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**HOW DOES A GIRL FROM SUBURBAN OHIO LAND A GLAMOROUS CAREER AS A CELEBRITY INTERVIEWER IN NYC?**

**HOW DOES A SUDDEN FEAR OF FLYING SPARK AN ETERNAL SEARCH FOR GROWTH AND SPIRITUALITY?**

**HOW DOES ONE ABANDON A CAREER OF MONEY AND FAME TO EMBRACE A LIFE OF TORAH AND MEANING?**

**MEET HEATHER DEAN, A DYNAMIC GIRL FROM SHAKER HEIGHTS, OHIO, WHO SUCCEEDED IN A DAZZLING POSITION AS A PREMIER ENTERTAINMENT JOURNALIST, DEVELOPED A SUDDEN FEAR OF FLYING AND FINALLY FOUND HER WAY TO TRUE TORAH JUDAISM.**

## **AN ALL-AMERICAN CHILDHOOD**

Heather grew up in a happy home; one defined by raw American patriotism and a deep respect for academics. There was flag-flying on July 4, the all-marked Flag Day, June 14, and you took your voting seriously on election day. As for the academic common theme: You earned good grades with the goal of getting into the college of your choice. Those were the ideals most important to her parents and of course they trickled onto the kids.

“With the best of their intentions, my parents encouraged us to excel. They wanted us to be set up for success,” Heather explains. Her father, having grown up in Chicago during the Great Depression, had been all too exposed to the bleak despondency of the time. As a loyal citizen of his country and defender of democracy, he volunteered as a soldier in the U.S. Army at the onset of World War II. After the war, the U.S. Army paid for his college stint, which was essentially his ticket out of poverty.

Dr. Dean moved on to become a university professor and chairman of the Department of Operations in the School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, which was practically in the Deans’ backyard. Having

realized success in education, he and Heather’s mother saw it as the way for their kids to succeed as well.

## **CULTURAL JUDAISM**

“We are a family of *Kohanim*,” Heather shares proudly. “My mother’s maiden name was Arnoff—symbolizing the sons of Aaron. And I married a Levi. All part of the tribe.” But growing up, the Tribes weren’t part of her lexicon, nor did they carry much weight.

Judaism was a cultural thing, a duty, just like being a good American citizen. You were a proud American, a supporter of the State of Israel and a proud Jew. Which basically translated into dipping apples in honey on Rosh Hashanah, fasting on Yom Kippur, eating matzah ball soup on *Seder* night and lighting candles on Chanukah.

The family belonged to a Conservative Temple, Park Synagogue, in Cleveland Heights, where Heather and her three brothers all had their bar and bat mitzvahs. The family also strongly identified with the State of Israel and the Jews who chose to live in their ancestral homeland. They visited Israel on occasion and would follow Israeli politics and news.

Most of Park Synagogue’s congregants



expressed their identification with their heritage by sending their kids to Hebrew School. Three days a week, they were bused to Hebrew school in the afternoons. The young kids also attended Hebrew school on Sunday, while the older ones had classes on Saturday.

Heather groans when she recalls the irony. “The “Rabbi” and staff were all *shomrei Shabbos* but the congregants did their own thing, while the “Rabbi” looked the other way. I think that this is why you find that in the Conservative and Reform congregations, membership numbers are always dwindling to the point of crisis, whereas the authentic Jewish — *frum* populations are just blossoming and growing.”

But that was the trend in suburban American homes at the times; you didn’t really keep *mitzvot*, but you were traditional.

And so the kids would grumble and groan all the way to Hebrew school, which was boring and uninspiring. The Jewish history classes were okay, and they were also taught to read and speak Hebrew. But there was no talk of Hashem; it just never came up. You could have been a complete atheist and do really well.

Heather chuckles as she now recalls “Ask the Rabbi Day.” A “Rabbi” from another temple visited

us to know where we came from. She lamented the fact that she didn’t have the advantage of going to Hebrew school,” Heather shares. “They meant well, they wanted to teach us. They weren’t connected to the Hashem part, so they weren’t going to turn their lives around and become observant.”

