

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

A Capitol Shlichus, Part II

By Chaya Chazan

Once again, the coffers were empty and debts were piling up. I had bills loudly demanding pay, but not two nickels to rub together.

I reminded myself of the story of the Baal Shem Tov, when he had to raise a large sum of money at once. He simply knocked on a rich man's door, leaving even before anyone answered. The Baal Shem Tov knew all that was needed was a hishtadlus. In the end, the rich man ran after him and begged him to take the money.

I was certain Hashem would send us the money. There wasn't even the slightest doubt in my mind. All I had to do was knock on some doors. I made two calls. The first person turned me down, and the second didn't answer, so I left a message for him.

I then carried on with my shlichus, going to the capitol and setting up a tefillin stand, as I usually do.

The next day, the second person called me back and pledged a nice sum of money. My bitachon was so certain, I took it as a matter of course. *Of course* Hashem would provide the money!

The next day, I checked my account balance to see if the money had been transferred yet. I was shocked to see *five times* what he'd promised already in my account! I quickly called to ask about it, but he was just as confused as I was. He hadn't even begun to transfer what he'd pledged!



At first, I thought it was a clerical error, but after some digging, I traced the donation back to another community member. For no reason whatsoever, he'd decided to donate a large sum of money.

Hashem knew which doors to knock on, even if I didn't.

After the 2019 shul shooting in Poway, California, Rabbi Goldstein used his time in the spotlight to mention the Rebbe's push for a "moment of silence" in public schools. It reminded me how important this idea was to the Rebbe, and how much the Rebbe spoke about it and encouraged others to implement it on a state or federal level. The Rebbe also promised many brachos to those who involved themselves in this endeavor.

I was inspired to make it happen in Florida. But the road to passing laws is long and complicated. I had to find a sponsor for the bill, and even after that was successfully accomplished, I had to speak about it many times before the State Senate and House of Representatives. Some senators were worried it crossed dangerously close to the separation between church and state, and despite my explanations to the contrary, the bill was not passed.

It took time, money, and energy that I didn't have, but I was determined to see it through. I formed a committee of shluchim, including Rabbi Yossi Denberg from Chabad of Boca Raton, to help. We found another sponsor for the bill and began the whole rigamarole once again. This time, the bill passed! It is now mandated in every Florida public school to begin the day with a moment of silence, when children are able to meditate and pray for anything they want. As the Rebbe explained, this brief moment sets the tone for the day and reminds the children of their overall goals.

Incredibly, after the bill was passed, my finances, which for years were mere steps from disaster, suddenly stabilized. Fundraising came easier, and it felt like a clog in a pipe had been mysteriously and miraculously cleared away.

We've kept good relationships with the governor's office over the years, meeting and forming friendships with each new governor in his turn. I accompanied Governor Scott and Governor Desantis on trips to Israel.

When Governor Desantis visited the Kotel, I explained that every country and state has an angel representing them on High. I advised him to pray for Florida's success and prosperity, since the angel would be accompanying him on his visit to this holy site.

A short while after we returned home, reports of a massive hurricane swept the state into panic. Miraculously, the winds dissipated the storm at the last moment, turning away what could have been a catastrophic event for the state.

Governor Desantis acknowledged the miracle, and credited his recent prayers at the Kotel with the cause.

After October 7, we held a vigil for our brethren in Eretz Yisrael. I gave a heartfelt and emotional speech in which I mentioned that "we fight darkness not with more darkness, but with light."

Neil*, a young college student, told me those words were what drew him to our Chabad house. Once he visited, he was enamored with what he saw and kept coming back.

After he graduated, he was interviewing for a position as a counselor for Jewish students at another university. The interviewer questioned him closely about his plans to care for the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of the students.

"Excuse me, Rabbi, but you forgot one thing," Neil spoke up bravely. "You haven't mentioned their spiritual wellbeing. Without caring for their spiritual state, everything else will fall to ruin."

"You're absolutely right!" the rabbi marveled. "Where did you get such innovative training?"

"At Chabad!" Neil smiled.

Jessica* wasn't Jewish, but she was interested in everything and asked endless questions. We humored her at first, but when we saw she was in earnest, we tried to be evasive. Eventually, when we saw Jessica was determined to convert despite our best efforts to dissuade her, we helped her enroll in a baalas teshuva seminary, so she could learn all the halachos.

Everything seemed to be going well, when, all of a sudden, Jessica changed her mind. She left the seminary, returned home to Tallahassee, and dropped contact with us.

It was a while before we heard from her again. She found out her mother had been adopted as a very young child. She painstakingly traced her mother's biological genealogy and found out she was born to Jewish parents!

There had never been any need for Jessica to convert. She rejoined our Chabad house with excitement and joy, and remains involved in all aspects of our community.



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As shluchim, we don't have private lives. Every moment belongs to our community. Every Shabbos, we eat our meal in shul, sharing it with anyone who wants to join. We don't even have a fleishig kitchen at home! Our Chabad house is literally our second home, and we spend as much time there as we spend in our private home.

