



Dear readers,

When I embarked on the recently concluded Shared Accounts column, I intended to shed light on the complexities of financial matters in the *frum* community. The column, featuring your neighbors, coworkers, and acquaintances, fostered an open and honest conversation about how individuals in the Lakewood community spend and save the money that Hakadosh Baruch Hu has gifted them. Throughout this journey, I have witnessed the power of sharing knowledge as I answered questions and connected readers to appropriate resources.

While Shared Accounts has ended, pursuing financial literacy continues. Countless resources—books, workshops, magazine articles, etc.—can provide ongoing guidance and support.

With this in mind, we are starting a new column, 500 in 5, in which five participating Lakewood-area families are challenged to save \$100 a week over the course of five weeks. Why five weeks? It's long enough to impact one's goals significantly but short enough to feel attainable. Each week we'll follow a different one of the five families on their journey and hear how they are faring with the challenge in real time. In addition, I'll present ideas that you can pick from and implement in your own lives.

Should you decide to join us and challenge yourself similarly, here are a few things to remember:

Hold yourself accountable: Just like a diligent patient following a doctor's orders, when you commit to a goal and track it, you are making the goal tangible and doable.

Track your progress: Enjoy the satisfaction of checking off tasks from your to-do list. With the five-week savings challenge, you'll feel like you have accomplished 10 times more with every check mark.

See the results: When you put in the work, you will see results. Your hard work and dedication will pay off, and you will experience the effectiveness of the challenge.

Looking forward!

Rivka

MEET THE PARTICIPANTS:

The Leibowitzes

Number of children: 3 (ages 1–8)

Yearly salary: \$152,000

Monthly take-home pay: \$12,650

Total monthly expenses: \$12,550

Our financial story: Despite our high income, after all our expenses we are left with only about \$100 at the end of the month. And like most other families in Lakewood, our income fluctuates in the summer as I'm a therapist and see fewer clients then.

We recently met with a financial adviser to discuss our future and what's wise to do with the \$50K we have sitting in savings. We opened up retirement accounts, investment accounts, and kid accounts. About \$600–\$700 gets automatically transferred from our checking account each month.

We also recently began therapy for one of our kids and are starting for another. We see a private skilled therapist for \$200 an hour. *Baruch Hashem*, we see progress, but that put a big dent in our budget.

Why we joined the challenge: We joined the five-week savings challenge because although we live within our means, my husband and I want to feel responsible and that we are doing *hishtadlus* for the future, especially since we don't have extra to spend or put away each month like we used to. Down the line, we would like to invest in something that would provide passive income, so we need to start saving for that. On a smaller scale, I would love a new wig.

Where we see ourselves cutting back: I am still determining where the \$100 a week will come from. Amazon orders? I'll have to figure it out. We should have more money left at the end of the month. We would like to tighten our belts and save more money as the economy worsens.

Short-term goal: Making and keeping to a budget

Medium-term goal: Cutting our monthly expenses. Spending close to \$1,000 a month on cleaning help is an awful lot. In addition, our food bills seem high for a family of five. I don't enjoy cooking and prefer to purchase ready-made foods and complete meals at the local grocery stores. If I cut down on some of my ready-made food purchases, I am sure I could save quite a lot of money. Vacations are a nonnegotiable expense, however, we could stay local instead of paying for airplane tickets, rental cars, and hotel rooms.

Long-term goal: Saving for retirement for both my husband and myself. Also, saving for something that will give us a passive income, although I don't know what type of investment.

The Kaufmans

Number of children: 3 (ages 2–6)

Yearly salary: \$65,000

Monthly take-home salary: \$4,500–\$5,000

Total monthly expenses: \$4,500

Our financial story: We're at a crossroads. Our income is working for right now, but we're about to take on a mortgage, and the numbers are just not going to add up anymore. We're working hard to increase our intake through various jobs, but I know we'll also have to cut some of our spending to make ends meet—fast.

Our income includes salary, freelancing, and *kollel* checks. We have a savings account that will soon be wiped clean.

Until now, we have been saving very carefully toward a down payment. I'm naturally frugal and don't tend toward impulse purchases. I use shopping lists for my weekly grocery runs and generally try to avoid takeout. On the other hand, my once-a-week cleaning lady is a necessity.

Where I see us cutting back:

1. Sometimes, we forget to buy some items on the grocery list, and we have to return to the store later, which inevitably costs time and money. Even though we're pretty religious about sticking to our shopping lists, the extra costs slip in. On average, we spend about \$80 more on groceries during weeks when we do extra grocery runs. I can save those \$80 by thinking through every part of the week and ensuring it's covered, food-wise.

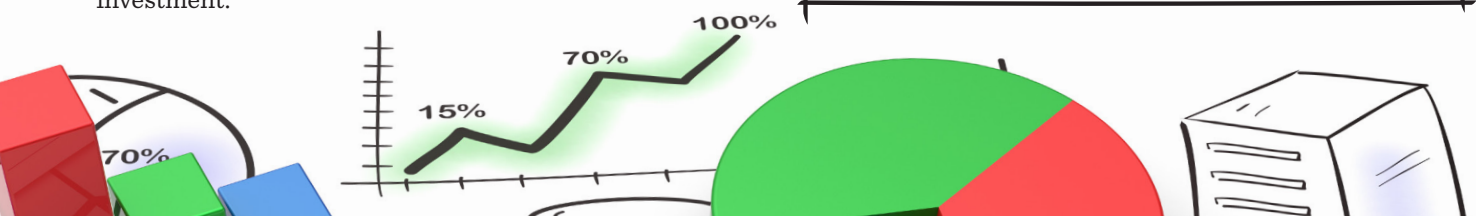
2. There's nothing like gourmet coffee for a delicious and energizing pick-me-up. When I look honestly at the numbers, though, I find a surprising truth: I spent an (arguably) whopping \$31 on various coffees last week! I don't want to cut out my weekly nuggets of joy, but I can cut back to twice-a-week visits and save at least \$15.

