

Dear Rabbi Benny,

As I sit here on my final stop on my trip in Bucharest, Romania I cannot help but reflect on how much my life has changed over the last few years. Just a short two years ago I was a broken boy with no hope for the future. I got involved with some bad people and got myself into drugs eventually landing myself in Cirque Lodge, a drug and alcohol rehab, in Orem, Utah. Naturally, I was apprehensive and scared at first of many different things. I had not been sober for more than 24 hours in years. How could I handle all of this self-reflection and how could I handle myself? I had horrible self-esteem and I will be the first to admit I hated myself.

In those first few weeks, the only thing that got me through was my Wednesday afternoon visits from Rabbi Benny. He used to come with a big bag of candy, tefillin, and a piece of Torah knowledge for me every week. The one thing I looked forward to most of all was the smile and hug I would receive every week. I was in a foreign place with foreign people doing some of the most difficult work I have ever done. Yet, for an hour or two every week all of that seemed to dissipate. Rabbi Benny brought the most amazing energy and charisma in the most difficult time in my life. It was a taste of home for me. He taught me that no matter where you go or how far you stray you can always come back. Those visits felt like home in such a strange place.

Growing up in a religious, Chabad community brought many challenges along with it. Between all the pressure to stay in the system and the trauma I went through in my childhood, I veered about as far off as a Jew can from his upbringing. Reconnecting with Judaism was never even a thought let alone an option for me. I resented everything about it. That was until I met Rabbi Benny. He taught me that the religion and what we represent is pure, it is only people that can do bad things. This understanding was a monumental shift in my relationship with Judaism. I began to love and appreciate my heritage, culture, and religion for the first time in my life. He opened his house for me and let me spend Shabbosim there. When I did not stay for Shabbat, there was always a delicious homecooked meal for me. Sharon and Benny's house became a home away from home.

I am eternally grateful to all the people who helped me get my life back on track but none more than Rabbi Benny. I do not know if I could have made it through those long days in Cirque without him. His telephone line was always open for me when I was not allowed to leave. Once I got permission to leave, his house was always open. He was my shoulder to cry on. He was my rock in my rockiest times. He was my smile when I could not bear to smile. He was my first step back into Judaism. But most of all he was my friend.

Thank you to Rabbi Benny and Project Heart for helping me more than I can describe in a single letter. I will always be grateful and will never forget the lessons I was taught.

-Chaim A.