

# Wherever there is Coca Cola, there is Chabad

Category: Holidays, Sukkot

*When a Yeshiva student tried to share some Judaism, he was rebuffed. But it led to more than he had ever imagined.*

## How to recognize a Jew

In the 1980s, Chabad had a Yeshivah in Caracas, Venezuela. In those years, the Rebbe would send a group of students to strengthen the Yeshivah each year, and among the students in one such group were Yossel Marosov and Zalman Karp.

Like all Chabad yeshiva students, they would spend their Friday afternoons visiting Jews who are not yet religious, bringing them words of Torah and putting tefillin on them. Each week, they would visit the center of the city which would always be packed with tourists — many of them Jewish.

Over their two year stay, they figured out how to spot the Jewish tourists: they were usually the ones with their cameras out, snapping photos of the Chabad Yeshiva students. After all, only Jews were amused to find fellow Jews in a foreign land. Whenever they saw someone paying attention to them, they would walk over and say, “Excuse me, are you Jewish?”

When the tourists would say how shocked they were to see Chabad all the way in Caracas, they always responded the same way. “Wherever there’s coke, there’s Chabad,” they would laugh. “Do you want to put on tefillin?”

When the two years were up, they returned to 770 in New York.

One day, Zalman was sitting and learning when a group of tourists entered 770. Rabbi Kastel, who led the tour, offered the group the opportunity to put on tefillin, when one tourist perked up.

“You know, when I was in Caracas, someone asked me the same question — if I wanted to put on tefillin.”

Smiling, Rabbi Kastel said, “You know what they say — where there’s coke, there is Chabad.”

The man’s eyes lit up. The boys had told him the same thing, he said. He continued to look around the large hall of 770, taking in the scene of so many Yeshiva students learning. Then he saw Zaman, sitting a few rows over, and began to scream.

“That’s him! That’s him!”

He ran over to him and gave him a big hug, his eyes filling with tears.

Meanwhile, Zalman was confused. Who was this person? What did he want from him? When the tourist calmed down, he sat down to explain.

“My name is Dr. Melvin Diamond,” he said. His parents were Holocaust survivors who came to America with nothing and built themselves up from scratch. When Melvin, their only son, was born, they were already rich and respected. They had a strong Jewish identity, but they weren’t religious. His father was the president of the local synagogue, they would recite kiddush on Friday nights — but their Judaism ended with that.

Melvin was well past 40, married with a family of his own, when his aging father began to regret some of his choices. “I shouldn’t have sent you to public school,” he said. One day, his father asked him to start attending synagogue. Melvin refused; he wasn’t about to change his behavior. For a lifetime, he had barely stepped foot in a synagogue, and suddenly he should start attending weekly?

His father nudged him again and again, and he consistently refused. That’s when his father gave him a simple choice. “If you don’t want to come to synagogue, that’s your decision — but I’m going to cut you out of my will.” Melvin knew that his father was a man of his word. He decided that it was worth the sacrifice, and he began to attend. He’d sit in the back with a novel, but his father didn’t care. He wanted his son to attend, and he had accomplished that.

But then, something terrible happened. One day, Melvin’s parents were involved in a terrible car accident. As they lay critically injured in the hospital, Melvin prayed to G-d for their recovery and donated large sums of money to charity, but within a short time, they both died.

"I don't believe in G-d anymore," he told his wife in devastation.

His wife saw that he was in a terrible state of mind, and she booked two tickets on an upcoming cruise to South America to help him get away, mourn his loss, and clear his mind.

He was in his office on the morning of their trip, when two black-hatters knocked on the door. Melvin groaned and told them to go away, but they were stubborn. "We just want to talk," they said.

"How much money do you want?" he asked them.

"Nothing," they replied. They were there to speak with him and possibly put on tefillin too, but if he was interested, they also had some books on Judaism for sale.

"OK, I'll buy some books — if you leave." He purchased several volumes and shipped them out.

Melvin was still annoyed at the boys when he left for the cruise. In all his years at that office, none of the religious boys had ever stopped by. Then, on the day he was leaving to escape religion, they showed up?

To his shock and surprise, when the cruise ship docked in Caracas he saw them there again — two religious boys with velvet bags of tefillin tucked under their arms.

"Again! What are they doing here?" He began walking in the opposite direction, desperate to get away. But his wife pulled him back.

"First we need to take a picture and show our friends back home," she said. She handed him the camera, and still frustrated, he snapped a photo.

Then, out of the hundreds of people who just disembarked off the cruise ship, the boys chose Melvin and Susan. They strode right over to the couple and asked, "Excuse me, are you Jewish?"

His wife nodded. "I'm so surprised to see religious Jews here," she said.

"Wherever there is coke, there's Chabad," the boys laughed and turned to Melvin. "Do you want to put on tefillin?"

He didn't want to, and they left to find the next Jew. But as he walked away, Melvin asked himself, "Why does this keep happening?"

Finishing his story, he told Zalman, "I know it was you who asked me to put on tefillin, because of that picture we took of you. I didn't put on tefillin with you that day, but when we got back to the cruise ship that night, I cried like I had never cried before. Back in New Jersey, I pulled those books out of my closet and started reading them. Now, I'm proud to tell you that I put on tefillin every day, and we've made a complete return to Judaism." (Ami Magazine, 24 Elul 5781).

## **The Best Charity**

Holidays are a time for charity. On the holiday of Sukkot, it is customary to be extra charitable; Maimonides writes that it is a mitzvah to invite poor guests to our Sukkah, and so on.

But what is the best form of charity?

The Rebbe once pointed out that the Torah commands us to give the fattest part of an animal to G-d (Vayikra 3:16). The message, the Rebbe explained, is that we need to give our best to G-d. Whenever we do a mitzvah, we should do it in the most honorable and most desirable form.

Therefore, the Rebbe explained, whenever we give charity, we should give that which is most precious to us. If we are obligated to give charity from the money that we own, how much more so we are obligated to give charity from the most precious thing that we own — our Torah and mitzvos.

You see, money is something that everybody has — Jew and gentile alike. But Torah is something that only Jews have. If it is rare, it means that is a precious commodity — and we are therefore obligated to be charitable and share it with others.

## **The Definition of Poor**

The Rebbe would often encourage people to share their Judaism with others, but they would respond, "I don't know enough to teach others. My Judaism is too meager to be shared."

To this claim, the Rebbe gave an interesting response.

According to Jewish law, if you own 200 *zuz*, you have no right to accept charity, because you are no longer considered poor. The Arizal noted that the numerical value of the Hebrew word *tzedaka* is 199. Someone who owns more than 199 is no longer considered poor and may no longer accept charity.

But the Mishnah adds a rule: “If someone has 50 *zuz*, but conducts commerce with them, he should not accept charity.” Normally, a person with assets less than 200 *zuz* is considered a pauper, but a businessman with only 50 has the ability to earn much more, and is therefore not considered poor, despite his low cash flow.

The Rebbe made the same case for Torah study. There could be a Jew who knows Torah — but sits on it. He studies for himself and doesn’t share it with others. Such a person remains a pauper. But if someone knows only a little bit but chooses to share with others, he is considered a wealthy person. The moment you share your knowledge with others, your own knowledge begins to grow.

Our sages promised us that when a person shares his Torah knowledge with others, “your mind and heart become purified one-thousand-fold.” What you would accomplish in your Torah study in the course of one thousand hours, you could now accomplish in just one. Therefore, even if you only know a little, make sure to “do business” with it. The more you pass around, the more you’ll have as well. (6 Tishrei 5738, Sichos Kodesh vol. 1 pg. 163)