

# LAKEWOOD INTERVIEW

Chaya Baumwolspiner

## Life-Giving Sparks

The discovery of a chronic neurological condition, *R"l*, is usually seen as a good reason to consider retirement. But for Rabbi Moshe Gruskin, a beloved former *Reb* at the Lakewood Cheder School, the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease (PD) turned out to be the starting point of a brand new career: He began a health-care organization for Parkinson's and became an expert in the field! Last week, I visited Rabbi Gruskin at the LifeSpark Kauftheil Parkinson's Wellness Center in Lakewood to find out more.

### There Was No Shortage of Surprises

Even though I'd heard that Rabbi Gruskin had started a group to help people, like himself, who have PD, I imagined it would be on the small side. After all, how could someone with Parkinson's run an organization?

Stepping into the unassuming entrance of the LifeSpark Wellness Center in the Cross Mills Village (a group of stores on River Avenue), I was surprised — well, actually shocked — to see, once inside, that the premises were spacious and pristine and included therapy rooms, a gym, offices and a well-appointed conference room where Rabbi Gruskin does the admitting of new members.

He does what? Patient liaison Mrs. Paulette Laniado, my tour guide, shrugged off my bewildered expression and led me into a hallway where I received the second, and most heart-warming, surprise of the afternoon: Rabbi Gruskin!

Smiling broadly and with a spring in his step, he took us into a quiet office so he and Mrs. Laniado could tell me more about what the organization does.

### A Parkinson's Story

As Rabbi Gruskin begins to talk about LifeSpark, it becomes clear that its history is inseparably intertwined with his own story, which begins like most Parkinson's stories: symptoms that were denied, a tentative diagnosis in 2007, the absence of a plan, a sense of fear and helplessness.

But for Rabbi Gruskin, the script changed when, in 2013, he visited a neurologist's office to get some clarity and saw a flyer for the upcoming Third World Parkinson Congress in Montreal. He decided to go and, during the four days of the conference, he gained what he calls "a whole new perspective" on his situation.

As one of 3,334 delegates from 64 countries, including sufferers, caregivers and medical professionals, he learned about the enormous advances in research, treatment and management of the disease that were giving PD sufferers the chance to lead productive lives.

He came back from Montreal on a high and immediately embarked on a vigorous daily exercise regime that made him feel much better within a few months. Wanting to share this, and



The ribbon-cutting ceremony at the LifeSpark Kauftheil Parkinson's Wellness Center

other information he'd gleaned in Montreal, with fellow Jewish sufferers, he looked to see if he could do this through an existing organization, but discovered there wasn't one to be found. Next, he tried to get an organization that dealt with another sickness to adopt PD too, but they politely declined his suggestion because their time and resources were already stretched.

Realizing that if he wanted to help Parkinson's sufferers, he'd have to do so himself, Rabbi Gruskin went ahead, made connections with numerous doctors and specialists, and embarked upon copious research. With still no clear blueprint of how to go forward, he held the first "Sparks of Life" (now LifeSpark) event in June 2016, mainly with an eye to publicizing the upcom-

ing Fourth World Parkinson Congress in Portland, Oregon. He did not expect more than twenty people to come, but there were over a hundred!

Buoyed by the event's success, Rabbi Gruskin started to make arrangements for the September conference and spent the next five weeks ensuring the possibility of daily *minyanim* and the provision of kosher food for conference attendees.

"At the 2013 congress there were three *frum* people," reports Rabbi Gruskin. "Me, my son, and a lady from Teaneck. In 2016, out of 3,700 people, we had 28 people coming from Long Island, New York, Lakewood, Chicago, Israel and Australia."

Making the conference accessible to the Jewish community was very grati-





Rabbi Gruskin addressing the ribbon-cutting event.

fyng to Rabbi Gruskin, but it was not enough. The next conference would not take place for another three years — and even then, he didn't think he'd be able to attract many *frum* Jews to its location in Japan! There was no question that the time had come to turn his attention to building a concrete organization.

"We want to make a Chai Lifeline for the person who has Parkinson's and their caregiver," said Rabbi Gruskin at that time. "That is my goal."

