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It's Never Too Late: Chabad of Colonie Part II

By Chaya Chazan

Before Rosh Hashana, we sent out a glossy magazine, covering the past few months of Jewish life in Colonie.

I included an envelope folded inside the cover, knowing I wouldn't get many responses, but hoping to encourage at least a few Jews to do the mitzvah of tzedakah before Rosh Hashana.

As anticipated, there were few envelopes returned; in fact, there was only one. The name on the envelope was Jenny Farbstein*, a name I was unfamiliar with. I would've gone directly to her house to meet her and thank her, but the return address was a P.O. Box.

A couple of days later, I had to stop by the post office while running some errands. There was a store celebrating its grand opening next door, so I quickly popped in, asking if there were any Jews working there. We had a little chat, and I waved goodbye. As I stepped out, a woman exited the post office at the exact same moment. I noticed the Magen David necklace on her neck, and something prompted me to ask, "Jenny?"

"Yes?" she answered, a bit surprised.

"Hi. I'm Rabbi Rubin. Thank you so much for your donation!"

We talked for a while, and I invited her to join us for Rosh Hashanah davening.

"I'd love to," she said. "My daughter, Susan*, will join as well. But my husband, Mark*... he's a staunch atheist. Please don't expect him to come and don't try to convince him either. He'd be upset just seeing you!"

Jenny and Susan joined us for Rosh Hashanah, but Mark did not. While Jenny and Susan continued joining our events and growing more involved, I still had yet to ever meet Mark, or even talk with him over the phone.

"Mark was diagnosed with cancer," Jenny told me a few months later.

"I'm so sorry to hear that!" I replied. "I know there's not much I can do, but I can come over and speak with you and him if you'd like. My wife makes the best chicken soup, which may not cure cancer, but it probably comes close!"

"No!" Jenny insisted. "He doesn't like religion or rabbis! If you come, it will just make him agitated and make everything worse."

"I understand. I'd still like to be of some help and support, though," I answered. "Can I just bring over the food? I'll leave it on the porch."

Jenny agreed to that, and it became something of a weekly tradition for me to pack up some soup, kugel, challah, and other goodies to deliver to their porch.

"My husband really enjoyed the kugel," Jenny would tell me.

One time, I brought up after-life plans, and explained the importance of a Jewish burial.

"I'll have one for myself when the time comes," Jenny answered, "but if you're referring to Mark, he'd never agree! He's a man of science and wants to be cremated. He's been absolute on that."

I tabled the discussion, wanting to avoid confrontation.

The week of Parshas Va'eschanan, I was inspired to help Jews fulfill the mitzvah in the parsha and offer them mezuzos to hang on their doors. I hung up many mezuzos

all over town - and then I remembered Jenny and her mezuzah-less door. I broached the idea over the phone.

"No way! My husband would have a fit!" she said.

"The mezuzah brings blessings and protection for all those inside," I said, in gentle encouragement.

Jenny was quiet for a moment. "You know what? He's asleep right now. If you come over now and you can be quick, then you can hang up a mezuzah."

I rushed straight over with the usual bag of Shabbos food and a mezuzah. I affixed it on her doorpost, and she even invited me inside, where I finally saw Mark for the first time, although he was still asleep, a deathly pallor his most notable feature.

Before I left, I mentioned, "Jenny, I know your husband insists on cremation. When the time comes, if you hear a little voice in your head telling you to consider burial, I beg you to just let that voice speak. Don't silence it immediately."

After Shabbos, I opened my phone to find a dozen texts from Jenny. Mark had passed away suddenly Friday night.

"Having a mezuzah on our door, even though Mark would be so against it if he knew, makes me feel like anything is possible," she said. "We want to bury him the proper Jewish way."

Her daughter, Susan, shed some more light on their radical decision. "My Dad once told me that although his parents were both traditional Jews and asked to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, he went against their wishes and cremated them. I feel like now is the time to right that wrong."

I hid my shock and helped her make the arrangements. At the levayah, I spoke about the power of a neshama.

"A soul is born a Jew, and dies as a Jew, no matter what happens in between. The purity of the neshama transcends anything that may come between it and its Heavenly Father."

Our cousin, a shliach in Orlando, messaged us about a woman, Caroline Friedman*, who recently moved to our area. He didn't have any contact information for her, so the best we could do was find her on Facebook and message her. She messaged back only to say she wasn't interested. Without knowing anything else about her, there was little else we could do.

Pesach was fast approaching, so we quickly forgot about Caroline in the rush of cleaning, cooking, and preparing.

