

## Community Connection / By Devorah Klein

# The Kosher Cop in Las Vegas

Steve Riback was born and raised in southern California. After relocating to Las Vegas and joining the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, Steve was introduced to authentic *Yiddishkeit* and was drawn to it immediately.

Over the next several years, Steve learned as much as he could and took on *shmiras hamitzvos*. However, when he stood up for his religious beliefs in the police department, he encountered many obstacles. Determined to show himself, his children and all Jews that we must stand up for our beliefs, Steve entered a long, drawn-out legal battle to assure his right to maintain *mitzvah* observance on the job. Drawing on his faith, Steve Riback continues to overcome ignorance, discrimination and anti-Semitism.

Recently, he has taken his story on the road, speaking at many events across the country as the "Kosher Cop" and sharing important messages on overcoming obstacles, loving one's fellow man, growing in Judaism and being proud of it, and standing up for one's beliefs.

We thank Mr. Riback for taking the time to share his story with *Hamodia*.

### Please tell us about your background.

I grew up in the San Diego

area and attended college in Los Angeles. My parents were both Jewish, and I was raised with the awareness that I was Jewish, but my family was barely traditional as far as observance was concerned. We lit candles on Chanukah and sometimes had a Passover

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*Seder* — we probably had the fastest *Seder* in the West! I really did not know much about the holidays or their meaning. I had lots of Jewish friends and was really surrounded by Judaism but did not pick up on it.

### How did you discover Orthodox Judaism?

In 1996, I transferred to the

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, which has an excellent program in education. After a while, I transitioned to a career in law enforcement, and in 1998, I joined the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. About ten years ago, I was invited to attend a Friday-night meal at the home of Rabbi and Mrs. Mendy Harlig, the Chabad *shtetl* in Las Vegas.

I really did not know very much about Shabbos at that time, but what I saw that Friday night changed my life forever. I watched the Rebbeztin light the Shabbos candles, and I listened to Rabbi Harlig make *Kiddush* and *Hamotzi*. I was entranced as the children said *divrei Torah* and everyone sang *zemiros*. There were probably close to forty people at that Shabbos table, but it was so warm, friendly and inviting.

I was intrigued and enjoyed myself immensely, but at the same time, I was disgusted with myself for not having any idea what this all meant. I felt that I had been disrespectful to Judaism because I had ignored all the previous opportunities to learn and still did not know about my heritage. I vowed to myself that this would change.

I began learning wherever I could — through classes, books and online sources. I consumed as much knowledge as I could and took on *mitzvos* as I became aware of them.



Detective Riback in uniform speaking at the Yeshiva Day School of Las Vegas.

Shabbos, kashrus, *tefillin*, *tzitzis* were all calling to me and have since become a part of my life. I love learning about the deep meaning to everything, and I just keep going, learning with the rabbis to consume as much as I can in order to make up for my lost education.

About four years ago, I got married to Michal Nelson and have since been blessed with two beautiful children.

### Can you tell us about your experiences with the police department?

I began working for the Las Vegas Police Department about thirteen years ago. Since then, I have faced many life-threatening situations, from police chases to shootings to undercover assignments. But none of these have had as great an impact on my life as my decision to become an observant Jew; that has been my toughest assignment.

When I first began working for the police department, I worked on patrol and in the plainclothes investigative unit. I also worked in the drug abuse resistance program, educating elementary-school children about the dangers of substance abuse.

After I started keeping

Shabbos, I was able to avoid confrontation about my newly adopted religious observances for several years. However, in 2006, a mandatory police operation was scheduled for Saturday; everyone was to report, even if it was their normal day off. In order to avoid conflict, I voluntarily changed assignments to work in a non-uniformed desk job. Little did I know that this would be one of the most defining events of my life.

My supervisor at the time was very understanding and allowed me to keep a short, trimmed beard and wear my *yarmulke* at work. However, six weeks into my new assignment, a high-ranking officer saw my beard and ordered that it be removed immediately.

I did some research and found a case in Newark, New Jersey, where some Muslims fought for the right to wear a beard and won. I showed this information to my department. I also tried to convince my department that I could wear another hat, not just a *yarmulke*. However, my department refused, simply stating that I could not wear either one.

I was frustrated and disgusted, especially since they would not discuss the matter with me. Left with no other option other



Detective Steve Riback making *Havdalah* for his family.

than to concede, I decided to pursue legal action. I felt that this was something that was too important not to fight. I wanted to show my children and others that one must be a Jew outside of the house in the same way that he is a Jew inside his house.

*I have filed a discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) as I feel my lack of transfer is discriminatory and calls for retaliation.*

I was also worried that if I gave in to the beard and *yarmulke*, they would soon be giving me a hard time about Shabbos or other religious practices. In addition, I wanted to help establish policies that would be in place for others so that they would not have to fight the same battles.

**What happened next?**

I embarked on what turned out to be a two-year legal battle with the police department. I was encouraged at the beginning when the judge offered a preliminary injunction that

allowed me to keep my beard, but wearing the *yarmulke* was to be determined via a court case, set for a later date.

In August 2008, there was finally a summary judgment in my favor, which determined that my religious rights had been violated when the department ordered that my beard be removed.

The trial to determine my right to wear a *yarmulke* was set for January 2009. Surprisingly, one week before the trial, the police department entered into a settlement agreement and decided that they would allow me to wear a hat with a *yarmulke* underneath. However, they stipulated that I could not wear the beard at all while wearing a police uniform. In addition, they paid me \$350,000 as a monetary settlement for the legal fees that I had incurred.

**What is your current assignment in the police department?**

I am currently working in the quality-assurance department, which is a non-uniformed desk job. However, I am still fighting and want to transfer out of this assignment and be allowed to perform different duties with my beard and *yarmulke*. So far this has not happened. I have filed a discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission



Detective Steve Riback with his children

(EEOC) as I feel my lack of transfer is discriminatory and calls for retaliation.

**What is your basic message when you speak to various audiences?**

I try to inspire others through my story. I convey the

message that we need to be proud of who we are. Sometimes it is not an easy road, but it is important to understand that it is okay to practice Judaism publicly; we can be Jewish and be proud of it. We may be different in terms of who we are and how we act,

but it is okay to be different. We all have the ability to be leaders and do big things in this world, no matter who we are. We must constantly strive to better ourselves, one step at a time. We must all stand up for what we believe and strengthen ourselves as Jews.