Heather knew no religious Jews in Shaker Heights, but there was a religious community nearby in Cleveland Heights. They had a synagogue on Taylor Road and Heather recalls passing by on Saturdays and seeing the congregants and their children all dressed up and going to services.

“I remember feeling so bad for them. Poor kids, they have to dress up and go to the synagogue and they don’t get to do all the fun things — like watching TV and listening to the radio — like we got to do on Saturday.”

## A FASCINATION FOR THE FAMED

Heather’s father had reached a level of greatness by earning it. And so young Heather harbored an admiration for scholars and those who did great things in their industry. But her real reverence was reserved for those who had reached great heights in popular culture. Famous people. People who had made it in the world of

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her Hebrew School class for a Q&A session. The students submitted questions for the “Rabbi” to draw from a hat and answer them.

The first one he drew was a short question: *Who wrote the Bible?*

We would answer: “*Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, next question.” But this Conservative “Rabbi” grappled with the question for an hour, hemming and hawing for an answer. Hashem was just never in the picture.

“I do remember my mother saying that we were sent to Hebrew School because they wanted

entertainment.

“I consumed a lot of entertainment and was fascinated by television. I would not only watch a lot, but I’d spend time reading about the industry, especially devouring interviews with famous people.”

Heather’s intrigue for celebrities would eventually segue into her career as a celebrity interviewer. But at the time, growing up in suburban Ohio, she couldn’t really dream of landing a job in the industry. And so the closest she could get, she figured, was writing for the

school newspaper, which is part of the news business — with hopes for an eventual job at the local Cleveland network affiliate.

Upon high school graduation, it was a given that Heather would attend the university her father taught in. She majored in English and took every class on cinema, film study, literature and writing. The campus also boasted a film society, where Heather soon assumed the position as director. She also produced and hosted a weekly radio show.

“My grades were amazing because I was doing all the stuff I loved.” Finally, a dip in the world of popular culture.

As graduation loomed, Heather only needed one more class in order to be able to graduate. She convinced her academic advisor to allow her to complete that class as an independent study. She planned to intern at one of the major television networks in NYC, collect her credits and finally graduate.

“I was going to apply to NBC, CBS and ABC but I really loved the popular culture network MTV. So I applied only there and got accepted, which today I recognize as major *hashgachah* because it’s really not *stam* that a girl from Shaker Heights, Ohio, would have the kind of access to celebrities that I had. Even then I felt blessed. I was just getting opportunity after opportunity.”

Heather relocated to NYC and began to work for MTV, with the hope that if she’d work hard enough as a team player, they’d hire her at the end of the internship. She assisted them in the news division, helped them with shoots and spent a lot of time schlepping stuff for the producers. Eventually, being an ambitious person, Heather got to assist them with editing.

At the end of a successful internship stint, Heather was hired to work on a weekly movie show — her big break — where she got involved in all kinds of movies. She got to attend movie screenings and slowly began to interview some of the celebrities herself.



## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

“It was a surreal experience.” Heather describes those first days as an interviewer. “Imagine meeting a big Rav or Rebbetzin. *L’havdil* — it’s really not far. This person whom you and the rest of the world has seen on screen and now you’re getting to see him or her in 3D. I was regularly around famous people and sometimes got to know them in real life.”

With time, being star-struck wore off to be replaced by ease; Heather simply grew accustomed to being around famous people regularly. With that ease comes the uncloaking of the entertainment illusion: the sham of fame. And Heather got the full view of what it’s like to live “the life” — not that glamorous at all. One by one, she busted the common beliefs enveloping the famous, revealing the unyielding truths.

“Number #1: Fame does not guarantee happiness!” Heather had interviewed some of the most famous people in the world. The rise to fame had not resolved any of their issues. In fact, the emotional

ONE BY ONE, SHE BUSTED THE  
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UNYIELDING TRUTHS.



baggage they’d carried just followed them right along, and when they finally got the mass audience they so craved, their issues were only magnified.

“These are people who really made it and got very rich.



