

In 1991, Cantor Michael and Julie Weisser just moved into a new home in Lincoln, Nebraska. One Sunday morning, the phone rang. The man on the other end of the line said, “You’re going to be sorry you moved in, Jew boy.” Two days later, a thick package of anti-black, anti-Semitic pamphlets arrived in the mail, including an unsigned card that read, “The KKK is watching you, scum.”

The messages, it turned out, were from Larry Trapp, the Grand Dragon of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, who kept loaded weapons, pro-Hitler material and his Klan robe in his cramped Lincoln apartment. Only 42, Mr. Trapp was nearly blind and used a wheelchair to get around; both of his legs had been amputated because of diabetes.

Threatening hate mail followed. Cantor Weisser called the police and learned about Trapp: he had terrorized countless other Jewish, black and Asian residents over the years. Weisser called Trapp’s racist hot line and sat through a 10-minute message that spewed hate at nonwhites. At first, he intended just to tie up the phone line, but then he started leaving messages.

“Larry, there’s a lot of love out there. You’re not getting any of it. Don’t you want some?” “Larry, you’d better think about all this hatred that you are involved in, because you’re going to have to deal with God one day.” “Larry, the very first laws that the Nazis passed were against people like yourself, who have physical disabilities, and you would have been among those to die under the Nazis. Why do you love the Nazis so much?”

One day, Trapp picked up the phone. He yelled at Weisser for, of all things, harassing him. “What do you want?” Trapp demanded.

Weisser stayed calm. He had talked his wife about what he should do if Trapp ever answered, and she suggested he say something nice. Weisser said he knew that Trapp had a hard time getting around, and so he offered him a ride to the grocery store if he ever needed it.

Trapp was momentarily speechless. Then he said, in a quiet voice, “I’ve got that taken care of, but thanks for asking.”

That simple moment of kindness unlocked something in Trapp, and he began to struggle with regret over how he’d lived his life. He’d had doubts before, and Weisser’s phone calls made those doubts harder to ignore. A few weeks later, he called Weisser. “I want to get out of this, and I don’t know how,” he said.

Immediately — and to the great dismay of their friends at the synagogue, who feared for their safety — Michael and Julie Weisser visited Trapp at his dingy apartment. The three of them spoke for hours, and when the Weissers were about to leave, Trapp asked them to take away all his swastika flags, KKK robes and white-power paraphernalia.

Over the following weeks and months, Trapp slowly but surely transformed and began to make amends. He called people he’d harassed in the past, apologized and asked for their forgiveness. He joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and spoke to high schools and other groups about why he’d renounced racism. Eventually, he moved in with the Weissers, and Julie Weisser quit her nursing job to take care of him as his health failed.

Three months before his death from diabetes-related kidney disease, Trapp converted to Judaism under Weisser’s guidance, in the very synagogue that he’d once plotted to blow up. Weisser said, “He died a good Jew.” [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/05/nyregion/05rabbi.html?_r=0, <http://forward.com/news/112461/he-conquered-the-kkk-now-on-to-flushing/>]

I’ve always wondered. What would I do if I was given the opportunity to make contact with someone like Larry Trapp, to show the kind of radical welcoming, loving the stranger, that

Cantor Weisser demonstrated. When the Torah commands us, **וְאָהַבְתֶּם אֶת-הַגֵּר**, “love the stranger,” it doesn’t refer only to the well-dressed wealthy young couple with children. It also means the ones who don’t quite fit in and the ones who struggle with mental illness and the ones who have skeletons in their closets, perhaps a prison past.

I thought I had my chance several years ago when the police contacted the synagogue because Fred Phelps, the infamous pastor of the Wesboro Baptist church known for picketing military funerals with signs saying “God hates gays,” although he used a less polite term for those who are gay or lesbian, was going to be in town picketing Calvin college and had announced on his website that he was going to stop by Ahavas Israel and picket one of our monthly summer Family happy hour Shabbat services. I thought I would take a few minutes and have a friendly conversation with him.

It never happened. First of all, I was persuaded that it was a bad idea because Mr Phelps had a penchant for suing organizations that engaged with him on the picket lines, and Ahavas Israel didn’t need the extra expense of attorney fees; and second, he didn’t show up.

However, this summer, I got my chance with someone else. You may have read about it on Mlive or in the Grand Rapids Press.

I received a 64 page essay in the mail, arguing that Jews are the most spiritually disgusting people ever to walk the face of the earth, that we have betrayed the LORD time and time again, that I, as a Jew, am a disgusting, filthy pig. The writer was careful to mention that although it may seem as if he doesn’t love me, he does in fact love me and has been praying for me for more than 20 years! It was nothing more than a nicely printed but nonetheless clumsy attempt to convince me that God would love me if I became a Christian because God no longer likes Jews.