Why I joined the challenge: I joined the savings challenge because we need to save money. Most of our spending is on needs, not wants, but I need to find where we *can* cut costs.

Short-term goal: To increase income/decrease spending

Medium-term goal: To restart our savings account through careful budgeting

Long-term goal: To invest our savings for our children's future



The Weissman's

Number of children: 7 (age 12 through married)

Yearly salary: \$137,000

Monthly take-home pay: \$11,417

Total monthly expenses: \$11,990

Our financial story: Like many other families in Lakewood, my husband, who is in *chinuch*, receives a reduced salary in the summer. One of our biggest financial challenges is maintaining our budget and spreading our income and expenses over 12 months.

In general, it's hard for us to stick to our budget. The budget varies monthly, and it is more challenging when my husband is not getting paid. Hopefully, with some fine-tuning, we can tweak our budget and cut our expenses, which will enable us to stick to it more easily.

Where I see us cutting back: I would love our family to be able to cut down and save in a couple of different areas. First, I would like to see what we can do with groceries (\$1,500 a month), eating out (almost \$250 a month), and miscellaneous expenses (\$500 a month). They all seem high with just three children at home. Second, we would like to review our fixed expenses, such as car insurance, and work on getting better and more cost-effective rates.

Short-term goal: Making and keeping to a budget, including budgeting for annual expenses so we can save throughout the year and not take a huge hit when the expenses occur

Medium-term goal: Saving for *simchos*. Saving enough for weddings seems to be an impossible task in the current economic situation. We currently save \$225 a month for our three single children's weddings. We have a daughter in *shidduchim*, and the amounts thrown around don't make any financial sense for us.

Long-term goal: Saving for retirement and purchasing a home. My husband and I are both in our 50s and only have a small retirement fund. In addition, we would love to own a house, but it feels like a pipe dream. If we can get a good handle on our finances, maybe we can purchase a small home.

The Feinbergs

Number of children: 3 (ages 1-4)

Yearly salary: \$180,000

Take-home pay, after tax, *ma'aser* (20%), and 401(k): \$8,759/month

Total monthly expenses: \$8,690/month

Our financial story: *Baruch Hashem*, I make a nice income. However, at the end of the month, there is very little left. I put 3% of my biweekly paycheck (\$207.69) in a Roth 401(k), and my employer matches it. I also put away a total of \$200 dollars per month divided into three *simchah* funds for my kids. Another \$500 per month go to pay back a loan I took from my family to purchase our home. I have also been giving a *chomesh* (20%) for over a year now. It gets taken off my paycheck, and I have recently begun utilizing the Donors Fund to help with keeping my giving in order. Since I have given, and plan on continuing to give, over \$25K a year in charity, I will be itemizing my tax return, so every tax receipt is valuable.

Why I joined this challenge: I decided to join the five-week savings challenge because, hey, who doesn't love a good challenge? Plus, if I succeed, I'll have an extra \$500 to treat myself with. However, I must admit that figuring out where to get that \$100 a week is a bit uncertain. My best guess is that it'll come from cutting back on small expenses like impulse purchases on Amazon.

Where I see us cutting back: During this challenge, my focus will be on practicing self-control and avoiding spontaneous spending. I'm determined to steer clear of fast food and takeout, too, to save even more. It won't be a piece of cake, but I'd say it's a medium challenge—definitely achievable, but it'll require some effort.

Short-, medium-, and long-term goals: At the moment, my main goal is to maintain my family's financial stability and ensure we don't spend beyond our income. While we'd love to work some more on paying back the house loan, that might have to wait a bit longer until we're on more solid ground. Taking this step toward saving will definitely put us in a better position for the future.





The Weingartners

Number of children: 4 (ages 1-8)

Yearly salary: \$240,000

Monthly take-home salary: \$20,000

Total monthly expenses: \$14,000

Our financial story: Our numbers look great on paper, and it even looks like we have a surplus of \$6,000 monthly; however, the numbers don't tell the entire story. It's so easy to splurge if you are not concentrating on not spending.

Why I joined the challenge: I have a large loan to pay off for an expensive car that I purchased. Additionally, we definitely have expenses that can be cut during the month, and I feel I should be able to save more money.

Short-term goal: Making and sticking to a budget. I bring in a good salary. We spend an awful lot on whatever we want—cleaning help (\$1,000 monthly), clothing (\$750 monthly), groceries (\$2,000 monthly), and spontaneous purchases. Making a budget would help us see where our money is going and where we can cut back.

Medium-term goal: Paying back the car loan. I borrowed money from my parents to purchase a nice car. I want to repay the \$20,000 I still owe them as soon as possible.

Long-term goal: Saving for *simchos* and retirement. In addition, I would like to shore up my children's savings accounts. ●

COMING NEXT WEEK:

How it went down for family #1.

