

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 Mendy and Mushkie Kesselman, Chabad of Frisco, Frisco, TX

A Collaborative Klal

By Chaya Chazan

I grew up proud to be a shlucha in Plano, Texas. My parents, Rabbi Mendel and Rivka Block, moved to the small suburb of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex while it was still in its early stages of development. Their shlichus grew along with the city, until both were flourishing in their own right.

There was always something to do or someone to meet in our Chabad house. My parents empowered us to be involved and take initiative in their shlichus. We tutored kids in Hebrew reading, taught in the Hebrew school, were counselors in the Gan Yisroel day camp, and became friends with the community.

As I grew older and left home, the Dallas - Fort Worth metroplex was booming. Developers frantically constructed more and more homes, moving north as each building filled up faster than they could build it. Soon, Plano was filled to the max, and developers moved north, to Frisco. The tiny suburb was starting to attract young families and professionals that were priced out of Dallas proper. My parents began receiving calls from people in Frisco and even farther north. They did all they could to help, even traveling to Frisco every so often to host events locally, but it was clear that Frisco would soon grow as large as Plano had, and would need its own set of shluchim.



After my husband and I got married, we were thrilled to join my parents and siblings in Texas, setting up Frisco's first Chabad house.

Baruch Hashem, over the last ten years, Frisco has become a populous, fast-growing city, and we are honored and privileged to keep up with the demand of its Jewish population, offering shiurim, Shabbos meals, minyanim, and more.

We had the model of Plano's rapid growth to assure us that Frisco would be headed that way as well, but it was still unsettling to move to a city with -at that point- such a small population. How many Jews even lived there? And would we be able to find them?

Our moving date was still a few weeks ahead of us, and we were living with my parents in Plano. That Shabbos, a visitor attended shul, and told us he was visiting Texas for the bris of his new grandson.

"Mazal tov!" my father wished him. "Where do your children live?"

"Oh, in a small town not far from here called Frisco," he answered.

My husband and I exchanged glances. Our first contacts in Frisco!

A few weeks later, it was finally moving day. While we directed the moving men on which boxes to unload in each room, the phone rang in the Plano Chabad house.

"Can I please get some mezuzahs?" Roger*, the person on the phone asked.

"Sure! Where do you live?"

"In Frisco," he answered.

"Amazing! The new shluchim to Frisco literally just arrived! They can help you!"

When Roger called us, the incredible hashgacha pratis put all our fears to rest. Clearly, Hashem wanted us in Frisco.

Not only were Roger and his family our second contacts in the city, they were also instrumental in helping us find and meet many other Jewish families.

Even shluchim in the most remote locations know that they are never alone. They are part of an extraordinary family - the Rebbe's global network of shluchim. We are all united in one cause: to bring Jews closer to Hashem. Lia's* journey to Judaism is a testament to the power of this shared goal.

Enter Shluchim #1: A family from South Africa brought their child to Dallas for a medical emergency. As a South African myself, I knew the family well and was happy to help them with meals and visits. They stayed in a hotel in downtown Dallas, close to the hospital. One day, the shliach called me, sounding very excited.

"Mendy, guess what? We just met the manager of the hotel, Cindy*. She's Jewish *and* she lives in Frisco!"

"Wow! I'll give her a call right away!" I answered.

When I called Cindy, (now acting as Shliach #2), she was happy there was a Chabad nearby, and promised to stop by one day. While we were chatting, she mentioned her daughter, Lia, who was about to leave to attend university in Columbia, Missouri.

"That's great! A friend of mine runs Chabad at Mizzou! Lia should definitely check them out!" I told her.

I quickly texted my friend, Rabbi Avraham Lapine (Shliach #3) about Lia, urging him to look out for her.

Over the next few years, I caught glimpses of Lia in Rabbi Lapine's pictures, and I was happy to see they'd found each other after all.

Four years later, I got a call from an unknown number.

"Hello, my name is Lia," said the caller. "I just graduated college and am moving back home to Frisco. I was very close with the Lapines in Mizzou, and I'd like to continue my connection to Chabad. Can we meet?"

"Lia," I chuckled. "We're way past that! I was the one who connected you and the Lapines!"

Lia stayed for a short while in Frisco and was very involved in our Chabad house the entire time she was here. She then moved to a larger city, where she joined the YJP community (Shluchim #4).

This is the fulfillment of the Rebbe's vision: an internationally interconnected grid, all united with one purpose: to help Lia strengthen her connection with Hashem.

"I just met a Jew from Frisco!" a friend from Crown Heights told me, excitedly. "His name is Simon Frisch*. He introduced himself to me while I was waiting to board my flight home. You've got to call him!"



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"Do you have his number or email?" I asked.

"No.... but I'm sure you can find him!" my friend encouraged me.

It took some effort, but I finally found Simon. He was cautiously happy to hear from me, and I invited him to meet up for coffee soon.

