



Uncle John Goes to Shul

by Steve Hyatt

When I first moved to Reno, Nevada, I was thrilled that the Chabad House was a mere two miles away; for the first time in my life I

could walk to *shul* on Shabbat.

My weekly Shabbat walk takes me through several neighborhoods. About halfway through the journey I pass a huge evergreen tree. Over the course of the last four years I've observed a strange, and for me, very mystical sight.

Every Shabbat, at exactly 9:20 a.m., a pair of Red Tail Hawks were majestically perched on top of this towering tree. They both looked down on me, my friends and family as we walked by, and then flew off toward the shul. This happened each time I walked by the tree on Shabbat. Winter, Spring, Summer or Fall, my "friends" were waiting for me and then flew off as I passed by.

When I first told folks about this interesting phenomenon, everyone listened and then told me I was exaggerating. Even my best buddy Baruch Smith looked at me with incredulous eyes. That is until he spent Shabbat at my home and walked with me to shul in the morning. Now, even Baruch is a believer.

Since the hawks were only there on Shabbat, I figured there had to be some explanation for their appearance. I asked everyone for insights but no one could offer any.

As the years rolled by I gave up my search for an explanation and just enjoyed this unique Shabbat experience. When my parents moved to Reno and I started walking to shul together with my dad, I "introduced" him to the hawks and he marveled at their regular appearance.

A few months ago my Aunt Meredith and Uncle John arrived from Boston to spend a few days with us. Upon their arrival we learned that

my aunt and uncle had never experienced a Friday night Shabbat dinner, so my wife Linda and I were determined to show them the true joy found at the Shabbat table. It's no secret in our family that Uncle John loves matzo ball soup, so my Mom cooked up a batch. Uncle John was beside himself when Mom put the steaming hot bowl in front of him. The smile on his face lit up the entire room.

Sitting around the table, my aunt, uncle, mom and dad, shared stories of what it was like growing up back in our hometown of New London, Connecticut. We laughed, we cried, and we eventually all went off to sleep with smiles on our faces, joy in our hearts and stomachs full of Mom's matzo ball soup.

The next morning we were sitting around the breakfast table and I told my uncle about the phenomenon of the two hawks. Uncle John, a world-class bird-watcher, was intrigued by my story and said, "Boy I'd give anything to see them up close."

A smile appeared on my lips and I said, "Well why don't you come to shul with us and I will show them to you on the way." Now for whatever reason, in his almost 80 years, Uncle John had never been to shul on Shabbat. So he was somewhat reluctant to start now. He politely declined my offer. As Dad and I were getting ready to leave, Uncle John said if I really meant it he'd love to come with us. As an avid bird-watcher he really wanted to see the hawks and he was also curious about what dad and I found so enjoyable about Shabbat morning at Chabad.

We walked out as we always do at precisely 9:00 that morning. Along the way we met up with our friends Jay, Judah and Mark and continued our walk down the mountain toward shul. At precisely 9:20 a.m., much to the amazement of my uncle, our feathered friends swooped into view and landed on the tree. We all stopped to view this wonderful sight and pondered how this continues to happen week after week. After looking at our friends from all angles we had to pull Uncle John away and continue our journey. And as if on cue

the hawks flew away in the direction of the shul.

When we arrived at Chabad, I introduced my uncle to everyone and Rabbi Cunin started the morning services. The two-hour service flew by. We brought in long tables, set up the Kiddush and started singing tunes and enjoying the Rebbetzin's wonderful food. When someone put a bowl of *chulant* in front of my uncle, he asked me what it was. I told him it was a staple of many Shabbat lunches. He skeptically tasted a spoonful, then smiled and ate the rest with great relish. He even asked for another bowl! Another Shabbat treasure discovered! When it was time to leave, my uncle told me that he could see why my dad and I were drawn to the shul. He said the people were wonderful, the Rabbi was warm and welcoming, and the *chulant* was unbelievable!

On the way home, one of our feathered guides swooped down onto a nearby tree as if to wish us a safe journey home, and then just as quickly flew off. My 80-year-old uncle, 77-year-old father and I walked the last mile up the mountain with a steady gate and smiles on our faces. I couldn't help but ponder that Reno really is a special place. A place where in the space of one Shabbat, an 80-year-old Jewish man could bask in the light of Shabbat candles, attend shul, eat *chulant*, and see Red Tail hawks up close, all for the first time.

After my aunt and uncle left, I finally understood the mission of the hawks. They had waited patiently week after week, and year after year for Uncle John to appear. They were there to entice and guide him on his first walk to shul. They were never my hawks they were always Uncle John's hawks. If I didn't have a story about this unbelievable phenomenon, Uncle John might not have been intrigued enough to make the four-mile journey to shul and back.

If this story isn't unbelievable enough, it is also interesting to note that dad and I have walked by the towering evergreen tree on five consecutive Shabbat mornings since Uncle John left, and we have yet to see the hawks. Coincidence, I think not! ■

etc.

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