



Photos courtesy of Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis

# REBBETZIN ESTHER JUNGREIS

## rising above

BY ALIZA DAVIDOVIT

As the visiting speaker and her aide sped toward the female penitentiary in Ramle, Israel, she still had not formulated a speech with which to address the Jewish inmates. The delay was born from Esther Jungreis's concern that her remarks to the prisoners might be misinterpreted as condescending or judgmental. The prisoners already knew they had erred and she wasn't going there to remind them. Jungreis hoped that God would inspire her as He has done a thousand times before with a meaningful message—one that would motivate these young women to start a new life. But even as she rang the bell on the prison gate, she still had no subject for her speech. Suddenly, however, in their haste, Jungreis's aide took a breathtaking fall that left all the spectators, including the prisoners, aghast. Never in the 20 years they had worked together had the aide lost her footing so. After the shock, the woman lifted herself up, brushed herself off and was ready to keep on going. Eureka! A speech had been born: "Banot Yisrael—daughters of Israel; in all the years that my friend and I have been working together, I have never seen her fall. It was meant to be that

she should fall in front of you so that you might know that it is possible for everyone to fall. But the lesson is to pick yourself up, clean yourself off, and keep going. I will now take questions.”

Ironically the meaningful message which came so tardy to Esther Jungreis, a world renowned teacher, speaker, and spiritual leader, was actually the very theme of her own life. She too had “fallen” into the blackest pit of despair and human anguish. It was not by her own missteps, however, but rather by the cruel hand of the Nazis and a fallen humanity that closed its eyes as Jews were being turned into bars of soap and lamp shades and as shivering naked children entered into “showers” of evil, one by one, and exited as piles of ash and smoke. In the camps of Bergen-Belsen, where echoes of death chilled every heart and ricocheted on every spine, even hope had fallen under the unyielding black boots of the SS.

Could Esther Jungreis, a cold, hungry child, stricken with lice, hope for anything more than a morsel of bread or that her bunkmates above wouldn't pee on her once again? What hope could a child cling to when even the little dolly she clutched was grabbed from her arms by a Christian neighbor saying, “You Jews don't need toys.” Could she have dreamed that from that fallen world she would one day rise to stand side by side with the President of the United States of America or fly on his plane above Germany, the very country that had bathed in Jewish blood?



Esther Jungreis is the founder of Hineni, an international Jewish outreach movement with centers in New York and

Jerusalem. Hineni, which recently celebrated its 32nd anniversary, values every Jew and aims through education to reconnect a people with its creator, identity, and obligations. “I am determined to fight the spiritual Holocaust among Jews in the U.S. and around the world,” Jungreis says. “Every time a Jew is apathetic he gives Hitler life.



(l-r) Esther Jungreis, First Lady Laura Bush, and President George W. Bush.

Every time a Jew does a *mitzvah*, he triumphs over Hitler.”

Since its inception in 1973, Hineni has helped and hosted thousands of people in its sky-blue marbled-location on West End Avenue. The Center, the first of its kind in the world, offers a comprehensive series of programs—including Torah, Talmud, Kabbalah, Prophets, history, rituals and ceremonies—in the home and synagogue, Hebrew language and prayer, and one-on-one tutoring. Hineni also offers lectures, publications, audio and video cassettes, family counseling, an introduction service for singles, and social gatherings. Hineni holds services for the High Holidays, where thousands of singles join together in a very meaningful, unforgettable experience held at the Pierre Hotel every year.

Jungreis's weekly Torah class draws crowds of up to 1,500 people. On a

personal, one-to-one basis, Jungreis has helped countless people throughout the world including couples in crisis, teens with addiction, kids with troubled parents, lost souls, and searching singles. Hundreds of singles have met their match through Hineni and Jungreis. She is a source of inspiration and strength to countless individuals.

Photo courtesy of Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis

“I have spoken with the most hostile, cynical, and apathetic people around the world and have watched them turn their lives around,” Jungreis says. “Every Jew has a *pintele yid* (a Jewish spark) inside waiting to be ignited and wanting to connect.”

Jungreis also hosts her own television show and has been writing a weekly column in the Jewish press for 45 years. She has authored three books, *Jewish Soul on Fire*, *The Committed Life*, and *The Committed Marriage*. All offer insight and real-life stories of

how a life committed to Torah brings true fulfillment and purpose.