I get anonymous letters like this all the time, sometimes in the mail, sometime shoved in the front door of the synagogue. Two things distinguished this letter from those. First, the writer signed it with his name and address. Second, there was a \$50 bill taped to the first page. I’ll admit that the \$50 bill caught my eye before I noticed the name and address of the sender. The synagogue appreciates donations from people who admire and support the work we do, although we normally don’t receive donations from people who think we are spiritual adulterers.

I shared some details of the letter with some rabbinic colleagues, wondering if others received it and how they responded. I found a few others, but mostly I received advice along the lines of calling the police, the FBI, or the Postal Inspector. One or two colleagues suggested that I pass their names along to them - their congregations could use the \$50 donations!

I decided that there were no threats in the letter and no matter how clumsy and offensive, an attempt to convert Jews to Christianity is not a matter for law enforcement. Therefore, my response was to publish an open letter on MLive and the GRPress and send it to Tim Vance in Spring, Texas, thanking him for the generous donation to the synagogue. I assured him that we would use the money to support the work that we do, supporting and encouraging those who are committed to Judaism as a spiritual path and who with great dedication and love, continue to observe God’s covenant. More than anything, I appreciate the fact that had had the courage of his convictions to sign his name as well as giving a return address so I might respond.

Basically, I told him that I am not interested in becoming Christian, but if he was ever in Grand Rapids, I’d love to have a face-to-face conversation with him. Perhaps he would be a better Christian and be better able to love his neighbors by learning a bit more about what Jews and Judaism are all about, and in return, he could explain to me how a Christian like himself has

so much apparent hatred in his heart for Jews, Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Calvinists, Catholics, and Moslems (basically anyone other than Martin Luther). I was curious whether he really thought that God's love could be bought so cheaply, by someone who would join his faith for a \$50 bribe?

To my surprise, he responded in the online comments with humor. He asked, how much would he have had to pay me to read the entire essay. I suggested that \$50/page would have been enough, which would have come to about \$5400. He expressed regret that he didn't use a smaller font!

Shortly after, I received a letter from him and it turned out that he had property in Michigan and could be in the area in the next couple weeks. We got in touch and arranged to meet for breakfast one morning. I talked about Judaism and he talked about his Christian faith. Since he had never been inside a synagogue, I invited him to follow me back to Ahavas Israel for a tour. I showed him the five Yahrtzeit plaques in the chapel for David Mandel's family on the day they entered Auschwitz. We walked to the foyer and I showed him the Holocaust memorial in the foyer and told him about Henry Pestka, who built this building after surviving Auschwitz. I talked about how Hitler used Martin Luther's anti-Jewish decrees as the basis for the Nuremberg laws. No matter how deep his personal devotion to Luther, he has to understand the equally deep antipathy the Jewish community has for his teachings.

We parted as friends. A short time later, he sent me a note: "I heard you loudly and clearly. I promise ... I will never rebuke your people again."

For 23 years, I had been looking for my chance for a Larry Trapp moment. I've been waiting for an opportunity to take a calculated risk that would let me be the catalyst for a major change. If I failed, I would be inviting a perhaps slightly unbalanced person to send me mail which would go straight into the recycling bin (after checking for cash) or to the spam filter. In the case of Tim Vance, I succeeded because he is not unbalanced or crazy. He is a sincere Christian who just needed a Jew to sit down with him and have a conversation.

There are other risks we are willing to take, and of course the greater the risk the greater the safeguards we put in place to protect ourselves. The thing is, if we don't open up our hearts and take risks, we don't grow and the world around us doesn't grow. If we close our hearts and stay insulated inside our little safe boxes, we live narrow, untested, lives. The Zohar suggests that Joseph couldn't be considered a righteous individual until after he went to Egypt and withstood the temptation of Potiphar's wife.

Here is my challenge to you – I want you to extend yourself, even knowing that you might fail, even knowing that you will fail, but nonetheless extend yourself and continue to hope that you will change someone's life. And when it fails you don't get to say I tried that once and it didn't work so I'm not going to try again. The challenge and the promise of Rosh Hashanah is that you will fail and you will fail and you will fail but that you will also unexpectedly succeed and that you will transform a relationship. So I want you to reach out to a cousin, a sibling, a child, who has failed you in the past. I want you to extend a hand to a former friend, an acquaintance, a colleague, who has rejected you in the past. I want you to do the same thing to those whom you have hurt, rejected, and failed in relationships. And I promised that you might fail to repair the relationship because taking risks does not always pay off, but I also promise you that you will feel good about having made the effort because making a sincere effort makes you a mensch.

And I also promise you that you might not fail and that you might unexpectedly rebuild something broken and that will feel even better.

In the end, Rosh Hashanah is not about sitting here in these seats. Rosh Hashanah is about going out and making changes by taking risks, opening up your heart, and pushing your boundaries.

ה' עֵז לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן ה' יְבָרֵךְ אֶת-עַמּוֹ בְּשָׁלוֹם.

May Adonai give us strength and bless us with peace.