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The Miracle of the ‘Yellow Pages Rabbi’

Shlomo Schwartz

In the mid-1990’s, before cell phones, Facebook, or other social media, I relied on my answering machine and fax machine to conduct business. My phone number was listed in the Yellow Pages, and I’d get fifty to a hundred calls a day that I would screen and call back as my busy schedule would permit. Often, I would ask people to send me a fax with requests or questions. As luck would have it, The Chai Center came up as one of the first Jewish organizations in the Yellow Pages, which was great for business.

One evening, I was in my office, an upstairs wood-paneled room that runs the length of the house, lined with my entire library of Hebrew and English books. It was midnights, a cold, rainy winter night, and the phone rang twice before the call went to the answering machine – long enough to hear, short enough to ignore.

A voice started to record: “Hi, there. I got your name from the Yellow Pages, under synagogue....My name is Christina. My grandfather is dying and has been unconscious for ten days; he is on home hospice, and we need a rabbi.”

Christina is not the most Jewish sounding name, I thought. This was intriguing enough to answer. I picked up the phone. Christina gave me a rundown again, and I told her I’d be right over.

I went to an unfamiliar neighborhood near Culver City, somewhat downscale and, from its vibe, not exactly little Jerusalem. As I approached the address, I saw an old RV in the driveway. Back then not many Jews took trips in RV’s so it made me think this wasn’t a very Jewish-identifying family.

As I went inside, I didn’t see what I believed to be a single Jewish face except that of the man lying in the hospital bed. “This is my grandfather,” one woman said. I saw an old man, unconscious, lying in bed and surrounded by a group of extended family, mostly Latino. It was 1 a.m., and the story began to unfold.

Sam, the elderly man, had worked for the U.S. Postal Service for nearly fifty years and lived in this neighborhood with his non-Jewish wife, Maria, all

that time. Maria knew that Sam was Jewish and had asked Christina, the granddaughter, to call for a rabbi for a Jewish burial. The wife said he had cousins in Riverside, and one used to call Sam 'Uncle Shimon.' Good, he had a name!

I then asked what his father's name was. It was David. Perfect: Shimon ben David.

During my nineteen years working as a campus rabbi at UCLA, I also acted as a chaplain at UCLA Medical Center. I knew that when someone is close to dying, you need to get squarely into the person's face and speak loudly so that he or she can hear you. So, I told Maria and the dozen or so family members, people who may well have never seen a Jew other than Sam in their lives, that I was going to get in Sam's face and speak loudly, because when a person is in a coma or otherwise unconscious, you have to yell. They all nodded with silent approval.

I told them that I was going to call on his Jewish soul with his Hebrew name and chant a special prayer for the soul of Shimon ben David: Sam, son of David.

I moved extremely close to Sam's bed and yelled into his ear the most important one-liner in the Jewish religion: "*Shma Yisrael, HaShem Elokeynu, HaShem Echod*" -- "**Hear, Israel. G-D is our G-d G-D is One.**"

Sam, lying in bed with his eyes still closed, said in response, *Baruch shem kavod malchuso l'olam vaed*: "**Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever.**" They were the first words he had spoken since falling unconscious ten days earlier.

Total silence. I turned around and saw twelve heads leaning over me, listening intently. Suddenly, all the people in the room started yelling, "The rabbi made a miracle; the rabbi made a miracle!"

Finally, Maria thanked me for coming, but asked that I not return. "Rabbi, we'll call you when we need you."

I called every day for several days, and every day someone would answer the phone and quickly end the call. Finally, on the third day, I called, and once again Christina said she would call me and then hung up the phone.

But then, as soon as I hung up, Christina called me back to report that while I had been on the phone with her just moments earlier, Sam had

passed away. It felt good to know that Sam died as I was on the phone thinking about him, one soul connected to another.

I was able to convince his wife, Maria, to have a kosher burial for Sam in a Jewish cemetery, telling her that he was born a Jew and should be buried as one. We gathered a *minyan* to help complete the Jewish funeral ceremony, men who stood up for Sam purely because it was a *mitzvah* to do so.

Shimon ben David left this world in the highest way.

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Source: Extracted, re-titled and lightly edited by Yerachmiel Tilles from “*I Love when that Happens*” -- copyrighted by **Rabbi Mendel Schwartz** (his son) in 2018.

Connection: Weekly Torah -- The *SHMA YISRAEL* prayer.

*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 *Chai Center*, 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.**