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But as the *Gemara* says: ‘One who wants one hundred, will then want two.’ People feel that way with money all the time. If I’ll have money, all my problems will go away.”

In the world of entertainment, the players are enmeshed in an obsessive desire and race for attention. The craze is driven by the erroneous belief that if I become famous, I won’t need to prove myself anymore; people will love me. I’ll finally be recognized.

“Fame is really like a drug,” Heather explains. In order for a celebrity to feed their constant craving to reach higher levels of admiration, they will need to go to great lengths to remain relevant in the public’s eye. They resort to all sorts of means — often awful ones — to keep themselves relevant. All to appeal to the mass audience.

Heather now talks a lot to seminary girls about the fallacy of fame. The Hollywood value system, she describes, is diametrically opposed to authentic Jewish values. Authentic tradition describes fame as *kavod* and talks about the pursuit of *kavod*, and if we look at our *heroes* —

bigger the audience size or standing, the bigger the problems. It’s such a mixed bag.”

As an interviewer, one of the most common questions Heather would ask was: What did you think being famous would be like? And what do you think about it now that you are? Most of her interviewees would talk about how they had not expected the lack of privacy they experience.

Celebrities may be reveling in the spotlight and enjoying the windfalls that come along with it, but one of the biggest fallouts they need to tend to is the utter lack of privacy they encounter. While “regular” people can head out to the corner store, pick up the items they need and return home, a celebrity does this very gingerly. There will always be lurkers peeking into their shopping carts, even taking pictures of what they’re buying, and reporting it to a gossip columnist.

Yet very few celebrities will disentangle themselves from the web. “I did meet some of them who’d actually become disenchanted from that life or couldn’t handle the pressure. I actually

THE FEAR WAS SO INCAPACITATING THAT INSTEAD OF TAKING A ONE-HOUR FLIGHT FROM NEW YORK TO TORONTO, HEATHER TRAVELED 10 HOURS BY TRAIN. EACH WAY.



the people we look up to — they are the ones constantly fleeing from *kavod*.

“By virtue of the fact that I did what I did and lived in New York City, I’ve seen the outcomes. I was friends with some celebrities before their big breaks in film or comedy. Many times, once they became famous, very tragic things would happen in their lives. They would be in relationships that weren’t good for them, and if the relationship would fall through, the whole world would know and wonder if maybe there was a scandal involved. They could have trouble with the law, and everyone would know. The

knew a man who was very big in comedy, had gotten very rich and famous and then left the business to raise his kids with his wife.” Once in a while, a celebrity will take a step back after a scandal that shamed them too much.

### THE TRIGGERING SPARK

Heather was living the NYC life, spending her time rubbing shoulders with stars and enjoying the perks that go with the business. Life was fulfilling and fast-paced and nothing should have upset her equilibrium.

But then out of the blue, she developed a





sudden fear of flying.

“It was strange. I had flown the world as a child and had flown plenty for my job. And then suddenly, I was petrified to get onto a plane. I just couldn’t do it.” The fear was so incapacitating that instead of taking a one-hour flight from New York to Toronto to cover the Toronto Film Festival, Heather traveled 10 hours by train. Each way.

When Heather turned down an opportunity to cover a big assignment in London, she knew it was time to deal with the issue. Her phobia was starting to get in the way of her career. She reached out to different counselors, but nothing worked, until she had a recollection of her mother mentioning that Rabbis counsel people.

“So I asked my good friend Rebecca if she knew of a Rabbi whom I could talk to. She gave me a list of phone numbers and I picked the first one on the list. I scheduled a meeting with the Rabbi who was at the center — I couldn’t even pronounce the name — A-I-S-H. I went to talk to this very nice Rabbi, Rabbi Avraham Goldhar.”

Heather found herself crying in the office of the Rabbi, who gave her an hour of his time, listening to her woes. And then she decided to humor him with a Jewish question.

“Rabbi Goldhar, I’m Jewish, I mean both of my parents are Jewish. If I have children one day, how am I going to impart their Jewish heritage to them?”

