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*Rabbi Zalman and Raizy Mendelsohn, Chabad of Wyoming*

## Cracking the Tough Nuts

By Chaya Chazan

***Wyoming has been on Merkos bochurim's visiting list since 1956. I was sent there myself as a bochur. Perusing notes from bochurim who'd been there before me, one comment caught my eye: Jackson Hole is a tough nut to crack.***

I knew right away I'd be spending lots of quality time there. I spent a week in the town, determined to "crack the nut." I met a lot of friendly people and felt I was making real progress.

The community in Casper invited me and my friend back for Chanukah. Then friends in Cheyenne invited us back for Pesach. The community in Jackson loved the model matza bakery, and asked us to return for the next Yom Tov. The invitations snowballed, and for the next three years, I spent every Yom Tov in Wyoming, as well as a month each summer.

Several months after I got married, my wife Raizy and I took a "honeymoon" trip to Wyoming, spending a couple of weeks visiting each city. In my mind, making the shlichus in Wyoming official was merely a matter of *when*. My wife, however, having grown up in the verdant and open fields of Ramat Beit Shemesh, felt suffocated by the mountains surrounding Jackson Hole, making it impossible to view the distant horizon. She doubted whether moving to such a small town would be feasible - or even bearable.

We spent Shabbos in Jackson, hosted by a good friend in a spacious and beautifully appointed guest house. We had a dozen or so guests over for the Shabbos seuda. We didn't know that they had an ambush planned.

Fred got up first. "Rabbi and Raizy, if you move to Jackson, I pledge to cover your salaries."

Morris offered to pay the rent for a shul. Lawrence said he would pay our moving expenses. Doris pledged a monthly donation. Each person stood up, promising to support us and begging us to allow them to help. We were absolutely blown away. All my wife's reservations melted. We returned to New York and penned a proposal to Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky, Vice Chairman of Merkos, outlining our plan to open the first Chabad House in Wyoming, based in Jackson Hole.

"We've actually received many requests for shluchim," he told us. "But they're mostly from community members in Cheyenne. Will you provide services for them too?"

Of course we agreed, and prepared to move to Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

We still had a sharp learning curve. Our first major event was a Purim party. We advertised a singles event and poured our heart and soul into planning a beautiful, grandiose program. We booked a DJ, a bartender, and a hotel conference space. Everything was in place for the perfect Purim party - until we were disappointed when only three people showed up... especially since two of them were a couple.

The next night, we hosted another Purim party for the community. This one was in our home and the budget was very modest. People came, sat on couches, and schmoozed comfortably. We realized we couldn't mimic the model of other shluchim in larger cities. We had to focus on individuals, and prioritize personal connections.

Now, I have eighteen individual chavrusas with community members setup every week. I enjoy learning one-on-one, and, since each person has their own personal interests, I get to cover a wide variety of Torah topics!

"Look at this!" I said, shoving the paper under my Merkos partner, Rabbi Levi Shmotkin's, nose. "Ray Tabular is hosting a pre-Shabbat get-together!"

Ray Tabular was a fabulously wealthy and incredibly influential man. He was somewhat religious, and even kept kosher. We knew we had to attend his Shabbat party.

A large crowd gathered, and we chatted with everyone. At the end of the party, Ray invited us to return on Sunday, when there would be time to talk privately.

On Sunday morning, at the appointed hour, we rang the bell on his estate gates. His voice came over the mic, apologetic and busy.

"I know we planned to meet now, but the queen of Holland called last night and asked to stay. I'm busy entertaining her now, so unfortunately, we'll have to postpone our meeting."

It was our last day of Merkos shlichus, so we were disappointed at this missed opportunity.

"Let's not waste the time we have now. This neighborhood is full of estates. Let's drive up to each one, ring the bell, and see what happens," I suggested.

Levi agreed and turned down the first driveway.

"McGillan," he read. He shrugged and started reversing out the driveway.

"Why don't we ring the bell?" I asked.

"Their name is McGillan. They're clearly not Jewish!"

"You never know," I said, and reached over to ring the bell.

"Who is it?" asked a friendly, feminine voice.

"We're two Chabad rabbis, visiting local Jews," I explained.

"Oh yes!" she answered. "I saw you at the Tabulars on Friday. I wanted to introduce myself, but I didn't get the chance. Wait a moment."



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The gates slid open and we drove through a splendid property before pulling up to the main entrance.

Mrs. McGillan invited us in warmly. "I haven't been involved in such a long time," she said, "I want a deeper connection. I'm looking for more."

It was an emotional conversation. We stayed for over an hour. Before we left, I apologized for not having a hostess gift on hand, but offered an alternative.

"I'd like to present you with the gift of Torah learning," I told her. "We can set up a weekly learning session."

We've now learned together every week for 17 years. She lights Shabbos candles every Friday, and is exploring her connection with her Yiddishkeit. She is a strong and steady supporter of our Chabad House, and a good friend.

