

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

Rabbi Eliyahu and Dena Schusterman, Chabad of Intown Atlanta, GA

G-d is Laughing

By Chaya Chazan

People often ask, "What made you choose this life?" But the truth is, as a child of shluchim, born and raised in a world of shlichus, I never imagined I'd do anything else; I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

I spent time in Russia as a *bochur* and fell in love with the warmth of Russian Jews and the vast, untapped potential I saw in its snowy vistas. I knew I wanted to return after marriage and make it my permanent shlichus. I brought it up while dating my wife, and I was relieved—thrilled, even—when she agreed.

Man plans, and G-d laughs. Despite my certainty that we'd soon be on a plane to Moscow, things didn't pan out that way. My wife was thrilled. I was not. I still wanted shlichus, so I started researching other opportunities.

On a *Chol Hamoed* trip to Atlanta, while visiting my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, we drove past Emory University and a neighborhood with a cluster of slightly neglected old Tudors, bungalows, and cottages.

"You know," my brother-in-law said thoughtfully, "this area has no *shliach* yet. There's a small *shul* here, but the rabbi is in his 90s, and I don't know if they even get a *minyan*. I think there's real potential here."

The seed was planted. After Yom Tov, we spoke with Rabbi New, the head shliach of Georgia. A few

months later, we were in Atlanta, setting up our new Chabad House.

We had our work cut out for us. Our focus was split between four major areas:

1. Emory University, a private university with a few thousand Jewish students
2. Georgia State University, located in Athens—an hour and a half drive from Atlanta
3. Our growing community at Chabad Intown
4. Working alongside Rabbi Katz, and eventually taking over his responsibilities at the small shul

We threw ourselves into it immediately—building programming for both the community and the universities, each with its own set of challenges and rewards.

Intown Atlanta had once been a thriving Jewish center, but over time, families had moved to the suburbs for larger, more affordable housing. The *shul* had been around since the early 1900s, but by the time we arrived, the once-vibrant congregation had dwindled to a small quorum of elderly men shuffling in for *davening*. They were happy for me to be their rabbi, and with a commitment on their part to pay my rent, I took over all rabbinic responsibilities.

We were determined to create a compelling reason for Jews to stay involved, and to stay *in town*. With the *shul* board's permission, we renovated the second floor and added a sign out front: **Chabad Intown**. We brought new life into the community—offering singles and Young Adult programming, Mommy & Me classes, Torah learning, and outreach events. The small *shul* did not know what to do with itself. The aisles once again filled with happy chatter, with little feet running around.

I drove to Athens weekly and taught classes on the University of Georgia campus every week. We also offered student programming for the large Jewish population at Emory.

We knew we wanted to focus on community building and offered the Emory University *shlichus* to Rabbi Zalman and Miriam Lipskier. They took it and ran with it. We never looked back—and we're so lucky to have fellow shluchim so close to us.

After three years with the small *shul*, we knew we needed a new direction. We continued Chabad Intown on the second floor of the shul while they searched for a new rabbi for their *Shabbos* services.

When our rabbinic contract with the shul ran out, I thought we might finally get a breather. We'd dived headfirst into *shlichus* in 1997 and never really slowed down. I figured it would take some time to find a new space for *minyanim* and programs—maybe we could catch our breath and focus on deepening individual relationships.

Man plans, and G-d laughs.

The day after we moved out of the second floor of the *shul*, a dear friend, Harvey Siegel, called me.

"Rabbi, Chabad Intown is moving to my house!"

For the next few months, we held *minyanim* and programs in Harvey and Sara's large living room. It was incredibly generous, but we knew we needed a permanent solution.

Soon, we closed on a two-story, 2,500-square-foot home on seedy Ponce de Leon Ave, renovating it to include a sanctuary, offices, guest bedrooms, a playroom, and classrooms.

We were thrilled to finally have a space of our own. The only problem? Our home was still too far from Chabad. We needed to be closer to Ponce de Leon Ave—without bribes, without meltdowns from the kids on the walk to *shul*.

One *Shabbos* morning, I passed a woman placing an **Open House** sign in her front yard. The house was around the corner from our Chabad house. Just the previous week, I had spent half the walk cajoling my preschoolers. So I waved at her and asked, "Mind if I take a look right now?"

She welcomed me in and explained that she and her husband were following their daughter, who was making *aliyah*. On Sunday, we formally visited the house. It was perfect for us. My wife agreed. We put in an offer.

