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

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A Crown of Faith

By Chaya Chazan

If you would've asked me when I was a young girl if I ever thought I'd be on shlichus - let alone in a remote corner of the world - I would've responded with an amused *I don't think so!* I'm just an ordinary Melbourne girl who grew up and suddenly found herself doing extraordinary things.

After meeting and marrying my wonderful husband, Yossi, we embarked on the adventure of a lifetime. We moved to Australia to run a very unconventional Chabad house called Chabad of RARA - Regional and Rural Australia.

Our job was to service the Jews of the Australian Outback who weren't close enough to a major Jewish center like the major cities had. Amongst thousands of kilometres were hundreds of Jews, scattered, dispersed, and searching, and our job was to find them and serve them in whatever way we could.

We spent a large chunk of the year on the road, travelling dusty rural roads and little towns searching for those shining souls in our bright yellow Campervan, lovingly dubbed the RARATank.

It was at times extremely rewarding and challenging. Our family was growing and it wasn't quite as effective to preach to our toddlers about why it was

worthwhile to sit in a van for so many hours as it was when we repeated that mantra to ourselves. I remember having to "bathe" my babies in the sink of a mall restroom while we were on the road. We tried to visit each city on our list at least once every year or two, and we loved each and every one of the lone, lost souls we gathered on our journeys, but we didn't have what we could really call a "community."

My life was a string of "I cannot believe we are doing this" experiences. Our shlichus was all about driving tens of hours because there was a Jew who needed spirituality in their lives - even if they didn't know it yet.

After a few years, we traded in the challenges and privileges of this one-of-a-kind shlichus for a more typical, staying-in-one-place kind. We moved to beautiful Newcastle, a couple of hour's drive from Sydney, and, with the community's approval and delight, began to revive Judaism in this lonesome corner of the world.

As if our lives weren't unusual enough, we were approached with an interesting proposal: to be the stars of a documentary about our outreach work called *Outback Rabbis*.

For two weeks, a film crew followed our little family across the country as we drove our RARATank from Melbourne into the red dusty centre of Australia.

While it might seem glamorous, filming is a daily grind of sound checks and a camera in your face all day, every day, as you try to juggle your kids and your shlichus, all while trying to give eloquent an-

swers to hard questions because you're representing G-d to the world.

We were travelling an extremely remote route, passing by towns with populations of less than 1,000. The chance of finding a Jew among so few is miniscule.

By the time we made it to Alice Springs, the most central town in the middle of Australia, we were exhausted and depleted. We'd traveled thousands of miles, and still we hadn't met a Jew. With the camera crew following our every move through the focus lens, I started to doubt the wisdom of the whole idea. We could've easily insisted on driving through the East Coast, where we knew plenty of Jews and would've had plenty to show the film crew. What could we expect in such an isolated area?

Despite the fact we arrived late that night and the kids were restless and the adults were tired, filming was scheduled bright and early the next morning. It was the first time in over a week we were in a town big enough to have a supermarket to stock up on our dwindling supplies, or a petrol station! I was hoping to get some shopping done, but the director just pointed to his schedule and insisted we go shopping on our own time.

We had no choice but to wake up even earlier to restock and refuel. I'm usually upbeat and optimistic, but I think I'd lost that somewhere between Coober Pedy and Marulan, and I wasn't feeling particularly sunny as we headed out way too early on our errands.

We only had a few minutes before being expected back "on set," and were rushing to the shops, when I heard a commotion behind me. I turned just in time to see a woman barreling down the car park towards me and grabbing me in a bear hug.

"Oh my goodness! I can't believe this!" she gushed. "Is this real? Are you a rabbi? You must be here for me!"

I looked at my husband in bewildered amusement, as the woman, Penny*, began to share her story. She grew up in Sydney, Australia in a home that valued Jewish tradition. Years later, her husband's job required them to relocate to Saudi Arabia. Suddenly, she felt a strong yearning for a heritage she barely knew anything about.

When her husband's contract ended, she was thrilled to hear he was considering a job in Australia.



lia. Then she found out it was in Alice Springs, thousands of miles from her family or any other Jew. She struggled for months, feeling lonely, isolated, and forgotten. She started to doubt G-d even cared about her.

