

WanderVingJews

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We see them on the highways as we travel to the country or to that wedding in Monsey. Sleek and sporty, or clunky and cumbersome, maybe pulled by a car or possibly pulling one. When we see that RV in the next lane, our curiosity is piqued and our eyes follow it for a while: Who's in it? Where are they going? What do they do in there? How long will they be traveling? How do they do it — *don't they work???*

While you may not know of many families who own an RV or have ever rented one, the fact is that RV sales have jumped by 30% since the pandemic hit and rentals have boomed. With on-and-off lockdowns, school and work closures and general feelings of physical and emotional restlessness, traveling by RV became a practical way to get out while the world shut its doors. In fact, besides the increase in sales, one travel-trailer rental site saw a mind-blowing



1,000% increase in trailer rentals nationwide between April and May of 2020!

So true, your cousins on 15th and 54th might not have an RV parked in their driveway, but the Kestenbaums, a chassidishe family from Los Angeles, has turned travel into a huge part of their lives in the past few years.

THE BACK STORY

Seven years ago, Rabbi Shaya and Shaunna Kestenbaum were the parents of three little children when their then-9-year-old *bechor* came across a picture of New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns National Park in a book about national parks. The boy got this bug in his head, asking (begging?) his parents to take the family there, but there was no way to take an eighteen-hour drive with three little ones. They weren't travelers, they weren't accustomed to long car rides... What would happen if five hours into the trip the kids (or, erm, the parents?) had enough?

Then came other practical concerns, not least among them the fact that their son was in a chassidishe *cheder* with very little vacation time. Shaunna decided that she'd try to find a similar type of destination much closer to home that would satisfy their son's desire to see Carlsbad Caverns. That summer, after much planning, the Kestenbaums set out on a camping trip to Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, a "mere" four-to-five-hour drive from their home.

That trip was a surprising success, and the Kestenbaums saw that a big trip was something they could handle. They decided they'd try another trip the following summer, and this time their son had his heart set on Yellowstone National Park.

The Kestenbaums had a baby the following summer, derailing their plans to Yellowstone (got there eventually, much, much later!). Life in the meantime was busy, but the Kestenbaums figured out a way to make the most of "obligation" travel, too. Rabbi Kestenbaum is from Eretz Yisrael, and a year after their No-Yellowstone-But-Yes-Baby summer, they had amassed enough credit card points to take the kids to see their family. Traveling on El Al would only give half the family tickets, but if they traveled on the Polish LOT airlines, they'd cover everyone. That trip, however, necessitated a two-hour layover in Warsaw. If they were stopping anyway, they mused, why not take advantage? They decided to take a later connecting flight out of Warsaw, which would afford the family a full ten hours in Poland rather than just two. The couple knew that the more they'd research and plan in advance, the easier time they'd have once they got to Poland, and they ended up really maximizing those hours with a fully packed schedule, kosher food and *minyanim* included.

The Kestenbaums also began to realize that the planning of a trip could be as much fun as the trip itself; three months of planning and researching, including the kids in the pros

and cons of various destinations, turned out to be as educational, interactive and amusing as the few weeks they'd actually be traveling. In fact, they actually stumbled on a 2010 study that showed that the planning and anticipation before a trip is actually more enjoyable than the trip itself!

WANDE-RV-ING JEWS

One thing led to the next with the Kestenbaums. Did the kids catch the parents' infectious excitement or was it the other way around? They never "decided" to become a traveling family; it happened very organically. It was a matter of putting extra effort into the trips they were taking, and it somehow became a family affair.

Shaunna remembered RVing from her home in LA to family in Pittsburgh as a girl, and in 2018 she called her mother to ask how that experience had been for her parents. Her mother only had positive memories of the trip, so the Kestenbaums decided to rent an RV

the family. They became experts in finding *minyanim* in remote locales (or creating their own!); spending Shabbos in an RV (how many *she'eilos* can you think of off the bat?); traveling with a *sefer Torah*; traveling in your ninth month; and dozens of other fun-filled, adventure-laden issues.

By now, most of the family has been to all forty-eight lower states or more (the newest addition to the family hasn't quite hit fifty yet, but definitely over thirty!). They have been to almost every type of Jewish community existing in America and Canada. In fact, they now are called by other families who are planning a trip, to sit down and help them map out an itinerary, where to spend Shabbos, how to manage meals and how to keep kids entertained. Shaunna's husband says that they might be traveling folks, but his wife has become an absolute expert. In fact, when the Kestenbaums got to North Dakota, they were written up in a local paper, as it was then that Shaunna had hit all fifty states (her husband and kids are just a step

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and take a huge road trip to visit Rabbi Kestenbaum's brother and his family in New Jersey. The plan was that they'd start out from California, with their sights on New Jersey by Shabbos, but they'd see how the trip was coming along: If it got to be too much, they wouldn't cross the continent. Well, they made it to New Jersey, spent Shabbos, and then turned around and headed back West, with the entire incredible road trip taking two-and-a-half weeks in all.

