

IllumiNations

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Rabbi Moshe and Chaya Sasonkin, Chabad of Casa Grande, AZ

Unconditional Love and Acceptance

By Chaya Chazan

Both my wife and I grew up on shlichus, so it was definitely something we knew we wanted to do. We began searching for available options during our kollel year.

We were looking for somewhere where we could strike out on our own; a city that had no Chabad presence yet. Baruch Hashem, it's quite a challenge to find such a place! After a fruitless search in the continental US, we finally turned to the one state we'd left out - my wife's home state, Arizona.

My father-in-law told me about an up-and-coming city named Casa Grande. Although it was small, it was projected to grow quickly and would be worthwhile to research.

On a trip to visit my in-laws, we drove to Casa Grande, a small burgeoning city located almost exactly between Tucson and Phoenix. The nearest shliach, Rabbi Deitsch, in Chandler, gave us a list of all known Jews in Casa Grande, mostly compiled by Merkos bochurim who visited during the summer and searched for Jews in small cities and towns. There were about twenty names on the list. We called or visited every name, just to learn that our promising list of twenty was, in reality, no more than six. Everyone else had either passed, moved, or weren't actually Jewish. We knew we couldn't

start a community with only six families, so, with heavy hearts, we flew back home to New York.

Although we'd left Casa Grande behind, we couldn't stop thinking about it. There was something about it that drew us. We finally decided to trust the optimistic predictions of a 2% annual population growth, and moved to sunny Arizona. We'd grow our shlichus along with the community.

In the past few years, the population *has* increased, and we see so much potential in this beautiful city!

One thing that has made a tremendous difference is the Chassidische kollel that moved here a couple of years ago. Looking for affordable housing, they chose Casa Grande, and now our tiny city is graced with a kosher grocery that rivals the one in Phoenix!

One day, I got a call from an unknown number. "Is this Chabad?" the man asked.

"Yup!" I answered, cheerfully. "How can I help you?"

"Well, what is Chabad?" the man wanted to know.

I laughed and gave him a brief reply. "How did you find us?" I asked.

"Last Saturday, my wife and I were taking a walk. Suddenly, right in the middle of Casa Grande, we saw two figures who looked like they stepped right out of *Fiddler on the Roof*. They were wearing long black coats, tall hats, and had curly sideburns. We were so curious about who they were and where they'd come from, we immediately Googled *Jews, Casa Grande*. Your website was the first thing that popped up. It sounds interesting. Can we meet, so I can hear more about it?"

While we looked for a house in Casa Grande, we stayed with my in-laws in Tucson. We drove to Casa Grande on Purim to deliver Mishloach Manos to the seven Jewish families we knew. Before Pesach, we drove down again to deliver matzos. We finally moved into our new home after Pesach, so we told everyone we'd be hosting a Lag Baomer get together.

"That sounds great, Rabbi!" was the general response. "But I think I'm the only Jew in Casa Grande..."

It was heartwarming - and a little comical - to see each person's face as they walked in and saw so many other Jews gathered. As they each introduced themselves to each other, they couldn't stop asking, "You live in Casa Grande? There's another Jew just a ten-minute-drive away?!"

It was an amazing moment of community and togetherness. We couldn't have asked for a better introduction.

I had just pressed *send* on the email inviting everyone to our public menorah lighting, when the phone rang.

"Hello, this is Sam*, from the *Casa Grande Dispatch*. Can I interview you about the Hanukkah event?"

"Of - of course," I stammered. "Can I just ask you - how did you find out so quickly? I just sent the email, moments ago!"

"Oh! You're Chabad, aren't you? I just assumed you'd be making a Hanukkah event."

When Sam arrived for the interview, he told me he was Jewish. I asked him if he wanted to put on tefillin, an offer he gratefully accepted.

Since then, not only have we gotten to know Sam better, he also introduced us to his parents, who live in the area. Sam helped us with *pirsume nissah* - in more ways than one!

Dr. Ira Bernstein* was a respected pediatric neurologist in El Paso, Texas for many years. New York born-and-bred, Dr. Bernstein grew up in a traditional home and even attended Yeshiva University, but religion was a major point of contention between him and his family. He was a philosopher and scientist by nature, and had many heated debates with his father. They usually ended in smoldering tempers, slammed doors, and a feeling of rebellious contempt on one side, and furious hopelessness on the other.



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He eventually married a Jewish girl and settled in El Paso, setting up a successful practice. Religion was, by and large, gone from his life. He attended a Conservative synagogue only rarely, and, although he knew about Chabad in El Paso, he chose not to have anything to do with them.

A few years later, Dr. Bernstein and his wife got divorced. He remarried a non-Jewish woman and distanced himself even further from Yiddishkeit. After many years, he retired and moved to Casa Grande to be near his daughter.

About two years ago, my brother visited us with a friend, and we sent them to do “cold calls.” They knocked on some doors, and tried to find Jewish families we didn’t know about yet. They met with Dr. Bernstein and struck up a lively conversation. Dr. Bernstein was happy to see them, and was intrigued enough to accept their invitation to join them at our house later on.

We struck up a quick friendship. When I started a weekly class on Jewish insights into the parshah, Dr. Bernstein joined every time. We also began a private class on Tanya and Jewish philosophy.

