

IllumiNations

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Rabbi Zalman and Nechama Tiechtel, Chabad at KU and Northeast Kansas, Lawrence, KS

Keeping Judaism Alive in the Heart of America

By Chaya Chazan

Lawrence, Kansas is located at the epicenter of the USA and is home to the University of Kansas with Jewish students attending from all across the country

Both of us grew up with a shlichus mindset. We always knew that was something we wanted to do. When we met the shliach of Kansas City, he mentioned Kansas University hosted a growing Jewish community where we could make a real impact.

It sounded promising, but before we moved, we davened to Hashem at the Ohel, asking for a clear sign that this was what He wanted for us. We drove back home and checked through our mail. We were just about to chuck out a piece of junk mail in the batch, when its return address caught our eye. It was a PO Box in Lawrence, Kansas, the home of KU.

So, sixteen years ago, we packed up all our earthly possessions, and together with our six-week old baby, made a new home in Lawrence. We live in the heart of America, just an hour away from the literal epicenter of the country. Lawrence is a typical college town, home to a small Jew-

ish community and close to 1,500 Jewish students, all of whom it is our privilege to serve.

Our Chabad House on Campus is more than just a community - it's an extended family. We're their home away from home. Watching us, just us, being a family, is enough to make an enormous impact. We're not here to sell Yiddishkeit; we're here to show it and live it - with joy and excitement!

KU attracts many students from the Midwest and the South, many of whom have minimal Jewish background. Shabbos meals were our first big focus. Since then, we've expanded to offer 53 different programs, including mental health support, Jewish learning, kosher meal plans, Shabbos and Yom Tov services, and so much more. Our popular and award-winning *JewishU* program is a platform for Jewish learning that integrates Jewish courses into the college experience. We also host the only Jewish radio show in Kansas.

Our college basketball team, the Jayhawks, won the college basketball championship this year. Our version of the school mascot, the *Jewhawk*, channels the students' natural passion and excitement into Jewish pride, as per the Rebbe's teachings. We serve free kosher hot dogs for students at games at our kosher deli in the stadium - the first kosher concession stand in a college sports stadium in the country.

"Is this Chabad?" the voice on the phone asked.

"Yes, it is," I answered excitedly. "We just moved! You're our first caller!"

"My name's Jordan. I have to write a paper on Judaism for class. I Googled 'Chabad in Kansas' and you guys came up."

"How'd you hear about Chabad?" I asked.

"Five months ago on Sukkos, a rabbi came to my dorm with a mobile sukkah. That was the first Jewish experience I'd had in years. I still can't shake off that special feeling. It gave me life! When my professor gave us a choice to write about any religion, I chose Judaism because I want to learn more."

Jordan visited our new Chabad House that week, and made himself at home amongst the piles of unpacked boxes. He ultimately became very involved in our program and now, years later, he is a pillar in his local Chabad house.

"Rabbi, you gotta come to Wescoe Beach ASAP!" My phone was blowing up with message after message from concerned students urging me to hurry to the campus quad, inaptly and jokingly named *Wescoe Beach*. I immediately made my way there. Before I even stepped out of my car, my ears were assailed with the tinny screeches of a megaphone. The words filling the air made me shiver in revulsion.

Two preachers stood on a raised platform, amping up the crowd with hateful and divisive rhetoric. They disparaged anyone who was different, including Jews. Gathered around them was a large crowd of onlookers. I spotted many Jewish students standing stiffly and proudly, proclaiming their Jewishness in the face of the preachers' hateful messages. For some of them, this united front of Jewish pride was the first sign of Jewish ownership they'd ever displayed.

More students gathered around the Jewish group in a protective circle, shouting and throwing eggs to drown out the darkness and anti-Semitism. I noticed one student, a freshman named Charles Goldberg, slipping away from the crowd. Charles was best known for his "extra-curricular" activities, especially on dollar nights at the bar. He'd never shown strong interest in his Jewishness. I watched in amazement as Charles wrapped himself in a tallis, placed himself conspicuously in front of the preachers, and began shuckling back and forth, reciting whatever prayers he knew by heart. His blatant display of Jewish pride in the face of open anti-Semitism was massively inspiring, giving everyone renewed strength and pride.



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The university paper reported the ruckus with a front page headline screaming about the two hateful preachers. A picture of Charles Goldberg, wrapped in his tallis, was inserted in the corner and captioned, "The Jewish Response."

That Shabbos, we had the largest crowd we'd ever had. So many Jewish students were touched by their pintele Yid. Somehow, they felt they needed to be at Chabad that Friday night.

During the meal, I turned to Charles and asked, "What exactly made you do that?"

Charles shrugged. "I don't know. Something drove me to it. I don't fully understand it myself."

Charles transformed his life, and a few years later, I was asked to officiate at his wedding to a wonderful, Jewish girl in Israel. Charles and his wife are now raising their family with Torah and mitzvos, and he travels across the country, sharing his inspiring story at Chabad Houses and shuls.

