

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

Serving Yiddishkeit and Deli Sandwiches, Chabad at Vanderbilt University Part II

By Chaya Chazan

Trey* originally came to Chabad for the social aspect – that's where his friends were. That quickly turned into something much more serious.

We farbrenged a lot and enjoyed many deep conversations about life, theology, and Torah.

I challenged Trey and another student to learn every day. They accepted, and visited my office daily to study Tanya. We slowly made our way through the sefer, mastering the fundamentals of Chassidic philosophy.

Trey continued his Jewish learning in Maayanot, and when he moved to Chicago for a college internship, I made sure to connect him with Rabbi Bentzi Shemtov, the shliach on campus.

Trey keeps Shabbos, wears tefillin every day, and dresses in a yarmulka and tzitzis. Although he still looks like a typical college grad, his familiarity with the lingo makes him sound like a bona-fide bochur! My son is in yeshiva in Chicago, and he invited Trey to spend a Shabbos with him and his friends.

My son told me that when two of his friends visited Trey's office on their regular mitzvoyim route, they asked the secretary if they could speak with Trey. They pulled out their tefillin and were about to ask him if he'd put them on that

day, when he surprised them by exclaiming, "Oh, mitzvoyim! Awesome! Let's do it!"

They looked at each other in surprise, especially when they realized Trey was getting ready to tag along with them! He took a long lunch and enthusiastically followed them down their route, asking people to put on tefillin. He's now the official third partner and accompanies them every week!

Jeremy* had that Long Island swagger and an air of "coolness" not belied by his pineapple-like hairdo and loud fashion choices.

"I know all about you," he said when we first met. "I grew up religious, so I know your whole shtick. I left that behind a long time ago, and nothing will change now. Get a good look, 'cuz you won't be seeing me around!"

Despite Jeremy's best effort, we *did* see him around. He couldn't ignore us, and the conversations slowly grew from simple, *Hey, how are yous*, to deeper, lengthier conversations.

Soon, the kid that'd seen and done it all was introduced to the wonders of Chassidus. It was incredible, watching him soak it up like a plant thirsting for water. Yiddishkeit clicked for him in a way it never had before, and he was able to begin his relationship with Hashem on a fresh, new page.

Jeremy didn't necessarily daven himself, but his father had taught him the *right* way to do it. Jeremy was dismissive of our recitation of *Kegavna* in Kabbalos Shabbos, one of changes the Alter Rebbe made to the Ashkenazi nusach.

"What's this Kegavna business?" he'd scoff. "Why don't you daven properly?"

The next week, I did my usual weekly *Kegavna Meditation*, speaking about continuous creation, how the world is truly one with Hashem, and how we can tap into that special Oneness by letting go of anger and judgement.

Jeremy approached me after davening, his eyes shining. "Wow! That was mind blowing!" he exclaimed. "I can't wait

to explain it all to my dad and tell him exactly why we do Kegavna!"

When I can convince someone to open a sefer and learn Chassidus in depth, I'm excited to do that. But I know that Chassidus is so powerful, even a short, off-the-cuff explanation can be life-changing.

Jeremy had worked long and hard on himself, and was finally at a place where committing to keep Shabbos and Yom Tov felt feasible.

We spent an amazing Rosh Hashanah, Shabbos Shuva, and Yom Kippur together. With the solemn parts of Tishrei behind us, I looked forward to the joyous celebrations of Sukkos. Of course, Jeremy was our guest for the first Yom Tov meal in our sukkah.

"I think I'm going to have to break Yom Tov," Jeremy admitted, quietly.

"What? But why?" I asked. "You already did the 'hard' parts; this is meant to be the fun, easy part!"

"I know," he replied. "But I have a test coming up on the second day of Yom Tov. The professor is Israeli, but she's very anti-religious, and I'm scared to even ask her to push off the test! I really want to keep my commitment, but my grades are very important to me..."

"Jeremy, this is not how it's going to go down," I assured him. "I'll come to your class tomorrow and talk with your professor."

Jeremy didn't believe me at first, but I insisted I was serious.

The next day, I got ready to leave. I hesitated for a moment, contemplating my lulav and esrog. Not bringing them would cut deeply into my mitzvoyim time, but maybe bringing such conspicuous symbols of Judaism would *enrage* the anti-religious teacher and doom my case before I even started....

Ultimately, I decided to bring them along.

As soon as I walked into the professor's office, she smiled in delight. "A lulav and esrog!" she gasped. "Are those for me?"

"Of course!" I responded, trying to maintain my composure.

"This brings back such memories," she sighed reminiscently. "When I was a college student, newly arrived from Israel, I felt so lost and homesick. I remember walking through Union Square and spotting some Chabad teens with their lulav and esrog, stopping passersby to make the blessing and shake them. It made me feel so at home, giving me a sense of belonging I sorely needed at the time."

She was excited to shake the lulav and esrog again, reliving all the pleasant memories she associated with them.

"Sukkot is my favorite holiday," she sighed, sniffing the esrog.

"I know someone else who loves Sukkos," I said, pausing expectantly.

"...Jeremy?" she asked.

"Jeremy," I nodded.



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"Okay, I... understand," she said. "But should I push off the test for the whole class, or just for Jeremy?"

A quick glance at her class list told me almost *everyone* was Jewish.

"Why not delay the test entirely?" I suggested. "Let everyone in your class celebrate Sukkos properly."

The professor agreed and wished us a happy holiday.

Jeremy could hardly believe it.

"I also have to write a paper on the last day of Yom Tov," Jeremy added, nervously.

