

Rav Yossi Raichik

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Rav Yossi Raichik, who died recently in Israel, was one of the most impressive human beings I have ever come across.

I met him first in 1979. It was the year Khomeini took control of Iran and thousands of Jews were fleeing—to anywhere, just to get out. Chabad Lubavitch, responding to a crisis in the Jewish world like no other organization, simply poured resources and manpower in, to arrange for as many children to leave as possible. They just put them on flights out of the country as quickly as they could and then made arrangements for visas and more permanent solutions. Hundreds of youngsters were arriving in the UK, hoping to go on to the USA to be reunited with relatives and friends; but it was taking time to process them. Chabad had to arrange for them to stay somewhere, and although they found families in London willing to help, the numbers were just overwhelming.

I was principal of Carmel College at the time. Carmel was an elite, selective Jewish residential school with around three hundred pupils, with a beautiful campus set on the banks of the River Thames in a pastoral paradise just south of Oxford. Its curriculum was modeled on the great English public schools—high academic standards, emphasis on sport, as well as drama, music, and art. And it had a parallel Jewish curriculum that went from basic Judaism and Modern Hebrew to Talmud. It was run on Orthodox lines, although most of its pupils did not come from Orthodox or traditional homes.

The head of the governors of the school at the time was Cyril Stein. He was then, as now, a well-known activist and philanthropist and a supporter of Chabad. He called me up, together with Rav Faivish Vogel, the public face of Lubavitch in London, of whom I had always been a friend and admirer. They described the emergency and asked if I could find space for two hundred kids, for as long as it took to get them visas.

Initially I thought I was unworkable. How could we cope with hundreds of teenage boys and girls, with no English, no idea of English discipline, or an Orthodox environment? They were away from home, uncertain and insecure, and for an unknown time span. I envisioned hordes of kids running wild. How would we occupy them? Feed them? All the problems of logistics and integration overwhelmed me.

I called in the teacher responsible for “English as a Foreign Language”, a formidable, Geordie lady called Isabel Craston. She refused to handle the situation, and she said that none of her colleagues would cooperate. She had not been employed to be a babysitter, she said. From her, opposition spread to all the non-Jewish staff, who were unanimously opposed to what they saw as endangering the academic status, threatening the discipline of the school and increasing their work load. I relayed their views to Rav Vogel. He blithely assured me that he would send someone who would take care of everything.

I felt I had no moral option. These were Jewish kids in distress, who needed help, all the more so because so many of them had no idea where their parents were. I gave the go ahead.

The day the buses arrived Mrs. Craston and her allies gathered to protest the arrival of the newcomers. When the first bus came to a halt, out bounced a cheerful, smiling, young American Chabadnik, in an open-necked shirt and jeans. He gave me a bear hug and introduced himself as Yossi Raichik from California. He said he was going to be with the Iranian children throughout their stay, and he would guarantee they would be well-behaved.

He asked who the ringleader of the opposition was. I pointed Isabel Craston out to him. He went right up to her, put his arm around her, and took her for a walk down the drive. Five minutes later they returned. Isabel Craston walked over to the non-Jewish staff, huddled with them, and then announced the opposition was over and she would take responsibility for their English program. And everyone quietly went back to work. Yossi smiled at me. He never told me what he had said. He just jumped back onto the bus and the convoy continued to the residential building where they unloaded.

For over a month, Yossi lived with the Iranian kids on our campus, commuting to London to arrange their papers. The kids themselves were some of the sweetest, nicest kids we had seen and they behaved impeccably. I have kept in touch with some of them ever since. Yossi was like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Wherever he went, his kids, our kids, were just mesmerized by him.

We would meet in the evenings or on Shabbat for a L'chayim. He talked about his life in California and his dream of living in Hawaii. When he and the children from Iran left, we were all sad. His parting gift to my elder son, who was four at the time, was a stuffed bear called "Bear Mitzva", complete with talit and kippa, which my son named "Yossi Raichik" after him, and which stayed with him for many years.

Yossi never got to set up a Chabad House in Hawaii. Years later he got involved in bringing children from Chernobyl to Israel for treatment for the diseases that came in the wake of the nuclear disaster in Belarus. He travelled around looking for funds to bring as many of them as possible to Israel. His mission was humanitarian, and of course evangelical.

He influenced thousands, and thousands more remember him with love and gratitude. He pushed himself beyond the limits most are physically capable of and in the end it took its toll. He had more love to give than any other human being I have met. If only he had taken as much care of his own health as he did of others. May his memory be a blessing.