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Faith in the Bayou, Part I

By Chaya Chazan

When I asked my wife what type of shlichus she'd be open to, she replied, "Anything and anywhere."

She grew up on shlichus in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans, so I knew she meant it. I'd had some exotic shlichus experience myself, as a bochor on Merkos shlichus, but a few weeks in a rural area can't compare to a lifetime, especially when considering raising a family. With the gravity of our commitment fully understood, we began researching shlichus locations.

In the end, we moved back to my wife's hometown, to help her parents, Rabbi Yossie and Chanie Nemes, in their Chabad house.

My in-laws saw many changes in the demographic they served. Originally, they took over a modern Orthodox shul, and many of their members identified as such. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina's devastation in 2005, everyone moved to larger, more established Jewish communities. My in-laws were left with the skeleton of a community, until hundreds of Israeli families surged into the battered city, armed with their engineering, plumbing, and building skill sets. The Chabad house welcomed them all, and practically became an Israeli center. A few years later, when the city was rebuilt, many of those families moved away as well.

By the time we moved in 2012, my in-laws were reshaping their Chabad house for the third time. We were a young, idealistic, family with lots of energy and ideas! We reached out to the younger crowd with social media posts, revamped the email system, and shouldered some of the weekly shiurim. Baruch Hashem, the community has grown tremendously, and continues to grow day by day!

While I was still in kollel, I remember a speech from a shliach about how he built up his Chabad house. Although going door-to-door on "mitzvoyim routes" is usually the purview of bochorim, he recommended doing exactly that when beginning a shlichus. It gives the shliach the opportunity to meet many people he may not have otherwise encountered, and build up a strong relationship when seeing them consistently, week after week.

When we first moved to Metairie, I remembered this advice and implemented it a few times a week. That's how I met Howie*. He owned a camera shop along the main avenue. When I first walked in, he was busy serving customers, and I wasn't sure how to get his attention.

When he finally turned and smiled at me, I blurted out a question about which camera to buy. Once we established a connection, it was easier to ask if he was Jewish.

Howie pulled out a Magen David necklace from under his shirt and smiled broadly. "I sure am!" he said.

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

Howie agreed, and we repaired to the back room, where I helped him wrap the tefillin and recite Shema.

I continued visiting Howie every Tuesday. When I couldn't go myself, I made sure someone else was there.

Eventually, those tefillin visits turned into monthly Shabbos invitations. Pretty soon, Howie was coming for Shabbos every other week or so. Then he started coming to shul for Yom Kippur. His connection to Judaism and the community grew steadily, until he became a "regular."

Years later, I asked Howie to speak at one of our events. He told everyone how his connection began - with weekly tefillin visits in the back room of his store - and how those few minutes each week had changed his life.

We presented Howie with a precious gift - his very own pair of tefillin. Now, I don't need to visit Howie at work anymore to help him put on tefillin. He does it himself, every day at home!

Directly across the street from the Chabad house is a large hospital. On Rosh Hashanah, I headed over with a shofar in hand, hoping to blow shofar for any Jewish patients. I asked the nurse for a list of all the Jewish patients, but she told me she couldn't give me that information. I tried again on Sukkos, this time with a lulav and esrog, but again, I was told the hospital couldn't give me information on their patients.

"What would I have to do to get that list?" I asked.

"If you were a chaplain, we could share it," the nurse answered.

"Great! I'll become a chaplain!"

I took the necessary courses and became a volunteer chaplain. I visited the hospital regularly - now with the approved list in hand - to give out Yom Tov packages, challos, and smiles.

One day, I noticed a new name on the list: Paul Schwartz*. I didn't recognize the name, but it sounded promising, so I headed to his room.

"Good morning Paul!" I greeted him, putting out a hand. "My name is Rabbi Mendel. I just came to meet you and see how you're doing."

Paul was in a good mood. He introduced me to his daughter, who was sitting at his bedside, and told me all about himself. He was a very successful and wealthy businessman, with multiple banks, law firms, and shipping companies in his name.

After chatting for a while, I pulled out my tefillin. "Would you like to put on tefillin?" I asked.

His eyes widened. "I've never done that before!"

"Not even at your bar mitzvah?" I asked.

"I grew up Reform," he answered. "I had a confirmation, not a bar mitzvah. No one even mentioned tefillin." He paused for a moment, considering. "When I was a teenager, I was on a trip to Jordan with some friends. One day, we figured we'd hop the border and visit Israel for a day. We went to the Western Wall, and someone asked me if I wanted to put on tefillin, but I declined."