#### **(Almost) Everything That's Needed**

The opening of the LifeSpark Kaufteil Parkinson's Wellness Center after Sukkos 2022, in the presence of PD sufferers and their families, local dignitaries and guest of honor, Mr. Chezky Kaufteil, who dedicated the center in honor of his father, *z"l*, essentially fulfilled this goal within six years. (Considering that LifeSpark is entirely dependent on private donations, and that its progress was interrupted by the pandemic, this is nothing short of miraculous)

Expanding upon the work of LifeSpark, Mrs. Laniado says it includes medical referrals for doctors and therapists; therapy (in addition to what is provided by insurance); tele-

phone support for caregivers; support events for caregivers, in Lakewood, Brooklyn and Monsey; in-person support groups for patients; education events for patients and caregivers' in Lakewood, also available on Zoom; a library with resource information; bi-monthly newsletters; and gifts for the family for Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah and Pesach.

A *Shabbaton* in Upstate New York was held for patients and caregivers in 2022, and another is planned for this year.

There are many services that LifeSpark would like to add to its list, especially the provision of more therapy opportunities, and they are already working to make this happen. In addition, although they already have a purpose-built kitchen where an occupational therapist teaches patients how to navigate everyday tasks, they'd also like to provide a small car where patients can maneuver entering and leaving a vehicle!

Rabbi Gruskin interjects that because many people cannot continue to work after they develop PD, due to decreased executive function, they experience not only a loss of income but a lack of purpose as a result. He aims to create a job bureau that would allow sufferers to work part-time in their former line of employment in

order to reverse this.

#### **The Importance of Being FAT**

As our conversation comes to a close, Rabbi Gruskin, who has maintained a repertoire of good humor throughout, jovially quips that if a person with PD wants to be "fit", he also has to be "fat." In this case, however he's talking in all seriousness, because "fat" refers not to a high calorie diet, a bad choice for anyone, but to the Fight, Attitude and Therapy that living with Parkinson's demands.

Rabbi Gruskin does not diminish the importance of medications; PD has various symptoms that are treatable with a range of medications, whose efficacy will vary from patient to patient. He nevertheless stresses that taking medications alone is not sufficient. A person with PD must FIGHT the condition, realizing that he is still a person with potential, even though he has limitations; he must develop a good ATTITUDE and do what he needs to, despite the challenges it entails; and he must get all the THERAPY he can.

#### **FAT leads to FIT!**

Citing his own example, Rabbi Gruskin is convinced that, with the help of Hashem, he is managing to get the better of his PD due to the fact that he takes this recommendation very much to heart. He's confident that his involvement with LifeSpark has slowed-down his mental and physical deterioration and is extremely grateful for the full life that he is now leading at its helm.

While at no time does he allude to PD as a "walk in the park," and his brief references to his condition suggest severe hardships, he focuses on its possibilities and not its problems. An unquestionable role model, Rabbi Gruskin is proving that it's possible to have PD and still thrive. With his boundless energy and ever-present smile, he is devoting his life to enabling others to do the same.

**For further information about LifeSpark, please call 732-534-6388.**

### **Case 1: Mrs. Chana Blum\*; caregiver for Reb Tzvi Blum for 4 years**

The knowledge that we can call LifeSpark with every problem is an enormous comfort. If we need a referral for a doctor or a therapist, we call! If we need a second opinion, we call! If we have an unrelated problem, we call!

We attend webinars (online seminars); I'm part of a caregivers' support group on the phone, and we also attended a wonderful *Shabbaton* last year. When a family member has PD, it's socially isolating for the sufferer and the spouse, and that's where LifeSpark steps in.

The organization is like a second family to us, and a very loving one at that. I can't begin to tell you how beautifully they arranged the sumptuous caregivers' event; when you're working so hard to tend to a spouse with a chronic condition, it's so nice to be pampered. The gifts they send for Yom Tov are very welcome too. They show us that we matter, that someone cares.

### **Case 2: Mrs. Tzippy Miles\*; caregiver to Reb Mendel Miles for 12 years**

We're fairly new to Lakewood, but we had contact with Rabbi Gruskin before we came. There are no words to describe my respect for him and my gratitude for the endless ways in which he lightens our load and gives us hope. His dear wife, Mrs. Kaila Gruskin, has visited my home several times and has given encouragement to my whole family. The Gruskins and LifeSpark bring sparks of life into our lives.

*\*All names have been changed.*

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