

SLICE OF LIFE



**Dr. Katz with Rabbi Cunin
The Cantor's Cantor**
by Steve Hyatt

As a young boy I spent countless hours fishing off the banks of Morgan's Pond near my home. I never caught many fish but I tossed many a pebble into the water and watched the resulting tiny ripples roll toward every corner of the shore surrounding that peaceful body of water. Little did I know those experiences would one day turn into a memorable Torah lesson.

In 1922, a young Boris Fisch and his twin brother Joe were born in a tiny village in Hungary. When they were young students they both attended a Hungarian institute dedicated to training young men to serve as *chazzanim* (cantors) in synagogues around the world. Young Boris mastered one ancient tune after another. He knew a melody for every prayer in his prayer book. When Boris and his brother were mere teenagers, their family emigrated to the United States looking for a new life in the land of opportunity.

Later in life Boris made his way from Pittsburgh to New York where he was employed as a full time men's hat maker and a "part time" cantor. While making hats paid the bills, Boris' true vocation was that of a cantor and bar mitzva teacher. Boris helped well over 3,000 boys prepare for their bar mitzvas. One of the very first bar mitzva students the cantor worked with in New York was a high-energy lad named

Paul Katz. While studying for his bar mitzva young Paul's Zaidie asked him if he was going to read from the Torah during his bar mitzva. Since he'd never thought about it, Paul asked the cantor. Without skipping a beat the cantor told Paul, "Sure but the journey will not end there." A 12-year-old Paul had no idea what the cantor had in mind but he wanted to please his Zaidie. So he studied with the cantor and eventually had his bar mitzva where he successfully read from the Torah, just as he'd been taught by the cantor.

As time went on Paul learned exactly what the cantor had meant. For Boris had found his protégé. Over the next half century the cantor taught Paul every note, every phrase, every melody from his vast repertoire.

Eventually the cantor retired and moved to Florida. Paul who was now better known as Dr. Katz, Chairman of the Washoe Hospital Stroke Center in Reno, Nevada, kept in touch with his friend and mentor and questioned him often about the tunes for Shabbat, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. While Dr. Katz paid the bills through his work at the hospital, his "part time" vocation was serving as the cantor at Chabad of Northern Nevada in Reno. Week in and week out the small but growing congregation listened intently as Cantor Katz chanted the ancient tunes a young cantor and his brother had learned many decades before in a tiny Jewish school in Hungary. The cantor had never heard his protégé lead the Reno congregation but he'd made plans to visit his pupil. But G-d had other plans for Boris Fisch; he passed away at the age of 83 before he could make the cross-country trip.

At the conclusion of the cantor's emotional funeral service his family mentioned that he had always intended to record his special tunes, so his many students and congregants could listen to them for years to come. But somehow life got in the way and he never made it to the recording studio. Immediately all eyes turned to the cantor's protégé and someone said, "Paul you

know all of his tunes, you should record them." On that day, in a shul in New York, a pledge was made and the cantor's exceptional student committed to recording his teacher's most treasured possession, his vast repertoire of melodies.

Upon his return to Reno, Paul received a personal invitation to attend a party honoring local Chabad Rabbi Mendel Cunin. The invitation cautioned that it was a surprise and asked him to keep the event a secret. Arriving at the Rabbi's home Paul was surprised to see over 40 members of the congregation packed into the Cunin's living room. When the rabbi walked in he asked everyone to join him in the shul. A few moments later the rabbi looked at Paul and informed him that there really was no surprise party for the rabbi. In truth, it was a gathering to honor the blessed memory of Paul's mentor, Cantor Boris Fisch, a man none of us had ever met but whose efforts and commitment had an immeasurable impact on our entire congregation.

Paul's friends had contributed funds, in Cantor Fisch's name, to sponsor the writing of a Torah portion in the shul's new Torah scroll, ensuring everyone who walked in the door for generations to come would recognize the cantor's impact on Chabad of Northern Nevada.

After Dr. Katz chose the portion, we all retired to the Cunnin's home and listened for hours as Chaztan Katz shared a plethora of stories of his mentor's glorious life.

As the evening came to a close and we departed for home, I couldn't help but reflect back to my youthful days at Morgan's Pond, throwing pebbles into the calm waters, watching the rippling waves make their way to distant shores. We had just spent an evening honoring a man, who 40 years earlier had thrown a spiritual pebble into the life of a very young boy, and now many years later the resulting ripples had made their way to the distant shores of Reno, Nevada, inspiring and captivating the souls of a Jewish community he'd never met. ■

etc.

New Emissaries

A number of couples have joined the ever-growing ranks of the soldiers of the Lubavitcher Rebbe as emissaries (*shlichim*) throughout the world. Rabbi Cheski and Chavale Edelman have moved to Olympia, Washington, to start a Chabad House that will serve students at Evergreen State College and Jews throughout Thurston County. Rabbi Shlomo and Miriam Landa have moved to Fairfield, Connecticut, where they are establishing a new Chabad Center. Rabbi Sholom Deovrah Lazell arrived recently in Toronto, Ontario, to start Chabad of Danforth-Beaches to serve the Jewish community of Toronto East. Don and Rebekah Braham are moving to Chabad West Coast breathtaking campus in Running Springs, California.

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The name of our publication has special meaning. It stands for the name of Rebbeitzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson (fmr), wife of the Rebbe.