Dr. Bernstein was still the same passionate, outspoken debater. After one particularly fiery exchange, I was worried that I had pushed too far. I was reassured and heartened after reading an email he sent later that night: *Rabbi, thank you for hearing me out and allowing me to express my opinion without abbreviation. I appreciate the fair exchange of ideas.*

Dr. Bernstein underwent a complete transformation, exemplifying the extraordinary power of Torah learning. During one class, as we discussed the meaning of Elyahu Hanavi’s biting reproach when he asked Bnei Yisrael, “*How long will you continue to sit on both sides?*” Dr. Bernstein visibly held back tears.

“Why did Hashem give us free choice?” he cried, after the class was over. “I abused my power of will so badly, and made so many choices I regret!”

Dr. Bernstein spent the last day of his life in shul, helping us complete our Sunday morning minyan. He stayed afterwards for a shiur and farbrengen. We heard the news of his passing the following day. May his neshama, which merited to return home before it was too late, have an aliyah.

Darryl* and Maya* didn’t know much about Yiddishkeit, but they had a warm, deep feeling for Hashem and the Torah. Their daughter, Debbie*, married a non-Jewish man, and they had a daughter, Laura*. Unfortunately, Laura suffered from various mental disorders, which often made her lash out at her mother.

Laura reported her mother to CPS, falsely claiming that her mother beat her. CPS removed Laura from the home, leav-

ing Debbie heartbroken. Laura was placed with a non-Jewish family, where, apparently, she was doing well.

Darryl, Maya, and Debbie joined us for a Friday night meal one time, where Debbie brought up Laura, and a new, troubling situation that had arisen.

“They want to send her to a summer camp in California,” she explained. “But it’s a Christian camp, and they advertise it as a *spiritual experience*. I just *feel* that this is wrong for my daughter, even though she’s only half-Jewish.”

“You’re right, *and* you’re wrong,” I replied. “You’re absolutely right that it’s not an appropriate environment for Laura. But you’re wrong about her being only half-Jewish. In Jewish law, we follow the matriarchal line. Laura is as Jewish as Moses! Every Jew has a part of G-d within them, called the neshama. The neshama is so special, holy, and pure, that beside it, all physical elements and differences fade into oblivion.”

We continued to talk about the neshama for a while, and I told them to keep me updated on the situation.

“Rabbi, you’ve got a great story to boast about to all your friends!” Darryl told me a few weeks later. “Today was the court case regarding Laura’s summer plans. I got up and explained to the judge that Laura was Jewish, and therefore, a Christian program was not appropriate. I told him that the body doesn’t matter; it’s only the soul that counts. He agreed with me, and ruled in our favor!”

One of the members of the kollel told me that he’d noticed the house across from their shul had a fire in the yard. The palm trees on the lawn were blackened, and the sidewalk was charred. He knocked on the door to make sure the owner was okay. The owner, Jeff*, was deeply moved.

“You’re the very first person to ask me how I’m doing!” he said. “I see you’re Jewish. I am, too!”

“I got his contact information,” the kollel yungerleit told me. “I’m sure he’d appreciate a visit.”

I scheduled a meeting with Jeff later that week.

“Is it alright if my sister comes too?” he asked.

“Of course!” I agreed.

I went to meet with them both at Jeff’s house. We found out his sister went to school in the same neighborhood in which I’d grown up, so we had lots to talk about! I helped Jeff put on tefillin, and snapped a quick photo for Chabad’s social media later.

During our conversation, I learned that Jeff’s sister had converted to Christianity. She had influenced Jeff to convert as well, and they both considered themselves Christian. They admitted they knew nothing about their Yiddishkeit, and

were open to learning more. Since Pesach was coming up, I invited them both to our communal seder.

A couple of days later, I got a call from Jeff’s grandfather in California.

“I saw the picture of Jeff putting on tefillin,” he told me. “Thank you so much! Jeff told me he and his sister will be joining your seder. I’d love to come too, if I can. I haven’t had a seder in so many years!”

Of course, I was happy to agree. Three generations sat by the seder table, experiencing a seder for the first time. Their grandfather beamed with happiness as he fulfilled the mitzvah of “telling your son” the story of Galus Mitzrayim.

“This is the happiest day of my life!” he proclaimed.

A few weeks later, Jeff asked if he could come over for a discussion about religion. He wanted to explain why he converted and what drew him to Christianity. I agreed to meet, but immediately decided that I would not engage. I knew that arguing with him would only make him upset, and wouldn’t help in any case. He wanted to be heard - so I’d give him my time and attention.

I managed to keep this resolution for most of the conversation. It was when he brought up the classic proofs, misquoting and mis-translating pesukim from Navi, that I couldn’t hold back any longer. I explained the true meaning of those pesukim, and how looking at their context completely disproves all the arguments he’d been fed. Jeff looked perturbed, so I didn’t push my luck. He thanked me for agreeing to meet with him.

“You’ve given me lots of food for thought. Thank you for taking time to hear me out and valuing my opinion.”

Whatever Jeff ultimately decides, it’s going to be the Ahavas Yisroel and unconditional acceptance that he remembers most.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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