

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

Rabbi Ari and Mushkie Rubín, Chabad of North Queensland, Cairns, Australia

Remembering the Forgotten Jews

By Chaya Chazan

When I was in yeshiva, I remember a shiur given by Rabbi Bogomilsky about how to conduct after death taharos in small communities with few resources.

“You may think this will never apply to you,” he said, a twinkle in his eye. “But I’m sure many of you will end up on shlichus in remote locations, and even if you don’t, this is always good information to know.”

Not me, I remember thinking. I’ll be living in Melbourne, where there’s a wonderfully competent Chevra Kadisha!

G-d must have been laughing when He moved us to Cairns - where we’ve already had to perform four taharos.

Our shlichus is the perfect compromise between myself and my wife. I wanted to live in my hometown of Melbourne, Australia, and she wanted to live in a small community, where her impact could really be felt. Cairns, a small city in Queensland just a 2-3 day drive away from Melbourne, seemed to be the best fit.

Our first introduction to Australian shlichus came during our Kollel year in Melbourne, where we started working with Chabad of Rural and Regional Australia making small trips to visit Jews in Australia’s most isolated cities. When it came time to set up a permanent base, Rabbi Sauly

Speigler, the founder of Chabad of RARA, set us up in Cairns, and covered our expenses for the first year.

Our unique shlichus was showcased in the documentary “*Outback Rabbis*.” Camera crews followed us as we drove a “Mitzvah Tank” for hours, searching for Jews at every stop.

Although we’re based in Cairns, in the north of Queensland, since the nearest shluchim are in Brisbane, much further to the south, we’re responsible for a massive area. On Chanukah, for example, we have menorah lighting events in 8 different cities throughout Queensland. After the final event, we have a *ten-hour drive* back home.

About 500 of North Queensland’s 1,000 Jews live in the Cairns area. Our close proximity to the Great Barrier Reef attracts many tourists - some of whom are lured to become permanent residents by Cairns’ picturesque scenery and tropical weather.

I serve as chaplain for the Cairns Regiment of the Australian army, but I also often make the five-hour drive to Townsville City, to visit the soldiers on base there. As the only Jewish chaplain in the state, I’m called to answer any question regarding Jews or Judaism. It’s always exciting to meet a Jew I haven’t seen before - especially when my government job facilitates it!

It was the first week of orientation at the Cairns Army Base. I was approached by a young officer who asked if I was the rabbi he’d heard about.

“My name is Josh*,” he introduced himself, shaking my hand. “I wanted to reach out because my wife, Nurit*, is pregnant.”

Nurit was Israeli. They’d met when Josh was assigned to an operation for the United Nations peacekeeping corps in Israel.

“This will be our first baby,” Josh told me. “We’re very excited, but how can we make a bris out here, in the middle of nowhere?”

“You’ve come to the right person,” I assured him, with a smile. “I’ve made two for my own sons! We’ll help you figure it out.”

When their healthy baby boy was born a short while later, we helped them arrange a bris. I was sandek as the newest Jewish member was inculcated into the tribe.

Just a few months ago, North Queensland was hit with a devastating cyclone that flooded Cairns’ streets and made hundreds homeless.

A day later, I received a call from a desperate Emma*. Emma and her husband are regulars at my weekly shiur.

“Rabbi, I’m desperate!” Emma cried. “The cyclone flooded our home. We barely managed to escape with the kids. We couldn’t take a single thing with us! Everything we have has been washed out to sea. We don’t even have a single change of clothes! Our kids are sitting in just their nappies. We counted ourselves lucky to still have our car, but just now, as we were on our way to buy some basic necessities, our car broke down! I just don’t know what to do!”

I was knee deep in debris myself. Our storage unit had flooded, and I’d come to assess the damage and clean up.

“Of course I’ll help!” I assured her, picking my way out of the mess. “Where are you now?”

I hoped I’d be able to fulfill my promise. Most streets were still closed or blocked, so it was doubtful I’d be able to reach them if they were any distance away. When Emma told me where they were stranded, I nearly dropped my phone in shock.

“That’s exactly where I am!” I shouted. “Be there in one minute!”

I picked them up and drove them to my home, where we were able to provide them with food and clothing for their children.

I was pushing my trolley through the supermarket, when a man greeted me with a hearty “Shuleim aleichem!”

He didn’t look Jewish at all, and I wondered how he even knew the traditional Jewish greeting.

“I used to be called Baruch*,” he shared, launching into a brief but fascinating history. Although raised in a Torah-observant home, a young Baruch had decided to forge a different path in life. Wanting to escape any reminder of Yiddishkeit, he fled to Thailand. There, he met an Aussie girl, and eventually moved back to her home country with her.

“You know what I really miss?” he asked with a nostalgic grin. “Learning gemara.”

“I have an easy fix! We have a weekly shiur in gemara, and we’d be more than happy to have you there!”



