



## THE ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE

by Daniel Ackerman



I have just completed my first week of college, and a successful one at that. My living hall is great; I have nice roommates, and I'm enjoying my classes as well as the beautiful campus in Tallahassee. Along with that, I found *Chabad* on campus and have already gone twice for *Shabbat*; it's a lot of fun and gets better every time. This past week at *Chabad* I met someone who stayed at the same hotel at our Orayta *Shabbaton* in *Tsfat!* They were in the same dining room as we were and described the scene as, "you were the table that was singing the loudest!" How crazy is that?! Meeting someone like this in Tallahassee, Florida?! I also have a twice week *Chevruta* (learning session) with my Orayta fellow BZ over Skype.

What I have seen so far is that the only extensive Jewish organization is Hillel. I very much look forward to getting involved; especially after the high I came off of before coming to college, when I was back home attempting my own *Shabbatot*, which is what I would like to talk about.

When I landed back in Florida after my year in Israel I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do Jewishly. I didn't have a *Chevruta*, and wasn't really going to any services; but I realized there was definitely one thing I knew I would commit to and enjoy at my own pace – *Shabbat!* I told myself over and over to conduct with the energy of Rav Noam and the warmth of Rav Moish, yet I was still extremely nervous, because I wanted to invite all my friends over and they had never seen me really incorporate anything so Jewish into my life to this extent. It was pretty much a brand new experience for them, and even more so, for me.

The first one I had was June 26. Oh boy was it nerve racking! But then again, I usually make things more complicated than they really are. I decided to invite my uncle and 4 friends. At the time, it was only my Dad and I who were home because my mom was in New York, so we did our best to make up for the lack of the motherly atmosphere in my house. My Dad did hours and hours of cooking (I did my best to help with that) and I did the cleaning and preparation. In addition I found myself doing something I had never done

before – prepare some *Divrei Torah*. I read the Isralight Bytes as well as Aish and Chabad.com. My dad prepared to go over the meaning and motions of what we were doing and why we were doing it. It all seemed to be a load, a mixture of nervousness, anxiety, excitement, and sweat – which I would soon come to realize is the perfect recipe to propel myself and those around me into a Fantastic Evening!

All I can say was that these first 5 hours of *Shabbat* were a complete success. Everyone was with me each step of the way as I was with them. I read my first Student perspective on Judaism and Happiness and my Dad also had things to say. Some of my friends who hadn't done *Shabbat* in a long time found themselves learning the blessing to wash hands for the first time. It was such a wonderful experience and I was so happy to be able to give my friends a taste of my year in Israel.

They all asked for invites back the next week. I thought maybe that was because I had not yet tried some singing, and *nigguns*....

The second week carried from the last the exact same mixed feelings, but this time, with much more confidence. I invited 6 friends, 3 of whom were not Jewish. I called Rav Binny and Zack to help me remember some *nigguns*, followed by a recording of their singing on my mac. I listened to these short sound bites about 100 times to make sure I remembered the tunes! I prepared even more to say on the *Parsha* and jotted down the *nigguns* on an index card to stick in my pocket for the meal - now that I look back it's kind of funny that I got so neurotic over trying to remember a few ni ni ni's. We had yet another great experience together and they all left around 12:30 am with smiles on their faces.

By this point I was not nervous anymore, just raring to go for next *Shabbat*! It was just absolutely exciting! I seemed to have forgotten about expenses and just wanted to invite as many people as physically able to fit around my dinner table.

Thank G-d that my Dad was completely on the same page as me.

My mom though always asked, "What?! How many people!?" Her concern, however, was from a good place.

Now it was *Shabbat #3* and seemed to be the talk of the town. People came back from the previous weeks as well as the ushering in of newbie's. The more the better, my Dad and I thought. Word spread and some of my friends' parents were asking their kids: well, if you seem to be going every week – why don't we have some at our house?!

