

YOUR MARK ON THE WORLD



Stories of service that show us how to give more with
a purpose without giving up what's most important.

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Your Mark On The World is available from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and will soon be available at
virtually all online bookstores.

Chapter 3

Rabbi with HEART

Nathan Pingor was completely out of control. He admits it. At seventeen, he was smoking cigarettes, sleeping around, street racing cars, flunking out of school and had completely abandoned his Jewish faith.ⁱ

The root of Nathan's troubles may lie in his parents' divorce at age two. Though he doesn't recall that being so difficult, when he and his mother moved from El Paso, where his father lived, to Houston, when he was seven, he began to feel his world unwind.

As a reform Jew, Nathan's mother, Melissa Fertel, felt strongly that she wanted to have her son educated in a Jewish day school where he would be taught values and history that would provide a "familial" connection, she felt was especially important following the divorce and the move to Houston. Ultimately, they chose a conservative Jewish day school that felt warm and welcoming.ⁱⁱ

Although Nathan had a bar mitzvah at age thirteen, as is the custom, the family was not particularly religious; they didn't keep kosher or attend Shabbat services weekly.

By the tenth grade, Nathan was in real trouble. While he is very bright and even won the school-wide poetry contest that year, he failed every class. He was acting out, desperate to find a foundation for his life.

Finally, when he was 17, his mother sent him to Utah to participate in a short-term program for troubled teens at Outback Therapeutic Expeditions. Why Utah? Utah law allows parents to send their minor children to residential treatment centers where the teens are not allowed to leave; most other states allow the teens to walk out if they choose.

The program helped, but trouble continued so Melissa began looking for a boarding school in Utah where he could get the help he needed to finish high school and get his life back. While virtually every program she considered was non-denominational, she wanted to find a school where he would not be the only Jewish teen and where the program would be open to religious practice. She settled on Discovery Academy Boarding School in Provo, Utah when they told her about a Rabbi that regularly visited the school.

Nathan had been at the school just a few days, feeling angry and isolated, when one of the faculty told him that he had a visitor. Nathan says, "I had nothing else to do." He then met Rabbi Benny Zippel for the first time.

Within three weeks, Nathan had completely reconnected to his Jewish roots, he says he "picked up all the religion that I'd totally lost."

Before long, Nathan wrote a letter home asking his mother to send his siddur (prayer book), Hebrew dictionary and tefillin (artifacts used for a Jewish tradition that connects participants to God and to their heritage). Melissa was blown away by the request, and took it as a sign that her son was not only connecting with his roots, but finding a purpose in his future.

Rabbi Zippel has been visiting troubled teens in Utah residential treatment centers since the year the Italian-born Rabbi first came to the state in 1992. That December, nearly 20 years ago, the Rabbi received a call from the father of a teenager in a boarding school in Utah, asking that he go and visit him. He did; in fact, he began making weekly visits.

After a few weeks, he asked the teen if there were any other Jewish youth in the program; he responded that there were about a dozen. Rabbi Zippel began visiting them all. As he began to understand the national draw to Utah's residential treatment programs, he established his Project HEART (Hebrew Education for At Risk Teens), taking his message to schools across Utah—every week.

The service to the young people in these schools is deeply personal for Rabbi Zippel. He gets to know each one and connects not only with them, but with their families.

After every visit with Nathan, Melissa got a call from Rabbi Zippel, reassuring her that Nathan was doing well and that he was looking out for Nathan. After learning that Nathan had a special relationship with his grandfather in El Paso, Rabbi Zippel contacted a fellow rabbi there and asked him to visit Nathan's grandfather—which he did.

The father of a girl in one of Utah's schools, wrote, "I cannot put into words my sense of security knowing that Rabbi Zippel was in Utah looking out for my daughter's well being. His reports on his weekly visits gave us an independent report on our daughter's condition and mental state. He always could sense the emotional state of our daughter and would relay that to us in an honest and direct manner."

One of many success stories that Rabbi Zippel shared was of a young man who came to Utah for treatment. He visited with him weekly for a year. When they began their visits, the teen described himself as an atheist. When he graduated from high school, he moved to Israel, joined a yeshiva and became an observant Jew. When the young man married, he sent the Rabbi an invitation, not anticipating he could actually attend.

The date coincided miraculously with a trip that Rabbi Zippel made with Utah's Governor Jon Huntsman to Israel. When the Rabbi told him about the wedding, the Governor insisted that he break away from the group to attend the reception—which he did. That surprise reunion brought father, son and Rabbi all to tears as they celebrated more than a wedding that evening.ⁱⁱⁱ

Rabbi Zippel doesn't ask the youth or their families for money—nor does he charge the schools for his services, though they uniformly praise his work. He accepts donations to keep the program going.

Rabbi Zippel is an orthodox Rabbi from Chabad-Lubavitch, a movement within Hasidism that focuses on outreach and education for the broader Jewish community.

Sue Fishkoff, a Reform Jewish author, notes that after spending a year researching Chabad-Lubavitch, she gained great respect for the organization.

She said, “I... have been touched by how Lubavitchers incorporate into their daily lives the Jewish values to which most of us give little more than lip service. They visit the sick. They comfort the grieving. They take care to avoid embarrassing others. Whenever I visit a Lubavitch home, I am urged to stay for dinner, if not for the entire weekend.”^{iv}

Tami Harris, Clinical Chaplain at Heritage Schools in Provo, one of the schools that the Rabbi routinely visits, says that she routinely connects her Jewish students to the Rabbi, noting, “Even the kids who say they are atheists like him and participate. He just loves them and they feel that.”

Tami notes, “For some of them it is life changing. He helps them feel God’s love again. He reminds them who they are.” She summed up her feelings, “It’s wonderful to see them go from hopeless to hopeful.”^v



Rabbi Zippel, Nathan Pingor and his mother, Mellissa Fertel, courtesy of Melisaa Fertel

Despite the Rabbi’s regular visits, when Nathan turned 18, he left the Discovery Academy. He went straight to El Paso to visit his grandfather and stay with his father. s

This was a difficult time for Nathan. He recalls one evening sitting on his grandfather's porch, when Rabbi Zippel called him. They spoke for 90 minutes. Afterward, Nathan decided to return to Houston to live with his mother, despite the fact that the Rabbi never took sides in Nathan's internal struggle between his parents.

Nathan says that Rabbi Zippel has had a tremendous impact on his life. "He's saved my life several times," he says, adding, "plus my relationships with others and with religion."

Living in the Bible Belt, his Christian friends will often use the phrase, "What would Jesus do?" as a decision-making guide. For Nathan, the question is, "What would Rabbi Zippel want me to do?"

Nathan says, "He's absolutely, not only the best role model as far as religion goes, but the best role model in general. He's absolutely the best man I've ever known."

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ⁱ Phone interview with Nathan Pingor, July 3, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Phone interview with Melissa Fertel, July 3, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Personal interview with Rabbi Zippel in his office, July 2, 2012.

^{iv} Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch*, Schocken Books, 2003, page 6.

^v Phone interview with Tami Harris, July 3, 2012.