Sonja and Leon were excited to have a role in our *shlichus*. But after closing, their daughter changed her mind and decided to stay in Atlanta. They were devastated. It took them years to come to terms with it and finally visit their old home—the home we had made our own. We stayed close, though. Their daughter even ended up teaching in our preschool.



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Sara and Harvey, too, became family.

In the early 2000s, when color printers were the latest gadget, they bought one for their home. Any time we needed flyers, pamphlets, or infographics, Sara designed them, and Harvey printed them. Every paper we handed out in those years was put together at their kitchen table.

Every Friday, Harvey picked me up for *shul*. We would *daven Kabbalas Shabbos* and then walk home together.

One Friday, as soon as I got into his car, I knew something was wrong. It didn't take much urging for him to open up.

Harvey had just been diagnosed with cancer. The prognosis wasn't good. My heart ached for him. I cried out to Hashem in my heart—*this man, who had dedicated himself so fully to Yiddishkeit, should be granted a complete healing!*

I was scheduled to visit the Ohel a few days later. Harvey asked if I could bring a letter on his behalf. When I arrived at his house to pick it up, I saw how quickly the disease was taking its toll. He looked frail, exhausted.

"Usually, I read my letter before placing it in the Rebbe's Ohel," I told him. "Do you want me to read it first, or should I place it straight in?"

"Whatever you think is best, Rabbi," he whispered.

A few days later, I stood before the Rebbe's Ohel and unfolded Harvey's note. Just a few short lines, written with shaking hands and a tear-streaked face:

Rebbe, I have so much more work to do for Chabad. Please pray for healing on my behalf.
—Zvi Ben Yosef Halevi

That was it. That was his entire request.

Not for himself. Not for more time with his family. Not to be spared from suffering. Only that he could continue serving Hashem.

Harvey—so deeply devoted to the Rebbe's *shlichus*, to his mission—returned his *neshama* to his Maker on *Gimmel Tamuz*, 2003 the *yahrtzeit* of the Rebbe.

The ultimate *chossid*.

May his memory be a blessing.

Not many people in our community would come to the Chabad House on Friday nights. But when my cousin, Rabbi Levi Deitsch, A'h, passed away, I decided to honor his memory by holding Friday night services. I knew I probably wouldn't get a minyan, but I'd do *my* part—open the *shul* and show up.

One Friday night, there were just three or four men gathered, and I was about to start when a stranger walked in. He put on a yarmulke, took a seat in the back, and sat quietly through the service.

After davening, he introduced himself. "I'm Jeff," he said, reserved but polite.

"Will you be having services every Friday night?" he asked. I told him we would, and he nodded, seeming pleased.

From that night on, Jeff kept coming back. First, just Friday nights. Then, Shabbos morning too. A few months later, we noticed he had started growing a beard. Not long after, he began staying the whole Shabbos, so he wouldn't have to drive back and forth. Eventually, he even went to yeshiva for a while.

Watching Jeff's journey was inspiring—he was taking leaps and bounds in his commitment to Yiddishkeit.

And then, one Friday night, he didn't show up.

At first, I assumed he was just running late. But as time passed, I knew something was wrong. He had been so consistent, so dedicated—I was worried.

The next morning during davening, we found out.

Jeff, after a long, painful battle with addiction, had tragically relapsed and overdosed.

At the time, we were in the middle of renovating and moving into a new Chabad house. I reached out to Jeff's mother and asked if we could dedicate a room in his memory.

"I'd love that," she said. "But if you could do something for people in the Jewish community struggling with addiction, like my son was... that would mean everything to me."

We knew immediately that it was the right thing to do. And that's how "Jeff's Place" was born.

His memory now helps others like him—people battling addiction who need spiritual support to heal. AA programs emphasize spirituality as a critical part of recovery. The stigma around addiction or substance use abuse in the Jewish community causes Jews who struggle to feel ashamed and unwilling to open up. Jeff's Place, in a Chabad House, challenges the stigma and allows for those struggling to know that they're welcome here. It has helped hundreds of men and women find hope, purpose, and a way forward.

Jeff's fight didn't end with his passing. His legacy continues to save lives.

Michelle* had sent her son, Josh*, to our preschool for a year, but when the time came to re-enroll, she was hesitant.

"I don't know, Dena," she told my wife. "I could send him to public school. It would be so much cheaper, so much more convenient. Why would I put him back in your preschool?"

Dena didn't hesitate.

"Because a Jewish child deserves a Jewish education," she said simply.

Something about that quiet certainty struck Michelle.

Josh stayed.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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