

# 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

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## The Worst Best Thing, Chabad at the Shore Part II

By Chaya Chazan

**I'd grown quite attached to the little storefront we called our shul. Year by year, we remodeled it to fit our needs, and it became a haven of community, peace, and kedusha.**

Granted, it was situated behind a restaurant, and everyone that walked through smelled vaguely of crab and pork, but it was our home. In the winter months, when it was just locals, it was spacious... but in the summer months, when tourists visited in droves, it became a little more crowded. I knew we needed a bigger space, but it was virtually impossible to find property in a residential, beachfront, vacation city.

Eventually, the restaurant closed, and I hoped we'd be able to buy the property from the bank. Despite all my efforts, it fell through, time and time again. I was upset and annoyed - why didn't Hashem want this for us? Wasn't that the way forward?

One freezing December night, the frozen pipes had had enough. As we completed a refrain of Lecha Dodi, the pipes burst and water began gushing through the walls. We rushed to save the sefarim, piling them as high as we could as the water pooled around our ankles. Seeing that the water was rising even higher, we grabbed the Sefer Torah and as much as we could carry

and brought everything to my house, which, thankfully, was within the eiruv.

The shul was completely demolished. We were forced to use our basement for a time, but it wasn't ideal. The summer months, with their swarms of tourists, were fast approaching, and I was obsessed with finding a large building that could comfortably host our minyan.

I clicked endlessly on a website that listed retail space for sale, but the same two entries appeared every time. Neither of them were viable, and I spent almost every waking moment trying to find a creative solution.

One motzei Shabbos, I refreshed the website and was shocked and excited to see a brand new *third* entry! There was an abandoned church for sale in a great location. I knew it was our new shul; it had to be. There was no other option.

The price tag was far beyond our means, but that didn't matter. The community staged an intervention, telling me it was a hopeless dream and they couldn't - and *wouldn't* - be able to provide the necessary financial backing. That didn't matter.

Despite everyone telling me *not* to, with tefillos and bitachon, I signed the contract, and we proceeded with the purchase. In my mind, I had no other choice. This was our only way out. Through a long series of miracles, we fundraised the down payment. The building was in terrible disrepair and needed extensive work. We didn't have the funds for *that* either, but, somehow, through Hashem's grace and the Rebbe's brachos, we managed to renovate it into a gorgeous building, perfectly suited for our needs!

A few years later, we even bought a second church a few blocks away and transformed it into our youth center. Now, whenever I pass a church, my community members warn me to look away, scared I might try to buy it!

I thought the flood was the worst thing that could ever happen to us. In retrospect, it was the catalyst for amazing growth.

I admired Baruch\* for his single-minded determination to ensure his mother heard megillah every year. He was a baal teshuva, and his mother knew and cared very little for any part of Yiddishkeit, but he made sure she always heard the megillah. Every year, he'd ask me to arrange for someone to read it for her, or to pick her up and bring her to ours. After a few years, when she moved into a nursing home, the tradition continued.

Baruch's mother was sickly and elderly, and she passed away a few years later. When he called to share the news, I consoled with him and asked how I could help.

"The levaya will be on Tuesday in the Jewish cemetery," he told me. "Can you officiate?"

The cemetery was almost two hours away, and I had a packed schedule. He lived in a large Jewish community, much closer to the cemetery, and I knew there were any number of qualified rabbis who could officiate in my stead. I tried asking if he could find someone else, but he insisted it be me.

"Why?" I asked.

Baruch hesitated, and stumbled over his words. "I... have a sibling, Brett\*, who's... not traditional. My rabbi isn't used to dealing with such things, and I just don't want there to be a whole awkward *showdown* at my mother's funeral. I think we'd all feel more comfortable if you could do it."

I agreed, and rearranged my schedule. Brett showed up with *their* non-Jewish boyfriend, but I just conducted the service as smoothly as I could.

"That was a really beautiful, meaningful service," Brett told me afterwards. "I really connected to it - I'd love to explore that more. Can I join your synagogue for Shabbat services?"

I knew Brett's presentation might stymie some, but I reminded myself that externals are just that - *external*. Inside, Brett's neshama is just as pure and precious as any other, and they deserve the exact same love, attention, and care as anyone else.

Brett joined us many times over the next few months, and even began taking on small commitments in Shabbos and kashrus.

"I'm moving to another state," Brett told me one day. "I must tell you: I've been to *many* synagogues over the years, of all kinds. Yours is the first time I've ever felt completely comfortable and accepted for who I am.



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Can you direct me to a Chabad synagogue in my new city?"

