

IllumiNations

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Dedicated in Memory of Harav Moshe Kotlarsky - Pioneering A Generation of The Rebbe's Shluchim

Rabbi Or and Rivka Ziv, Chabad of Katamon and Gonen, Israel

From Basketball in Ra'anana to Shabbos in Bangkok

By Chaya Chazan

My parents raised me with the same level of Yiddishkeit they'd been brought up with - namely, nothing - so I grew in an almost-typical secular Israeli family.

My friends were jealous of me for having a father who once played basketball for HaPoel Tel Aviv, but otherwise, I was exactly like them.

My parents dragged me to shul for my obligatory bar mitzvah ceremony, but it was the only time I ever stepped foot inside one.

To this day, I'm not sure what inspired me, but when I was 16, I turned to my good friend, Idan, and suggested that we visit a Beit Knesset that Friday night, "just to see what it was like." He agreed to come with me, so, that Friday night, dressed in clean trousers, cotton shirts, and trying to contain our giggles, we slipped into the shul closest to my home.

Walking through the doors felt like entering a portal into another world. While the car continued roaring down the

street, and music wafted from nearby cafes, in the shul, we were transported to a different world. Men in black jackets stood ramrod straight, chanting a slow, unfamiliar tune from their siddurim. It might not sound like much, but I was entranced. For the first time in my life, I felt the separation of kodesh and chol.

Although Idan and I went on to enjoy our usual Friday night entertainment after shul, and we both joked how "weird" it was, I knew I'd be back.

For months, I kept up the habit. I attended shul for Friday night davening, came home, ate dinner with my family - sans Kiddush and Hamotzei of course - and went out to play basketball with my friends before ending up at some party in Ra'anana or even Tel Aviv.

That was my first introduction to Yiddishkeit. My second was just as sudden and unexplainable. I was working as a waiter in a cafe in Ra'anana when I was 18. One of my coworkers, Yaakov*, was Dati Leumi. Despite my shul-going habit, religion still felt very strange to me, and I hadn't taken a single mitzvah commitment upon myself. I knew about tefillin, since someone had wrapped them around my arm by my bar mitzvah, but I hadn't worn any since.

But somehow, just being around Yaakov gave me that feeling I recognized from shul - a sense of kedusha with an underlying yearning for more. One day, completely out of the blue, I asked him to help me put on tefillin. He was surprised, but, of course, agreed. I've never missed a day of tefillin since then.

Once I entered the army, I was determined to keep up the two mitzvot I'd committed to. It wasn't easy - there isn't much room for spirituality or personal time in the army - but I was committed, and thank G-d, I succeeded in keeping these mitzvot over my three-year service.

The true test of my commitment came after the army, when I toured Thailand with some friends. We were in the middle of nowhere, and could go for days without seeing another Israeli, let alone a religious Jew! The fact that I still wanted to put on tefillin every morning proved to myself that this was a lasting, sincere commitment.

My options for shuls in Thailand for Kabbalat Shabbat were limited. I was hesitant about going to the Chabad house, because they seemed too religious for me - too extreme to make me feel anything other than unwelcome and othered. But this wasn't Israel. There weren't any other options, and I wasn't willing to turn my back on a five-year commitment for vague discomfort.

Once there, I had every intention of being there as short a time as possible - I distinctly remember making my escape plan so that I would be able to leave as soon as the tefilla was over. But when I walked out of the building to go back to my friends, I found them standing around the Beit Chabad. They'd heard about the free food and were excited to join. I couldn't say no.

We made our way inside and found ourselves among 300 other Israelis, and, of course, the Rabbi of the Chabad House - Rabbi Nechemia Wilhelm - and his family. We spent about 40 minutes there, eating and singing along with everyone else. It was nice, but I couldn't wait to leave and get on with the real program of the night - exploring Bangkok's best pubs and bars.

"I'm having an oneg Shabbat at my house," Rabbi Wilhelm shared. "Why don't you join us, Or?"

In a moment of panic, I jokingly grabbed my best friend, Shai, and declared that if he was willing to go, then I would go too! Much to my surprise, he agreed. I was disappointed, but I was a man of my word. Together, Shai and I made our way around to Rabbi Nechemia's house and sat down. We placed ourselves next to the door with every intention of escaping once the rabbi wasn't looking. After all, our friends were still waiting for us.

It was a smaller crowd, so once the festivities started, Shai and I had no choice but to get involved. Each person was asked to choose a song, or share words of inspiration. I was sure that they, like me, were just waiting out the clock, and would choose a song to get it all over with as quickly as possible. Amazingly, all these young Israelis, so similar to myself, chose to share words of inspiration, speaking of spirituality with a familiarity I couldn't help but envy. Before we knew it, it was 3 in the morning. Shai and I were the last to leave.

Before we left, Rabbi Nechemia invited us back the next morning for a Chassidus shiur. I'd never heard of Chassidus before, but knew I had to find out. That shiur changed my life. Rabbi Wilhelm spoke about our connection to G-d, and how every aspect of our lives was created in order to help us serve Him. I felt invigorated. For the first time in my life, things had meaning!



