtaining all the necessary releases, and hiring a translator to make sure he doesn’t miss any unfamiliar Hebrew or Yiddish words). So far, he reports being very impressed with his young subjects. “They’re very self-confident,” he says. “They answer quickly and surely. Unlike many kids, they’re not always looking towards their parents for the answers.”

To the Orthodox observer, it seems obvious that the kids he studies have absorbed their ideas on altruism from their homes — from the mother who cooks supper for the lady who just had a baby, from the father who helps a yeshivah, from the aunt who works for a *zedakah* organization. They also absorb from school: putting a penny in the pushke before davening, learning about *ahavas Yisrael* and other mitzvos. Since Linenberger confesses to enjoying a nice long browse in Eichler’s, we suggest he stock up on some Jewish children’s books and a few Uncle Moishy CDs for a quick education in the values our children absorb through their entertainment!

Seeing the Forest By maintaining an open mind, and subsequently becoming enamored both of his students and the religious principles they showed him, Linenberger has enriched his own life and work, as well as helping them advance towards professional success.

His students are equally appreciative of his warm regard for their way of life. “He made us appreciate what we lost sight of,” Jon Green says.

Within our own community, we see only trees; it takes an outsider to see the forest. When we feel oppressed by community problems, or struggle with the challenges of *ikvesa d’Meshicha*, it definitely gives a nice lift when somebody comes in with a fresh perspective, takes a look around and says: “Maybe this isn’t perfect, but it sure looks great to me.” ■