

The Chusid, the Amishmen, and the Judge

We knew the young Hasidic rabbi when he lived in a tiny house in Bryn Mawr with his young wife and a couple of babies. My wife had an immediate love for the family because of her devotion to little kids. I remember on at least one occasion she babysat for the family so that the young couple could get an evening out. They moved up in the world when they purchased a larger Chabad house close to a college campus. Things changed a lot as students began to pour in, as they often do when Chabad shows up. My wife was still bothered by the fact that there was no Ark and the Torahs were kept in a closet, to be brought out ceremoniously, tallit removed, and utilized appropriately in the service. Still, they needed a proper home!

Enter the Amishmen. We had handled a civil rights case for the Amish community when a local backward municipality decided that the Amish-owned horses should wear diapers and be subjected to other restrictions. The Amish cleaned up the roads when horse droppings were left behind, but that did not satisfy some less than pleasant members of the community. Eventually the story was covered in *The Washington Post*. Ultimately, after educating the municipality's very cooperative legal counsel, the threats against the Amish community were removed. Other than doing this on a mostly pro bono basis, I did get a nice horseshoe out of it. The horseshoe now proudly hangs on a wall in our lounge.

So, what does the Chusid and the Amishmen have in common? Well, nothing, except a devotion to family, friends and religion. Community is everything. I approached my Amish friends about building a proper set of bookshelves and a Torah Ark on wheels that would fit right into the bookcase for the Chabad.

The Amish had performed some work in our kitchen and they knew perfectly well that Jewish people posted the scripture on their doorposts when the Amish workmen removed the mezuzahs from the doorways in our old-fashioned kitchen (which has lots of doorways). The Amish carpenters asked an "Englishman" just what those little boxes were. The Englishman had "the Google". He explained to them what was in the boxes and they discussed the matter during their lunch hour. When my wife explained to the Amish that there had to be two drawers for utensils, one for milk and one for meat, and the same for pots and pans, they were delighted to oblige. In fact, the Amishmen were so cooperative that they made a place for two garbage cans. There is nothing like a little bit of over-enthusiasm.

The Amish were delighted to build the cabinet for the Chabad rabbi as a resting place for the Holy Scriptures. I doubt they ever met a Rabbi before and I would be surprised if the Rabbi ever met an Amishman. One of the most delightful experiences of my life was having the Rabbi and his young son drive up to the small Pennsylvania community outside of Howard to meet the Amishmen who were to build a cabinet in their barn. Make no mistake about it, this is not Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where tourists and the Amish mix every day. This is upstate Pennsylvania, a solid 2-1/2 hours northwest of the epicenter of Amish communities in Pennsylvania.

The Rabbi, his son, the Amishmen and I; we all sat down at a table to discuss the design of the cabinet. After a long period of creation, discussion and very friendly debate, the Amish finally showed up in southeast Pennsylvania to install the cabinet and the Ark. Both parties, Rabbi and Amish, could not have been happier. It was a beautiful occasion where people of very different stripes could not only communicate well but showed enormous respect for one another.

The story reminded me of the time that a different sect of Hasidim presented in federal court before a well-known federal judge sitting on the bench in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, the home of Little League Baseball. The Judge was fascinated by the Hasidim and their demands for kosher food in prison where one of their members was residing. The entirety of the Judge's knowledge concerning the Hasidic community resulted from his reading books by Isaac Bashevis Singer. It surprised me that the judge, about as blueblood as they come, not only had read the IB Singer books but compared the author to Faulkner. The judge ultimately granted relief in the way of kosher food, changing the way the prison system dealt with incarcerated individuals requiring special dietary needs.

The story of the judge and the Hasidim came back to me when considering the recent creation by the Amish of the Ark for the Hasidic campus Rabbi. There is something unique and beautiful when people who are very different can not only get along, but actually respect one another. We have come to a point in our country when differences are no longer celebrated but rather are grounds for suspicion and manipulation. It would be great if we could return to a time when the Chusid, the Amishmen and the Judge would teach all of us how to better behave toward one another.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,
Waters & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.