Rabbi Goldhar had a nice answer about Judaism feeding the soul — the *neshamah* — and invited Heather to come back for classes or services where other people like her who are curious about Judaism come and learn. Then he showed her to the door, likely guessing that he was never going to see her again. At least, *career Heather* never thought she would go back.

It was a nice summer day and she just went on with her life.

Summer came to an end and morphed into fall, and there was a day when there were no celebrities to interview. “I just thought I’d go race-walk around the Central Park loop — one of my favorite forms of exercise back then — but then I thought, one second... There are no interviews today because the publicists are in Temple. It’s Rosh Hashanah! Maybe I should get dressed nicely and go back to that center there to attend services. I have no idea why I decided to do that.”

And so Heather Dean put on a nice dress and went to Aish for Rosh Hashanah services. She took a *siddur* from the bookshelf and to her surprise found that she could actually follow along. She even remembered some of the *niggunim*, which led to a raw emotional experience.

She stayed the day and even joined the participants at Riverside Park for *Tashlich*; the tender first steps of the journey back. It was a slow process, there was no jumping the gun. But Heather began to learn and explore true Torah Judaism.

“The beauty of Aish New York — eventually I learned how to pronounce it — is that there is no hard-sell. They just show you what Judaism is. There are *talmidei chachamim* and Rebbetzins who are teaching by example, giving lessons in *halachah* and teaching *peirush hatefillah*.” Heather has fond memories of her days there. “I never heard the staff demand anything like: Guys you need to put on *tefillin* or else!”

The Rabbis would invite her to meals and engage in fascinating discussions on meaning and purpose. It was all done without any pressure.

Heather looks back at the sudden onset of flying fear and recalls what was uncomfortable about flying for her. “It’s like you’re in this little vehicle and there’s this whole wide universe around you, and you don’t see the pilot. I see that as part of my spiritual journey; as Jews we are in this big wide world, and we don’t see our Pilot.”

And what happened to her fear of flying? One day, Heather got the courage to book herself a flight from New York to Philadelphia. A very short flight. From then on, she just continued to fly.

## THE PLUNGE

“It was a slow process. From the time I started going to Aish until I was fully *shomer Shabbos* it was a little over a year.” Meanwhile, across the country on the West Coast, her younger brother had embarked on his own journey of return. The two of them engaged in lengthy conversations over their respective explorations and Ted was the one to introduce Heather to Rabbi Tatz’s books. (Ted eventually attended yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael and went on to establish his beautiful *frum* family there.)

At that time, Heather was itching for more.

“I was a frequent guest in people’s homes for




Shabbosos and was seriously attending classes in Aish. I had also attended many of Aish's Israel tours and was pining to learn more: to dive into *halachos* and learn what is expected of me as a Jewish wife and mother. I wanted to know everything to be able to build a home of my own."

Not ready to give up her career just yet, Heather took a few months' break to attend Neve Yerushalayim. Her assistant was more than thrilled; he got to do all the celebrity interviews while she was away, growing in her lofty environment. The few months at a time quickly turned into a year, and little time passed before a matchmaker set her up with Andy, her future husband.

The day after they announced their engagement, Heather placed the fateful call to her editor from a payphone in Kikar Tzion.

"I get a congratulations," she shared. "I'm engaged!"

"Oh, Heather. I'm so happy for you, you'll be leaving the business!"



**SHE CLOSED ONE DOOR OF OPPORTUNITY TO OPEN ANOTHER; ONE OF MANY MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO COME.**

And just like that, Heather walked away from her glamorous career. She closed one door of opportunity to open another; one of many more opportunities to come.

"I wanted to stay in Eretz Yisrael. I already kept one day because it was clear to my *posek* that it was where I wanted to live as a married woman." Heather's love for

the Land of Israel is absolute.

The Motzoei Shabbos of December 1, 2001, only fortified her decision. It was during the second Intifada and Heather and her *chassan* had *melaveh malkah* at a restaurant in downtown Yerushalayim. At one point, Andy asked her to come with him to Holy Bagel to pick up a *Torah Tidbits*, which was featuring his ad.

