

IllumiNations

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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

Rabbi Shmuel and Chana Tiechtel, Chabad at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona

The AS Jews of ASU

By Chaya Chazan

My maternal great-grandfather, Rabbi Yitzchak Raskin, was a shochet, mohel, and teacher in Leningrad. The KGB regarded him suspiciously, since he was known to harbor dangerous criminals, such as Reb Chonyeh Morosow, the secretary to the Rebbe Rashab, as well as other illegal activities.

When they arrested him, my grandmother and her sisters clung to each other and sobbed as he was dragged out to the waiting carriage. He turned back to them and said, "You are Yiddische kinder, Jewish children. You must continue living for the reason they're arresting me." He also told them to turn to Reb Peretz Mochkin if they needed anything. That was the last time my grandmother saw her father.

Sixty-three years later, I, his great-grandson, married the great-granddaughter of Reb Peretz Mochkin.

Although both my wife and I grew up in Crown Heights, we were raised on these stories of our illustrious grandparents, and fed on a diet of mesiras nefesh. It seemed only natural to follow in their ways and forge our own path of mesiras nefesh through shlichus.

Arizona State University, or ASU, as it's more commonly known, is one of the largest colleges in America. We moved in the fall of 2003, and were immediately deluged by the pressing needs of the Jewish student population.



Freddy* grew up proud of his Jewishness, although he knew very little about it. His mother was Jewish; his father was not. They attended temple on Yom Kippur, and had a semblance of a seder on Pesach. That was it.

Freddy was apprehensive about ever meeting religious Jews. He knew they'd judge him for his intermarried parents, for not knowing how to read Hebrew, and for never being bar mitzvah-ed. He once saw a group of religious Jews in the airport. It was the closest he'd ever been, and he examined the long peyos curling down the sides of their faces with curiosity.

The next summer, Freddy went on a Birthright trip, which ignited his desire to learn more. When he returned to ASU in the fall, he passed by our table on the quad, manned by a man with a bushy, black beard. Although the beard, the black hat, and the jacket intimidated him, Freddy approached the booth.

"Hi," he said, hesitantly. "I'm Freddy. I'd like to learn more about Judaism, but I'm afraid I'm not religious enough for you. I don't really know much."

The man beamed. Shaking Freddy's hand vigorously, he introduced himself. "How are you doing? My name is Sholom*! Just a few years ago, I was you - standing on that side of the table, entirely clueless. I found my home away from home at Chabad, and I'm sure you will too! Please join us this Friday night!"

Curiosity won over uncertainty, and Freddy hesitantly walked up the pathway to the Chabad house door that Friday night. He was greeted with a big hug and a smile, and immediately felt embraced for who he was. He stayed for the farbrengen afterwards, and was pleasantly surprised to find out that religious people could be pretty relatable!

Freddy returned again and again, never again feeling any hesitancy. Last year, he joined us for Pegisha - an annual international Shabbaton for college students in Crown Heights, New York. Shabbos was electrifying, and, ironi-

cally enough, Freddy finally felt he'd found where he belonged.

He'd stop by Chabad every morning before the gym, to "do a soul workout before a body workout." When Freddy asked me for a Chumash, I gladly gave him one. Unbeknownst to me, Freddy began learning Chumash on his own, from the very beginning. Whenever he had a few minutes between classes, he took out the Chumash and learned.

One Friday night, I asked each guest to share who inspires them. "Levi Tiechtel," Freddy said, when it was his turn. "He's only 10, and I'm 21, but we're learning the same thing in Chumash. We were quizzing each other!"

Later, Levi offered Freddy a challenge. "Let's quiz each other every week," he said. "And since you're already learning Chumash, why don't you try celebrating Shabbos? I challenge you to keep two Shabbosim in the next two months!"

"You're on!" Freddy said, shaking hands with my son.

Freddy recently completed a five-week stint in Mayanot in Yerushalayim. He spoke at our graduation ceremony last year, describing his delight in uncovering a whole new world of knowledge.

Just last week, a student asked me for a Chumash. "I'd like to do what Freddy did," he said.

This is the ultimate shlichus nachas.

I was excited for our upcoming Birthright trip, where I'd be leading a solid group of ASU students around Israel. Baruch Hashem, my niece got engaged shortly after we'd booked our trip, and the wedding was scheduled for the same week.

I tried to rearrange the dates, but only one student could delay his flight. Instead of leading a group of my own students, I led a group of 40 strangers from New York.

We all know Hashem works in mysterious ways, but I didn't understand why my trip was delayed until a year later.

Brayden* was a typically secular Jewish kid from Long Island. Judaism ceased to hold any meaning for him after his bar mitzvah. When a campus shliach asked him if he was Jewish, Brayden had no compunction in denying it.

A few years later, now attending grad school at ASU, Brayden began to re-think his approach to Judaism. *How could I deny something I know so little about?* he berated himself. Resolute, he opened the ASU website and searched for Jewish student groups. The alphabetical list was headed by a name he'd never heard before - *Chabad*. Figuring it was as good as any other, Brayden clicked the "I'd like to find out more" button, which sent us an automated email.

