

IllumiNations

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

*Rabbi Shlomo and Shterna Sara Ossowiecki,
Lubavich of Niteroi, Brazil*

The Tefillin Chronicles, Chabad of Niteroi Part I

By Chaya Chazan

Rio de Janeiro is famous for many things, but not many people know that the city is split by an inlet of the Atlantic Ocean. The two halves of the city are connected by an 11 km long bridge.

Both of our parents are shluchim in Brazil - mine in Sao Paulo, and my wife's in Rio. A couple of years after we got married, we were ready to begin a shlichus of our own. We approached Rabbi Goldman, the head shliach, and asked if he had any ideas. I knew my in-laws had been working with him for over 20 years, and he himself had even *more* years of shlichus under his belt! It seemed probable that every area that could *sustain* a shliach already had one. Rabbi Goldman was excited to open a satellite Chabad House across the bridge, serving the Jews in an area not too far away, but still separated by a gulf - literally.

Niteroi is right on the beach, and the weather is cool and mild year-round. Physically, it's a utopic oasis; spiritually, a barren desert landscape. For many Jews in the community, ours was the first sukkah they ever saw, and their first time learning about the holiday. Inter-marriage is rife, with nearly 80% of the population marrying out - so there's plenty of work to be done!

Mr. Pereira* is a close friend, and one of the most influential people in our community. It was his support and generosity that got us started, meeting and connecting with people in the community.



Mr. Pereira sponsored kosher mezuzos for anyone who agreed to hang it on their front door. Barely anyone already had a mezuzah, and the few that did had small ones of questionable kashrus. We were able to hang more than 50 mezuzos!

Mr. Pereira also sponsored 10 sets of tefillin. Each recipient barely knew what tefillin were! Now, they're committed to wearing them every day.

Raul* had been to shul every Shabbos since our first minyan. He was one of our regulars, but he was an elderly man - around 90 years old - so I didn't see him much during the week, as it was hard for him to come to our shiurim and events.

I was surprised, but delighted, to see him one Thursday afternoon.

"Boa tarde, Raul!" I greeted him. "What brings you here today?"

Raul held out a worn velvet sack. "Can you help me change the strap on my tefillin?" he asked.

We sat in the shul, and, as I gently disentangled the tefillin's knots, Raul told me how he'd received the tefillin.

"I was living in Sao Paulo," he recalled. "I met a Chabad rabbi there, Rabbi Shermatez. We struck up a conversation, and after a while, he asked me if I put on tefillin every day. I had to tell him I didn't. I tried explaining that I'd grown up in a very assimilated, secular home. Tefillin were not on the table! Rabbi Shermatez dismissed my concerns and just asked, *Would you like your own pair?*

"I uncomfortably told him I couldn't commit to doing it every day... that I wasn't sure it was for *me*... but the rabbi kept pushing, insisting I was wrong.

"I'm over 70 years old, Rabbi! I said, a final excuse. *Don't waste the tefillin on an old guy like me. It'd be better to*

give them to someone young - someone who can wear them and enjoy them for a long time!

"Nonsense!" the rabbi answered. *Take them and use them, in good health, for many more years!*

"There was nothing to say to that. I took them. And you know what? He was absolutely right. I've been wearing them for 19 years now, and I haven't missed a single day. I will continue to put them on as long as G-d grants me life."

We were still settling into our new shlichus, when Adriano* asked me for "a huge favor."

"I'll help however I can," I answered, honestly. "Can you tell me more?"

"It's my nephew, Caio*," he sighed. "His mother, my sister, married a non-Jew. Caio was just a little boy when she became ill, and he was just eight years old when his mother succumbed to the terrible disease. He became very bitter and angry at G-d. I tried getting some rabbis to meet with him, but he refused to talk with any of them or hear anything about Judaism. Here's where the big favor comes in -"

"You want *me* to try?" I guessed.

"Exactly," Adriano answered, pleased. "He's already 18, and I fear if we don't speak with him now, we may never have another chance."

"I'll do my best," I promised.

The next Thursday, I knocked on his door with a gift of homemade challah and wine. Caio looked shocked to see me standing on his front porch.

"Who are you...?" he asked, with barely concealed hostility.

I held up the gift bag disarmingly. "I'm Rabbi Shlomo. I come bearing gifts!"

Caio was still suspicious, but his father welcomed me warmly, and gratefully accepted the bottle of wine. He invited me in, and we chatted comfortably for a while.

I came back every week, following the same pattern. Slowly, Caio started to let down his guard. He soon joined the discussions, and a tentative friendship was born. After a couple of months, I felt we were good enough friends to ask him to put on tefillin. Baruch Hashem, Caio agreed, and I helped him wrap the black, leather straps around his arm for the first time in his life. Caio's eyes misted with tears as he repeated the sacrosanct words.

"I want to show you something," he told me, after removing the tefillin. He went to his room and returned a few moments later with a paper. "This is a letter my mother wrote to me before she passed away," he explained. "Obviously, I treasure it very much. Look! She

wrote that she knows she's going to pass soon, but she wants me to have a bar mitzvah and celebrate with the whole community. Her last wish was for me to continue my Jewish education and have a bar mitzvah.

