

IllumiNations

Issue 165 | Parshas Tatzaveh/
Zachor 5875

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

Rabbi Mendy and Rivky Hertzel, Chabad of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia

The Rebbe's Bracha to Zambia

By Chaya Chazan

"Are there any Jews there?" we're often asked when people hear we're on shlichus in a small African country.

Surprisingly, yes. When the British colonized Zambia in the early 20th century, the fertile land and untapped potential attracted many seeking new fortune. Jews traveled north from South Africa and Zimbabwe's larger communities, spreading out throughout Zambia's cities. At the height of the Jewish communal growth, there were nine flourishing communities, each with their own shul and rav.

When Zambia declared independence from the British, everything changed, and many Jews, feeling that it was no longer safe for them, quietly packed up and left for safer shores. After the Communist uprising in the mid to late 1900's, even more Jews fled Zambia. By the time a third wave of panicked Jews left after an antisemitism uptick following the Yom Kippur War, Zambia was left with just a bare skeleton of its once thriving community.

There are now less than 200 Jews left in the country. Seven years ago, the final of the original nine shul buildings was sold, placing a seemingly impenetrable seal of doom on Zambia's Jewish community.

Luckily, even as a bochur, I felt a strong pull to African shlichus. I even brought up the possibility to my wife while we were dating and was thrilled to hear her answer that she'd be willing to move anywhere - yes, even to Africa.



A couple of days after our sheva brachos, we heard that Rabbi Ben-Tolila, the head shliach of sub-Saharan Africa, had announced he was opening a new shlichus position in Zambia l'iluy nishmas his wife, who had passed away not long before.

By the time I wrote to him, inquiring about the position, he told me someone had already applied. Disappointed, we began looking into other options. We received many offers, and had plenty of opportunities to visit various communities to see if it would be a fit, but something kept pulling us back to Africa. We just *knew* that's where we were supposed to be.

Finally, we received the green light, and, in Adar 2022, we moved to Zambia.

It was official. We'd been appointed the new shluchim of Zambia. Before we could even move there, though, there was a long list of things that had to be done. Fundraising, of course, was paramount, and I spent a lot of time going from shul to shul in New York, explaining what we were going to accomplish, and collecting funds.

At the same time, I couldn't help but feel anxious, and doubt our decision. There were so few Jews in Zambia, and it was so far away; so isolated. Was this the right choice? Was this what the Rebbe truly wanted?

One day, I got a call from a man named Alan Glazer. "I just heard you're moving to Zambia," he exclaimed in his signature, booming voice. "I myself was born and raised there, so I'm very happy to hear the news."

It was a pleasant surprise to meet a Jew who'd been born there, and I asked him how he'd heard about me.

"Oh, you went to my brother's shul yesterday to fundraise. He told me about it, and I had to call you up to congratulate you!" he explained. "You really should meet my brother, Yerachmiel. He has a lot of great stories to tell about Zambia."

I was eager to meet him myself. When I was in New York for the kinus, I called Yerachmiel and asked to meet.

Alan was right. Yerachmiel was a veritable font of information, and had a fascinating story to share:

I was born and raised in Zambia, and attended the Jewish school there. However, even I knew there was something missing. We barely celebrated any holidays, and didn't learn much about Yiddishkeit. Hungry for more, I decided to join a religious kibbutz in Israel.

After a few weeks of being on the kibbutz, I realized just how much education I was lacking. I knew I had to fill in the gaps with a stint in yeshiva if I would have any hope of catching on. I found my way to the yeshiva in Kfar Chabad. I loved every minute, and decided to become a Chabad chassid.

The Rebbe sent me many letters, encouraging and blessing me to spread Yiddishkeit in Zambia. Whenever I went home for Pesach or Tishrei, I made sure to reach as many Jews as possible and include them.

After a couple of years in yeshiva, I was planning on joining Kvatza, where Israeli bochurim stay on in New York after Tishrei and continue learning in 770. To my surprise, the Rebbe told me to go back to Kfar Chabad after Yom Tov, instead of staying in New York.

I scheduled a yechidus for my final days in New York. I wrote a letter explaining my history, and gave it to the Rebbe, standing nervously before him as he read it. The Rebbe told me to do all I could in Zambia to further Yiddishkeit. Even though I'd be staying in yeshiva, the Rebbe told me to write to the Zambian Jewish community and ask them to post my letters on the bulletin board for all to read. I could explain the inspiration and significance of each holiday, helping the community even from a distance.

I did that for a while, until my father asked me to come back home for a year to help out with the business. The Rebbe agreed, asking me to continue spreading Yiddishkeit while I was there. I rode my motorcycle all around the small villages, looking for Jews and helping them put on tefillin.

After a while, my father decided to close his business, and my family moved to South Africa. It's been many years, but Zambia still holds a special place in my heart.

I sat back in my chair, taking a moment to digest everything I'd heard. One thing struck me powerfully, and I asked if he still had the letters from the Rebbe.

"Yes, in my archive," he replied. "Feel free to take a look."

I rifled through the stack of yellowing papers, and soon found what I was looking for. It was incredible to see just the envelope, with its blue and red stripes around the sides, 770, Brooklyn, New York on one side, and an address in Zambia on the other. On the backside of one letter, the Rebbe had written the address and "Zambia" in his own handwriting.