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When I got back to Israel, I started college and at the same time, Shai and I started studying Torah in a yeshiva in Ramat Aviv. I found a Chabad shul just down the block from my apartment, and my journey to Yiddishkeit began in earnest.

I was soon introduced to my wife, Rivka. Her parents are baalei teshuva, who met the Rebbe as young adults. Eventually, they opened their own Chabad house in New York. After a while, they received a bracha from the Rebbe to fulfill their dream of making aliyah, and they began a new Chabad house in Israel, continuing the Rebbe's mission.

With my bachelors in Criminology, I had a good job that I loved. After a trip to Thailand for Pesach to help the Wilhelms with their seder, my wife asked why we weren't pursuing a shlichus of our own. I agreed with her, so I began making inquiries.

Baruch Hashem, there are a lot of shluchim in Israel, so finding a shlichus can be a long, drawn-out process. When Rabbi Yarchi, who runs the head office in Israel, explained the process to me, I hung up, confused. Should I give up my job, where I'd been recently offered a raise and promotion, for a shlichus position that very possibly wouldn't pan out? How would we manage?

I called Rabbi Yarchi back, and explained that while I was still interested in shlichus, I needed to stay in Yerushalayim.

"I just got off the phone with the shliach in Katamon. He was just telling me that he needs help desperately," Rabbi Yarchi explained. "I can't ignore this incredible hashgacha pratis. It looks like you two are meant to work together!"

Although the process usually takes months, I was able to start immediately. Baruch Hashem, there's no end of things to accomplish!

I started a project in Israel called Aruchat Eser. It started as a way to honor the memory of Liel Gidoni, a combat soldier that fell in combat ten years ago. After he was killed, I went to meet his parents - who live in Katamon - and heard so many beautiful things about this young soul. One thing in particular stood out to me - Liel used to bring extra sandwiches to school every day to share with anyone who needed it.

This story inspired me to begin a similar program in his memory. With his parents' blessing, I began with a small

group of forty children. We made sandwiches for their lunch every day.

Looking for a sponsor to help fund the cost of the lunches, I reached out to Nadav Shtrauchter, a successful businessman from Tel Aviv. He loved the program, and helped me start a social media marketing campaign, urging our followers to *Spread Liel's Smile!* I was amazed when the campaign was picked up by politicians, ball players, and celebrities, and we soon collected enough money to offer lunches to 200 children every day.

Today, we serve 5,000 children in the Jerusalem area, spreading Liel's smile to countless families every day.

The country was thrown into turmoil after October 7th. A friend of mine is a TV personality, and had an upcoming appointment with Netanyahu.

"How do I give him the right outlook, according to the Rebbe's views?" he asked.

"Tell him we need to do something practical," I advised. "The Prime Minister needs to put on tefillin. Now, we all know that he's never agreed to do so before because he doesn't want it spun out of context, but I think I have a way of getting him to agree. There was a soldier killed in Gaza when a missile made direct impact on his truck. The only thing to survive were his tefillin and Chitas. I'm going to have this soldier's mother write a letter to Netanyahu, asking him to put on her late son's tefillin."

My friend agreed, and I spoke with Ruchama, the soldier's mother. We made sure the tefillin were kosher, and I gave them - and Ruchama's letter - to my friend.

My friend interviewed Bibi for two hours before finally taking out the tefillin.

"My rabbi has a request from you," he said, placing them on the table.

Bibi immediately started to object, but my friend held up the letter.

"Before you refuse," he told Bibi, "Read this."

Netanyahu agreed. He read the letter, growing emotional as he learned Ruchama's story. He folded the letter, his eyes misty.

"Tell Ruchama that I promise to put them on," he told my friend.

"She wants a photo," he demanded, boldly. And Bibi agreed.

But months went by. After the initial meeting in November, the prime minister forgot until Purim. And then he couldn't find the tefillin until Pesach, and on and on, the excuses kept coming. Finally, I had enough. I had someone put me in touch with Bibi and made my feelings clear.

"With all due respect Mr. Prime Minister, enough," I declared. "The war is continuing without end, and pressure from other countries is amping up. No one knows what's about to happen, but I know one thing. Nothing sends a stronger message than seeing the Prime Minister put on tefillin. And it's almost Yom Hazikaron no less!"

"You're right," Bibi declared, after a second's thought. "I'll do it!"

A few days later, the now famous picture was widely disseminated. Almost immediately, the impact became clear. Shluchim all over the world reported that people were asking to put on tefillin. *If Bibi can do it, so can I*, they were saying.

A month later, Netanyahu asked Ruchama and me to come meet with him - he wanted to return the tefillin to us personally.

"I could have gotten these back to you in many ways," he said to us. "But I wanted to meet with you to thank you. This whole experience really touched me. It reminded me so much of the Rebbe, a man that had so much wisdom. Not a day goes by where I do not think about the Rebbe."

I told him about the impact his actions had already made on people all over the world.

"I promise to make this a tradition," Bibi shared. "I want to put on these tefillin every Erev Yom Hazikaron!"

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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