"Yes, yes," Simon answered, vaguely. "One of these days..."

Whenever I tried to set a date with him, he gave me the same vague answers. Finally, I decided enough was enough. One Friday morning, I went to his house with a freshly baked challah wrapped elegantly. Simon didn't seem as though he was ready to entertain any visitors, but he welcomed me in nonetheless. That ice-breaking meeting was the beginning of a long, fruitful friendship.

Simon told me how he'd closed the door on Judaism thirty years earlier.

"When I married my non-Jewish wife, my family sat shiva for me," he told me, a sad, mournful smile deepening the furrows in his brow. "It felt final; absolute. I turned around and never looked back. I haven't been in a synagogue since."

I met with Simon many times, learning with him and reminding him how to put on tefillin. He was receptive to everything and eager to learn more. When we celebrated my son's bris, Simon attended, crossing the threshold of a shul for the first time in thirty years.

"Good afternoon, Rabbi Kesselman. My name is Abe*. Are you an Orthodox rabbi?" asked the stranger on the phone.

"Yes; I am. How can I help you?"

"I'm scheduled for a complicated surgery in a few weeks, and I want to make sure all my affairs are in order - just in case," he explained. "I was finalizing my will with my lawyer, who happens to be an Orthodox Jew. He suggested that I include a clause in my will that any lifesaving measures and end of life care will follow halachah. I need to include an Orthodox rabbi so the hospital will have someone to contact with questions. Can I put you down?"

We arranged to meet at his house later that night. Based on what he'd told me, I knew that while he was on board for including the clause, his wife - who'd be the one making decisions if the worst came to pass - was the one who needed to be convinced.

I explained that Judaism is more than just a set of rules. It's a way of life. A Jew commits themselves to following G-d's commandments, even when it goes against their feelings and desires. Even under hard and tragic moments, it's always about putting aside our own thoughts and feelings and submitting ourselves to following a Higher Power. After some back and forth, she finally agreed.

Abe shared his background, explaining that he'd grown up knowing he was Jewish, but little else. The temple he attended didn't require much in the way of ritual, so he was unfamiliar with many of the mitzvot. As we were talking, I asked Abe if he'd put on tefillin that day.

"I've never put on tefillin before," he admitted.

"It's nighttime now, so unfortunately, it's too late for today," I told him. "But I'd be happy to come back tomorrow morning and help you put them on."

Abe agreed, and we parted ways until the next morning.

As a shliach, I've put tefillin on countless individuals, in various different settings and circumstances. But when I entered Abe's home the next morning, the very atmosphere stopped me in my tracks. Abe's face was solemn, and he placed a carefully reserved yarmulka on his head with reverence. It was clear that this meeting had been on his mind since the moment he woke up. He'd spent the morning waiting for me, preparing himself spiritually and emotionally to perform this mitzvah for the first time. He even told me that his wife, now at work, had called to check in on him and had asked if he was "ready for the tefillin." Most other times I'd helped someone put on tefillin, there was a sense of casualness or randomness to the encounter. Abe's steady regard and awe for the mitzvah inspired me to don my own tefillin with more care and love from then on.

Baruch Hashem, Abe's surgery went off without a hitch, and he's become quite involved with the Chabad house and community. He's also put on tefillin many more times since that first memorable experience, and still dons them with a sense of wonder and solemnity.

Rabbi Zalman Tiechtel, shliach in Lawrence, Kansas, texted me a selfie of himself helping a man put on tefillin. I recognized the man as the father of one of my community members, and I immediately texted him.

I have a picture to share with you, I wrote. But I'll only share it on condition that you agree to copy whatever you see in the picture.

His curiosity must have got the best of him, because he agreed. I showed him the picture and followed up with an invitation to meet and put on tefillin.

A deal is a deal! I reminded him. He kept up his part of the deal, and I was able to send Rabbi Tiechtel a reply - a selfie of myself putting tefillin on the son!

One morning, I answered the door to find a man standing on the doorstep, looking confused.

"Is this the synagogue?" he asked, hesitantly.

"Yes! Please come in! How can I help you?" I asked.

"I'm a truck driver," he explained. "Just a few days ago, I was driving my route, and I guess I must've crossed into some bad territory, because a bullet came out of nowhere and whizzed right past me! It only missed me by a couple of inches!"

"When I told some friends how closely I'd escaped death, they told me I should go to the synagogue to say a special thanksgiving prayer."

"Wow! What a miracle! Yes; there is a special blessing called Hagomel. If you come back on Shabbos, we'll have a minyan, and I can call you up to the Torah so you can recite it."

The man returned that Shabbos and recited the bracha.

"Now that I'm here," he mentioned. "Can we speak about planning my son's bar mitzvah?"

Through the bullet that missed, he made sure his son *didn't* miss his bar mitzvah!

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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