"For so many years, I was too angry with G-d to follow through. Now that I've put on tefillin for the first time, I feel... more connected with her. I'm still angry at G-d for taking her away from me, but I'm ready to honor her dying wish. Can you help me arrange a bar mitzvah...?"

"Caio," I said, near tears, "it would be an honor."

We invited the entire community to join us in celebrating Caio's bar mitzvah, 5 years overdue. The evening was filled with joy, festivity, and dancing, and I'm sure Caio's mother shepped reams of nachas from Heaven.

Caio fulfilled the other part of his mother's request, too, continuing his Jewish education by regularly attending Kabbalos Shabbos services, and establishing a bi-weekly chavrusa with me. His youthful conviction is an inspiration for the entire community.

I was hopeful the first time I went to visit Dr. Silva* at his home on Friday afternoon, armed with a gift of challah and my velvet tefillin bag tucked under my arm.

Dr. Silva accepted the challah graciously, but turned down my offer of tefillin. We had a short, friendly chat before I left.

The same pattern repeated itself, week after week. Although a steady friendship slowly flourished, visit by visit, and although I often explained the beauty and meaning of tefillin, he never agreed to put them on. I visited him nearly every week for over three years. I didn't always bring my tefillin, but occasionally I did, offering him yet another chance - a offer that was always politely, but resolutely, refused.

One day, another community member, Gabriel*, shared that he was suffering from a serious heart condition. Gabriel was a close and dear friend, who'd been with us from the beginning. In fact, he was one of the ten members of our community who'd committed to wearing tefillin regularly and received their own very own pair.

I could see the exhaustion and fear in Gabriel's eyes as he told me he didn't have money to see a specialist. "Do... you know anyone who could help me?" he asked, tremulous hope in his voice.

"I'll do whatever I can to find someone," I assured him. "I may have an idea..."

I called Dr. Silva and asked if he'd agree to see Gabriel, pro bono. Dr. Silva was happy to oblige, and set up a time to see Gabriel.

The next Friday, I brought my tefillin along on my usual visit to Dr. Silva. He greeted me at the door, and directed a coy smile at the velvet bag in my hands.

"Ask me, Rabbi," he said, laughing. "I dare you."

I grinned. "Dr. Silva, would you like to put on tefillin?"

"Yes," he replied, shocking me into silence. It took me a minute to process, after which I quickly whipped into action - before he could change his mind!

"What made you say 'yes' after all these years?" I asked him.

"I saw Gabriel this week," he explained. "He told me what a difference wearing tefillin has made in his life. His words inspired me to try it for myself!"

Tamara* was very interested in Judaism, and wanted to learn more. She knew her *dad* was Jewish, and had reason to believe her mother might have been Jewish as well. She was willing to consider conversion, but we urged her to do some genealogical research and find out for sure, one way or another.

I tried speaking with her father, Rodrigo*, to ask him some questions, but he wasn't very friendly or forthcoming. Knowing *he* was Jewish, I tried to interest him in some of our activities, but it was clear he wasn't impressed.

Although I hung up disappointed, my efforts had not gone *completely* to waste. A few weeks later, he randomly showed up on Shabbos, and we had a friendly chat. He returned a few weeks later, his icy demeanor already considerably thawed. Slowly but surely, he began visiting the Chabad house more often, and we became good friends.

Finally, a couple months later, at one of our Sunday events, Rodrigo agreed to put on tefillin. It was the first time in his life he'd ever had the holy, black leather straps wrapped around his arm. Everyone at the event celebrated his "bar mitzvah" with singing and joyful dancing, commemorating this significant milestone in his Jewish life.

The next week, Rodrigo came to shul on Shabbos, receiving his first aliyah. Again, the entire community celebrated, dancing in circles and congratulating him.

"Maybe we can talk about the next step in your journey," I suggested.

"Sure," he agreed. "What's that?"

"Having a bris milah," I said.

Rodrigo was silent for a moment. "Yes," he answered, finally. "As soon as an opportunity comes up, I'll have one."

A short while later, I heard that a shliach in Sao Paolo was arranging a group of adult brissim. I immediately told Rodrigo about it, and he was excited to join.

It's a five-and-a-half-hour drive to Sao Paolo, so we planned the itinerary carefully, ensuring we'd get there in plenty of time. However, the morning of the bris, we found out that major sections of the highway were under repair, and it would be nearly impossible to get there on time. I frantically searched for last-minute flights, and, baruch Hashem, found one that would get him there on time.

As before, Rodrigo's incredible commitment to Hashem and the Torah was celebrated by his extended family: our entire community. Everyone was inspired to hear how Rodrigo, no longer a young man at 65, had voluntarily undergone the painful procedure, and we celebrated his mesiras nefesh and dedication.

Rodrigo is now a regular at our Shabbos minyan, never missing a week. When Mr. Pereira offered to gift a set of tefillin for any man who'd agree to put them on regularly, Rodrigo was happy and proud to be part of the group.

**Names changed to protect identity.*

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