

From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles <editor@ascentofsafed.com>

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Turnabouts

It happened one Purim in the early 1980's when **Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz** – a.k.a. **Schwartzie** -- was working as a college campus Rabbi at UCLA [the University of California in Los Angeles]. He was pushing for students to hear a public reading of the *Megilah* [Scroll of Esther], but not a single one agreed.

Finally, one Jewish professor agreed; the professor imagined that this would take one or two minutes, but when Schwartzie started rolling a big parchment to where the reading of the Megilah starts, the professor asked: How long will it take? The rabbi replied: 15-20 minutes. The professor said that he was in a hurry to go to his home in the town of Irvine and could not listen to the reading of the Megilah.

Without thinking twice, Schwartzie said "Irvine? I have to get there too. Can you give me a ride?"

The professor said yes, and Schwartzie got in the car. The town of Irvine is just outside of Los Angeles, about an hour's drive away. As they drove, Schwartzie said to the professor: Look, we have a long enough drive ahead, and it's a pity not to do anything. I suggest that in the meantime I will read the Megilah to you, and you will listen while you drive. The professor agreed.

When they arrived in Irvine, the professor asked: Where do you need to go? Schwartzie replied: To the bus station.

The professor then realized that Schwartzie did not have to hitch a ride to reach this town, but Schwartzie took a ride just to read the Megilah during their trip. Now the rabbi is going to the bus stop, to take a bus back to Los Angeles.



At first glance, this story seems to have ended, and one may see the story as something strange. What a waste of time on the part of the rabbi, to drive in the car and read the Megilah to someone who does not want to hear it. What's the point?

The plot thickens....

Thirty plus years roll by. Schwartzie passes away in the beginning of 2017. Moshe “Mayshe” Schwartz, a rabbi in the Boston area is in New York. He meets a student in the Chabad Chasidic yeshiva there.

The young man asks Rabbi Mayshe: Are you the son of Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz? Mayshe replies yes. The young man insists that he listen to his story.

“I grew up in an assimilated family. When I was nearly 20, I decided to do *Teshuva* [‘return’ to Torah-true Judaism] and study in a yeshiva. My parents got frightened. Their dream was that I would go to college, and studying in yeshiva seemed like a nightmare for them. A fierce conflict developed between me and my parents.

“At some point my parents suggested we have a ‘family intervention,’ to which we will also invite my grandparents to discuss the crisis. Grandpa was a respectable professor, and my parents were sure he would support their perspective.

“Grandpa listened to both sides. Then he turned to me and asked, ‘What Yeshiva do you want to go to?’

“‘A *chasidic* yeshiva’ I replied.

“Surprisingly, Grandpa said: ‘Well then, that's good. Go there.’

“My parents were truly shocked. What happened to Grandpa that he supported such a move?

Grandpa opened up and told the story with Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz. He was the professor who drove the car and heard the reading of the *Megilah*. Grandpa concluded: ‘If this Yeshiva educates for such values, for such devotion to other people, to the point of dedicating hours for someone else to have a single mitzvah, I am happy that my grandson will go to study in a place like this.’”

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from a mailing of Rabbi Mendel Schwartz, his father’s successor as director of “The Chai Center of Los Angeles.”

Photo credit: Jewish Home LA.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz** [7 Kislev 5705 -12 Shvat 5777 (Nov. 12,1944–Feb. 7, 2017)] was a staff rabbi of the very first campus Chabad House in the world, in Berkeley (California) and then Los Angeles. In the 1980’s the widowed Schwartzie married Olivia, and in the same decade they opened *ChaiCenter*, independent of Chabad, to give full expression to his creative--and *wild*--ideas for adult education for “every Jew that moves.” Over the years he had a life-changing effect on thousands of Jews. For the last two decades of his life, he was Ascent’s “Summer Rabbi-Scholar in Residence” – accompanied by Olivia, of course.