I found a letter where the Rebbe gave Yerachmiel many brachos and encouragement to spread Yiddishkeit in

Zambia. Reading the letter clarified everything for me, and I was thrilled when Yerachmiel gifted it to me.

The Rebbe had thought about Zambia, cared about Zambia, more than 60 years ago, concerning himself with every aspect of shlichus there. Of course we were supposed to go there. All my doubts had vanished.

Charlie* left his hometown in Australia for Zambia, looking for new business ventures. His Judaism, or lack thereof, had never really bothered him before. Suddenly, very aware of his isolation, he felt a burning desire to connect with G-d.

"Where can I find a prayerbook or other Jewish book in this G-d forsaken country?" he asked a friend.

"Check if there's a Chabad house nearby," his friend suggested.

"Chabad? In Zambia?" Charlie replied, incredulous. "No way!"

But a simple Google search revealed there was, indeed, a shliach nearby.

Charlie immediately contacted me. I helped him wrap tefillin for the second time in his life, and gifted him a siddur and Chumash to continue his Jewish education.

Zambia is full of lonely lost souls like Charlie, and it is our privilege to find them and help them connect to Hashem.

I met Eyal* on the street, and he was happy to see a fellow Jew so unexpectedly in such a random part of the world. He asked if he could join us for the Pesach seder, and, of course, I agreed, but I saw that he was apprehensive about taking on any more, so I didn't pressure him to put on tefillin.

A couple of months later, on Yom Hazikaron, I called him and asked if he'd want to put on tefillin in honor of the special day.

"Sure, come to my house," he replied.

We chatted for a while, commiserating about the awful war and sharing Eyal's personal experiences in the Israeli army. Then I brought out my tefillin and offered them to him.

I helped Eyal wrap the straps around his forehead and arm, as he remained uncommonly quiet and still.

"You know," he said, removing the tefillin with suspicious moisture in his eyes, "this is only the second time I've put

on tefillin. My first was only because my Savta told me she wouldn't let me in her house unless I put them on. I did it only to oblige her, so I don't know what happened today. For some reason, it was incredibly moving and meaningful. Thank you."

As the Shlucha I have a unique insight and role to play. Everyone who comes to Zambia feels some level of isolation. While they may be apathetic, or even annoyed, to meet a rabbi back at home, they're usually overjoyed to see a fellow Jew out here in the middle of nowhere. They're much more receptive to Yiddishkeit here than they are at home.

It's not like a Chabad house in America. Here, we're all foreigners together. And every foreigner is aching for friendship and connection.

Like Meirav, a dear friend, fifteen years my senior but in the same stage of small kids at home. She showed me around the town my first year here, giving me the best recommendations, taught me how to make pitot for my Israeli events, while I offer her the opportunity to give a Shabbos experience to her kids where, for personal reasons, she cannot do it at home.

There's Jasmine, an American Jewish mom who grew up going to a Conservative Synagogue. She told me with a laugh, "We didn't manage a Jewish preschool back in Chicago, and here in Zambia I landed in Chabad!" She confided a few minutes later, "I never would have gone to Chabad... my parents cannot believe it." Now her sweet little Josh and Yali are part of our brand new Mommy and Me.

Originally, Noa* and her family weren't interested in connecting with us, even though they'd been to Chabad in other places they'd lived. But with her son's bar mitzvah coming up, and her grandmother pressuring them to celebrate it properly, she reluctantly called my husband to schedule bar mitzvah lessons.

While my husband taught her son to lein, Noa hung out with me in the kitchen or on the couch, chatting about anything and everything. Her younger son played with my toddler, and we enjoyed many cups of coffee over those few months.

Although originally indifferent, Noa is now our greatest ambassador. Whenever she meets another Jewish parent, she asks, "Have you been to Chabad? You must meet them!"

Having grown up in Alaska, with its challenging date line, I'm no stranger to unusual halachic shailos. However, life in Zambia has given us the opportunity to find our own.

We had to ask a rav what kind of non-kosher food we'd be allowed to buy, because it's impossible to ignore the dozens of children, stretching out their hands, begging for food everywhere you go.

Like other countries in Africa, we've been dealing with an electricity shortage. The entire grid is shut down for increasingly long periods, and it's been a difficult adjustment. Our Chabad house across from our home has a hospitality suite for Jewish businessmen. It's beautifully furnished, but without electricity, our guests often have to come over to shower, charge their phones, and survive the heat. In the near future, we hope to have a generator for the Chabad House so we can establish our first Jewish preschool, opening with two children - ours.

One of the biggest challenges we'll face is our children's chinuch. They are still young, and Alef Beis books and videos of the Rebbe are all they need, but soon they'll be school aged. I'm a graduate of online school myself and am very grateful for the education and virtual social life they provide, but knowing that my children will have to leave home at a young age is hard. Even now my toddler understands that his friends in Zambia are not quite in his world, they don't know his pesukim and niggunim, and he definitely feels a lack.

Shlichus in sub-Saharan Africa certainly has its challenges, but it is the greatest joy to be here carrying out the Rebbe's vision, and simply the best gift I can give to my children.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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