

L'Chaim

SLICE OF LIFE

Just A Good Stretch Of The Legs!



By Steve Hyatt

As I went out the front door of our new house I was grinning like a Cheshire cat. I touched the mezzia on the doorknob and strolled down the sidewalk leading to the road that runs by the front of my house. After walking about three steps, my eyes began to tear up, my cheeks got bright red and my fingers felt like frozen hot dogs. "It must be 24 degrees out here," I thought to myself.

When my wife Linda and I moved to Reno, Nevada, we were fortunate to find a home that was located about two miles from the local Chabad shul (synagogue). Since we had never lived close to a shul before, I was excited about the opportunity to enjoy a brisk Shabbat walk to shul each week. Now it is not unusual for me to walk three or four miles when I exercise on my treadmill, so I knew a short two-mile walk to shul on Shabbat would be a piece of kugel. However, I must admit, I never walk on my treadmill in 24 degrees or when the wind is blowing like a small gale straight into my face. After walking another 100 yards I stopped and pondered the idea of turning around and driving to shul. "Who'd know," I asked myself. "You'd know," I answered without hesitation.

As I paused to consider my situation, my good friend Desmond Rothenberg suddenly popped into my mind. Des, as we like to call him, is the *gabba'i* of the Chabad shul in Wilmington, Delaware. He's the guy that gets to shul early on Shabbat, makes sure all the seats are perfectly arranged, all the prayer books are neatly stacked on the bookshelf

and the shul itself is ready for services.

During my last visit to Wilmington, I attended the Bar Mitzva of another good friend, young Dovi Vogel. It goes without saying that we had a wonderful time celebrating Dovi's special day. Relatives and friends from around the world came to hear Dovi lead the services, read from the Torah and chant his Haftorah. After an afternoon of celebration and joy, the sun finally set, the stars illuminated the sky and those remaining at the Vogel home participated in the *Havdala* ceremony to officially mark the conclusion of that Shabbat.

I had taken advantage of a great online deal and was scheduled to take a red-eye flight back to Nevada later that evening. As I was making my way to the front door I heard someone say, "It's late, can someone give Des a ride home?" I had about four hours until my flight, so I gladly volunteered. I assumed he lived nearby, since he has been the *gabba'i* ever since I walked into the Chabad of Delaware shul many years before.

Des and I jumped into my rental car and started our journey. The first mile went by and then the next. After three miles I said, "Des, have we missed the turnoff, we've driven more than three miles?" He laughed and said, "Steve, it's right up the road." Two miles later, I asked again: "Des where the heck do you actually live?" He replied, "I live about two more miles up the road. Go to the second street light and turn right and we'll be there."

Incredulously I asked, "You live six and a half miles from shul and walk both ways every Shabbat?"

"It's just a good stretch of the legs Steve" he replied. When we finally pulled up in front of his house I said, "Des, do you walk all this way, through two states, when it rains and snows as well?" He laughed and replied, "Well, when it rains or snows I just walk a little faster!" I looked at him and shook my head in astonishment and admiration. We shook hands goodbye, wished each other well and parted company. As he made his way to his front door I was awestruck by his commitment. Every Shabbat he walks 13 miles round trip, and still manages to make sure the shul is perfect before the rest of the

congregation arrives. I, on the other hand, complain if my tea is a tad bit cold!

The memory of this encounter bombarded my brain as I stood at the top of the hill in Reno feeling sorry for myself because my ears were a little frosty and the howling wind was messing up my hair. I thought about Des and his unwavering commitment to his beliefs, his shul and his friends. Des' mantra "It's just a good stretch of the legs," was now my mantra. Inspired by his example I shrugged off the chill, blew on my hands and started down the hill. My body quickly warmed up. Arms and legs pumping like a member of the Chabad race-walk team, I found myself briskly covering the ground between my front door and the shul.

Before you could say, "Please pass the kugel," I was there. Greeting me was Rabbi Mendel Cunin, with a big smile and a warm, "Good Shabbos, Steve. I looked out the side window and saw you walking briskly to shul, isn't it a wonderful day for a good Shabbos walk?" Thinking of Des I said, "It was a good stretch of the legs Rabbi."

After the morning services, Rebbetzin Sarah Cunin treated us to a sumptuous *kiddush*. While munching on herring, a thick, steamy *chulent* and assorted other delights, Rabbi Cunin asked me to talk about my walk through the early morning frost. I related my story about my good friend Des and everyone marveled at his dedication. At the conclusion of the *kiddush* I said "Good Shabbos" to one and all and made my way back up the hill.

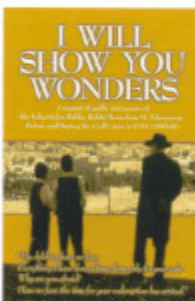
I quickly found that walking down a two-mile hill is much easier than walking up a two-mile hill. Thanks to the spirit of Shabbat and my inspirational friend Des' example, I eventually made it home. About two months later I was leaving shul for my walk up the hill when a friend from Chabad stopped me and asked if there were any houses for sale in my neighborhood. I told him there were a number of very nice ones available at the moment. I reminded him that I lived about two miles away. He said that didn't bother him and if he found the right place we could walk to shul together. I wished him "Good Shabbos" and started up the hill. ■



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L'ZICHRON CHAYA
MUSHKA

The name of our publication has special meaning. It stands for the name of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson (bmt), wife of the Rebbe, shlit'a.

Published by
Lubavitch Youth Organization
1402 President Street
Brooklyn, NY 11213
(718) 778-8200 • (212) 258-8400
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L'Chaim contains words from rabbi's *sichos*.
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to L'CHAIM, 1408 President St., Bklyn, NY 11213