We replied to his email immediately, explaining that we were the "home away from home" for all ASJews, and inviting him to join us that Friday night.

Brayden was unsure what to do. He wanted to explore, but walking into someone's home, where he knew nothing and no one? It seemed too daunting. He decided he'd show up, but leave early - unless he received a clear sign that he was meant to stay.

His apprehensive knock was answered with the door flung wide open, and a hearty greeting.

"Shabbat shalom!" I greeted him. "What's your name? Where are you from?"

"I'm Brayden, from Long Island," he answered.

"Oh, Long Island!" I repeated. "Do you know Michael Kay*, Jack Davidson*, or Henry Gold*?"

"Know them?! We've been friends since high school!" Brayden answered, disbelievingly.

"That's amazing! I met them last year, on our Birthright trip. I was their rabbi! We got along really well."

"I don't believe it!" Brayden said. "I remember them coming back, raving about the rabbi who somehow made Judaism meaningful and fun. I also went on a Birthright trip, but my guide wasn't religious. I felt no difference between the stones of Masada and those of the Western Wall. I was so jealous of them! It's a pleasure to finally meet you!"

Needless to say, Brayden stayed.

I always encourage my students to pick a S.M.A.R.T. hachlata - something that is **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**ttainable, **r**ealistic, and **t**imely.

It was Amy's* birthday, and I encouraged her to take the inspiration of the farbrengen and make it real with a mitzvah commitment.

"I don't know," she answered. "I'm not really into that."

"How about you light Shabbos candles each week for a month?" I suggested.

"If you really think it's that important, I'll do it," she agreed.

She later told me how much that had impacted her life.

"At first, I was doubtful. How much could one small mitzvah accomplish? I wasn't even keeping Shabbos - just lighting a candle! I was shocked to see how that one small action a week led to so much more!"

Jennifer* vividly remembers her bat mitzvah. She stood before the congregation in the temple, wrapped in a pink tallis, a pink yarmulke perched on her head, and chanted the blessings over the Torah. That was an authentically Jewish experience as far as she was concerned, and she didn't care to learn differently.

She attended ASU for college, and her roommate once dragged her out to our Sukkos party. She enjoyed it, but was busy with her sorority, classes, and social calendar. She didn't think of Chabad until her grandmother reminded her that it was her grandfather's *yahrzeit*. She urged Jennifer to honor her grandfather's memory appropriately, in a synagogue. Jennifer was stymied for a bit - where would she find a synagogue in a college town in Arizona? Then she remembered that evening at Chabad.

She was sure we'd be upset at her for not dropping by for so long, and then rudely turning up without so much as a warning. My wife's hug and warm greeting blew her away, and she immediately felt at home.

She started coming more often, and soon enrolled in Sinai Scholars. Her non-Jewish boyfriend chauffeured her back and forth to each class, and she spent the ride home enthusiastically explaining what she'd learned. He always listened, but with a slightly detached air - until it mattered very much to him. When Jennifer returned to the car after the lesson we'd had on the importance of marrying Jewish, she was unusually silent. She wrestled with her thoughts and feelings for a while, before deciding that she wanted a genuine, Jewish home. Although it was very difficult, she broke up with her boyfriend, and continued making great strides in her Yiddishkeit.

A few years later, she was contemplating attending a yeshiva, but wasn't sure if it was the right move for her at that point in her life.

When she visited New York, she took a trip to the Rebbe's Ohel, and wrote down all her questions and confusions. She also asked for a clear sign to show her what she was meant to do.

When she returned from her trip, I told her I had a very special gift for her. Someone I'd met had given me some Rebbe dollars she'd received and asked me to pass them on to those who needed one. I wanted to give one to Jennifer, but the timing never seemed to work. One day I was in a hurry; the next, she had to rush out. I'd been promising her this gift for months, until finally, one day, I knew

I had to give it to her right then. I handed her the Rebbe dollar, explaining its significance. Jennifer began to cry.

"Right before I came here, I ran through the whole yeshiva debate in my mind again," she explained, tearfully. "My heart was pushing me to just take the plunge, but I still felt torn. I asked Hashem for a sign. You've been promising me this dollar for months. I can't believe that tonight, the night I finally decided to go to yeshiva, is the night you felt compelled to give it to me."

Jennifer ended up attending Machon L'Yehadus in Crown Heights. She found her place there, and even connected with the woman who'd given me the dollars to distribute. Those who saw their meeting described it as a kidney recipient meeting their donor. It was the dollar that had changed her life.

Jennifer, now Chava, and her husband, Baruch*, also an ASU alum, have joined our shlichus team here at ASU. They're now inspiring other students, who are starting where they did so many years ago.

It's bittersweet that recent events have given our students opportunities to showcase their Jewish pride like never before. Neil* decided to wear a yarmulke publicly, as he walked through campus. Sam's* Jewish pride is legendary and inspiring. A large pro-Palestinian protest was marching behind us. Sam took that moment to wrap tefillin. He raised his voice above the shouting of hateful slogans, and recited Shema Yisroel. Our enemies will learn, as so many before them have, that hatred and terror only serve to unite us, and strengthen our connection to Hashem.

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