There were so many people coming that we had to start cooking on Wednesday and move the dinner table into the living room. There was a whopping 13 people (Although I would have liked to have had 20)!

It was time to bust out – the extension table.

I thought it would add a lot more if I could finally learn how to sing *Aishet Chayil* – so I did. I called Zack and recorded him singing it over the phone and

just practiced and practiced until it sounded pretty good. I also read up a bit on the meaning of the song so I could share it with my friends.

At around 7:45 everyone shuffled in like the previous two weeks. We explained the lighting of the candles somewhat, and as we moved to the table my Dad and I employed one of Orayta's most infamous touches - candles and dim light which just beautifully set the mood (BUT YOU COULD SEE YOUR FOOD)! Afterwards, at the time of *Aishet Chayil* I did a little explanation (procrastinating because I had never sung it) and told everybody to bear with me. To my surprise everyone gave me a standing ovation! What a shock, it felt amazing to have been able to do that for the first time in front of them.

We ate, we ate; we stuffed ourselves. There was a buffet of just about everything you could think of. I paused in the meal to share a few ideas on the meaning of *Shabbat*, my Dad shared ideas from his perspective, people asked questions, we laughed and....we sang! By this point, I was so comfortable with all my friends that there was no stepping out of my comfort zone, because being with my friends and family on *Shabbat* was my comfort zone. My Dad and I did each *niggun* at a slow pace so everyone could get the hang of it. After all, you don't sing a song to get to the last note.

It was hysterical. I guess *niggun*s were new to this crowd. I don't think I ever laughed so much in my life, and the same for those who were there, but I kept on going. Soon, one brave soul joined in, another started tapping the table, then another joined, and one friend just began to flat out beat box to the *niggun*. I loved it. At one point I stood up and conducted the table with my knife. It was where you point to someone and they say the same 3 chants and then in between everyone goes "HEY!" The best part of that song was the "OOWA OOWA OOWA OOWA," which everyone had their own..... interesting version at the table. If it were on the radio it would have been voted hit #1 at my house for *Shabbat*. My Dad conducted one song where we had to split the people at the table in half, where each group had a part to sing followed by an attempt to harmonize the 2 which was quite comical. There were so many Oratya classics: play it in your head because I don't think I can turn it into sheet music for all of you.

At the end of the meal I read Rav Binny's Isralight Torah Byte on what I felt would be a meaningful message. As my audience was comprised of both Jews and Non-Jews, I discussed the meaning of the "chosen" people. Are we Jews arrogant? Are we Jews better? Does G-d favor us? Where does everyone else come in? I read the article clearly and with the intent of having everyone hear its message: that really everyone has a job, everyone has a role, everyone is equal, and that most importantly, everyone in this world is - chosen.

And now here comes the best part. In the commotion and excitement at the climax of one of the *niggun*s at the very end of the meal – the 10 foot long dinner table cracked right down the middle and was just about to cave in with everything on the table when my friend Seth swiftly slipped under to hold it up. It was literally timed perfectly.

I figured that was just a sign from *Hashem* that we were going to need a bigger table for the next week.

Everyone left by around 1 am.

The week after was just too good to be true. It was ridiculous; I was just hooked on *Shabbat*, and especially looked forward to singing *Aishet Chayil!* We were expecting around 25 people but it leveled out at 19. The butterflies in my stomach had mutated by the 4<sup>th</sup> week, and each day leading up to *Shabbat* felt like I was teetering on the edge of a roller coaster drop. My Dad cooked like we were a hotel on Passover. We needed two 6 ft. extension tables in addition to the one my uncle bolted back together from the previous week, a bunch of extra chairs, more candles, dim lights, 20 pieces of sweet Moroccan chicken, 3 trays of meat loaf, loads of veggies, mushrooms, 3 trays of mashed potatoes.... and honestly I don't remember the rest. Oh, and one of those monster loaves of *Challah* like they have in *Me`ah She`arim*. I made a list of things we needed from the Kosher Market, and everybody brought something to contribute to the meal, whether it be humus, wine or tahina.