By the time COVID came and locked the country down, the Kestenbaums were among the half million Americans who made the decision to invest in their own RV. That opened a whole new world of traveling to

behind...). Shaunna decided that if someone else was going to write about her family, it was better if she herself did the writing. It was then that she gave in to what the people who she helped plan trips and travel had been pushing her to do all along, and finally began writing about, well, "wandeRVing Jews!"

BUSINESS OR PLEASURE?

The Kestenbaums have learned lots of things along the way. Chief among them is that aside from the fun, adventure, bonding (fighting? Huh? Whose

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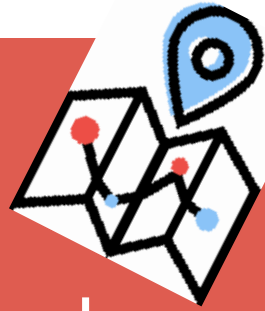
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When mishaps happen, for example (and they will!), how do the parents handle it?



family fights???) and incredible memories created, family travel is from the greatest opportunities for educational experiences with our children. The Kestenbaum kids attend insular chassidische schools with minimal secular education. Yet, they can tell you about American pioneers, the Gettysburg address, beekeeping and the difference in taste that honey will have based on which flowers the bees pollinated (yes, they can tell you what *pollinated* means, if you want) and how to bottle olive oil. They know who the Confederates were and how immigrants in 1915 North Dakota built shanties (my kids learn social studies in school but have no idea what a *shanty* is). And no, the Kestenbaum kids don't travel during the school months. Everything they learn is from the places they've been during *bein hazmanim*.

Is everything always an educational experience? Of course not. There are the regular family moments of fun, games, bedtime and taut nerves. There's missing

connecting flights, ear infections and birthdays. There's simply driving, doing, *being*. In fact, cautions Shaunna, turning every moment into a "teachable" experience is a surefire recipe for disaster.

And yet, built into those just "doing" or "being" moments are the stuff that will shape our kids, our connection and our memories. As with all our interactions with our children — not only while traveling — without preaching or saying a word, these are the moments that instill values and character and coping mechanisms and tools for life.

When mishaps happen, for example (and they will!), how do the parents handle it? They can get bent out of shape, or they can ask themselves (out loud!) what they can learn from this. The Kestenbaums like to say that the only difference between a roadblock and an adventure is attitude... but that has to start at the top. So are they all superhuman? Do they never get tense? Is everything *always* a Norman Rockwell painting? Obviously not. (Do *not* ask them about the time they ran out of gas in the middle of nowhere, twenty miles from the closest living being...). Families are families, dynamics are dynamics, and overtired, cranky kids are the same everywhere. But in order to travel with family, the whole family needs to be willing to put in their all. And let's not kid ourselves... parents' attitudes *do* trickle down!

Aside from history, lessons in geography, topography, culture, nature, water life, weather conditions, mechanics and hundreds of other interesting things that crop up when traveling, there are powerful life lessons learned, just by planning and executing the trips. Like what, you ask? Well, Life Lesson #1 from one Kestenbaum daughter: *Always put on the emergency break!* Yes, they learned that the hard way in Nevada, when the RV almost rolled over Rabbi Kestenbaum and into the Hoover Dam...

In all seriousness, the Kestenbaum kids remember

some really poignant things they've learned. They've learned that sometimes you think you're in a bad way but you just don't know how Hashem is looking out for you. They once broke down on a remote road in Utah, and by "remote," they mean that possibly two cars passed in a span of three hours. *Remote!* Yet, they had no idea how truly "lucky" they were to "happen" to be in that exact spot. You see, one of the cars that stopped turned out to be a woman who pulled over in exactly that spot. Being from that area, she knew that there was no cell reception for thirty miles, other than that particular spot, and she wanted to call her grandfather to wish him a happy birthday. The Kestenbaums, of course, had no idea that had they gotten stuck only fifty feet in any direction, they would have had no reception — they just knew that they were stuck, but with cell phone reception!

Another moving lesson the kids recall is the fact that no matter where, no matter what he looks like, a Yid is a Yid is a Yid, and always has your back. They were at the Lumberjack World Championship in Wisconsin and were standing around with a bunch of police officers, the police chief and the mayor. To an outsider, it would have looked as though the family was in some kind of trouble. (They weren't, but why they were standing there is a long story for a different time, like most of their adventures!) Suddenly, a couple on bicycles rode over and whispered in Rabbi Kestenbaum's ear, "*Hakol beseder? Tzarich ezra?*"

Shaunna intentionally leaves gaps in her itineraries for several reasons. You need leeway in case of (inevitable!) mishaps and unforeseen events, for one. Then there is the idea of not scheduling in every moment with adventures and spoon-feeding her kids with something to do at every second. Allowing them to be bored, and

allowing them to figure out how to fill their time, is something she ensures is part of their life even when they're home. Then there's the opportunity to allow the kids themselves to plan (with Mommy's/Tatty's help) while they're traveling. Yep, educational moments all, without ever lecturing.

