

illumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

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Door to Door; Soul to Soul

By Chaya Chazan

Being on shlichus just a stone's throw from where I grew up has given me a whole new appreciation for my parents and the vital work they do.

Growing up in a Chabad house meant we were automatically involved in everything: on Shabbos and Yom Tov, there was no "downtime." There was always something to set up, people to talk to, food to make, and Yiddish to learn with. I thought I knew it all. My wife, Leah, grew up on shlichus in the Inland Empire, where driving two hours each way to school was just a fact of life. With no friends within 50 miles, she found herself befriending the community's older women, spending hours laughing with them and hearing their stories.

I was surprised to see how much mental effort it takes to run your own Chabad house. Knowing that the finances, planning, organization, and initiative all depend on you is a massive burden - but well worth it, of course.

My generation of shluchim, who've just opened our doors in the past few years, have a unique perspective on shlichus, especially those of us in large, well-established cities. Baruch Hashem, Los Angeles is dotted with Chabad houses in every neighborhood. Those seeking a closer connection with Hashem have no trouble locating a Chabad house within close

proximity. What we focus on is the people who, somehow, still haven't heard of Chabad. We knock on door after door, in search of those few Jews who don't know about Yiddishkeit. It's amazing and humbling to be part of this "second wave" of shlichus, and to know that we're implementing the final stages of the Rebbe's vision to reach every last Jew in the world.

I met Seth* like so many others - by knocking on his door with an offer of fresh challoos. Seth seemed happy to meet me, and shared that he'd only recently found out he was Jewish. His grandmother had grown up in Cuba, and had been trained from an early age to never let anyone know she was Jewish. The importance of keeping it secret was so deeply ingrained in her mind, she only revealed it on her deathbed. At first, the entire family was shocked, but once the initial surprise settled, they were left with the bigger question - what does being Jewish even mean?

My eyes opened wide as Seth shared his incredible story. I was excited to introduce him to the richness of Yiddishkeit and thought he'd be equally as keen to learn. Unfortunately, since it was all so new to him, Seth remained cautious and reserved. He accepted my challah with thanks, but stammered a refusal to a Shabbos meal invitation. For months, our only interactions were initiated by me, when I visited his home to deliver Shabbos or Yom Tov packages.

Eager to compel him out of his stagnation, I renewed my efforts to get him to come to shul. Just after Chanukah, I invited him for our inaugural "Scotch and Sushi Shabbos," a program we've since instituted on a monthly basis.

"This is a rough time for the Jewish people," he responded.

"True," I concurred, "but the message of Chanukah, which we celebrated just last week, still remains true. Yes, there's a lot of hate out there in the world, but when we drove our menorah truck around town, we received so much love and positivity! Come and see for yourself how we fight darkness with light!"

Many months after our initial conversation, Seth finally stepped foot in our Chabad house - still hesitant, reserved, and cautious - but he was there.

"I don't think I've ever been in a synagogue before," he confessed. "I wasn't even sure about coming tonight, but my wife - who's not Jewish, by the way - told me I should spend time with my people; that it would be good for me."

"Welcome! Come join us!" I invited him.

That first baby step soon led to others. I put a mezuzah on Seth's door, and helped him put on tefillin for the first time in his life. Although he's over 70 years old, Seth is ready to brave new horizons, and unpack the treasures his grandmother hid for so many years.

Since we focus heavily on not-yet-affiliated Jews, we knew it would be difficult to get them all into shul to hear the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Instead, we adopted the Covid-friendly option used by shluchim worldwide, and held a public shofar blowing in the park. It was so successful and so well-received, we decided to hold our Chanukah party in the park as well.

We texted and emailed everyone on our list about the event, and also advertised it in community Facebook groups. "Join together in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Israel," we wrote. "Am Yisrael Chai!"

Just after we lit the menorah, a woman we'd never met before came up to introduce herself. She had tears running down her face, and her voice shook with emotion.

"My name is Amy*," she told us. "This is my first time ever attending a Jewish event. After October 7, I felt a strong urge to connect with my Judaism, but I didn't know where to start. When I saw your Facebook post, I knew I had to come. I want my kids to understand their heritage, and what's going on!"

"The other night, I wanted to do something Jewish; to feel connected. I remembered my mother gave me a menorah as a wedding gift. It's been sitting in my attic for an embarrassing number of years, but I finally brought it down and cleaned it off. Unfortunately, I didn't have any Hanukkah candles, and I didn't know what to do! I ended up whittling some scented candles down until they were narrow enough to fit in the menorah.

"Seeing your Facebook post inspired me to dig out that menorah and come here tonight. If not for that reminder, I would've just continued on, trying to ignore that nagging feeling that something was missing."

That was the start of Amy's involvement. Her children joined our Kid's Club, and I'm giving her son bar mitzvah lessons as well.

That's how we see our role as shluchim - helping to dust off the neglected, forgotten menorahs in the attic, and set them aglow.

We built a Sukkah mobile in a flatbed truck, and I tried to pick high traffic areas to park in, to gain the most attention and visibility. One day, I parked just outside a public school at dismissal time.