Her influence and far-reaching work in the Jewish world has earned her acclaim on the highest levels. She was chosen to deliver the closing benediction at the 2004 Republican National Convention, right after Laura Bush's speech. In March 2005, she was asked by President George W. Bush to be a part of a delegation to the State of Israel led by New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg to attend the inauguration of Yad Vashem's New Holocaust History Museum. It was on that trip that she flew in the presidential plane over German airspace.



The road from Bergen-Belsen to the Beltway, however, was hardly a charted well-lit journey. But Jungreis's course has

always been illuminated by her faith in God and directed by the Torah and its teachings. She was born in Szegeed, Hungary, the daughter of the chief rabbi, and is a descendant of a rabbinic family that traces back to King David. Her small home was always filled with people seeking advice from her father and with unknown guests who found food, respite, and refuge with the kind rabbi and his family. "Since I was a child my parents nurtured me to be open to everyone's feelings and sensitive to people's problems," Jungreis shares.

Prior to the Nazi's invasion of Szegeed, Jungreis's father often saved Jewish boys from conscription into the Hungarian army, where they would end up in slave labor battalions. As the chief rabbi, he was allowed to visit the detainees and would take along little Esther and one of her brothers. In the children's coat linings they smuggled sweets and messages to the conscripts as well as benign injections and concoctions that would induce a mysterious fever and create the semblance of a contagious illness in the young Jewish men. The Hungarians feared the Jews would spread their strange disease and the trick often deterred their conscription and saved their lives.

But the freezing night the Nazis entered Szegeed the lives of all of its Jews became tenuous as the deportations to death began. Prior to the Holocaust, 85 rabbis in Hungary bore the name Jungreis. Only a handful survived, including Jungreis, her parents, and two brothers.

After the war, the Jungreis family was sent to a DP camp in Switzerland, where children were separated from their parents. Every night little Esther would have nightmares of the Nazis. She and her orphaned girlfriend would survey their room in the dark to convince themselves that the table and chair were simply a table and a chair and not Nazis. Their little frightened

eyes flitted around the room a thousand times questioning their reality, and eventually coming to terms with it. By 1947, they parted ways and were both off to see new and better days. The young girl was sent to Palestine, but because of the quota imposed by the British, Jungreis and her family were issued visas to America.

The journey was a turbulent one. To start, a ubiquitous stench aboard the Italian freighter assaulted every breathing moment. The family also had



Photo courtesy of Rebbeztzin Esther Jungreis

very little to eat and became gravely ill. There were moments of uncertainty whether Jungreis's parents would survive the trip. They did. Upon reaching America, their first surprise was to meet a policeman, a man in uniform, who was actually kind and helpful. Their second welcome experience was to meet an officer who was Jewish and spoke Yiddish. The policeman put them in a cab, paid for it, and sent them off to their unsuspecting American relatives in Brooklyn, New York.

Jungreis's older brother decided to surprise their aunt whom he had never met and see if she would detect a family resemblance in him. When she did not, he told her who he was and also that the remainder of the

family, including her sister, was waiting downstairs in her house. Suddenly, a loud thump was heard through the ceiling. The poor women had fainted from the shock.

The Jungreis family soon settled into their new life, but even on American shores they were still determined to fight against Hitler's "final solution" by keeping the Judaism in Jews alive. She remembers her father buying lollipops for all the young kids in the neighborhood and when giving them out he'd ask for their Hebrew names and teach them the benedictions. Her father soon set up a yeshiva and once again the rabbi's home became a bastion of Torah, of inspiration and love for all fellow Jews. Both of her parents were actively doing mitzvahs, cooking for widows, visiting the sick, matchmaking, inviting guests for *Shabbat* and reaching out to every Jew in need. Throughout the years, Jungreis observed, listened, and learned and thus honed her own oratory skills and innate ability to help people.