A mere few seconds later, the ground was rocked by the sound of an explosion — screaming, glass, sirens.

"I knew it was a bomb. And peculiarly enough, with that realization came the intense feeling of 'I don't want to be anywhere else, but in Israel!'" A few minutes passed and a twin bomb went off. Eleven people were killed that night.

The next morning Andy went back to the restaurant and paced their walk to the bagel shop. He calculated that they had missed the suicide bomber by thirty seconds.

"I told my *chassan* that Hashem had spared our lives, and we now had to show Him in our future marriage that we had been worthy of being saved." And Hashem indeed continued to shower them with blessings as he gifted them three precious children in quick succession.

"I think this is a tremendous *chizuk* for older singles and anyone else who's been told stuff about their fertility. I was essentially an older single and my children were all born naturally over the age of 40. All from Hashem."

## THE SHAVUOS UPGRADE

A milestone birthday inspired Heather to share her story with her world, as she realized that her story was one of sheer *hashgachah* and Jewish strength. The fact that a suburban Ohio girl achieved the kind of access to A-list celebrities and then was able to just walk away is a testament to the power of living an authentically Jewish life. And so Heather took pen

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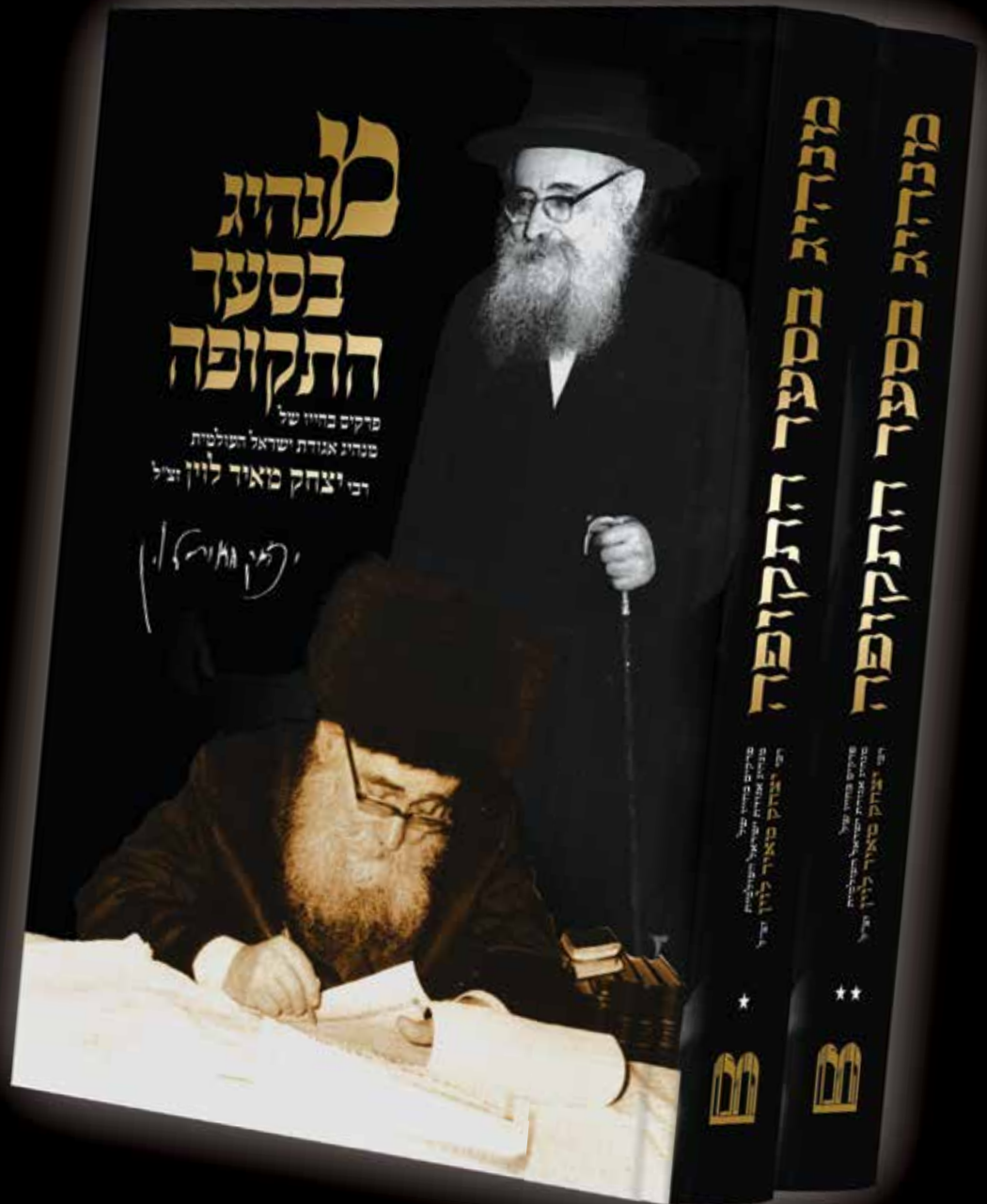
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in hand, figuratively speaking, and published her memoir, *Searching for Heather Dean: My Extraordinary Life as a Celebrity Interviewer and Why I Walked Away From It*. The feedback has been tremendous from readers who are curious as to why this enviable broadcaster would walk away from her glamorous career, and from others who give her book to a loved one whose heroes are entertainers and can benefit from a wake-up call about show business.

