

IllumiNations

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.  DollarDaily.org

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

*Rabbi Schneur Zalman and Chanie Oirechman,
Chabad Lubavitch of the Panhandle, Tallahassee, FL*

A Capitol Shlichus, Part I

By Chaya Chazan

My parents went through some measures of mesiras nefesh to be close to the Rebbe. My father had to spend a significant period of time fundraising for his shlichus in Eretz Yisroel. At first, he left us at home, but when the separation grew too difficult, he asked the Rebbe what to do.

The Rebbe told him to ask the advice of experienced friends, who told him to bring us all over. We left everything we had in Eretz Yisrael and moved to Crown Heights. Though finances were tight and it was hard to be so far away from everyone and everything they knew, my parents understood why they were making such a great sacrifice. At farbrengens, the Rebbe spoke about "Mach duh Eretz Yisroel," "Make your current place into Eretz Yisroel," and my father felt as though it was encouragement directed towards him personally.

I was just a bochur, so although I remember hearing my mother crying some nights, I was enjoying every minute being so close to the "action." We went to every farbrengen, received every kuntres, stood in line for dollars, and spent a

year living life on the Rebbe's timeline. It was exhilarating! Those memories still keep me going.

Having been on the other end of things, I realized that being far away from family and volunteering for a life of challenges has its benefits as well! If you know why you're doing it, it makes all hardships fade into mere annoyances.

While my wife and I were dating, I told her I wanted a shlichus where I'd be starting from scratch. I relished the challenge of building a community from nothing. Baruch Hashem, she agreed, and we got engaged and married shortly thereafter.

Thanks to Rabbi Yossi Biston, we were able to move from Eretz Yisroel to Parkland, Florida on a temporary shlichus until we found a permanent position. We knew there was no shliach in the state capital, Tallahassee, so we got approval from Rabbi Korf, the head shliach of Florida, to start a Chabad house there.

It was exactly what I'd had in mind: we knew absolutely no one in the city and had nothing to start us off. We were faced with the challenge of building a shlichus from scratch.

Our area covers the entire Florida panhandle, so, while we were based in Tallahassee, we often had to travel hours to Pensacola, Panama City, and other locations. Baruch Hashem, in the last 25 years, we've been able to bring other shluchim down to cover those cities full time!

When we first moved to Tallahassee, it was daunting and overwhelming. Of course, there were Jews around. But where to start? What to do first? Was this even the right place for us? I asked Hashem to give us a sign that we were where we needed to be.

I took a deep breath and decided, *first things first. We need a house.*

My wife's cousin had gone to school in Tallahassee, so we asked her for recommendations on where to begin our search. We were directed to a row of apartment buildings.

A young man gave us a tour of the unit. He told us he was a college student, and kept eyeing us in wide-eyed surprise when he thought we weren't looking. Finally, he spoke up, although he was still hesitant.

"I was just speaking with my mom the other day," he said. "She encouraged me to explore my Judaism and go to synagogue. Do you know any synagogues around?"

I'd gotten my sign, loud and clear.

We'd arrived in Tallahassee with the clothes on our back and not much else. We had no choice but to get right to work.

We didn't have a computer, but we had a typewriter. We bought some labels from the store, and equipped ourselves with the latest copy of the White Pages. We sat at our kitchen table, with me leafing through the phone book, reading out Jewish-sounding names, and my wife clacking away at the keyboard, typing out labels for each family.

Purim was coming up, so we decided to host a Purim party. We went to the library, armed with a floppy disc from the Shluchim Office, loaded with basic "how to" guides and templates for holiday event flyers. We customized the Purim party template, printed it out, and mailed it to our painstakingly typed list.

Baruch Hashem, the party was a great success! We met so many people, and no longer felt like we were swimming in the deep end with no life jacket. Our first month of shlichus had given us many challenges, but also shown us how rewarding it could be.

On a high from our Purim event, we enthusiastically began planning a communal Pesach seder. The reservations were pouring in, and our shopping list kept getting longer and longer.

We didn't have any money saved up, as our move to Tallahassee had been somewhat impulsive. We counted on our good friends, MasterCard and American Express, to fund the sederim, and swiped our card again and again without paying much attention to the running totals.

Baruch Hashem, the sederim were beautiful! Many people from the community joined us, and it was a great opportunity for us to get to know them, and for them to get to know one another.

As we counted the days of sefira, there was another accounting taking place. MasterCard sent us a thick envelope whose bottom line was staggeringly insurmountable. We had no sponsors, no generous donor with whom we'd built a strong friendship - we had nothing.

As spring shifted into summer, my doubts rose back to the surface: *did Hashem want us in Tallahassee? Had we done the right thing? If it was where we were supposed to be, how would we overcome this hurdle?*

I'd never missed a Gimmel Tammuz in New York since the Rebbe's passing in 1994, but our financial situation made it impossible to buy a ticket. Then I remembered I had accumulated points with TWA, and could buy a ticket with those.



I spent a long time in the Ohel writing my pan. I explained everything to the Rebbe - what we'd accomplished thus far, our current situation, and my doubts. I knew there were only two possible outcomes: either there would be a miracle, or I'd return home empty handed, and our shlichus would be at an end.

Just outside the Ohel, I bumped into an old friend.

"How are things going?" he asked, with a smile.

I grimaced in reply.

"That bad, huh?" he replied, sympathetically. "I recently began a fund to help new shlichim as they start out. What's your monthly budget?"