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"Oh, I love seeing this!" a woman said, leading a young boy and girl up to the Sukkah Mobile. "Can my children and I shake the lulav and esrog?"

"Of course!" I said, showing them how to hold it and say the bracha.

Claire*, the children's mother, asked a lot of questions. "Do you have any clubs or activities for Jewish children? My kids don't know much about Judaism, and I'd love for them to meet other Jewish children and connect with their culture."

"As of right now, we don't," I admitted. "But maybe we can start something! I'll be in touch with you."

I went home, all fired up after meeting Claire and her children. "We have to start a kid's club!" I told my wife.

She hesitated for a moment. "For just two kids?" she said. "Won't they feel silly being the only attendees?"

We thought about it for a while, but ultimately decided to go ahead, even though only Claire had expressed any interest.

Baruch Hashem, it went very well. Claire told a friend, who told another friend, until, thanks to word of mouth, we had 15 kids signed up, every month!

"Hi, Rabbi. My name is Joanne*. I'm calling about my son, Josh," said the woman on the phone. "He's 12, and will be bar mitzvah soon. Would you be able to give him some lessons?"

"Of course!" I agreed. "When can -"

"I should tell you a little more about him first," she interrupted me. "Josh is autistic. It's hard for him to meet new people, and he doesn't like to leave the house. Lessons would have to be on Zoom. Is that okay?"

I agreed, of course, and we arranged a time to meet. I soon found out that Josh was extremely bright and inquisitive. His homeschooling curriculum hadn't included anything about Judaism, so he knew nothing about Torah, bar mitzvah, or even how to read the Alef Beis.

I started teaching him how to read, and hoped we'd be able to learn the brachos for the Torah in time for his bar mitzvah. I underestimated his quickness and eagerness. He quickly mastered the brachos, and wanted to keep learning. I started teaching him how to read his Torah portion, one aliyah at a time, and he was able to complete most of it!

Josh wanted to emulate me in any way he could. He bought a black fedora, exactly like mine, and promised he'd grow a beard. Even after his bar mitzvah, he wanted to continue to learn, and set his sights on uncovering the secrets of the Kabbalah.

I was so happy to hear that Josh was enrolled in a Jewish school for special needs students for the following year, knowing how much he'd love the learning.

"You don't understand what you've done," Joanne said, blinking back tears. "You didn't know Josh before to know what a difference you've made. He's a different person! A few months ago, the mere thought of leaving the house was enough to give him a panic attack. Now, he can't wait to go to school! Thank you for all you've done for him. You've given him a new life."

Door knocking requires a certain level of detachment. You're often talking to doorbell cameras instead of face-to-face interactions, and you get a lot of rejections. You need to steel yourself and not take it personally. I usually remind myself that every rejection is leading to the next acceptance. It can't be all bad, all day! If you can make it to that sixteenth door, your efforts will, more often than not, be rewarded.

I remember once knocking on a door and, after explaining who I was and what we offered, receiving a polite, but firm rejection. I left the house in disappointment, mentally recording it as another failure.

I could never have imagined that the woman who'd so stiffly told me, *No thanks; we're not interested*, would mention my visit to her relative, who'd then look us up and reach out, offering their support to help us in our "very special mission." They've since become one of our greatest supporters and dear friends.

Another time, a man opened the door and welcomed me with a big smile.

"It's been so hard recently. After October 7, I felt lost and abandoned. I marched with all my friends to champion their causes, but not a single one of them reached out to me after Hamas' invasion. I've learned who my true friends are. We Jews need to stick together! Thank you for visiting! It means a lot to me."

Another man, Ted*, declined to even speak with me when I first rang his bell. Now, if I don't visit him at least once every couple of weeks, he calls to find out when I'll be in his area next.

Although I suffer from cynophobia and try to avoid dogs, when knocking on doors in Los Angeles, it's impossible to avoid. I've had to work on myself to overcome my fear, and now, I mark down the dog's name beside the owners', so the next time I visit, I can greet them, too.

Jodi* was on our list of people to visit, and we often took our kids along. She was an elderly woman, and enjoyed interacting with them.

On Sukkos, I brought my lulav and esrog around. I showed it to Jodi, and she inhaled the sweet scent of the esrog with closed eyes. When she opened them, they were filled with tears.

"I remember being a little girl in Poland," she said, "smelling my Papa's esrog. This smell takes me right back to my childhood before the war."

We knew it'd be hard to get a minyan for Yom Kippur, but it was still disappointing to see that we only had nine men as the last hours of Yom Kippur approached. I started Neilah with a heavy heart, wistfully wishing that just one more person had shown up.

There were just a few moments left, and we were on the final pages of the Machzor. Suddenly, the door opened, and a man slipped into a seat and looked around, curiously. As I chanted the ancient words, describing how the gates of prayer were closing, I thanked Hashem for miraculously completing our minyan.

After making havdalah and eating a bit, I introduced myself to the mysterious "tzenter."

"I actually live right behind this building," he said. "I saw your signs go up a while ago, when you first moved in, and I told myself I had to come here one day. Today, I was sitting with my daughter at home, when I remembered it was Yom Kippur. Even though the holiday was almost over, I knew I needed to come in and celebrate the last few moments. I'm so glad I did."

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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