Four years later, on April 13, 2014, a neo-Nazi gunman opened fire at Kansas City's JCC, killing three innocent souls. We were all shaken, especially the students. The situation worsened when an anti-Semitic picket was arranged at the funerals of one of the victims. Their hate-filled signs and slogans insisted that the Jews deserved everything coming to them.

Alex Brown, another Jewish student, remembered Charles Goldberg's impact, and resolved to do the same. He created a Facebook event calling on all Jewish students to show up, wrap themselves in tallis and tefillin, and show the anti-Semites how Jews respond to hate and discrimination. He named the group "The Do Jewish Movement." Thousands joined and responded to his call.

Four days later was Pesach. We had to add a dozen extra tables to make space for the flood of last-minute reservations. During the seder, I asked Alex, "What gave you the courage to stand up to such unbridled anti-Semitism?"

Alex's answer echoed Charles' of four years before: "I don't know exactly what it was. Something told me this was what I needed to do." Alex then shared that the success of his movement had inspired him to "Do Jewish" in his personal life. He cut ties with the non-Jewish girl he was dating, and resolved to marry Jewish.

In a moment of darkness, something remarkable happened: Charles and Alex had the unique opportunity to unique opportunity to encounter themselves - to meet their neshama.

I'd known Jeremy for a while, and started gently pressuring him to put on tefillin every day.

"The only pair I have is my grandfather's," he told me. "I should probably buy a new pair."

"You're right," I agreed. "You *should* own your own pair. But bring me your grandfather's tefillin anyhow, and I'll get them checked. You never know."

A few weeks later, the package from the sofer arrived. Inside were Jeremy's brand new pair, as well as his grandfather's, neatly sealed. "They're kosher," read the attached note.

"What should I do with two pairs of tefillin?" Jeremy asked.

"You can continue the chain of mitzvot by donating one pair to Chabad, so we can use them to help others put on tefillin as well."

Jeremy liked the idea and gave me his grandfather's set, keeping the new ones for himself. They were put to good use!

A few weeks later, I was giving my weekly Parsha class on campus. I was happy to see Blake there, since his attendance at Chabad programs and events was sporadic.

"Would you like to put on tefillin?" I asked him.

"What are tefillin?" Blake asked.

I was excited to introduce Blake to tefillin for the first time. After we recited Shema together, I and the other students broke out into song and dance. Blake was embarrassed by the hullabaloo.

"There's no need to be embarrassed," I encouraged him. "The first time you put on tefillin is like your bar mitzvah! Of course we should celebrate!"

Someone approached the room and began to open the door. Blake was worried.

"I told you, Rabbi! There's a meeting next door! We disturbed them, and now they're coming to complain!"

There were dozens of available conference rooms, but, with hashgacha pratis, the room next door was being used. The meeting had been abruptly interrupted when they heard "Siman tov umazal tov" through the wall. Since they were Jewish, one of the meeting's members wanted to investigate. When he walked in, we both stared at each other.

"Hi Rabbi!"

"Hi Jeremy!" I said, with a big smile. "Come see your grandfather's tefillin being used to give Blake his bar mitzvah!"

Jeremy was in the right place at the right time. He rarely has work-related meetings on campus, but today, he did. He admitted that he hadn't started using his new tefillin yet, but the blatant hashgacha pratis convinced him it was time to start.

Rebecca grew up in a Reform family and had only basic knowledge of Judaism. She attended a Sinai Scholars re-

reat, and was especially inspired by the talk about taharas hamishpacha. She met her husband at that retreat, and when they got married, Rebecca accepted the mitzvah wholeheartedly. At last year's Sinai Scholar retreat, she gave a moving personal address about her experience with mikvah.

Julie is native to Lawrence, whose Jewish population is negligible. She grew up without any Jewish background and got engaged to a non-Jewish man.

Then Julie went on Birthright, an intense two-week trip to Israel. She was inspired by everything she saw and heard, but when she returned to her usual routine, she couldn't figure out how to leverage her inspiration into her life.

Two weeks later, we held a Siyum Sefer Torah - the first ever in Lawrence, Kansas. We blocked off the streets and marched proudly through them with the Torah. Julie cried as she watched the streets of her childhood fill with Jews singing and dancing for joy of their heritage.

She came to me the next day and said, "Something happened to me. My neshama awoke! I feel like I need to do something; I need to make a change!"

Nechama suggested she attend a seminary. Julie agreed.

She soon broke off her engagement to her non-Jewish boyfriend, and, in time, married a frum bochur. They now live in Brooklyn, and recently welcomed a baby into their beautiful family.

A year ago, tragedy struck. Julia's mother was hit by a car while crossing the street in front of the Chabad House. Julie decided to transform her mother's tragic death into a means for positivity and light. She donated her mother's car to Chabad. The instrument of her mother's death now crisscrosses the streets on which she was raised, bringing chalos, soup, hope, and light to those in need.

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