

IllumiNations

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

Rabbi Shlomo and Nechama Rothstein, Chabad at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

Walking the Walk, Chabad at Vanderbilt University Part I

By Chaya Chazan

My wife grew up in Berkeley, California, where her parents assisted the Ferrises with their shlichus. For her, shlichus was a familiar and comfortable way of life, and it was clearly something she wanted for herself.

For me, the process was a little more lengthy. I grew up in Baltimore, where, though the Chabad community was small, I had access to every kosher amenity available. My only exposure to shlichus was my father's stories of how his life had changed, through his interactions with shluchim on campus when he was in college and beyond. He spoke about them with awe, love, and respect, but I just didn't see myself following that path.

When I was in yeshiva in Chicago, I became friendly with Berel. He'd been through lots of ups and downs, and lived on the fringes of Chicago's Chabad community. We struck up an uncanny friendship.

I began learning with him, and one time, I was passionately expounding on a talk given by the Rebbe about shlichus. Berel looked at me with a raised eyebrow and commented, "If you're so passionate about it, why don't you do it?"

Those words stayed with me for a long time.

The yeshiva also asked many shluchim to farbreng with us at various times, and I was impressed by the vitality and excitement they had in carrying out the Rebbe's vi-

sion. *That wouldn't be such a bad life to live*, I thought to myself.

As I got older, I experienced shlichus for myself. One Chanukah during my yeshiva years, I got permission to light menorah with college students on campus. I loved it, and felt my work had an important impact at a crucial crossroads in life.

After my wife and I got married and started thinking about applying for shlichus positions, college campuses seemed like the perfect option. My wife had grown up with it, being so near Berkeley College, and I was inspired both by my father's stories and my own experiences on campus shlichus.

I called a friend who served on the vaad of Chabad on Campus and asked him to tell me which college campus needed a shliach the most.

"Speak to Rabbi Yitzchak Tiechtel in Nashville and Rabbi Levi Klein in Memphis about Vanderbilt," he told me.

"I'd love to meet and see if it'd be a good fit," Rabbi Tiechtel said.

So we hopped in a car and drove down to Nashville. Baruch Hashem, everything fell into place, and it seemed like a match made in heaven!

Vanderbilt, established over 200 years ago in Nashville, Tennessee, ranks among the top 15 schools in the country, and is an extremely prestigious university.

In the early 2000's, the board was brainstorming ways to edge their way into the competitive college rankings. They analyzed the successes of the top schools and realized one common denominator: their Jewish population. They also knew that the key to creating a diverse and enriching environment was to ensure Jewish students felt comfortable on campus.

They built a Hillel house, and began recruiting from areas with heavily Jewish populations, and managed to grow the Jewish population on campus from a mere 2% to 15%! There are close to 1,300 Jewish students enrolled in Vanderbilt, and it is now considered one of the best university options for Jewish students.

It was thrilling to unpack our boxes in a tiny, two-bedroom apartment at the edge of the campus, knowing we'd finally achieved our goal - we were the Rebbe's newest shluchim! It filled us with excitement and a feeling of powerful invincibility.

We needed those elixirs to keep our faith up through the struggles with which we were soon presented. It was hard not to feel like we were grouped on the unfortunate side of the *haves* and *have nots*. The Hillel center was new and attracted crowds of students, while we pulled out folding chairs to squeeze a mere 15 seats into our tiny living room. The students were largely from upper middle-class homes - it was probably the first time they'd ever eaten food purchased with food stamps, although they didn't know about that.

We know the greatest impact we have is on individuals. We don't measure "success" by how large our crowds are; we focus on fostering individual connections, and meeting students one by one.

Tabling is a great way to meet new people. Every day, we unfold a table and fill it with Jewish paraphernalia - tefillin, Shabbos candles, flyers about upcoming events, and more. As friendly and welcoming as we try to be, we know we can't compete with the overwhelmingly inviting cuteness of a baby. It was more than just lack of childcare that compelled us to bring our 8-month-old son along.

Inevitably, his adorable smile and giggles won us a new friend. Dr. Baum originally approached to pinch Mendel's cheeks and tickle his chin, but we quickly got to talking. We found out he was the medical advisor on campus. We struck up a fast friendship, and he even took on the role of faculty advisor for our student group.



Although we made quite a few friends through tabling, we soon saw it wasn't the most effective way to reach our students. They were busy rushing from class to class, and didn't have time to stop at our table. So, we adapted.

We started visiting residence halls in the evenings, setting up tables with college student essentials - hot, fresh, steaming food. All evening, we dished out bowls of matza ball soup and scooped falafel into pitas, using food as the ultimate tool to overcome invisible barriers and crush stereotypes.

It was easier for the students to realize that the warmth emanating from their steaming soups echoed in our hearts; that we could offer spiritual nourishment as well as delicious dinners.

