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Local Stories

Baltimore rabbi speaks to religious Jewish community on connection between Torah and healthier living and eating

By Cindy Sher

Managing Editor

The Gemara (rabbinic commentary) instructs that “a person should always conduct himself as if a holy person resides in him.”

Rabbi Eli Glaser, a Baltimore author, lecturer, and health educator, traveled to Chicago to speak about health education at an event called “Wealth of Health” in September at Joan Dachs Bais Yaakov Elementary School in West Rogers Park. His talk, aimed at parents of Chicago’s religious Jewish community, focused on the connection between Torah and healthy living and eating.

The rabbi and his wife, Zakah Glaser, founded the non-profit organization Soveya to counsel Jews who are frustrated with diet and weight-loss programs. Their approach is based on Torah principles for personal growth and healthy eating and tools adapted from recovery programs for compulsive behaviors. “The Talmud (Rabbinic writings) asks us to make the connection between proper eating and our relationship with Hashem (God) very clear,” said Glaser. “This is not just giving in to our physical desires. This is about our relationship with Hashem.”

His speaking engagement was the product of the Sinai Health System’s Urban Health Institute (SUHI) and the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago’s findings of their Jewish Community Health Survey: West Rogers Park and Peterson Park—a comprehensive survey, released in 2006, of a Jewish community with a large Orthodox population in northeast Chicago. The survey revealed important findings about the Jewish community, including high rates of adult and child obesity, disability, and depression.

The survey had found high rates of obesity in all age groups of the community, including among very young children, whose obesity rates were the highest. More than half of adults surveyed were overweight, 25 percent of whom were obese. Also, the majority of children 2-12 years old were overweight (54 percent), and 26 percent of them qualified as obese.

An anonymous parent from one of the schools sponsored the event with Glaser and the advertising was paid for by a grant, which was sponsored by the Polk Bros. Foundation and the Michael Reese Health Trust. The grant is a joint effort between the Jewish Federation, SUHI, and the Associated Talmud Torahs (ATT). Debbie Cardash, director of Student Services for ATT, along with Dr. Maureen Benjamins, Ph.D., an epidemiologist at SUHI, organized the program.

Since the preliminary survey results were released, the Federation and SUHI have acted. They have been working with affiliate and beneficiary agencies and local leadership to examine the data and creating ways—“interventions”—to help community members gain better access to their specific health care needs, through programs like the Rabbi Glaser event. The Federation and SUHI have worked in conjunction with the Associated Talmud Torahs (ATT) in five religious Jewish schools in the Chicago area on physical fitness and nutrition programs and creating healthier school environments. The original pilot schools were Joan Dachs Bais Yaakov and Yeshivas Tiferes Tzvi, while additional schools, Akiba Schechter Jewish Day School, Arie Crown Hebrew Day School, and Hillel Torah Day School, were added this fall.



Rabbi Eli Glaser and his wife, Zakah, before their weight loss...

Glaser understands the health-and-weight struggle because he, along with his wife, experienced it. Six years ago, Glaser lost 110 pounds and he credits his strong faith in God with guiding him through the weight loss. “When I thought it was all in my hands to change, then it was hard to change,” he said. “But when I asked God for guidance, then it’s easier because it’s not all up to me.”

The rabbi recognizes that food is a centerpiece of the Jewish experience. Particularly in the religious Jewish community, there are constant simchas (happy occasions)—births, bar and bat mitzvahs, and weddings, plus many holidays, including Shabbat dinner every week—and each is celebrated with tons of food. He recommends that Jewish people serve higher-quality, but lower-quantity food at such affairs.

Glaser offers other tips for families striving to create healthier households. He advises reducing the amount of sugar and added sweeteners bought, offering unsweetened snacks like plain yogurt with fruit, string cheese, and nuts and healthy desserts like homemade sorbet with fruit, and using non-food items as rewards for mitzvahs for children.

“We’re very grateful for this exciting opportunity provided by the Jewish Federation, the Michael Reese Health Trust, and the Polk Bros. Foundation for allowing us to promote healthier children and families,” said Cardash. “This is just one way we at ATT are hoping to educate the community, schools, students, and parents alike.”

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