Jungreis soon became a rabbi's wife herself, after marrying a third cousin who was also a Jungreis. She thus obtained her now often-used title, *rebbeztzin*, a Yiddish term of endearment and respect for a rabbi's wife. She and her husband built the North Woodmere Jewish Center, and together, they sought to change the world, one Jewish soul at a time. The *rebbeztzin* began teaching Torah classes and it was not long before her oratory skills coupled with her heartfelt inspiring words gained recognition and were soon in demand. At a convention of college youth, Jungreis challenged the young people to do battle against the spiritual Holocaust that was now threatening America and world Jewry. "What would you do to accomplish that," they asked. "Well, for one thing, I would rent Madison Square and call for a Jewish awakening."

But even as her mind considered

the notion an impossible dream, her feet led her to the Garden to explore the possibility. With a force beyond her power, she signed a contract. She had no money, no backing, no precedent, just her faith. On November 18, 1973, Jungreis claimed her place on the stage before a full house. That day Jungreis moved minds, touched lives, and gave birth to the Hineni organization which was committed to doing the same. She attributes her success to the Talmudic teaching: That which truly comes from the heart will surely reach the heart of another.

Eleven years ago the *rebbetzin's* own heart was crushed when her beloved husband of 40 years succumbed to cancer. The very man who so often comforted the sick and prayed for them to get well, could find no prayer to save

Pointing out that no one lives forever, Jungreis says that every Jew must ask himself a very important question: "How serious am I as a Jew? What is the legacy I leave behind?" She is not satisfied by those who absolve themselves of Jewish guilt by writing out checks to charities. "You don't have to be Jewish to be charitable or moral, the gentiles are that too," says the *rebbetzin* with tough love.

She often refers back to the question God asks Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. "Where art thou?" Surely God knew where they were as He certainly knows everything. Biblical exegesis explains that God wasn't asking about their physical whereabouts, but rather where they were spiritually.

"Where art thou?" asks the *rebbetzin* when it comes to being a committed Jew. She hopes the answer is Hineni,

fest one's Judaism by doing good deeds, observing the Torah, and standing up for the Jewish State, thusly bringing light to the world. She teaches that even the smallest deed can make a difference, just as a single candle can dispel much darkness.



The fashionable, chic *rebbetzin* is highly in demand as a speaker around the world. In the past year alone she has traveled to Israel, Mexico, Venezuela, Panama, England, Hungary, Poland, Germany, South Africa, Australia, Belgium, Holland, Czechoslovakia, Moscow, and the Ukraine. And as she raised herself up from the lowest tier bunk of a concentration camp, she attempts to raise the world up with her

**"A long life is not good enough, but a good life is long enough."**

himself, but rather died while blessing each and every member of his family. In later months, while the widowed Jungreis was going through her husband's papers, she found a note he had written which read: "A long life is not good enough, but a good life is long enough." She understood; for, the *rebbetzin's* life course has always been guided by the Talmudic teaching that saving a single Jewish life is tantamount to saving the entire world. Her purpose is resolute: to save Jewish lives spiritually and physically. She has taught that same lesson to her own four children, all of whom teach at Hineni. The *rebbetzin* is opposed to calling her life's work a mission, but rather says it is merely her responsibility as a Jew.



which means, "Here I am." It was the biblical response all the patriarchs and prophets gave when they were called upon by God and indicates dedication, devotion, and commitment.

We live in a world where every absurd cause, every minority, every subjugated group, is proud to carry its banner, yet still only the Jews, a people who brought compassion and civility to the world, a people whose homeland is the only democracy in the Middle east, hides ashamed in the closet mired by designer labels, materialism, and assimilation.

"Our people are hemorrhaging and are in serious need of a spiritual transfusion," the *rebbetzin* says. She believes that just as the Chanukah menorah is placed by the window to bring light unto the world, so should a Jew mani-

by teaching the beauty of Torah and its guiding principles. Her own motto hardly adheres to the well-known commercial, "I've fallen and I can't get up." As she told the female prisoners in Ramle, Israel, you may have fallen, but you can "get up"—you must get up!

Although all that traveling can be weary on this mother, grandmother, and great grandmother, she says that she has never taken a vacation in her life. Giving to other people, she explains, is like one candle being used to light another—the light of the original flame is not diminished by giving, but rather enhanced by the new light it created. "People who go on vacation are running from something," the *rebbetzin* says. "I am running for something. If you have fulfillment, you don't have to run!" 