

IllumiNations

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

Rabbi Herschel and Chana Finman, Jewish Ferndale, Ferndale, MI

Reuse, Recycle, Repurpose

By Chaya Chazan

My journey to Yiddishkeit began in high school calculus. Every time my teacher mentioned “infinity” and its mathematical properties, I wondered, *Does that mean infinity is attainable? That it may be a process longer and harder than humans can endure, but that there is a process?*

My parents were traditional, and we lived upstairs from my Bubby, who kept many of the mitzvos, but G-d, Torah, and Judaism were little more than abstract ideas to me. My science teacher, attempting to teach us the rudiments of quantum mechanics, unknowingly gave me the final push I needed: when I questioned *why* the equations worked the way they did, she could only shrug and say, “That’s how G-d created it.” If even *science* didn’t have all the answers, I had to find G-d.

My five years of Hebrew school made me feel quite the expert in Judaism, so I began eagerly searching other religions, hoping to find the answers to quieten the storm in my soul. None of them did. I was beginning to research Buddhism, and was enjoying what I was learning, when a young Lubavitch couple moved into my Bubby’s now vacant apartment. Casual greetings soon turned into much more, and I visited every Friday night, enjoying deep philosophical debates over chocolate cake and tea. Some of his arguments referred to texts and

ideas I was unfamiliar with, so, determined to be on equal footing, I looked up every book he referenced, starting with Tanya and the weekly parsha.

While I furthered my Jewish education and began attending shul weekly, I was also keeping up with my Buddhist studies. I was even thinking of booking a trip to Thailand in the near future. One day, I commented to my Lubavitch neighbor that Chassidus and Buddhism were very similar in many ways.

“Why fly all the way to Thailand if you have the same thing right here?” he reasoned. I couldn’t argue. He registered me for a Shabbaton in Crown Heights, promising me I’d find it a life-changing experience. I was hesitant, but allowed myself to be convinced.

While enjoying the Shabbos meal at my Crown Heights hosts, the phone rang. They all ignored it, but it continued ringing, over and over. My grandmother, who kept Shabbos, had often picked up the phone when it rang multiple times, reasoning that “it was probably important.” When the phone rang yet again, I asked my host if he would answer it.

“What if it’s important?” I asked.

“What if it’s not?” he smiled, and lifted another forkful of chocolate to his mouth, serene and unbothered.

His words left me dumbfounded, glued to my seat. *He’d reached infinity*, the goal I’d been searching for all these years!

Within two months of graduating high school, I was enrolled in Yeshivas Tiferes Bachurim.

I stayed there for a few years before moving on to other yeshivos. After my wife and I got married, we moved to Melbourne, Australia for kollel. Four years later, we returned to New York. I went to 770, took out a sefer, and began to learn. Rabbi Itche Meir Kagan AH approached me.

“You’re Finman,” he stated. “Do you want to come to Detroit? We need someone to run adult education in our Chabad house.”

It was exactly what I was looking for. It was the Chassidus and the learning that had drawn me in the first place, and I was

thrilled to put all my years of learning to good use. We moved to Detroit a few weeks later, taking over responsibility for all adult shiurim, chavrusa learning, and classes in the city.

After a few years, we began working on independent projects, though we stayed in Detroit. I arranged the first business lunch-hour shiur, bringing in speakers for a crowd of businessmen in downtown Detroit during their midday break. I also started a radio show called *Jewish Hour*, as well as virtual shiurim on the weekly parsha.

Eleven years ago, we moved to a Detroit suburb called Ferndale and opened a Chabad house there.

Jewish Ferndale is unique. Every program, class, and event we have began because the community asked for it. We don’t come with our own agenda and invite them to follow along. They lead; they tell us what they need.

One of the most special requests we received was for a community garden. Baruch Hashem, we have a large tract of land on our property that was perfect for this project. We grow a large variety of local plants and produce and our community is always welcome to help with the gardening, or just to sit and enjoy the green oasis. Every meal served at our table, even in winter, utilizes ingredients grown right in our backyard. We also have a bird sanctuary and a converted store-room that serves as a quiet observatory.

We want to show our community that not only *can* Torah-observant Jews be environmentally conscious and sustainable, but that a Torah way of life *encourages* such a lifestyle. We use our garden to teach about sustainable living and are proud of our farm-to-table menu.

At Jewish Ferndale, we encourage everyone to reuse, recycle, repurpose. When we replaced our garage doors with glass panes to turn it into an art studio, those doors became the basis of our raised garden beds. The beds not only gave the doors new life, they also make gardening accessible for the elderly and disabled, who can sit comfortably in a chair while they prune and plant to their hearts’ content.

This underscores our mission: to help Jews in Ferndale find their purpose.

Our first event in Ferndale was a public menorah lighting. I made sure to meet with the city council members, asking for permission to set a large menorah up on city property. The question went up for a vote, where the decision was unanimous. We were granted permission to put up the menorah in one of the city squares.

The menorah was over 10 feet tall, and made of heavy aluminum. It was difficult to maneuver at the best of times, but with the winter wind blowing snow into my face, it was virtually impossible. As I struggled to find the correct pieces and lift the heavy frame into place, a firetruck screeched to a halt beside me.

“We’re here to set up your menorah!” the fireman told me. The well-trained team managed the task quickly, and the menorah was built better - and safer - than I could have done on my own.

The public menorah lighting drew a crowd of over 50 participants, even though it was our first event there and we hadn’t met many people in the community yet. It told us that there



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was a real need for a Chabad house there, and we were ready to fill that void.

