

SLICE OF LIFE



As the scribe (left) writes the final letters in the Torah scroll, Steve and his father Marvin look on. Rabbi Cunin is in the center.

by Steve Hyatt

My dad and I have always had a strong, close relationship. From the time I was young, we did many things together. He taught me to ride a bicycle. He taught me the proper direction to push a lawn mower. He taught me how to shoot a foul shot. Later in life, when I became a homeowner, he showed me how to fix a leaky faucet and paint the house.

Mine has been a life filled with numerous memories of my father and I spending important, quality time together. But, as I look back on our journey, the one thing I can't remember is Dad and I going to the synagogue together on Shabbat.

In 1983 I moved to Palm Springs, California, and a friend of mine introduced me to a Chabad rabbi named Yonason Denebeim. It was Rabbi Denebeim who first planted the spiritual seeds that would eventually grow and flourish within me many years later. During the entire time I lived in Palm Springs, Dad and I never went to shul together.

When I moved to Wilmington, Delaware, Rabbi Chuni Vogel lovingly cultivated the spiritual seeds that Rabbi Denebeim had carefully nurtured for the better part of ten years. My journey in Delaware awakened a spiritual awareness and joy that I previously would have thought impossible. When I asked Dad during his visits if he'd like to go to shul with me, he would tell me that he supported my spiritual journey but his experience in shul as a boy had left him with negative memories and he just

didn't want to go.

When we moved to Salem, Oregon, I'd ask him if he wanted to go to shul with me in Portland and meet Rabbi Wilhelm. He once again politely declined. While I was disappointed, if I've learned anything from the Chabad rabbis I've met, it's that everyone travels at his own speed. So I waited.

When we moved to Reno, Nevada, my journey took me to the steps of Chabad of Northern Nevada where I met Rabbi Mendel Cunin. Since my parents spend summers with us, they are exposed to many Chabad activities. Sometimes they go and other times they don't, but the rabbi always invites them.

During their last visit we were all sitting around the Shabbat table one Friday evening when my Dad said he'd like to go with me to shul the next morning. He told me that he had only one condition: that was he did not want an *aliya* – to be called up to the Torah. I quickly agreed.

As the services progressed the next morning, I was dismayed to see that the service would be one of the longest of the year because not only was the Torah reading the longest of the year, we were also going to bless the new month. I was concerned that this visit would be his last. To top it off, we walked home in a blistering 92 degrees.

During lunch, Dad said he thought he did pretty well for the first time and was confident he'd feel more comfortable next week. To make a long story short, the next week turned into many weeks as the summer progressed. Every Saturday morning Dad and I walked down the mountain, walked into the shul and Dad greeted Morris with a "good Shabbos," and Ken with a "good Shabbos," and Aaron with a "good Shabbos" and then took his seat.

Several weeks later I overheard Dad practicing the blessings over the Torah out loud in his room. I ran in and yelled, "You're a sandbagger, you're a sandbagger." His rendition of the blessings was perfect. We laughed as my Mother came into the room and asked why I was raising my voice. I explained and she joined in on the laughter.

The next week, Reno celebrated a momentous occasion. Almost a year before, our congregation had commissioned the writing of a new Torah. The scribe

was due to arrive in a few days with our brand new Torah and the entire Jewish community was abuzz with the thought of its pending arrival.

The day the scribe and the Torah arrived was one I will never forget. When my family and I arrived at the Shul the place was packed. When the scribe wrote down the last letter of the Torah, blew on the ink, and stood up from the table, the entire congregation burst into a joyous song. The rest of the evening is a blur as we danced with the Torah, celebrated and came together as a community.

That night, when we returned home, Dad looked at me and said, "I can't believe I had such a good time. I am almost 76 years old and I've never seen a night like this. I feel really comfortable with this congregation." I had to smile because if I've learned one thing from the Chabad Rabbis over the years, it's that everyone travels at their own pace on their spiritual journeys and when it is time to go to the next level, they will know it. I looked at Dad and said, "Well maybe its time for your first aliya." He said, "Maybe you're right."

That Shabbat morning I awoke full of excitement. When we walked into shul, Dad greeted everyone with a "good Shabbos" and took what was now his regular seat. As we worked our way through the first part of the service my heart was racing. When it finally came time to read the Torah, the first aliya was given to a "*Kohein*," and the second aliya was given to a "*Levi*." The next thing I heard was Rabbi Cunin calling "Moishe Pinchus ben Eleazer" to the Torah. Dad looked at me, stood up and walked to the Torah. I followed and stood a few inches away. Looking like an old pro, Dad took the end of his *tallit* (prayer shawl), touched the first and last word of the aliya, grabbed the handles of the Torah and chanted the ancient blessing. After the Rabbi completed the aliya, Dad once again brought the handles together and chanted the last blessing. When he was done he leaned over, and with a twinkle in his eye, said, "Piece of Kugel!"

On a special Shabbat, in the Biggest Little City in the World, one of the millions of spiritual seeds planted long ago burst forth and brought a loving family even closer. ■

etc.

High Holiday Hoopla

Wondering what to do or where to go during the upcoming Jewish holidays? Your Chabad-Lubavitch Center has services, classes, meals, and numerous other events scheduled for the flurry of festivals in the upcoming weeks. To find out what is taking place in your area, call your local Chabad-Lubavitch Center. You can find them on the web at www.chabad.org

Have Shofar Will Travel

As in years past, the Lubavitch Youth Organization has arranged for volunteers to walk to hospitals and nursing homes throughout the New York Metro area on Rosh Hashana so that those who will not be able to attend synagogue services will still be able to fulfill the "mitzva of the day" for Rosh Hashana – listening to the sounding of the shofar.

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The name of our publication has special meaning. It stands for the name of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson (obm), wife of the Rebbe, *shlita*.