“I tell seminary girls that if being a celebrity interviewer had given my life so much meaning and so much to live for, I would have still been doing it. But no, instead I consider my return a life upgrade.” And even though Heather walked away from the world of network broadcasting and publishing some of her celebrity interviews in secular entertainment magazines, she now uses her skills and experience to produce and host a weekly podcast, “613 Books,” geared to *frum* audiences who enjoy a variety of books with authentic Jewish values. *Binah* magazine’s columnist Mindy Blumenfeld who co-authored *Hillel and the Paper Menschies* has been featured twice on her podcast. Heather feels privileged to

*shomer Shabbos* status.” While Heather took slow steps in embracing the Shabbos on her road of return, until it finally took center stage in her week, nowadays, she will do “just a little something” in preparation for Shabbos every day of the week.

“About two years ago, I was inspired by an article by someone who had taken on the *mitzvah* of *tosefet Shabbos* — which includes lighting Shabbos candles 10 minutes before the local *zman*. Many *chachamim* have said that it brings on tremendous *yeshuos* and *brachos*.” And Heather took on the challenge and has been going strong for almost two years non-stop.

Her own inspiration has led her to launch an early Shabbos lighting group in her neighborhood called Ten Minutes ’Til Shabbat (TMTS). This group quickly ballooned into a world-wide initiative, including women from across the globe.

“Every week I send out a weekly email to the participants that includes a time management tip of the week as well as a simple and tasty recipe of the week. On Sunday morning, I send out an email where participants can reply if they managed to

**HEATHER ADDS THAT WHEN HASHEM GAVE US THE TORAH AT MAAMAD HAR SINAI, HE GAVE US A LIFE UPGRADE! SHE HADN'T GIVEN ANYTHING UP; SHE HAD BEEN CHASING BRACHAH.**



add her voice to the podcast space by promoting a Torah way of life by way of the Jewish literary landscape.

Heather adds that when Hashem gave us the Torah at *Maamad Har Sinai*, He gave us a life upgrade! She hadn’t given anything up; she had been chasing *brachah*. And that includes her husband, her kids and the opportunity to live in Eretz Yisrael!

“I have a special connection to Shavuos. It’s the day we recognize *Kabbalas HaTorah* and the way we identify a *frum* Jew is by his

light 10 minutes early. If they did, they’re entered in a raffle, which is drawn on Monday nights. People appreciate the incentive!”

Heather invites all women to join her in this endeavor to spread the light of Shabbos, and convey to Hashem how eager they are to bring in, and thereby extend, Shabbos. To be clear, lighting 10 minutes early is not a requirement to join; this is simply our aim. Together we make the effort every week.

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