We're just an hour from Yellowstone National Park, and even closer to Grand Teton National Park. In the summer, thousands of visitors flock to the area to witness the majestic views and magnificent scenery. Of course, many from Jews come as well. We often host Shabbosim for hundreds of frum tourists in the busy months.

One time, we got a call. The man's wife had recently passed away and he wanted to know if there was a minyan for him to say kaddish.

"Of course. We start at 10:00," I told him.

It was a busy morning, but when the man and his family showed up at 9:00, I sat down to chat with them. We had a pleasant conversation before I excused myself to get the shul ready.

"Rabbi, do you know who that is?" a member of my congregation whispered. "That's Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots!"

Throughout davening, I turned to Robert to signal that a kaddish yasom was approaching. After a couple of times of me turning around, Robert commented to the man next to him, "The rabbi thinks I'm a goy who doesn't know where kaddish is!"

We became close. They continue to support our Chabad house, and any time we have a new baby, they send boxes and boxes of Patriots baby gear. I'm a Dolphins fan myself, but we accept the gifts, knowing they're coming from a good place.

The last two summers, we had thousands of frum Jews passing through Jackson on their way to Yellowstone. We had a beautiful Shabbos meal set up for over 100 people.

As is customary in many Chabad houses, during the meal, we went around the table, asking each person to intro-

duce themselves, and share a piece of inspiration or suggest a song to sing.

A man stood up and introduced himself as Yoely. "I'm not Chabad, as you can tell," he said, "but I love the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Any time I have any issue at all, I go to the Ohel, ask the Rebbe to intercede on my behalf, and the problem is always resolved soon after.

"I manufacture sweeteners and sell them to large companies. I'd made a deal with T.J. Maxx, but then they told me they no longer needed the product. For two months, they kept threatening to cancel the order. I didn't know what to do. I went to the Ohel and explained the situation to the Rebbe. Within two hours, I received a call that everything was back on - business as usual."

The Greens frequently visited our Chabad House, and we loved having them over for Shabbos meals. Their oldest daughter, Stephanie, was training to become an Olympic skier. She was very popular in school, and had a lot of interests. Unfortunately, Yiddishkeit didn't seem to be one of them. When she came to our house, she always hung back, preferring to sit on the couch by herself, rather than participate in the davening or the meal.

Her grandmother was concerned about her and kept trying to strategize ways to get her involved. We tried inviting her to many types of programs, but she always remained politely disinterested.

One Shabbos, she decided to actually sit at the table for the meal. While we had her attention, my wife mentioned the upcoming CTeen Shabbaton in New York and invited her to join. Stephanie was interested, especially after my wife described all the trips, concerts, and activities on the schedule.

Stephanie had an amazing time. When she returned home, she was a changed girl. She started learning with my wife once a week, connecting with other Jewish teens, and taking on small mitzvos. She was showing passion for Yiddishkeit - finally!

At the end of the year, my wife suggested that she join a Jewish school for the upcoming school year. Stephanie interviewed at a few places, and, shortly before the beginning of the school year, announced that she was throwing away all her tank tops and shorts. She decided to become fully tzniyus. She also began keeping kosher on her own.

In the span of just three months, Stephanie went from *thinking* about attending a Jewish school, to being almost completely frum! She now attends a frum girls' high school in Philadelphia, and has become an inspiration to the girls around her.

"I need to catch up to Stephanie!" her father told me. "Can we learn together?"

Mr. Green and I now learn Tanya together once a week, so he can understand what his daughter is so passionate about.

With tourists come the inevitable Israeli mall kiosk owners, peddling their Dead Sea wares. I offered to meet with the group to learn together. I'd come once a week to give a shiur on Pirkei Avos, the parsha, or anything they were interested in.

Matan was more serious than the other Israelis. He was more earnest, and had so many questions. He really took everything to heart. He was ready to commit to kashrus, but didn't know how he would manage while sharing a kitchen with his friends who weren't as careful. Matan started coming for Shabbos, and by the time the year was over, I thought he was ready for the real deal - yeshiva.

"There's a great yeshiva for ba'alei teshuva in Morristown," I told him. "I can help you apply. I really think it'll be good for you."

Matan started yeshiva in Morristown, and quickly settled in. After a few months, he sent me a picture of himself. His longer hair was gone. A few months later, the picture showed him smiling beneath a black hat. He stayed in yeshiva for a few years, and fully adopted the Chassidic lifestyle.

I invited him back to Jackson for Yom Tov. The last we'd seen him, he was just starting his journey to Yiddishkeit. Now, he led the davening on Rosh Hashana with confidence and professionalism, as if he'd been born to it.

We kept in touch, assisting him with shidduchim, celebrating with him when he earned his semichah, and inviting him to visit us back in Jackson from time to time.

He now assists shluchim in Florida, running their Israeli programming. Who knew that a full-fledged chassid was waiting in disguise in Jackson, Wyoming?

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