

Gens de cœur

The rebuilding generation

Dr. Joseph Caytak is a busy man. When he returned to his office after being away for several days observing Rosh Hashanah, he was greeted by a foot-high stack of files and messages. And life is almost as hectic at home following the birth of his 11th child.

“We love children,” he explains. “Not only that, but I see myself as part of the rebuilding generation because much of my family was wiped out in the Holocaust. I take that responsibility very seriously.”

Caytak, who practises family and emergency medicine, considers his work an integral part of his religious commitment. An observant Jew, he says it is easy to integrate Jewish law with Canadian health law. “The fact that I am Orthodox gives me tremendous grounding in how to deal with patients,” he says.

Caytak, who graduated from McGill in 1979, practises at a 6-physician clinic in Manotick, Ont.,

a bedroom community about 30 km south of Ottawa. He says he chose medicine because it allows him to cure illness, and by curing illness he can help improve people’s lives. Combining religion with medicine, he is also interested in the way Jewish law can help physicians make difficult medical decisions, “especially these days with [constant] end-of-life issues.”

A *ba’al t’sbuva* — in essence, a person who turns to observant Judaism — Caytak never developed an interest in his religion until he entered medical school. “My sister and I were not educated in the religious system at all,” says Caytak, who was born and brought up in Montreal. “At home we did not light Sabbath candles, we did not go to synagogue during the High Holidays, we did not live in a Jewish neighbourhood.”



Dr. Joseph and Devorah Caytak and family

He speculates that his parents, who were Holocaust survivors, may have rejected Jewish ritual in an attempt to forget the persecution they experienced during World War II.

When their only son started hanging around with the Lubavitch Hasidic Jews who had established a centre for learning near McGill, his parents were wary of what many people still consider religious extremism. Today, he says,

“my parents are comfortable with my commitments and lifestyle.”

He and his wife, Devorah — she runs a religious nursery school and Ottawa’s Jewish Youth Library — live in a large home in Ottawa’s tiny Lubavitch community. Here they welcome guests, including entire families, almost every Sabbath as a way of helping other Jews who are interested in uncovering their roots and, perhaps, in becoming a *ba’al t’sbuva* as well.

For the Caytak children, education comes

first. “My oldest son is in yeshiva [Orthodox Jewish school] in the United States, studying Torah and Jewish law,” says Caytak. “I tell all my children that I want them to get a grounding in Jewish education, number one. When my son finishes his yeshiva program, then he may become a rabbi, he may become a doctor, he may become something else. It is his choice.”

Caytak thinks doctors and Jews are among “the biggest sceptics when it comes to [God]. But I have personally found, through an honest observation of human beings while practising medicine, that this profession brings one very close, almost automatically, to belief in [God].

... We are just the emissaries.” — *Lynne Cohen, Ottawa*