I gave him a number that would cover our rent, utilities, and basic expenses, and he nodded. "I'll cover that amount for your first year," he said. "Hatzlacha rabba!"

I couldn't believe my ears! Again, I'd been granted the answer I sought: Yes! Even though we could no longer receive a direct response in the Rebbe's own writing, it was clear that the Rebbe wanted us on shlichus in Tallahassee.

At the beginning of our shlichus, we made sure to visit the Florida State Capitol. I wanted to make our presence official and inform the governor that we'd arrived. Unfortunately, he wasn't there at the time, but I asked the receptionist if there was anyone Jewish in the building.

"Actually, I do know someone who'd like to meet you!" she responded, excitedly. She called her friend, Karen, who came rushing down to the lobby. Karen was very close to the governor and held an important position on his staff. She'd attended Chabad in Miami, and was thrilled to hear we'd be opening a branch in Tallahassee. She called her husband to come outside to visit our Sukkah mobile, bentch the lulav and esrog, and make a bracha in the sukkah.

This was the start of a long and fruitful friendship. A few months later, just before Chanukah, Karen helped us arrange a menorah lighting in the governor's office! It's a tradition we've continued throughout the years.

Karen's influence helped us meet and form relationships with many government officials. Before each yom tov, I bring packages to the capitol, sharing our culture and community with our government officials.

One of the biggest challenges we've faced on shlichus is the lack of chinuch for our children. In the early 2000's, we joined the first iteration of Shluchim Online School with daily phone calls for our young children. Needless to say, it was extremely difficult.

We sent one of our children to Orlando, dropping them off on Monday, and making the four hour long drive back on Thursday to pick them up.

For another child, we opted for the slightly closer school in Jacksonville. It's three hours - each way - and we made the commute every day for a month before we were able to find a driver. During that month, I had very little time for anything else. Most of my day was spent in the car! Even though it was Tishrei, the busiest time of year for a shliach, I told myself that *this* was my shlichus. Everything else became second tier. My children's chinuch was my top priority. Incredibly, in that month, I saw tremendous brachos in our shlichus. Things happened without needing as much effort from me!

We sacrifice a lot for our children's chinuch, and are so proud of the amazing men and women they're becoming.

Tallahassee is home to Florida State University, so there's a large student population that we serve as well.

When Dylan* first started coming to Friday night meals, we were taken aback. His hair, tied in tight dreadlocks, trailed down his back, and he seemed to view everything from a distance, as if his mind was somewhere else. It was hard to imagine that he was getting anything from us other than a hearty home-cooked meal.

Despite our reservations, Dylan continued to return, week after week. He even stayed for the farbrengen after the meal, and really enjoyed niggunim. Every week, I'd teach him a niggun and he would close his eyes tightly and sing, straight from his neshama.

"Rabbi, guess what?" he shared one Shabbos. "I started wearing a kippah on campus this week. Sometimes, it was really hard. Whenever I felt like it was too much and I wanted to take my kippah off, I'd close my eyes and think of the video I saw of the Rebbe singing Tzama Lecha Nafshi. I'd replay that video over and over in my mind. It gave me the strength and courage to continue wearing my kippah proudly."

Dylan's path continued to weave about for a while. Today, Dylan is a dayan in a large Jewish community, and it all began singing niggunim at our Shabbos table.

When I first met Jason*, he was dating a non-Jewish girl. After coming to our Chabad house a few times, he decided to break up with her. He then met Rachel*, who'd also just broken up with her non-Jewish boyfriend, and they began dating.

I challenged Jason and Rachel to take on shomer negiah for the month of Tishrei as a special hachlata. They were nervous, but finally agreed to it.

On Simchas Torah, we had a large group of students sitting around and farbrenging. Jason spoke, perhaps louder than he intended to, about how his month was about to come to an end, and how he couldn't wait to resume the status quo with Rachel. I quickly got up and poured a cold cup of water over his head.

"I saw a fire!" I said, almost jokingly. "I needed to put it out."

Jason later admitted that the teasing reprimand had been exactly what he'd needed.

When Jason graduated college and began working a 9-5, he'd come to the Chabad house every morning before work to learn with me. We studied Tanya together, and it made a lasting impact on him. The next year, Jason enrolled in Maayanot, a yeshiva for baalei teshuva, and completely turned his life around.

He is now a proud husband and father, raising a Jewish family according to Torah values.

We were very close to Nathan* throughout his years of schooling here, and stayed in touch even after he graduated. He attended a yeshiva and began living a Torah true life.

He met a girl from Los Angeles, and, after they married, they settled there. He was offered a job on a college campus as the "Jewish liaison."

"I have two pictures hanging in my office," he told me. "One is of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The other is of you. They both inspire me every day. When I remember how sincere and genuine you were with all of us, and how much you influenced my life, I want to try to be the Rabbi Oirechman to someone else."

**Names changed to protect privacy*

DollarDaily.org

a Project of

**YadLShliach.org
and COLlive.com**

COL LIVE



**SUPPORT SHLUCHIM
THIS PESACH** *with*



DollarDaily.org

\$732+

DONATING PER DAY

\$743868+

ALREADY DONATED TO ORGANIZATIONS

\$266450+

TO BE GIVEN OVER THE NEXT 365 DAYS

Join 700+ people giving just \$1 a day at DollarDaily.org and make a lasting impact!