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Chuppa on a Hollywood Billboard

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In the summer of 1985, having completed a two-year shlichus internship at Yeshiva Ohr Elchonon Chabad in Los Angeles, I was invited to assist Rabbi Moshe Bryski in expanding Chabad's activities in the Conejo Valley, an area made up of small towns 30 miles northwest of L.A.

A handful of families who were part of his shul in Westlake Village were slowly becoming shomer Shabbos and asked him to start a minyan in their neighborhood. In addition to serving as their rabbi, my responsibilities also included running a Hebrew School, teaching adult classes and organizing large community holiday celebrations.

Having grown up in Montreal, the thought of spending winters in Southern California was tempting, but the privilege of going on shlichus in Agoura Hills/ Oak Park, a "bedroom community" nestled in the beautiful surrounding mountains, was exciting and adventurous! I received the Rebbe's brocha and the journey began!

In the teachings of Chassidus, emphasis is placed on recognizing the hand of Hashem in every experience, appreciating the specialness of every Yid, and cherishing every mitzvah and good deed. As I reflect on my 36 years of shlichus, I have baruch Hashem observed all three teachings countless times.



That summer, I received a call informing me that a choson was getting married and had requested to put on tefillin before his chuppah. I asked where the hotel was but was told that the wedding wasn't in a hotel.

"OK, where's the hall?" I asked. "It's not a hall" the caller replied.

"Then where's the shul?" I tried again. "No shul. The ceremony is taking place at the corner of Sunset and Sweetzer in West Hollywood. When you get there you'll understand."

I was intrigued, if not wholly mystified. The corner of one of the busiest streets in Los Angeles wasn't quite my idea of a proper wedding venue. But this is L.A. One never knows.

A Silicon Valley company had just invented a new computer microchip and they promoted their product on a large billboard on Sunset Blvd. But to draw attention to the advertisement, they offered a Ferrari to the person who could live the longest on the scaffold of the billboard.

No, I'm not delusional. This actually happened. The challenge began in December with 45 contestants and by June there were 6 individuals who refused to give up. (In case you're not sure what this entails, *living on a scaffold* means eating, sleeping whatever normal people do on ground level. They were permitted to climb down several times a day for short breaks.)

The company decided to end the competition by dividing the value of a Ferrari between the holdouts. To celebrate his last night of living in the elevated outdoors, one of the finalists who was Jewish decided to get married *on the scaffold*.

A chuppah was erected high above the street and, since this is Los Angeles, there were hundreds of on-lookers and every TV station on site to witness this historic event! The excitement notwithstanding, our eccentric choson dutifully wished to put on tefillin amidst all the fanfare and *mishugas!*

Adam Eisenberg and I were about to begin his bar mitzvah lesson when Rabbi Bryski asked me for a favor. "The camp counselors flew back to New York and accidentally took the car keys back with them. The car has to be towed but I've used up my free service calls with AAA. Can you please use your membership card and arrange for a tow?"

I excused myself to Adam and dialed the familiar number. While the counselors we imported every summer from the east coast were always full of life and energy, the same could not be said of the donated vehicles they drove. Hence, most camp directors have AAA on speed dial.

"You've reached the Automobile Club of Southern California" the voice began, "and my name is Hank. How can I help you?" For some reason, rather than replying with "Hi Hank, my membership number is ... and my car needs to be towed," I surprised myself by saying, "Hi Hank. My name is Yitzchak."

"Your name is WHAT?" asked a shocked Hank. "Yitzchak" I repeated. "Listen Hank, the name is Yitzchak Sapochkinsky. What do you say we move on to the membership number?"

"Yitzchak? My name is Chaim!"

"Wait. Didn't you just say your name was Hank?"

"Yes. It was Chaim when I lived in New York. Hymie when I moved to the Midwest. And when I reached the West Coast it became Hank. But my father's name is Yitzchak!"

"That's great, Hank," I replied. "Because **my** father's name is Chaim!"

So now we have Yitzchak ben Chaim, speaking to Chaim ben Yitzchak, and we're talking about everything except towing cars. Suddenly, Hank said; "Yitzchak, you're Orthodox, right?" I'm not sure what gave it away, but I confessed that indeed I was.

"Two weeks ago, I was working out in the health club and I met an Orthodox guy and he was very nice and I just wanted you to know that." I wasn't quite sure if Hank was "just sharing" or if he was communicating that his prior encounters with observant Jews might not have been so positive.

I must've been in a jolly mood because I once again said something that surprised me. "Which health club was it?" I asked, as if it made a difference. Southern



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California is the mecca of health clubs and Hank was working in downtown L.A. Why did I even ask?

"It was the Westlake Sporthouse," he replied. Now it was my turn to be shocked. "Hank, you're not going to believe this but I know who you met. The Sporthouse is a mile from my home and there's only one guy who wears a kippa even when he exercises. His name is (Eli) Jay.

