



RABBI ZEV KAHN

GOLD MEDALIST RUGBY RABBI, FOUNDING DIRECTOR, AND AUTHOR

Rabbi Zev Kahn is better known in the Chicagoland area as the "Rugby Rabbi" from his days as a former Maccabi Games gold medalist in 1985 and 1989. Originally from Port Elizabeth, South Africa, Zev played rugby for the University of Cape Town, and Western Province under 20 state team, before being selected to represent South Africa at the Maccabi Games in Israel. Zev came to Chicago after spending six years at Ohr Somayach Yeshiva in Jerusalem, where he completed the Ohr Lagolah teacher training program and was very involved in college student touring and learning programs. Married in Jerusalem to Hilary, the Kahns moved to Chicago in 1998 to work for the Chicago Community Kollel, and in 2005 Zev founded JET—Jewish Education Team—a campus outreach organization. Now in its 21st year, JET operates in Chicago and in Champaign at the University of Illinois and has inspired thousands of Jewish college students and young professionals to live a more committed Jewish life.

The “Rugby Rabbi”

RABBI ZEV KAHN

I know that God exists even though I can’t definitively prove it.

I grew up as a traditional Jew in South Africa but I knew practically nothing about Judaism itself until a series of unlikely events happened to me.¹

Rugby was my religion. At the University of Cape Town, I played for the under-20 team and was selected, ahead of an amazing player from a prominent rugby family, to play for the Western Province state team. There is absolutely no question that I should never have been chosen. Although I wasn’t religious at the time, I now believe God was involved and had big plans for me.²

I tried out for the Maccabi Games in Israel, also known as the “*Jewish Olympics*.”³ In the tryouts, I was up against older and considerably more experienced players. Again, I should never have been selected, but God obviously had other plans and I made the 1985 South African team.

It all came down to South Africa-versus-Australia in the finals. South Africa and Australia are fierce sporting rivals and national pride was at stake.⁴ If we had lost, I don’t think I would have ever returned to Israel again. But God had something else in mind and we won the gold medal.

I returned to South Africa, proud of being Jewish for the first time, and became editor of the campus magazine. There were many anti-Israel protests occurring due to Israel’s partnership with the South African government. But God apparently had intentions and I was asked to travel to Israel to learn how to defend them on campus.

While there, our tour leader strongly encouraged us all to go hear a particular Rabbi speak. I was the only one who did. I found myself adamantly disagreeing with most all of his points.⁵ This experience lit a spark in me and I can now clearly see that everything in my life was leading me to this point. Upon returning to Cape Town, I started taking numerous classes on Jewish philosophy, with people just like me, searching for answers to life’s questions.⁶

Apartheid was crumbling and many young Jewish adults were leaving the country. I decided to move to Israel⁷ and enrolled in a six months intensive study course.⁸ Those six months turned into six years. I guess that was God’s plan all along. God wanted me to learn Torah and ultimately become a Rabbi.⁹

I can go on, and on.¹⁰ Through “*Divine Supervision*”¹¹ and another unbelievable series of unlikely events, I met my wife and later got my first job in Chicago, where I am affectionately known as the “*Rugby Rabbi*.” I’ve now made 23 trips to Israel and each time, there are amazing stories.

I tell all my students this story, saying: I know beyond a doubt that God is a part of my life. Only God could have orchestrated these improbable events. I encourage everyone to start looking for God’s “Hand” in your life. I guarantee that if you open your heart and mind, you’ll find Him. “God is where you let Him in.”¹²

Footnotes:

- 1) My knowledge of the Jewish religion was extremely limited. My family celebrated Shabbat on Friday nights (not Saturday) and observed most (but not all) holidays.
- 2) I firmly believe that was why God "placed me" into the Western Province under-20 state team, the South African Jewish rugby team that won the gold medal at the 1985 Maccabi Games (and ultimately brought me to move to Israel).
- 3) The Maccabiah Games, known as the "*Jewish Olympics*," were first held in 1932 in Tel Aviv. Inspired by Zionism, the games were held again in 1935 but were postponed due to World War II and the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. They resumed in the newly formed State of Israel in 1950, and since 1953, they have been held every four years, establishing Israel as their permanent home and encouraging Jewish immigration.
- 4) The South Africa-Australia sports rivalry is a fierce and long-standing competition, primarily centered on rugby union and cricket, with both nations seeing each other as major rivals. It's marked by close contests, memorable clashes, and a sense of parity, with both countries often having world-class athletes to match each other across various sports. The rivalry is intensified by the shared green and gold colors of their national teams and has been a major feature of international competition.
- 5) I later found out later that the Rabbi I was disagreeing with was the infamous, esteemed Rabbi Dr. David Gottlieb. An author and lecturer, Rabbi Gottlieb received his Ph.D. in mathematical logic at Brandeis University and was a member of the department of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University from 1969-1980. Rabbi Gottlieb is now a senior faculty member at Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem.
- 6) I eventually moved to Johannesburg to take courses at Ohr Somayach, where the popular Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz gave classes to standing room only classes.
- 7) Winning another gold medal beating England at the 1989 Maccabi Games
- 8) My intensive study program was at the prestigious Ohr Somayach yeshiva in Jerusalem. Ohr Somayach is a Jewish educational institution, located in the Maalot Dafne neighborhood of Jerusalem. Founded in 1970, it primarily serves young, college-aged Jewish men who are interested in learning about Judaism, especially those with little or no prior religious background. The institution's main campus is a large complex with a study hall, classrooms, libraries, residence halls, and food services.
- 9) It all began with a trip to Israel to learn how to defend them, a lecture by Rabbi Dr. David Gottlieb, back to Cape Town and then to Johannesburg to take numerous classes with Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz, eventually back in Jerusalem, and finally to my home in the United States in Chicago.
- 10) The list seems really almost endless. It includes meeting a close family member for the first time, the birth of two of our children, the founding of my organization, "JET" - Jewish Education Team, which teaches Jewish college students and young professionals, what I learned when I was their age.
- 11) God's help, or "*Divine Supervision*" is referred to in Hebrew as, "*Hashgacha Pratis*."
- 12) Perhaps one day too, you'll tell your own story of how you came to believe that there is a God in the world and how He supervises our lives? Or as the Kotzker Rebbe said: "*God is where you let Him in.*" The Kotzker Rebbe, or Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern (1787-1859), was a 19th-century Polish Hasidic rabbi known for his uncompromising teachings focused on absolute spiritual honesty and self-scrutiny. He led a reforming movement within Hasidism that sought to move away from ostentatious piety and idolization of the rebbe, emphasizing instead a more intellectual and demanding spiritual path rooted in Torah study. Known for his sharp intellect, unconventional behavior, and influential sayings, he is considered a pivotal figure in Hasidic thought.