

# L'Chaim

## SLICE OF LIFE



### Little Stevie Grows Up

by Steve Hyatt

As I walked up to the front of the Chabad House *shul* (synagogue) in Reno, Nevada, my mind drifted back to June of 1967. Back in the days of the Boston Celtics dynasty and the Beatles, I had been studying for months for my Bar Mitzva. But, despite my continuous effort to master the Hebrew, I was without a doubt the worst student in the history of my synagogue. My poor teacher Rabbi Lepidus made the decision to save me from embarrassment in front of friends and family and limited my participation to leading the *Mincha* (afternoon) service.

While the *Mincha* service takes less than 20 minutes, under my stewardship it took a mind-numbing 45 minutes. Terrified, humiliated and exhausted, I left the synagogue and vowed never ever to lead any sort of prayer service again. Of course, that pledge was made at the age of 13 and I had not yet met my first Chabad rabbi.

Fifteen years later, I was living in Palm Springs, California. It was in the hot, dry, desert community of Palm Springs that the seeds of my spiritual journey were planted. The "farmers" were the Lubavitcher Rebbe's emissaries Rabbi Yonasan and Rebbetzin Sussy Denebeim.

Year after year I received invitations to Shabbat dinners. While I would accept an occasional invitation, I just wasn't into it, my spiritual "field" just wasn't ready yet.

In 1995 I moved to Wilmington, Delaware. Unbeknownst to me, Rabbi Denenbeim had handed the spiritual baton to the local Chabad rabbi, Chuni Vogel. Rabbi Vogel would call me and invite me to Shabbat dinner. In typical fashion I made up an excuse and politely declined.

Two years went by and one day, when I returned from a business trip, what I thought was a box of pizza was sitting on my desk. When I opened it I discovered the toastiest looking matza I'd seen in my life. It was a box of hand-baked "*shmura*" matza for Passover. Attached to the box was a note from the rabbi inviting me to join him for services on Passover.

A lot had changed over that two year period and something inside me said to call the rabbi. Following the instructions of that inner voice I picked up the phone and called the rabbi. That Friday I went to his home for Shabbat dinner and quite frankly, I never left. The spiritual field that had been fallow was now quite fertile. Every time the rabbi showed me something new, I wanted to know more. And in typical Chabad fashion he was ready to show me as much as I could handle.

Time went on and one day I found myself transferred to Portland, Oregon, where I met another Chabad rabbi, Rabbi Moshe Wilhelm. A few years later, I moved to Reno and discovered Chabad of Northern Nevada and Rabbi Mendel and Rebbetzin Sara Cunin. I committed myself to the pursuit of learning how to read Hebrew well enough so I could keep up in the daily, Shabbat and holiday services. I dedicated a period of time each day to read part of the weekly Torah portion. But never in my wildest dreams did I ever think about getting back up in front of a congregation and leading the services.

In my mind I was still little 13-year-old Stevie Hyatt who was traumatized at his Bar Mitzva. In my mind I was once again going to bumble my way through the prayer book, horribly embarrassing myself in front of friends and family. Of course that is not what Rabbi Cunin had in mind.

It was a typical Shabbat afternoon as my Dad

and I walked down the mountain to attend services at Chabad of Northern Nevada. As Dad and I walked in, Rabbi Cunin was talking with a couple of our buddies when he turned to me and said, "Steve, Paul (the gentleman who usually leads the services) isn't here today. Why don't you take over for him?"

In one fell swoop I was 13 and terrified. Every fiber of my being screamed out "no"! But I heard myself saying, "Sure rabbi, no problem."

"Great," Rabbi Cunin said, "Let's get started."

I began a little shaky, picked up some steam during the *Shema* and then felt much more comfortable during the repetition of the "*Amida*" prayer. All the while a little voice inside was saying, "Little Stevie simply wasn't ready 40 years ago. It took a long time for his spiritual field to be nurtured and become fertile." In reality it took a whole team of "gardeners" to cultivate this fertile soil so the seeds of Torah could grow. But these Chabad "farmers," these wonderful rabbis and rebbetzins so love their fellow Jews that they are willing to patiently wait as long as necessary to see their fellow Jews grow and flourish in a safe, nurturing, nonjudgmental environment.

As I held the Torah in my arms and chanted the *Shema*, I couldn't help but thank and admire my team of rabbis and rebbetzins and wonder at their patience, love and commitment.

I'd be lying if I said it was "a piece of kugel," to lead the services that day, but it was much easier than I thought. At least this time I was fast enough so the rabbi could give his Shabbat sermon to the congregation. And if all of this wasn't enough, seven-year-old Rochel Cunin told my mother that I was "...pretty good, a little slow, but pretty good."

Armed with that knowledge I went home and started practicing for the next time business would take Paul out of town and Rabbi Cunin would ask me to help lead the services. As you read this I am working hard to improve my reading speed. I am bound and determined to hear Rochel Cunin say, "Good job Steve, much faster this time!"

# etc.

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