"That's right," he exclaimed!

"Not only that, Hank, but Jay's son Adam is sitting very patiently in front of me waiting to begin his bar mitzva lesson."

Naturally, we were all left speechless by the *hashgocha protis*, but the clincher came when we shared the amazing story with Jay. He had no recollection of meeting Hank. "How could you not?" I wondered. "It was only two weeks ago!"

Jay's answer has stayed with me all these years. "Because I wasn't just nice to one guy two weeks ago. Wherever I go, I try to make a kiddush Hashem. I know I'm wearing a yarmulke and I'm cognizant that, sadly, people have misconceptions about religious Jews, so I always try to be friendly to everyone I meet."

The mother of two of our Hebrew High students was misdiagnosed. By the time the doctors realized the mistake it was too late and tragically, she passed away. The heartbroken father called to arrange the funeral and I went over some of the basics of the funeral service and shiva.

The next day at the funeral I was horrified when the hearse pulled up with a beautiful, teal-colored metal casket. I had completely forgotten to stress that our tradition is to use a wooden coffin. Now it was too late.

After the service, the family and friends left while I remained to fill the grave. The cemetery workers brought a tractor to help them lower a large cement vault above the casket. (Most Californian cemeteries ensconce the casket in a hollow catacomb that weighs several tons.) As they gingerly positioned the dangling vault over the open grave, the cables slipped and the massive apparatus came crashing down atop the metal coffin, sending a plume of dust into the air.

I left the cemetery but by the time I got back to the Chabad House, there was a message from the funeral director. "Rabbi, can you please come back at 3 pm to

rebury Mrs. K? The casket was damaged and we need to replace it." He felt that it would be proper to have a rabbi present for the reburial.

I immediately called the distraught husband (who had been told what had happened) and delicately discussed the problem with a metal casket. "I know we're supposed to use wood but teal was my wife's favorite color and my kids chose that coffin" he cried.

My heart broke as I gently explained that their choice to honor their mother in this manner was truly touching. "However, I've been to many funerals and I've never seen something like this happen. Could it be that Hashem is sending us a message and giving us the opportunity to follow our ancient tradition?"

After discussing it with his children, they agreed. It's the only time I've ever buried the same person twice, grateful to Hashem for giving me a chance to right my wrong.

When a new shopping center opened in Agoura Hills, I suggested to the marketing manager that it would be beneficial for their business to co-host a Chanukah festival with us. Although the concept was foreign to them, they liked the idea of attracting hundreds of people to their new mall. We organized an outdoor concert, kids' entertainment, hot latkes and the kindling of a 20-foot menorah and sure enough, the crowds showed up to celebrate.

The following year, as we strategized on how to make the event bigger and better, we noticed that all the shopping centers on the main street of Agoura had signs on their light posts wishing their customers "Happy Chanukah" and "Happy Holidays." There was no mention of any other holiday by name.

This aroused the ire of one resident in the area who called our office with menacing threats. "If you guys light that menorah again at the mall I will light a 50-foot cross right next to it. I've also got 300 people ready to boycott the mall." She blamed us for all this Jewish stuff that was suddenly happening all around her, including the signs which she found offensive. We, of course, had nothing to do with that.

We really weren't sure what to make of her threats. Was she serious? Was she truly representing others as she claimed? While we were a little stunned by this smidgen of anti-Semitism, at that moment our minds were preoccupied with building a float for an upcoming Torah dedication.

We worked through the night putting the finishing touches to the magnificent crown that was to adorn

the float. Before we headed off to bed, we began discussing "the phone call" and the best way for us to respond.

I reminded everyone that the Rebbe always encouraged us to double our efforts when faced with adversity. So I suggested that we not only go ahead with the Agoura festival as planned, but that we also choose another town and organize a second celebration there.

This fortuitous decision - made at 4 o'clock in the morning - led to a memorable Chanukah festival in the largest mall of Ventura, some 30 miles north of Agoura. Overwhelmed by the outpouring of enthusiasm that night, the legendary Rabbi Yehoshua B. Gordon obm, executive director of all the Chabad centers in the S. Fernando and Conejo Valleys, opened a new Chabad of Ventura several months later.

Wanting to keep up the momentum, we added the mall in Simi Valley to our list of festivals the following Chanukah. Years later we would learn (in a beautiful story that has been widely publicized) that that event saved a life, quite literally.

A single father had lost two of his children in a terrible accident *r"l*, and was unable to go on with life. He took his only surviving daughter to the movie theater that night with the intention of treating her to a fun night and then ending his life after he'd put her to bed.

As they entered the mall they were startled to hear live Jewish music playing and

wandered over to find the source. Jay (the guy who's nice to everyone he meets) immediately pulled him into the circle of dancers and he was swept up in the joys and purity of unabashed Judaism on public display. That night, he and his daughter went home with a new appreciation for Yiddishkeit and for life.

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