We once spent a couple of weeks in Miami, renting out an Airbnb for our family. On Friday night, my wife set the Shabbos table with just enough settings for our family. Our kids were confused, and even upset.

"Look how nice this is!" I said, trying to insert some positivity. "We get to spend time together as a family and enjoy each other's company!"

"Tatty," said my 7 year old, tugging on my gartel. "I like it better with a big Shabbos. Can we go back to that?"

We aren't just our students' rabbi and rebbetzin for the few years that they're in college. We stay in touch with them and continue the relationship for many years afterwards!

I called David*, an alum from some years back, to thank him for a recent donation he'd made.

"Nu, David," I nudged. "What's going on with your tefillin?"

"I put them on once a week!" he told me.

"That's good," I replied. "But why not every day?"

With my encouragement, David agreed to push himself to put them on every day.

He joined the list of over 150 people who I text every day to remind them to put on tefillin.

Recently, Brody* dropped off that list. He no longer needs me to remind him to put on tefillin; he hosts a Zoom call with all his friends, during which they all put on tefillin together!

It was a very busy time. It was erev Shabbos, and we were preparing a huge Lag Baomer parade and party, as well as the bris of our week-old son. We were busy in the kitchen and the shul, making sure everything was going according to plan. Meanwhile, the kids were keeping themselves busy in the yard.

Everything was going as smoothly as could be, when a blood curdling shriek howled through the building. I immediately rushed outside and paled at the sight that met my eyes.

A well-meaning community member had dropped off a bonafide hunting bow, along with the corresponding ar-

rows, to serve as decor for our Lag Baomer party. The kids had gotten hold of it and somehow, an arrow landed directly in my son, Shmulie's eye. He was just a toddler and was screaming in pain.

We called an ambulance immediately, and I also sent a message to the Ohel, asking someone there to daven on my son's behalf.

The doctors gave us good news and bad news: the arrow had miraculously not penetrated into the brain, but our son had sustained heavy injury to the eye, and it was unlikely that he would ever regain vision.

He needed emergency surgery to remove the arrow and close the wound. While we waited for the surgeon, I sat down and wrote a long, detailed letter to the Rebbe. I found out the paramedic that had taken us to the hospital was Jewish, and I made sure to put tefillin on him. Then my wife and I both sat down to say Tehillim while Shmulie was wheeled away, looking even more fragile and small in the voluminous white sheets.

The surgery lasted over three hours, far longer than what we'd been told. The surgeon finally emerged with some good news.

"When I first saw how damaged the eye was, I was going to remove it," he told us. "But then I thought about my own 4-year-old. If there was any chance of saving his eye, I'd want his surgeon to do everything he could. So I did my best and I managed to save the eye."

This was the second piece of good news the doctors were able to give us, and we looked at both as open miracles.

We were able to take Shmulie home that day, heavily gauzed and bandaged, and celebrated the bris of his younger brother on Shabbos. We knew that we had an important decision to make: where would we continue treatment for the damaged eye?

The doctors in Tallahassee were pessimistic. Shmulie couldn't even perceive light out of his damaged eye, signifying damage too severe to treat. They recommended enucleation. We even traveled to a world-renowned retina specialist in Miami, but, after many tests, he gave the same suggestion.

"You have two weeks to decide," he told us. "There is a surgery we can try, but it carries a very small chance of success, and can cause further damage. I recommend removing the eye completely."

I decided to take Shmulie to New York to daven to Hashem at the Rebbe's Ohel. I wrote a long pan at the Ohel, asking for a bracha for a refuah shleima, and for guidance on what to do with Shmulie's eye.

My wife, back at home, was doing the same. As she composed a letter to the Rebbe in her mind, she received a call. The man on the phone told her he had received an eye injury when he was four years old, and the doctors had recommended removing the eye. His parents took him to Sunday dollars to ask for the Rebbe's guidance. The Rebbe held a dollar in front of his face and waved it slowly from side to side so the boy could follow along. The Rebbe told his parents not to remove the eye, and he eventually regained vision. The man offered my wife the dollar he'd received from the Rebbe.

My wife immediately called to tell me of the providential phone call. The eerie similarities in the story told us that this was the Rebbe's way of answering our question - that we should not remove the eye and that Shmulie would be okay. I returned to the Ohel to thank the Rebbe for giving us his bracha.

I then took Shmulie to a specialist in Los Angeles. He conducted a series of tests on Shmulie and concluded that there was hope! Shmulie was able to perceive light, which meant there was something salvageable. We scheduled the operation for a week later.

Before the surgery, I asked the doctor for two things: to put on tefillin beforehand, and to place the Rebbe's dollar under Shmulie's pillow for the procedure's full duration.

Baruch Hashem, the surgery was successful. Over the next year, Shmulie continued receiving treatments and his vision gradually improved. About ten months later, we went back to Los Angeles to visit the specialist for a checkup. He examined the eye closely and was satisfied with the recovery.

"I can't believe how well his eye has recovered!" the doctor said. "This miracle is almost enough to convince me to start keeping all the mitzvos!"

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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