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FEATURES

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Mitzvot Arizona

Roving Rabbis offer Jewish connection in rural communities

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Yeshiva student Dovid Kotlarsky leans back ever so slightly in his chair at one of the "learning tables" at Chabad of Arizona in Phoenix. His elbows are pressed against his thin frame as he speaks gently, no more than one or two sentences at a time, and his movements are mildly rigid as he tries to hide his shyness. Then he begins to talk about Judaism. He leans forward, places his elbows on the table and clasps his hands as he explains the purpose of his journey around Arizona this summer. His eyes glisten and he smiles as he speaks while the sunlight pouring through the window lights up his reddish, ragged beard.

"You can look at a mitzvah in two ways," he says. "Most people look at a mitzvah as, 'You gotta do this, you gotta put on tefillin, you gotta keep Shabbas, you can't eat ham.'"

Then he breaks off into a short story.

"A person is climbing a mountain, and as he is climbing the mountain he has a bag of rocks. He has a buddy next to him who says, 'Hey, Yankel, you want to take another rock?' He turns back to his friend and he says, 'Are you crazy? I've got this whole bag of rocks! I'm gonna die! Please, leave it to yourself.' But then you've got this person climbing the mountain with a bag of diamonds. And then his friend comes and says, 'Hey, Yankel, you want to take another diamond?' He says, 'Please, add in two!' So if you look at the mitzvah as a rock, you say, 'Please, leave it. I don't need it.' If you look at the mitzvah as a diamond, as a way to connect to Hashem, that's beautiful, that's amazing. Give me another one, please!"

Kotlarsky is one of eight yeshiva students who paired up with a colleague and spent two weeks in July traveling around Arizona visiting Jews. One team stayed within greater Phoenix while the others traversed the rural areas of the state, dropping in on those who lacked a nearby synagogue, or in certain situations, any semblance of a Jewish community.

The program, Roving Rabbis (rovingrabbis.com), is part of the Lubavitch Summer Peace Corps, an organization that provides these same services worldwide. It was founded more than 65 years ago and has been in Arizona for approximately 40 years.

"I feel that the heart of Judaism is to always help others," says Shlomy Levertov, who traveled with Kotlarsky and is the son of Rabbi Zalman Levertov, director of Chabad of Arizona. "It's a great thing. You get a chance to go to the smaller cities where some of them have no idea of anything Jewish. You just kind of give them a pat on the back and speak to them about Judaism."

Kotlarsky looks back fondly upon their visit to Nogales, telling of a man close to 80 years old who was married to a non-Jew and had lost his connection to the bulk of his Jewish traditions over the last several decades.

"We came to his house and he was about to leave, but he especially made time for us," he says. "As we came in, right in the beginning we put on tefillin. And he brought out his old tallis that he hadn't used for maybe 30 or 40 years. He was putting it on and crying away. He said he hadn't put on tefillin for maybe 40 or 50 years."

Kotlarsky told another story of a mixed marriage in Nogales where the mother was Jewish, as were her three children, but the kids knew nothing about Judaism - they did not even know who Abraham was. Kotlarsky and Levertov helped them put up a mezuzah and dressed the 15-year-old son in tefillin for the first time.



Project SEED participant Aryeh Berkowitz glances up from his studies at the Phoenix Community Kollel.

Photo by Josh Sayles

They are still in contact with the family and are helping them find ways to bring Judaism into their lives.

"When we go to someone's house in smaller cities where there's no temple at all, we're just trying to let them see another Jew and actually just give them some Jewish pride," says Levertov. "You obviously try to do a little more than that, but the idea of just giving them some Jewish pride and talking about Judaism is enough.

"We actually try to do a mitzvah together. For women we'll talk about Shabbas candles, for men we'll put on tefillin. Maybe we'll put a mezuzah on the door. In general we just try to give them some excitement that they should have a little bit more of a push in doing mitzvot."

After their travels, the eight yeshiva students returned to Chabad of Phoenix to provide opportunities for one-on-one learning with members around the community from July 27 to Aug. 22. Both Kotlarsky and Levertov, who want to become rabbis, say that their excursions around the state and one-on-one lessons have provided them with valuable experience in their rabbinical training.

"When we're out there, we get the toughest questions," Kotlarsky says. "A lot of (people) ask you, 'How do you know there is a God?' or 'Prove to me that the Torah was given to the Jewish people.' It catches you (off guard) sometimes. But you (learn) a way to explain it. It really gives you a lot of training for the future."

Phoenix Community Kollel

Six students of Yeshiva Shaar HaTorah, based in Queens, N.Y., are spending two weeks at the Phoenix Community Kollel from Aug. 8 to 24. They are visiting as part of Project SEED, where they study with the community in groups in the morning, with individuals at night, and partake in recreational activities during the afternoon.

The students eat dinner at people's houses, gave talks during Tisha B'Av and make themselves available to learn with Jews in the Greater Phoenix area. All denominations of Judaism with any level of knowledge are welcome.

Third-year rabbinical student and Project SEED participant Aryeh Berkowitz says that the material learned is not as important as a greater understanding of Judaism.

"I don't think it's specific that we learn (a certain) page of Talmud," he says. "We can make people (better) understand Torah, and that's unbelievable. It's a good feeling to have an impact on somebody else. The whole concept of learning is to be able to teach."

Phoenix Community Kollel Rabbi Shraga Yankelewitz says that outside of the Jewish learning aspect, the purpose of bringing the students to town is twofold - to give the community the opportunity to interact with yeshiva students and to allow the students to see a smaller Jewish community outside of New York.

"It's worth experiencing," Yankelewitz says of learning with the students. "We don't just study books. Our books come alive. When you study together with someone, the book comes alive."