"Paul, there are two times in life that almost every Jew puts on tefillin: their bar mitzvah, and the first time they visit the Kotel. You missed out on your bar mitzvah, *and* you said no at the Kotel. It's not too late though! We can celebrate your bar mitzvah, right here and now! What do you say?"

"Let's do it!" Paul said, with a smile.

I helped him wrap the tefillin, and played *Siman Tov Umazal Tov* on my phone. I danced with him in his hospital bed as his daughter laughed and videoed the whole thing.

"Actually," I told him, as I wrapped the tefillin in their boxes and replaced them in their pouch, "I'm organizing a trip to Israel soon. Would you be interested in joining?"

"That sounds great!" he responded. "I've been meaning to learn more about my Jewish heritage. Let's keep in touch about it!"

Paul was released from the hospital the next time I visited, but he was back the week after, in much worse condition. He smiled weakly when I came in, and introduced me to his wife.

"This is Rabbi Mendel," he told her. "The bar mitzvah guy."

"Oh!" she smiled, clapping in delight. "I heard *all* about the bar mitzvah! Thank you so much! He was so happy, and he's been telling me about this Israel trip. He's excited to discover his Judaism!"

"My pleasure!" I said. "Would you like to put on tefillin today?"

Paul was in too much pain to agree, so I chatted with his wife for a bit and waved goodbye.

Two days later, I received a call from the hospital, telling me that the Schwartzes were looking for me.

They told me Paul had passed away earlier that morning. I was shocked. I knew he was *sick*, but had never dreamed he was on the verge of death! It seemed a tragic complication in his condition had turned fatal.

"We'd always planned a cremation and a small ceremony," Mrs. Schwartz told me, dabbing her eyes with a splotchy tissue. "But ever since his conversation with you, Paul changed his mind. He told me he wanted a Jewish burial. I didn't expect to have to fulfill his wish so

soon," she said, breaking down in tears. "You're the only rabbi I know. Can you help?"

I assured her I could, and got busy arranging all the details of a kosher levaya.

Paul's funeral was well-attended by all the *who's who* of New Orleans society.

"I didn't even know Paul was *Jewish*, let alone him knowing a bona-fide rabbi!" some people commented.

It didn't matter. His neshama knew, and had woken up in time to ensure he'd put on tefillin and have a kosher kevrurah.

Mr. Klein* was on my list for a long time, but every time I visited his hospital room, he was either sleeping, or too *out of it* for a real conversation. Still, I visited each week, hoping one day we'd be able to make a real connection.

Mr. Klein was usually alone, so I was surprised to walk into his room one day and find a couple of visitors - a man and a woman. The man was big, brawny, and heavily tattooed across his face and arms. He told me he was Mr. Klein's nephew, his brother's son, and I doubted the chances of him being Jewish.

As we continued speaking, it became clear that he was *indeed* Jewish. He told me he'd spent some time in prison, and had been helped through the Aleph Institute. Since he'd been released, he'd had no Jewish connection.

"I wasn't even supposed to be here," he told me. "I've been in a fight with my uncle for years, and we aren't on speaking terms. Something compelled me to come visit him today; I don't know what. I thought visiting him in the hospital was the least I could do."

"I think I might know why," I said, with a wink. I took his contact information, and promised to be in touch.

We gave him matzah before Pesach, which led to a weekly private study session. He stops by the Chabad house during the week to put on tefillin, and I told him about Rabbi Gordon AH's audio Tanya classes. He listens to them regularly, and I can tell how much he's internalizing them by the things he repeats and the questions he asks. He's started coming to minyanim, and recently received his very own pair of tefillin.

He's a changed man - all because of a "mistaken" trip to visit his uncle!

"Hi, Mr. Goldstein!" I greeted the new patient. "My name is Rabbi Mendel. How are you feeling today?"

"I can't believe you're here!" he said. "I'm a member of a synagogue in New Orleans. A few weeks ago, I had a procedure in Texas. While I was recuperating there, the only visitor I received was a nice Chabad rabbi who brought me a warm meal. My synagogue knows I'm here, but once again, the only visitor I've had is another *Chabad* rabbi!"

Mr. Goldstein was in and out of the hospital for years, and we built up a close relationship over time. I visited him in his office and helped him put on tefillin, and we got to know his family as well. He became a great supporter of Chabad and an active community member.

Towards the end of his life, he was in hospice, and I spent many hours just sitting with him, talking softly. I'd often bring my baby with me, and Mr. Goldstein's face would light up just seeing her.

After Mr. Goldstein passed away, we paid a shiva call to his daughters. We'd never met his oldest daughter, since she lived in Russia. She told us she'd attended Gan Yisroel many years before, and remembers being invited to the Rivkins' house for Shabbos. Years later, the memories of that summer live on.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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