

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

A Dream and a Building, Chabad at Vanderbilt University Part III

By Chaya Chazan

Our shlichus began in a tiny apartment, with barely enough room for a minyan of guests at our Shabbos table.

We soon bought a house, chosen not for its aesthetic, as it was terribly dilapidated, but instead for its location - directly across the street from campus. Our plan was to renovate it and turn it into a beautiful, functioning Chabad house.

As all homeowners know, the execution takes years longer than the planning. It was nearly a decade before we were even able to start.

Just a short while later, we'd outgrown the house as well. The turning point came one Friday night, when the room was packed to absolute capacity. We'd crammed 80 people into every nook and cranny that could conceivably fit a human. Just then, Mark*, a college sophomore, ran in and excitedly announced, "Rabbi, guess what? I convinced my whole *frat* to come! There are 60 guys heading your way right now!"

"I'd love to meet your fraternity," I told Mark. "But look around! I couldn't possibly fit six more people in here, let alone sixty!"

But isn't that why we're here? I couldn't stop the thought from swirling over the next few weeks. *Our mission is to provide a Jewish home for every single student. We should never have to turn interested students away because of space! It's time for a proper Chabad House!*



I threw myself into the project with eagerness. We launched a campaign and raised a considerable amount. I pored over graphics and schematics, and met with architects, redrawing and reframing, until there was a rendered image that matched my vision - a spacious, gorgeous work of art that would welcome Jewish students.

"This is it!" I said, excitedly. "How much do you think it would cost to build?"

"Around \$2.5 million," he replied, nonchalantly.

I swallowed convulsively. *Can I actually raise such a sum?* I thought.

By the time I spoke with builders and the bank, I *wished* the cost would've been \$2.5 million. The actual price would be upwards of \$5 million, and the monthly mortgage alone was enough to set my head spinning.

If I choose to pursue this, it will become my sole focus, I realized. It will consume me. Is this truly the right choice?

I'd recently recovered from a slew of operations, and my recuperation was not totally complete. *I'd be so busy raising the funds and overseeing the project, I won't even have time for my students - the real reason I'm here!*

We consulted with experts and soon came to the logical conclusion - use the money we'd already collected to renovate our current facility and buy another house for the family. It wasn't the ultimate Chabad house we'd dreamed of, but it was practical and realistic. Despite the years of planning and the endless hopes and dreams, I'd made peace with our truncated plan. My wife and family were on board as well.

Of course, we'd never make a decision like this without informing the Rebbe and getting a bracha - one way or the other. We are the Rebbe's shluchim, and are merely carrying out *his* vision. We know the Rebbe "calls the shots." If my answer was to follow through with the

building, I'd throw myself into it, heart and soul, knowing I was fulfilling my shlichus exactly as demanded. I wrote a letter, detailing all the challenges and doubts we had in regards to building a new center. I emailed the letter to the Ohel.

Barely an hour later, I was watching a clip of the Rebbe speaking to a large group of men, consisting of shlichim and their community friends. The Rebbe asked why the community members, many of them successful businessmen, were leaving their area of expertise for the rabbi to fumble through. The Rebbe pointed out that the shlichim were all yeshiva graduates, capable of explaining a complicated sugya in Gemara or Chassidic discourse, but not savvy in the ways of business. The Rebbe exhorted them to take their responsibilities seriously - to build more and more Chabad houses, but *shouldering* the burden, rather than leaving it up to the shliach.

It was like each word was directed straight at me.

I immediately forwarded the clip to my dear friend and partner, Joe Lubeck, with the caption, *The Rebbe is talking to us!*

He certainly is, came the reply. *What kind of numbers are you comfortable with?*

\$2.5 million, I typed back, *but the contractors are telling me it will be over \$5 million. That's too much.*

It wasn't until a day and half later, on Friday morning, that he called me with a response. "Rabbi, everything is settled. We'll build the Chabad house for \$2.7 million!"

"How?" I sputtered. "There's the labor, and the materials, and the permits, and..."

"I'll tell you all about it at our chavrusa on Sunday morning. Have a good Shabbos!"

By Sunday, I couldn't wait to hear how our dream Chabad house would be built for half the estimated cost.

"On Friday morning, an old friend and business partner visited me to negotiate a deal we'd signed," Joe explained. "He was so thankful to me for agreeing to revisit the terms, he offered to do me a favor. I immediately asked him to build the Vanderbilt Chabad house for \$2.5 million. We negotiated a bit, and landed at \$2.7 million!"

Asked and answered, within half a week!

The road to building the *Lubeck Center for Jewish Life* was long and full of challenges. Every time, I wondered, *is this it? How can we overcome this hurdle?* I'd remember the video and become encouraged all over again. *I'm not in this for myself,* I reminded myself constantly. *This is the Rebbe's building, and we have the Rebbe's brachos. Everything will work out fine.*

It also helped to have Joe Lubeck at my side, through all the tests, challenges, and new expenses that seemed to crop up. Joe was our miracle.