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Baruch started joining us regularly, navigating gemara's tricky roads with long-forgotten ease. That soon evolved into him joining us for minyanim and Shabbos. We soon discovered his wife was descended from a Holocaust survivor, and was Jewish as well! Their daughter joined our small school, and started learning about Yiddishkeit in earnest.

A short while later, Baruch called me, his voice laced with emotion. "I decided to start lighting Shabbos candles at home," he began. "I helped my daughter light the match, and began coaching her with the first words of the bracha. Before I could continue, she rattled off the rest of the bracha with practiced ease. I know she didn't learn it from me, so it must've come from you." His voice thickened. "Thank you for not forgetting about this forgotten Jew."

Anthony* grew up in a small town, where no one had ever heard of a Jew. He wasn't raised with much religion, but he always assumed he was Christian, like everyone he knew.

It was at his father's deathbed when he learned the shocking truth.

Anthony urged his father to declare his faith in the Christian messiah before it was too late.

His father made a derisive sound. "Forget about that guy! I'm a Jew, and I'll die a Jew!"

Anthony was stunned, and immediately started researching everything about Judaism. His search led him to us, where he gradually learned about his heritage and grew more involved with the community.

Periodically, I make rounds of the public schools in the area, and address the student body. I impress two things upon them: the Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach, and that if your mother is Jewish, so are you.

I don't usually get a response either way, but on one visit to S. Lutheran, a kid in the back raised his hand.

"If my nan is Jewish, am I Jewish?"

"If it's your mother's mother, then yes!" I replied. "You're as Jewish as I or Moses!" I didn't want to embarrass him with any more focused attention, so I just told him, "If you're ever interested in finding out more about your heritage, visit our website."

A few years later, I spotted a new family at our Pesach seder. As soon as I could, I went over to introduce myself and welcome them.

"Do you recognize me?" their son asked. I had to admit I didn't. "You once told me I'm as Jewish as you or Moses!" he said. "You told me to check your website to find out more. I saw you were hosting this Passover seder, and decided to join! I want to learn more about this side of my heritage."

I knew I could always count on Edward* for a minyan. He was an elderly Holocaust survivor, and wanted to be active within the community. He used a wheelchair, so some of his activities were limited. I wanted to invite him for Shabbos and Yom Tov, but I obviously couldn't call a taxi for him! The best way to get him involved was for weekday minyanim. His schedule was free more often than not, so I was always able to get him a ride to join us.

One Chol Hamoed, I brought him back to his flat, where his carer was waiting.

"It's so important for Edward to get out," the carer confided. "He needs the fresh air, and the change of scenery is important for his mental health. Unfortunately, he's too depressed to go anywhere. No matter what I suggest, he turns me down. But somehow, whenever you call to invite him, Edward gets very excited and immediately starts preparing!"

Sadly, Edward passed away recently. I wasn't even home at the time; we were out of the country! Still, I needed to make sure this precious Jew said viduy, and had his end-of-life arrangements carried out properly.

I called everyone I could think of to ask them to visit Edward in the hospital and assist him. Finally, I found Dovid Trachtman, a chef who was catering a private party in the area. He agreed to visit Edward, although he'd never performed the last rites with anyone, and was nervous about doing it for the first time. He used the long taxi ride to confer with his rav and other shluchim.

He was still rather flustered when the nurse showed him into Edward's room, but the warmth of Edward's hand as he sang Adon Olam and other Jewish songs, and led him in reciting Viduy, soon relaxed his unease.

Dovid left, profoundly moved by the life-changing experience. He'd just barely returned to his hotel when he found out that Edward had passed.

A silver lining of the horrific events and aftermath of October 7th is the sense of unity it brought amongst Jews from every walk of life. Jews who never wanted to admit their religion suddenly felt a strong sense of belonging and a yearning to deepen their connection to their people.

Luna* had quite a rude awakening. A staunch, life-long liberal who'd protested on behalf of every victimized minority in the country, she was shocked to find not a single one of her like-minded friends sympathetic to Israel. She felt deserted and betrayed; hurt to her very core.

She asked to join us for Shabbos, although it involved a long drive. "I need to be amongst my *real* family," she said, simply.

Australian immigration laws require second year visitors to apply for a Working Holiday Visa, where they have to complete a few months of work in a remote location. That's how we met Avichai*. He was an Israeli, backpacking his way across Australia, working on a farm near Cairns to complete his visa requirements.

Although he'd grown up completely secular, he'd recently developed an interest in Yiddishkeit. He reached out to me, and began visiting often. Avichai is a very earnest and intense young man. He soon decided to commit to keeping Shabbos fully.

He'd come before Shabbos, and stay for the meal. Then he'd prepare to walk back to his farm. We urged him to stay with us, but he refused, not wanting to impose. Only when I told him we'd need him for a minyan the next day would he agree to sleep over.

A few months later, Avichai moved to a farm much further from Cairns. We still kept in touch, but it wasn't as practical or easy for him to come for Shabbos.

One week, Avichai was feeling low. He so badly wanted to be with us for Shabbos. Consumed, Avichai decided to go for it. He walked for *eight hours*, until he finally made it to our doorstep.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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