"Last night was especially difficult," Penny told us. "My husband works long hours, and I have a young son who needs constant attention. I really missed my family and the support I so badly need. I was desperate. I started speaking to G-d, asking if He heard me, and if I mattered to Him.

"This morning was even worse. My son refused to cooperate, which made me late for work. I was late to drop him off at daycare, and he reacted badly to my stress. As I walked back to my car, I knew G-d had given me an answer. He *didn't* hear me. I *didn't* matter to Him. I whispered one last time for a sign to show me He's with me and I'm not all on my own.

"Then I looked across the street and saw you! A real rabbi! I knew G-d had sent you here for me."

We hugged and wiped away our tears, and promised to come by later to meet her son and discuss Judaism.

The film crew might have missed the encounter they'd been hoping to capture for so long, but it gave me the answer and reassurance I needed that our work had value and our shlichus was important, despite the many challenges!

Newcastle is the most magnificent city. And one particular clear night, as I picked my way through the dark shrubbery, and carefully descended the dark path towards the water, the beauty was not lost on me. The radiance of the moment coupled with the absurdity of the situation tickled the humour inside me.

It was mid-2021, and Australia was taking Covid-19 extremely seriously. There were strict laws in place about when and how one could leave their homes, even just to take a walk. Grocery shopping? Better sign in at the front so any potential outbreaks could

be traced back to the individual! Roadways were shut to limit exposure from state to state.

Which all meant that my usual, challenging, two-hour drive to mikvah was no longer an option. I thought I knew exactly what we'd be facing when we moved to Newcastle. A modern day break-the-ice-to-dip kind of moment? Not what I signed up for! I was willing to drive or fly anywhere for the mitzvah, but the airport was shuttered and roads blocked.

With the guidance of several rabbis, we found an alternative - to use the local beach's natural pool.

So there I stood, watching a beautiful, full moon illuminating the water.

The scene was so beautiful and serene and despite the fact that the tide was rising and I had only minutes to finish before I risked being washed away by the growing waves, it felt so spiritual and right.

Despite how beautiful the setting was, it was still chaotic as I tried not to be swept away by the increasingly ferocious waves, and also to remember to focus on doing the mitzvah properly.

As I leapt back out of the water, I realised I hadn't had those moments to pray, not even said one tefilla. I quickly threw a, *Hashem, you put me here in this situation, and anyways You know better than I do what I need, so please, hear those unsaid tefillos* and clambered back up to the car. But, as the adrenaline subsided, I was worried that my hurried, one-size-fits-all tefilla wasn't good enough.

Several weeks later, to our utter shock and delight, we found out I was pregnant. It had not been an easy road, and we'd suffered much loss and grief. To me, it was Hashem's biggest hug. A reassurance that the mesiras nefesh of going to mikvah on time, following the guidance of the Rabbonim, was exactly what I was supposed to do. A nod that my unsaid tefillos had been heard, and answered.

I couldn't wait for the epic conclusion of this inspirational tale, my cherubic rainbow baby.

A couple of months later, as I waited for the Friday night meal to begin, I sighed a content sigh, and gratefully placed a hand on my growing belly. Our rainbow baby growing inside of me, finally approaching a gestation that perhaps would let me let go of that breath I'd been holding since we found out we were expecting. In the quiet, the cold tentacles of dread gripped my heart, tight and fast. When was the last time I felt the baby move?

I'd done this a thousand times before this pregnancy. Every small inconsistency made me fearful. I was triggered by everything. But I was right. For once in my life, I pleaded in my head that I was wrong.

On erev Chanukah, the doctor confirmed that our sweet rainbow baby had died in utero. We went from finalizing our Chanukah events to scheduling an induction. The pain of our loss was amplified by the lost opportunities to do what we were here to do: spread light.

While regional shlichus is lonely at the best of times, it's amplified to a whole new level by loss and grief. We flew to Melbourne to bury our little baby and were wholeheartedly embraced by the community. They gave us all the love, support, delivered meals, and friendship we so desperately needed to heal. When we flew back home, the gaping chasm in our hearts was a little bit less vast.

Baruch Hashem, we were blessed with another miracle - our precious baby boy, Yehuda.

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