I was asked to officiate a funeral for a dear member of the community. The funeral was well attended by all their friends and relatives, including one in a sea captain's uniform. Since he was a captain, he was asked to officiate as well. As I stood watching him, someone tapped me on the shoulder and said, "That's Captain Jake\*. He's a Catholic now, but I know for a fact that he was *born* Jewish."

After the ceremony, I approached Captain Jake and introduced myself.

"Are you Jewish?" I asked, wanting to confirm the rumors.

"Not anymore," he answered. "Years ago, I was on the brink of death. The hospital staff told me my hours were numbered, and asked if I wanted to see a clergyman. Of course, I asked for a rabbi. They came back a while later, telling me they'd contacted every rabbi in the vicinity, but none could come. They told me they had a Catholic chaplain on staff and asked if I wanted to see him. I really thought I was about to die, so I agreed.

"The chaplain was kind and friendly. He comforted me and said some prayers with me. Then he asked me to affirm my belief in his lord and savior. I was so thankful to him for ensuring I wouldn't die alone that I agreed. You can think whatever you want, but I recovered after that! I've been a devout Catholic ever since."

"Did you ever have a bar mitzvah?" I asked him.

"No," he admitted. "I always knew I was Jewish when I was growing up, but I wasn't very involved with the Jewish community."

"It's not too late!" I said, pulling out my leather tefillin pouch. "Would you like to put tefillin on now?"

"Rabbi, did you not hear my story? I'm no longer Jewish. I'm not interested," he answered.

My heart broke. This was a lost neshama, who'd grabbed onto the first thing that offered him warmth. There had been no rabbis available when he needed

them most; I refused to let myself be the next rabbi to let him down.

Quickly, I said the first thing that popped into my mind. "You know, Yoshke was Jewish," I blurted out. "He *definitely* put on tefillin. It wouldn't be crazy for you to put them on, too."

"I... guess you're right," he conceded. "I've never thought of it that way."

He stuck out his arm, and I helped him put on tefillin for the first time in his life.

After the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh in 2018, Davy\* unexpectedly showed up in shul.

"They're going after Jews in shuls now, huh?" he said, shaking his head. "I refuse to let a crazy anti-Semite win. I know you must be having a hard time getting a minyan these days. I promised myself I'd come to shul every Friday night from now on."

He'd never shown any interest before, but Davy was true to his word. He came every week, in the summer's heat and the winter snows. Throughout the off-season, when Friday night minyanim were hard to come by, I knew I could always rely on Davy.

After a few years, Davy got sick and was hospitalized. I visited him often, and brought tefillin along each time. Surprisingly, he gave in and agreed to put them on. I was there in his final moments, holding his hand as his breaths grew more ragged. I slowly recited Shema and Viduy with him as he weakly attempted to follow along.

Davy squeezed my hand feebly and looked me straight in the eye. "Rabbi, I'm going to ask you for an impossible favor," he rasped. "My daughter married a non-Jew, and my grandson knows nothing about Judaism. He's 11. I've tried asking her many times to give him a bar mitzvah, but she refuses to listen. Please... can you try to talk with her? They'll be at the funeral. I know she probably won't listen to you... but please try. My grandson needs a bar mitzvah."

He closed his eyes, and his breathing got heavier. The nurses asked me to step out. A few hours later, I was making funeral arrangements.

Sure enough, I met Davy's daughter and son-in-law at the funeral, as well as their 11-year-old son, Zach\*. Funerals are, generally, very overwhelming and emotional, but Davy's voice kept repeating in my mind every time I looked at Zach. I knew I had to try.

"Hey - Zach, right? I'm Rabbi Avrohom. What sports do you like?" I asked, trying to be as light and casual as possible. We struck up a conversation, and Zach was open and friendly.

Later on, Zach started asking questions unusual for an 11-year old. He had *many* deep thoughts on G-d and religion, and I could see how much his neshama thirsted for connection.

A couple of days later, I approached Zach's parents. "I don't want to seem pushy, but I must share this with you," I told them, in a quiet, but sincere voice. "The very last words your father spoke were a request for Zach to have a bar mitzvah. You don't need to sign up for a membership, or pay any dues. Just bring him to shul, and we'll give him an aliyah and help him put on tefillin."

It took some time, but they were finally convinced. Zach celebrated his bar mitzvah in our shul. He also grew more connected, joining our CTeen club, and teaching everyone how to put on tefillin themselves. He even led sports in our summer camp!

I know now to never assume someone is incapable of making a change and becoming closer to Hashem. Every Jew's true desire is to connect to their Heavenly father.

*\*Names changed to protect identity*

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