

As Chief Risk Officer at the National Security Agency, Anne Neuberger has reason to think carefully about questions of how far the agency should go in collecting intelligence: Not far enough, and U.S. national security is at risk. Too far, and Americans' civil liberties are at risk.

"Dreaming of those freedoms brought my family to this country," she told tech executives at a recent risk management conference. Her father spent his childhood in Communist-ruled Hungary and learned firsthand about life in a surveillance state. His stories from that time helped shape Neuberger's understanding of what it means when a government spies on its own citizens.

But she also has to consider another experience her parents have shared with her. In 1976, they were passengers on an [Air France flight that was hijacked](#) by the Palestine Liberation Organization. They and other Jewish passengers faced execution — but were saved by a group of Israeli commandoes.

"A military saved my parents," Neuberger says. "My life would look very different if not for that military operation. So [I understand] that there are threats where sometimes only a government, only a military, can bring peace."

For her, the importance of balancing privacy and security concerns resonates personally.

"She gets risk," says an NSA colleague.

A Generation Without Mentors

A rising star at the agency, Neuberger, 39, has worked at the Pentagon, helped plan the U.S. military's [Cyber Command](#) and served as NSA liaison to private tech companies. But what makes her story unique is where she came from and how it helps explain her rise to the top of the U.S. national security establishment.

As a girl, Anne Neuberger went by her Hebrew name, "Chani." She grew up in a Hasidic neighborhood in Brooklyn, N.Y., largely segregated from the secular world. She spoke Yiddish at home and attended an all-girls Jewish school, where half the day was devoted to religious instruction.

A woman in her ultra-Orthodox community was expected to think of herself first as a wife and mother. It was not an environment that normally supported professional aspirations.

Those who know her say Neuberger's achievements make her stand out.

"Anyone who has studied women's success in the workforce [knows] it's all about having mentors, and her generation did not really have mentors," says Faegie Horowitz, who grew up in the same Brooklyn neighborhood and now works as a career counselor serving ultra-Orthodox women. "Chani is of that generation where the mothers may have gone out to work, but certainly they were not out there in the bigger world with an education."

Some Orthodox Jewish women find professional success only after breaking with their community, but not Neuberger. She married an Orthodox man, whom she met on a parent-arranged date. They keep kosher. Neuberger leaves the NSA every Friday in time to observe the Jewish Sabbath, before sunset. She remains close to her religious community.

A Family Reaffirming Its Identity

Neuberger's devotion to her faith tradition largely is a product of her family history. The Brooklyn neighborhood where she was raised was settled by Jews who escaped Nazi gas chambers because, at the time, they were young and strong and therefore suitable for slave labor assignments — while older and weaker Jews were sent to their deaths.

"I didn't realize until I grew older that the oldest people in the community were pretty much all the same age," Neuberger says. "Most had lost their parents. My mom says [when she was] growing up, nobody had grandparents."

Of her eight great-grandparents, seven perished in the death camps. Their surviving children — Neuberger's grandparents — started new lives in America. They were ultra-Orthodox back in Hungary, and in America, traumatized by their war experiences, they reaffirmed that identity.

"There was a deep sense among my grandparents that their parents had been killed for their faith, and they had an obligation to bring up a generation [for whom] that faith and that tradition was meaningful — and to recreate it in these kids who were proving that Hitler had not been successful at eradicating this commitment to faith."

Among those postwar kids were Neuberger's own parents.

"So we heard a lot of that growing up," she says, "that sense of, 'You're a link. You're a link in a family chain that was broken, but it's our obligation to rebuild that link.' "

In that sense, Neuberger inherited her religious commitment. But she has defined it in her own way. Her Jewish faith includes the notion that people with talents should make the most of them and that they are accountable for what they have achieved.

"Knowing that I'm named for a great-grandmother who was killed with her children when she was just a few years older than me makes that very personal," Neuberger says. "It's that sense that time is a gift, and that one should use it to do good."

Challenging Tradition

"I try to lead an examined life," she says. "I try to lead a life where I'm asking myself that question: Have I earned the gift of existence, in some way?"

Her adherence to this principle made Neuberger determined to further her education, even if it meant challenging tradition.

"The Orthodox Jewish community tends to be more conservative about gender roles," she notes. "For my parents, the thought that a young girl would go alone to a college environment was something frightening. So we struck a deal, and I went to an all-girls' night school."

She attended Lander College, a women's-only division of Touro College in New York, which serves the Orthodox Jewish community. She excelled in computer skills and later helped run a financial services company.

After marriage, she attended graduate school. Her decision to move from financial services into national security work was prompted by the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Neuberger says she wanted to serve the country that gave her grandparents and parents a refuge. So she left Brooklyn to become a [White House Fellow](#).

A Helping Hand

In the years since, her life choices have worked out. But Neuberger knows other ultra-Orthodox women have faced problems. Marriages sometimes end. When they do, women who have felt duty-bound to stay home and raise children may find themselves without support.

"The role of the family is a core part of religious practice [in Orthodox Judaism], and, as a result, women who are left alone, women raising children alone, sometimes talk about a sense of feeling isolated, of feeling judged and of the children feeling judged," Neuberger says.

Her understanding of that reality led her to start a charity called [Sister to Sister](#). It operates in 30 Orthodox Jewish communities around the country and in Canada, serving single Jewish mothers who may not be prepared to support a family on their own.

Back in Brooklyn recently, the charity organized a career day, with job training specialists on hand to advise women on employment opportunities offering relatively easy entry, advancement possibilities and decent salaries. All the women at the meeting were dressed modestly, according to Orthodox custom, and had their hair covered with scarves or wigs. Neuberger herself hosted the event.

"Starting something new is not easy," she told the two dozen women gathered for the event, "but with us, and I think with everything we try to do at Sister to Sister, the goal is to say, 'We're sisters, we're here to offer a helping hand, please call us, please reach out for us.' Because we're really in this together."

At such gatherings, Neuberger tells her "sisters" that if not for the vagaries of life, they could be in each other's shoes. She says she has found that a commitment to ultra-Orthodoxy does not have to be a career impediment, even in the decidedly non-Jewish environment of the NSA.

"They are two different worlds," she says, "and I think that the joy is where you can bring different things between them."

Indeed, she insists that religious practices like hers can actually be helpful in dealing with workplace challenges.

"The discipline and rigor, the restrictions on what one can eat, the restrictions on how one behaves, I hope I bring that in values, living true to one's values, trying to bring that integrity into the way you approach your job each day and how you interact with people, every single day," she says.

Neuberger's point: Her professional achievements have come not in spite of her faith. They've come because of it.