There was the time that over the span of a long trip, the Kestenbaums left three days open with no itinerary. They told the three oldest children that those were their days to plan. (Remember, these kids are already accustomed to planning trips with their parents. If you or I gave our kids a map of a state and said, "Ok! Plan a day!" it may not be as successful...) Well, for the Kestenbaums it worked swimmingly. The oldest, a boy, found an antique instrument museum in a sweet little town nearby. One daughter knew that her sister wanted to try fishing, so she found a place that would teach them. Another daughter, though... Well, she chose not to make any plans for that day. And so, the instrument museum was interesting and fun, and the fishing day was a day with lots of adventure and learning a new skill. And the no-plan day... Well, Shaunna and her husband didn't try to talk her out of it or warn her about what might happen. They allowed her to just wing it, which was exactly what she chose. But the other kids ended up less than happy with their sister since they lost out after working hard to plan activities the family would enjoy, so that ended up being an invaluable life lesson, too!

As Shaunna puts it, "There is a fine line between lack of planning (*not* recommended!) and planning a lack (go for it!). Some of the best memories and experiences exist within the window of 'no plan.' But planning those windows of opportunity is crucial."

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THE GREATEST GAIN OF ALL

I listen to the Kestenbaums speak about the experiences their children have had. There is no doubt that their kids have acquired tremendous knowledge, both intellectual and emotional. But what blows me away most of all is hearing their experiences with making a *kiddush Hashem* and representing *Yiddishkeit* wherever they've been.

When you are deeply aware that the interaction you are about to have will likely be the first, last or only encounter the other person may ever have with a religious Jew, that interaction will be vastly different from the one where you run into the bank on 13th Avenue in a huge rush and (unfortunately) barely look at the teller. This is something intrinsic that is second nature to the Kestenbaum children. They've had trips (particularly after riots across the nation,

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where police came under attack by American citizens) where they stopped in a police station in every state they passed through, bringing homemade cards and warm verbal thanks.

They've interacted with unaffiliated Jews in the most remote places (PSA: No matter how many baseball caps a chassidische male wears, he's still identifiable, and tattooed and leather-clad motorcycle riders might still approach him to say “Shalom!”) and made *minyanim* with Jews who externally had nothing in common with them. They have learned how to wait in line properly and patiently, overly vigilant that eyes are upon them as *frum* Jews. They've



learned not to come across as entitled or aggressive. They have become comfortable in these situations — no doubt stemming from the comfort and confidence they themselves exude — and welcome them. They have become knowledgeable in *halachos* that most of our children (or possibly even we!) would not even know exist and have had the opportunity to explain their *hashkafah* and *mehalech hachaim* to others — something that is only possible if we can verbalize these things to ourselves first.

The Kestenbaums have spent *Shabbosos* in communities across the *frum* spectrum and seen how others live. They may not be on the same ideological page as some of the Yidden they've been in contact with, but a Jew is a Jew, and they've learned that there is something to respect and learn from any Jew anywhere. They look for different communities to travel to, eager to see the richness and vibrancy of *Yiddishkeit* in different places.

This summer's itinerary was a trip to Mexico. Across the States, they've mostly been exposed to communities of Ashkenazim. This trip afforded them the opportunity to live amongst Sephardim, with *minhagim* and a *mesorah* very different from their own. Mexico City does boast an Ashkenazi community as well, but the Kestenbaums

wanted their kids to be exposed to — or even immersed in — vibrant, dynamic, non-Anglo *Yiddishkeit*. With over 50 *kollelim*, Mexico was a great option!

There's a famous quote floating around, something to the effect of, “I haven't been everywhere, but it's on my list.” The Kestenbaums say that's not their goal — they're not traveling in order to see everything and everyone everywhere. They don't have wanderlust, and they don't travel for the sake of having the most stamps in their passports. They travel to see Hashem's world and the people inside it. They travel to give their children a pride in their People, a sense of family togetherness and a sense of identity. They travel to build resilience, gain skills and tools, and learn kindness and respect. When they plan a trip, they first ask, “Where will the family benefit from going?”

“Traveling with the family is not really a ‘vacation,’” Shaunna says. “I work hard, both before and during a trip, and I'm *on* full time. The kids are not sitting in front of DVDs while we drive! So no, it's not an effortless vacation for my husband and me, but it's so beneficial for our family. Our kids learn so much about how to live from our travels, and that makes it worthwhile.”

So...where will you be taking *your* family this summer? ●