When everyone had arrived and crammed into the living room, I shared my thoughts on the two *Shabbat* candles, and the story of *Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*, which I watched Rabbi Aaron explain on an old Isralight retreat tape.

*Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai* hid in a cave with his son during the time of the Romans. After studying for many years, he came out, but had trouble coping with the physical world, and therefore had to return to the cave. When he left the cave for the second time, he saw a whole new perspective on the physical world. He saw a man preparing for *Shabbat*, running with 2 myrtle branches. One represented to *Lishmor* and one to *Lizkor* the *Shabbat*; cherish and remember the *Shabbat*. What is so powerful about this is that a myrtle branch is physical, as well as spiritual - with fragrance. We see from this union that the physical and spiritual are not in conflict; the ultimate state of holiness is to harmonize the two, so there is no conflict between the eternal and the transient, because the holy of holies is timelessness, and timelessness is beyond time and within time, where the transient has as much meaning as the spiritual and eternal. Lighting candles reminds us to "cherish" it, enjoy and experience it to the fullest; and also "remember" it. To "remember" it is for every day of the week, because during the week we can lose sight of *Shabbats`* essence, which is to strive to create, in the Rabbi's words, "a palace of time and tranquility" in each day of the week.

That last *Shabbat* was definitely a step up from the last and was just absolutely inspiring, leaving the everlasting hope in my mind that I will live to have many more like it. Everyone pretty much stayed until about 1:30 – 2am.

Looking back, there really are no words to describe that month long progression of *Shabbatot* at my house. It was an honor and privilege to be hosting *Shabbat* for my closest friends and family, as well as acting as an icebreaker back in America. It couldn't have gone better. Having the support from all my friends was absolutely incredible. No-one looked at me in a funny way, no-one judged, no-one said, "you're religious now?!" Instead, everyone helped. At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> *Shabbat* some friends told me that it was the best *Shabbat* they had ever been to. Period. I was blown away! Shocked! And humbled; to be able to be a vehicle for creating a meaningful and wholesome *Shabbat!* What a gift to be cherished. In the beginning I did my best to try and

make everybody feel comfortable. I focused on that more than anything else. Are we doing too much? Should we just eat already? But after a little while, it felt like it came so naturally from the heart that I didn't have to worry anymore about trying to create an experience; it just happened so effortlessly, so that both my non-Jewish and my Jewish friends present each week could not only watch, but also partake in the creation of such a warm and genuine *Shabbat* experience.

I'm now in college; it's been almost a month since the last *Shabbat* at my house; and the momentum has definitely slowed down. It's much more challenging in college with everything to balance, but I was told by Rav Binny not to see it as a challenge, but rather an opportunity. I don't know where it will take me, but the biggest lesson I learned from hosting *Shabbat* at my house is that you shouldn't be afraid to just be real with people, be you, and if *Shabbat* is a great example of that, then just invite everyone over!

Here is some food for thought: How remarkable would it be if every Orayta guy got at least 4 friends to go on an Isralight birthright group. That's 80 people, plus us 20 Oraytians! We could help lead with the Rabbis, giving cheers to our friends. We could pass on the unique Torah experience that changed each and every one of our lives, and maybe make a difference in our friend's lives too. I think that's a momentous and exciting task but we could definitely do it. What if we each brought more people? Think about it ...

On a final note, wherever you are on campus, or whoever your friends are, don't be afraid to put *Sefarim* on your shelf or to tell people you're going to *Chabad* Friday night instead of a party. Give them your story. It's pretty interesting to see how people react when you're upfront and real with them. You will be pleased. Or better yet, in the words of Rav Binny, with contorted hands and fingers pointing to the sky:

It's awesome!

Shabbat Shalom from Tallahassee Florida!

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