"Come on, Jeremy!" I encouraged him. "Is the grade of this one paper worth breaking Yom Tov in the long run?"

After much encouragement, Jeremy decided to write it on Chol Hamoed instead.

Even though he'd already submitted his paper, Jeremy was nervous all Yom Tov long.

"I know I got a 'C' on that paper," he repeated. "I *have* to check my grade online!"

I encouraged Jeremy to stay strong, and he managed to hold out until Yom Tov was over. He pulled out his phone and quickly checked his online gradebook. His jaw dropped, and he held out his phone to me with shaking hands. "Check this out, Rabbi," he said.

This paper deserves a 'C,' the professor commented. Your argument is poor and delivered unconvincingly. However, it reminds me of a paper I wrote when I was in a similar circumstance in college. I made the same argument you did. I can't give myself a 'C,' so I'm giving your paper an 'A.'

It was a clear message from Hashem, showing Jeremy exactly how much his commitment and dedication meant.

The school year had just started. I was sitting in my office when the campus chaplain burst in.

"Rabbi, there's an emergency in the freshman dorms! They're asking for a rabbi!"

I rushed across campus and found Zack absolutely distraught. He'd just been informed that his brother had taken his own life. Tears streamed down his face as he sobbed uncontrollably. My heart ached, and I sat by his side, holding his hand, and just being a supportive presence as he vented his grief.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," a woman said, peeking into the room. "Zach, your dad is on the phone."

I spoke with Zach's father, Gary*, as well. He told me he'd catch a flight right away, even though he had a flourishing law office in Qatar. I figured Qatar hadn't offered him much

- if anything - in the way of a Jewish community, so I offered to be his rabbi if he wanted. We developed a deep relationship over time, both with Zach and Ken.

Ken's first Chabad experience was the Pesach seder. Living in Qatar for so long, he'd thought of Chabad as a religious group for devout rabbis. Walking into a tent, flanked by beautifully set tables and filled with over 200 college students from every walk of life seemed like a magical, otherworldly experience.

"This is amazing!" he kept repeating. "What an incredible impact! I really want to get involved!"

I filed those words away, and mused over them a bit. Ken made it obvious that he was a man of means, and I knew he wanted to help. I couldn't decide whether to ask him to help us launch a kosher food truck, or build a larger Chabad house, both long-time dreams of ours.

Thoughts swirling in my mind, I wrote a letter to the Rebbe, detailing my quandary. A few moments later, I opened my inbox and saw an email from a Chabad publication, containing a transcription of a yechidus. The man had asked the Rebbe whether there was any value in giving a Jew a kosher lunch, knowing that he'd eaten non-kosher for breakfast, and would eat non-kosher again for dinner. The Rebbe answered categorically that no matter what else he may choose to eat, there was definitely value in giving a Jew kosher food for lunch.

I was stunned. I printed a copy of the email and called Ken.

"What do you say we meet up for lunch?" I asked him. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

We chatted about nothing in particular over delicious deli sandwiches, and I was rehearsing my pitch in my mind, when Ken cleared his throat.

"I've been thinking," he began, "about Chabad's impact. I'm impressed how you're always meeting people where they are, and trying to fill their needs. And somehow, no matter what you're doing, there's always food around. I also want to do something in my son's honor. So I had an idea. It's a bit radical, because it was seen as low-class when I was growing up, but now it's accepted, and you guys are always up to date on the newest fad... It's a way to merge your tendency to give people what they lack while keeping you mobile..."

I stared in disbelief. "I came here to discuss something with you too. Let's say it together, on the count of three. One... two... three... *kosher food truck!*"

Ken gasped and then laughed heartily. I told him my side of the story, and showed him the printout I'd brought along. Ken was amazed and agreed to fund the entire thing on the spot.

Ken, Zach, and I threw ourselves into the project with gusto, and after a year and a half of hard work, the food truck

was finally opened. Unfortunately, it closed down after only a few months, as the management was too overwhelming.

Ken was suffering from a mental health crisis of his own. The painful divorce, followed by the loss of his son, had robbed him of his *joie de vivre*. I remember, a few months later, when he called me and asked if G-d wanted him to sacrifice his life to make the world a better place. Of course, I told him that G-d wanted him to *live* above all, and we had many deep conversations. We then lost touch, as his family had him transferred to a psychiatric institute. Unfortunately, in a tragic twist of fate, he followed his son and took his life a short while later.

Before ending his life, Ken asked if I could revive the food truck. He saw it as an extension of his son, and it gave him comfort to know the food truck would continue to fill the role it'd always been meant to play. I told him we'd do absolutely everything in our power to revitalize it. After his passing, it became a matter of urgency; the food truck represented Ken's legacy and path of teshuva.

The food truck was a full-time job of its own, and I couldn't see how I'd manage the business while *also* taking care of my Chabad house. When I went to visit my sister a short while later, I suggested that she and her husband, Gavriel and Menucha Isenberg, join our *shlichus* with the primary roles of managing the food truck and launching JGrads, a chapter of the Chabad house, focusing on graduate students.

Baruch Hashem, they're doing a phenomenal job. The food truck has become a staple on campus, with hundreds of students enjoying a hot, deli sandwich every day. Many graduate students who may not have been reached otherwise join them for Shabbos meals every week, farbrenging and taking the next step in their relationship with Hashem.

The success of the food truck proved the importance of kosher meal options, and inspired the campus to open a kosher dining hall.

Ken and his son live on in every bracha recited and every bite taken from the *Holy Smokes* food truck.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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