On Yom Tov, I took my kids to a park down the road. On our way back, we saw that traffic had started piling up. Cars were at a standstill along the entire route home. We turned it into a Pesach parade - the kids, looking very obviously Jewish, smiling and waving at all the cars as we passed by. When we got home, we sat on the lawn,



continuing to greet all the cars as they inched their way forwards.

Some drivers smiled, some waved back, and some stared ahead blankly. Only one woman rolled down her window and called out, "Hi!"

"Happy Passover!" we wished her.

"Thank you! And a happy Passover to you as well!" she responded.

The cars ahead of her had started to move, so she quickly turned forward again. Before she shot forward, I threw a bag of matzah through her window, explaining that it was a special mitzvah to eat it.

"What's your name?" I asked as she released the brake.

"Caroline Friedman," she answered, before zooming off.

When the next Pesach came around, we were determined to give Caroline matzos properly, preferably without either of us being in a moving vehicle. I messaged her on Facebook, inviting her to stop by to get her matzah at any time.

Caroline came by to get some matzah, and told us about her two sons - an 11 year old, and a 13 year old.

"I'd like for them to be bar mitzvah properly," she said. "Can you teach them?"

"It would be my pleasure!" I answered.

I taught them to read Hebrew, some basic Jewish knowledge, and the brachos on the Torah. We recently celebrated the bar mitzvah of the elder brother, and are looking forward to the 13th birthday of his younger brother.

"Rabbi, I just had the strangest thing happen to me," said the man on the phone, who introduced himself as Seth*. "I was adopted as a baby, and my parents moved far away from my biological family. They changed my name, got me a different social security number, and never spoke about my biological parents. I never even knew their names. Today, I received a death certificate for a woman who passed away over 30 years ago. Apparently, it was my biological mother. The mail had no return address, so I have no idea who sent it, and how they tracked me down.

"The reason I'm calling you is because the death certificate said my biological mother was Jewish. Does that mean I'm Jewish, too?"

"It sure does!" I told him. "This is a lot to process all at once, but it's Divine Providence that you called now. It's actually the holiday of Chanukah now - the holiday of miracles! I'd love to give you a menorah so you can light it."

"That sounds great!" Seth answered. We made up to meet on his way back from work, and I gave him the menorah.

A short while later, Seth was involved in a terrible crash. A truck plowed into his car, head-on. To everyone's shock, Seth survived.

"That was a pure, utter miracle," Seth told me, his voice shaking. "There's no way I should've survived that crash. I have no doubt my miracle came from my lighting the menorah to celebrate the holiday of miracles."

We put on tefillin and Seth was very moved. "I feel proud to be a Jew, especially in this climate," he said. "Now that I know I'm Jewish, I want to learn everything about it!"

When we approached the university about making a Chanukah party for the students, they offered us a large social hall just off the main thoroughfare of campus. As we were getting the part underway, a girl walked in and looked around curiously.

"I just heard the music, so I wanted to check it out," she said. "Is that okay?"

"Of course! Please come in and have a bagel!" my wife offered.

That was the first visit of many. She soon joined Jewish U and Sinai Scholars, and became an active member of our student group.

Baruch Hashem she decided to follow the music!

When Carl* first brought his friend, Gary*, to shul, we were very excited - at first. Then Gary introduced himself, telling us he'd been training as a JW for 20 years. While we were taken aback at first, we know that no neshama is ever too far gone to reach.

At first, Gary's religious dogma was impenetrable. Slowly, over time, he came to appreciate the warmth of the community. He'd been desperately lacking friends and familial support; seeing that we were more than ready to step in as his family simply because he was Jewish unnerved him.

We started having deep discussions about religion, theology, and ethics, and eventually, over time, Gary began shedding the thoughts and mindsets of his former self, and coming to embrace genuine Judaism.

Finally, Gary was ready to cement his commitment by having a bris. He chose the name Akiva, identifying with the great Sage who began his Torah career very late in life.

Gabriel* was an international student from France that came to America on a soccer scholarship. He spent four years in YU, where he decided to begin keeping kosher. In New York City, that might have been easily attainable. For his final semester, he transferred to Siena, where keeping kosher was significantly more complicated.

The university had no kosher food on site. They offered him airplane meals, stale matzah and peanut butter, and gelatinous jarred gefilte fish.

When we found out about him, Gabriel's food difficulties were over. We had him over for meals often. I'll never forget the smile that spread across his face after eating fresh meat for the first time in months. He became an honorary member of the family, and we even started attending his games regularly to cheer him on!

Gabriel was a huge inspiration to our community. Many of them considered kosher too difficult a commitment to keep. This young man's dedication to this mitzvah, in spite of the challenges it caused him, was incredibly impressive.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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