I liked Benji* a lot. He was a Vanderbilt alum, super smart, and funny. He was also the rabbi of another Jewish student group. We were friendly with each other, despite the spark of competition between us.

We soon settled into a comfortable rhythm, respecting each other's space and becoming good friends. We started a weekly chavrusa, and I spent a lot of time considering what I wanted to learn with him. Eventually, I settled on a deep exploration of the fundamental ma'amer of our generation - Basi Legani. The discourse, originally written by the Friediker Rebbe, was the first ma'amer the Rebbe said, and its recitation signalled the acceptance of Chabad leadership. From then on, the Rebbe had analyzed a different section of the original ma'amer every year on that same day.

We'd barely waded into the vast depths of Chassidic thought, when Benji informed me that he, regretfully, had to cancel our chavrusa sessions for the foreseeable future. He assured me it wasn't anything personal, but he wouldn't say more than that. I connected the dots for myself, and watched with some sadness how our promising friendship faded away.

Soon afterwards, Benji got a job as a computer programmer, and I didn't see him anymore.

About fifteen years later, I saw Benji wrapping his tefillin in shul one morning. I greeted him with a friendly smile and wave, and he timidly smiled back. Day by day, the greetings grew warmer, and I was looking forward to picking up our friendship where it had dropped so suddenly years before.

"Sholomo, I'm leaving," he told me one day, rather abruptly. "I'm moving to Ohio."

"You're leaving? But we've barely started getting to know each other again!" I protested.

"True," he conceded. "But our brief friendship has had a long-lasting impact. When I interviewed in Ohio, they asked me what I was learning. I told them I learn Chitas every day."

"Chitas!" I repeated, stupefied. "Including Tanya?"

"Of course!" he replied. "I listen to Rabbi Gordon's shurim online every day!"

He chuckled. "They looked just as confused as you do right now. I told them that throughout my years in yeshiva, I learned a lot of Gemara and Halachah. But I only realized the life-altering impact Torah learning had on me when I started learning Basi Legani with you. The ma'amarim, with all their discussions of Chassidic thought, completely changed my life. Even when we stopped learning together, I knew I needed to continue learning Chassidus. I chose to learn Chitas and Tanya every day, and it has continued to be my greatest boost."

Ollie* walked into our Rosh Hashana minyan with a group of guys I knew weren't Jewish, so I figured he wasn't either, and had come along just out of curiosity. He didn't have typical Jewish features either, so I didn't even question him about it.

I was surprised when he returned for Yom Kippur, and again for Sukkos. We had a tiny sukkah, and each person had to cram in uncomfortably to fit inside.

Is such discomfort really worth the "experience?" I wondered. *Maybe there's something else pulling him here.*

I sat and talked with him and found out that his mother was Jewish.

"When I was a kid, my favorite part of the service was the Temple choir," Ollie told me. "I love music, and that's always been my strongest connection to Judaism. When I came on Rosh Hashanah, it was my first time attending a Chassidic service. I thought I'd miss the professional harmonies and piano accompaniment, but the heart-rending tunes and moving melodies spoke directly to my soul. I felt the power of the music more than I ever have before."

That was the beginning of a long friendship. Ollie continued visiting regularly, becoming a "staple" of our Shabbos morning minyan. He joins in the singing enthusiastically, and farbrengs every Shabbos. He graduated, but is committed to continuing his Jewish learning in the Jewish Summer Fellowship.

"Shlomo!" wailed Abe*, a recent Vanderbilt graduate. "What do I do now?"

"What's going on, Abe?" I asked. Abe is very intelligent, and I knew he wanted to continue in law school after graduating. "How did the LSATs go?"

"That's just it!" he exclaimed. "I don't get it! I took the LSATs a while ago, and I walked out feeling pretty confident. But when I got the results, I saw I really hadn't done as well as I wanted. I was disappointed, but chalked it up to partying too much, getting too little sleep, and not eating well."

"I decided to focus on my health and wellness, and try it again when I felt better. A few months later, I took the LSATs again. This time, I was well rested and felt the best I'd felt in years. So why did I get the exact same grade I got on the first one?"

I heard the despair in his voice, and I tried to help him come to an inner understanding of his life.

"You've worked so hard to give yourself a healthy, robust life," I said. "Why not add a spiritual element of wellness? You've always loved putting on tefillin, so why don't you include that in your daily routine? Additionally, creating a vessel helps G-d's blessings flow."

Abe didn't need much convincing. He'd been at Chabad long enough to understand how a mitzvah would enhance a wholesome life.

I met up with him the next day and got him a pair of tefillin. He put them on every morning, and soon bought his very own pair!

Needless to say, Abe did very well on his third attempt, and is now studying in a prestigious law school.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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