

REMEMBERING RABBI ABE SHARP, Z"l

A Renaissance Man of the Kosher Industry

cRc Business Manager



Grabbing a steaming cup at Dunkin Donuts before running to the dry cleaners to pick up his *shaatnez*-checked coat, the typical Chicagoan may not realize how much of the communal infrastructure and amenities we take for granted are the result of the hard work of a diligent and innovative activist, whose presence uplifted and deeply affected so many areas of Chicago Jewish life.

Abraham (“Abe”) Sharp was born in Memphis to Holocaust survivors, who were dedicated to rebuilding their lives in the spirit of Torah and *mitzvah* observance. They taught him to extend himself for the needs of others, caring for them in ways even the recipients would not have considered. His father, a kosher butcher, particularly conveyed the value of working with integrity and toiling to ensure that Jewish people enjoy the highest standard of *kashrus*.

During his high school years, Abe’s family moved to Chicago, the city where he was to have a major impact.

As a pioneer of AFTA (Association For Torah Advancement), he formalized and expanded the *shatnez* testing program, trained testers, and traveled to New York to learn the latest techniques. Abe increased awareness and accessibility in the community by setting up testing sites at day schools, dry cleaners, and popular men’s clothing stores. He also organized the first community-wide *mezuzah* checking campaign.

A lifelong student of the legendary *mashgiach* and mainstay of Jewish Chicago, Rabbi Chaim Goldzweig, z”l, Abe set up the city’s first *kashrus* hotline in his own apartment, taking people’s questions to the rabbi and relaying his replies.

In the 1980s he opened the O.K. Corral, a kosher restaurant, through which he strove to bring the Chicago Jewish community innovations in kosher dining and specialties that had not yet been available in the city. Even after the restaurant closed, it left an important legacy. Abe’s relationship with his next-door neighbor, Mr. Patel, on Devon and Kedzie, led to the city’s first Dunkin Donuts to be certified kosher by the cRc.

He next turned his attention to importing and distributing kosher products, bringing previously unattainable commodities to commercial establishments as well as local

groceries and homes in the Chicago area. An innovator by nature, Abe developed several new products, and as president of the Kosher Food Distributors Association, he established the New Product Competition, which has been a prominent part of Kosherfest, an annual event he was integral in founding.

For years, Abe oversaw the local kosher catering for EL-AL, to which he applied his signature zest for going the extra mile, dynamic dedication, and outsized scrupulousness. At one time, a planeload of passengers was stranded in Chicago. Abe “rolled up his sleeves” and made it his business to ensure that they were well-fed and had their religious needs tended to.

In his final decades, he was fundamental to the cRc, where he began as *mashgiach* but eventually became the Business Manager. “He paid attention to the small details that made people comfortable,” recalls cRc Comptroller, Morris Loterstein, who was a childhood friend as well as professional associate. “When arranging the AKO (Association of Kashrus Organizations) conferences, which were major undertakings, he also made sure that the microphone was placed in a way that each speaker should be most comfortable and that they should have a place to plug in their laptops. He naturally cared about people and went the extra mile for everyone.”

He applied his creativity and tenacity to improving many elements of the cRc infrastructure and maintained fruitful relationships with countless company executives and others, all the while tending to the nitty-gritty of the finances. Ever concerned for others, he changed cRc procedure, so that *mashgiachim* would never have to wait more than two weeks to be paid.

A classic *osek betzorchei tzubbur* (one who endeavors on behalf of the community), he gave 100% of himself for others, as he did for his own beloved family, inviting newcomers to Chicago for Shabbat meals, volunteering at neighborhood *shuls*, and taking care of whatever needed to be done – especially tasks overlooked by others.

Abe continued to work at the cRc until illness resulted in an unexpected early retirement, but he leaves an indelible mark on his family and a local and global community that will forever be changed in more ways than anyone will ever fully know.