I really wanted to open a shul in Ferndale to establish ourselves and to serve as the foundation and center of our community. *Wait, my wife advised. Let them ask for it.*

A short while later, a few community members asked if we could host Tishrei davening in our home. The makeshift shul, jokingly called Beis-Ment, was formed, filling the needs of the community as they saw them.

Our whole shlichus works like that. We ask people what they need and find a way to make it happen. One summer, young mothers were complaining that their children were all registered in camp and were busy all day, but they were bored! So we opened a week-long "Day Camp for Mothers," an unusual version of the typical Gan Yisroel.

I knew Jerry's* parents and grandparents, and had been learning with him for a while as well. When I organized a trip to New York to get dollars from the Rebbe, Jerry joined the group.

A generous Crown Heightser hosted us for lunch, and I organized a speaker to prepare the group for the experience they were about to face. I wanted them to understand and appreciate what it meant to meet the Rebbe face-to-face and to treasure the moment and the dollar for the incredible bracha it was.

Jerry looked thoughtful as we discussed what was and wasn't appropriate to ask the Rebbe in those precious few seconds. I could guess what he was thinking. He'd applied to many medical schools and had received nothing but rejections. There were only two schools he hadn't heard back from yet - one local, and one out of the country. He really wanted to stay local, and was praying to hear back from the local university soon.

As Jerry passed by the Rebbe, he took a deep breath and blurted out, "Rebbe, can I please have bracha to get accepted to medical school in America?"

The Rebbe gave him a piercing glance so penetrating, I felt a chill up my spine. The Rebbe handed him a dollar, giving him a bracha to hear good news. The Rebbe then paused, and again, threw him an intensely incisive look, and added, "Spiritually as well."

The entire encounter had lasted no more than 10 seconds, but Jerry emerged, shaken. He immediately crossed the street to the Judaica store. He bought tzitzis, tefillin, and a yarmulke.

"That's it," he said. "I'm in. I'm following Torah, 100%."

His reversal was astonishing in its suddenness, but, having seen how the Rebbe looked at him, I understood.

A few weeks later, Jerry received an acceptance from the local university, and went on to achieve great success exactly as the Rebbe blessed him: he not only became a prolific doctor, he is also an ehrlich, committed Torah Jew, and a respected member of his community.

We're very proud of our garden which grows many varieties of local plants. The community is always invited to relax in the green oasis or to help with the gardening if they wish. We also use the fresh produce in the kitchen, creating healthy, nutritious, and deliciously fresh recipes for Shabbos. Anytime we offer food, we always include a vegan option as well, and have had many take us up on it.

My wife was excited to meet a Jewish vegan chef who was able to teach her some new tips and tricks in vegan cooking. They even planned a collaboration, where we'd host a vegan Shabbos, catered by the chef. We invited those we knew who'd appreciate it, and the chef invited his friends as well.

Before the meal began, my wife gathered all the women and guided them in lighting the candles and making the bracha. As the women waved their arms in three welcoming circles, another guest arrived. She was an elderly woman, dressed in a chic ensemble that made her seem far younger. She stopped short at the sight of the women waving their arms around the candles.

"What's all this?" she asked in confusion.

"We're lighting Shabbat candles to usher in the Shabbos queen," my wife explained. "Have you ever lit candles before?"

"No," the woman said. "But it looks fascinating!"

It was surprising that she'd never come across Shabbos candles at her age, and we were curious to understand.

Sylvia*, as she introduced herself, quickly explained. Her mother had been radically anti-religious and refused to give her daughter any religious experience whatsoever. Sylvia herself had never been in a synagogue before - not because she'd inherited her mother's antipathy, but because religion was simply not something she ever thought about.

"I'm here because I'm friends with the chef," she said. "I'd have never come to a Jewish synagogue, but I couldn't refuse his invitation."

"Would you like to light Shabbat candles?" my wife asked. "It's not too late yet."

Sylvia's eyes lit up. "I'd love to!" she said. "It's incredible to think of everything that's led up to this moment, giving me the opportunity to do this mitzvah for the first time!"

I had a weekly Tanya class, attended by people from all walks of life. Randy* came every week, and we became good friends. He was a radio show host in Detroit, broadcasting a travel show every week.

One day, he told me that the Sunday 11:00 - 12:00 slot at his station had just become available.

"Would you think of hosting a weekly radio show?" he asked.

I laughed aloud. "It's been on my bucket list ever since I turned 11!" I told him. "When my voice changed, I was told I had a great radio voice, and I practiced advertising lines in my spare time. I'd love to do it!"

A few weeks later, the Jewish Hour was broadcasting weekly, and has been going strong ever since. It's been over 30 years, but there's always more Torah inspiration to share!

One memorable interview from a recent radio show was with Mitch Herman*. He was inspired by Krakow's *Ride for the Living*, a 60-mile bike tour, beginning in Auschwitz and ending at the Krakow Jewish Center. He organized a bike tour in Detroit with the same mileage, hoping to raise money for Krakow's Jewish community.

It was a great interview, and I called him after we finished taping the show to thank him for coming on.

"Can I set up a tefillin booth at your event?" I asked.

"For sure!" Mitch answered. "It's all about keeping Judaism alive, so a tefillin booth fits right in!"

There were over 150 riders registered for the event, so within half an hour, we put tefillin on over 100 people!

Now *that's* a marathon!

The Rebbe once told me to "do the things that no one else is doing." We've been doing our best to fill the hollow niches we find.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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