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Baruch Hashem, the Chabad house surpassed all our dreams and visions. With more space, we were able to invite in more guests, and our attendance grew by leaps and bounds. Every student on campus heard of Chabad, and were much more eager to speak with us and find their way home.

Rosh Hashanah is one of the big holidays that even those who don't consider themselves religious will try to celebrate. Every year, we held a Rosh Hashanah dinner on the first night of Yom Tov, keeping in line with how the students were used to celebrating back at home. It was amazing to see the guest list grow year by year - from 25% of all Jewish students, to a whopping 350, one third of everyone Jewish on campus!

When we moved into our new building, we finally had the potential for more, and were eager to see how many students we could reach. Only one thing bothered me - it was great to host such a large crowd for the seuda, but while apples and honey were sweet, the main mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is hearing the shofar! True, some students attended services during the day, and of course, we managed to reach many more on mitvtzoyim throughout the day, but shouldn't our Rosh Hashanah event be centered around this fundamental theme?

We toyed with the idea of hosting an early dinner on the second night instead - late enough to qualify as dinner, but still light enough outside to blow the shofar. We were warned that circumventing tradition wouldn't work - students would only come on the first night. We were determined to try anyhow.

We were astonished and overjoyed to have 550 students join us that afternoon. They all stood in silence as the 30 blasts reverberated through the cavernous tent in the center of campus, and I couldn't help marveling at the thought that I was standing before *half of our Jewish student population!*

It reminded me that, while we have to do our part to make our events exciting and engaging, our main focus should be on the mitzvah. When we focus on what's truly important and beautiful, we are bentched with overwhelming hatzlacha.

It was Shabbos Bereishis, the tail-end of a whirlwind Tishrei, filled with more guests than we'd ever had before. We'd started a small Yom Tov morning minyan with a few committed students, but we were often short

of a minyan. I'd hike around campus until I found a willing fellow or two to round out our ten.

That Shabbos morning, there were six students in shul. We needed another three for a minyan. It was the third day of a 3-day yom tov, coming a scant week after another energetic, three-day yom tov. We were all exhausted.

It was tempting to give up and just start davening, but it was Shabbos Bereishis. I had to make an effort.

Hashem, I'm giving you five minutes. I'll walk around campus for five minutes, and then I'm just going back to shul to daven.

A moment later, I met Danny*, who often came to shul.

"Hey, Rabbi," he called, in response to my greeting. "These are my friends. We all attend the same synagogue back at home."

I smiled. It all seemed so Heaven-sent. What could be better than a regular shul-goer, accompanied by friends he'd met while davening? But when I asked them to join our minyan, they turned me down, citing reservations for breakfast they couldn't cancel.

I was disappointed, and turned back towards the Chabad house. *Okay, fine*, I shrugged. *One more lap, Hashem. For You. For Shabbos Bereishis.*

From across the walkway, I saw Reed* ambling along. Reed and I had a friendly smile-type relationship. The only time he came to shul was Neilah - maybe a shofar blowing on Rosh Hashanah. When I thought about it, I realized I hadn't even seen him at Neilah that year. *I probably shouldn't even bother asking him*, I thought. ... *No; you promised you'd try your best.*

"Hey, Reed," I called. "Do you want to help us complete our minyan?"

"Sure!" he responded, without hesitation.

"Great!" I said, hiding my surprise. "You're number 10! Now I just need to find numbers eight and nine!"

As Reed accompanied me to the frat house in search of more minyan volunteers, I asked him why he'd agreed to join me, when he usually stayed away.

"I wasn't here for Yom Kippur," he explained with a sad smile, "because I was at home, saying goodbye to my dad. I was walking around today, missing him horribly, and wishing I could find a minyan so I could say kaddish for him. That's when you approached me!"

When we reached the frat house, I cajoled two students out of their Saturday morning laziness. I explained how special and important Shabbos Bereishis was, but the clincher was when they heard a fellow student, newly bereaved, needed them to say kaddish for his father.

From that Shabbos on, Reed was a regular at minyan every week. He was often the first one to arrive, and he soon started staying late, attending the meals and farbrengens, and making friends on campus. We developed a close relationship, and, by the end of the year, it was Reed who joined me on my walks around campus in a quest to recruit missing minyan members!

It's incredible to reflect on our journey and how far we've come since that young couple first started out in a tiny, two-bedroom apartment. With Hashem's help and the Rebbe's brachos, we've grown beyond our wildest dreams!

With so much going on, we wanted to make sure the individual student is never forgotten about. With that in mind, we recently welcomed a new couple, Rabbi Sholom Ber and Mussy Gurary. Sholom Ber's grandfather was one of the first campus shluchim, and had a tremendous impact on hundreds, if not thousands, of students in Buffalo. We are lucky to welcome such an incredible and talented couple into our shlichus.

As much as we have done and accomplished, a shliach can never be satisfied until every last Jew has been met and impacted. With Hashem's help and the Rebbe's brachos, we'll soon reach the 1,000th Jewish student in Vanderbilt!

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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