

# 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,  
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## An Everlasting Chain of Goodness, Chabad of Niteroi Part II

By Chaya Chazan

**In everything we do, we know we are representing the Rebbe and fulfilling his vision. We've been lucky to see the Rebbe's brachos and guidance in our shlichus, beginning even before we'd met one another!**

I was walking along a Crown Heights street, when I noticed something glinting on the sidewalk. I bent down and picked up a keyring someone had clearly dropped without noticing. I clicked the key fob until I saw a car flash its lights in response. There was a receipt on the dashboard that included the owner's name and address. It wasn't too far, so I went there right away, assuming the owner was frantic with worry over his missing keys.

"I think you dropped your keys," I told the man who answered the door.

His eyes opened wide, and a huge smile spilt across his face. "Yes! Thank you so much! This is such a life saver!"

He invited me in and kept thanking me, over and over. "I have a much better way to thank you," he said. "One moment." He left the room, returning with something in his hand. "I'm not Chabad, but I grew up near Crown Heights and have been friendly with Chabad all my

life. As a thank you for finding and returning my keys, I want you to have this." He opened his hand and gave me a Rebbe dollar.

I was born post Gimmel Tammuz, so I'd never been zoche to receive a Rebbe dollar in person. I accepted the precious gift gratefully, thinking it must be the Rebbe's way of giving me a bracha for my upcoming shidduch.

A few days later, my wife and I went out on our first date - a relationship that has been filled with bracha and happiness ever since, baruch Hashem!

I'd known Daniel\* for years. He was married to a non-Jew, and they had a child together, but he was very open and warm towards Yiddishkeit.

Recently, I visited him in his office on a Friday afternoon.

"I'm here on mivtzoyim," I announced, with a smile.

"Oh, mivtzoyim!" Daniel repeated. "I used to go on mivtzoyim, too!" I looked at him in shock and surprise and Daniel chuckled. "Oh, yeah! I was in a Chabad yeshiva for two years! I did the whole black hat and jacket, learning all day, and going on mivtzoyim every week!"

Daniel reminisced wistfully about his years in yeshiva. "Those were the best years of my life, although I didn't know it then," he sighed. "I don't even know if I can explain what happened after. I left it all behind and completely changed my life, but I miss it. I'd give anything to return to those idyllic days, and my purer, innocent life."

I have a weekly chavrusa with Benicio\*, where we learn about the weekly parsha and the lessons it contains. I knew Benicio had overcome many challenges in his past, and he often spoke bitterly about the contentious divorce he was going through then.

"I wish I would've started learning years ago!" he burst out, one day. "My life would be so different today!" I encouraged him to continue. "I'd never make the mistakes I made then, had I learned all this," he said. "The Torah would've helped me overcome my challenges in different ways. I'd have never married a non-Jew, and I would've had such a different focus in life.

"I'm glad I'm learning now, at least," he concluded. "Every time we learn together, it changes me for the better. It gives me tools to handle my challenges differently; to grow and improve."

When Mr. Levitas\* passed away, I knew it would be a challenge to ensure he'd receive a proper Jewish kevarah. His wife wasn't Jewish, and she wanted them to be buried *together* in a non-Jewish cemetery. Mr. Levitas didn't have any other family around that could influence the decision, and I was at a loss.

I then found out Mr. Levitas had a brother... although they'd been estranged for over 20 years. I was ready to grasp any opportunity to ensure a kosher kevarah for the departed Mr. Levitas, no matter how far-fetched.

I called the other Mr. Levitas, condoling with him on the loss of his brother. He was sad they'd missed the last 20 years of each other's lives, and wanted to do something in his brother's honor. I explained the sanctity of kevarah, and how it allows the neshama to find peace and live eternally. Mr. Levitas was very moved and agreed to pay all the expenses for his brother's burial.

With the financial burden so neatly squared away, Mrs. Levitas's claims weakened, and she finally agreed to let her husband be buried in the Jewish cemetery.

While the two Levitas brothers had lost many precious opportunities to show kindness to one another, Mr. Levitas had performed the ultimate chessed shel emes for his departed brother.

Miguel\* was hospitalized in the psychiatric unit, after years of mental health challenges. I visited him as often as I could, and one time, Miguel told me he'd owned a pair of tefillin, many years before. He wanted to wear them again, but assumed they were probably not kosher after so many years of disuse.



I took them to my father-in-law, who was able to open them up and inspect them, making the necessary repairs.

I returned to Miguel with the newly restored set and helped him wrap them over his arm and forehead.

When I'd removed them, Miguel settled back in his hospital bed with a deep, happy sigh. "Now that I've worn tefillin once again, I can die in peace," he said, serenely.

I'd assumed he was exaggerating, but just 10 days later, we received news that Miguel had passed away. Despite his hospitalization and health challenges, he was deeply in tune with his neshama.

Shluchim try to stay as apolitical as possible, especially where shul politics are concerned. So when our shul members couldn't agree on a new president, resulting in insults, screaming matches, and disagreements, I tried to stay out of it.

Mr. Mendes\* had dearly wanted the presidential seat, and was very hurt by the ensuing chaos. Although he'd been a longstanding member of the shul, he stopped coming and isolated himself from the community.

I tried reaching out to him many times, but he rebuffed every overture. He wanted nothing to do with the community or our shul.

I hadn't seen him in quite a while, when I bumped into him leaving the grocery store as I pulled up.

"Mr. Mendes!" I called out, excitedly. "It's so nice to see you! It's been so long! How are you doing?"

We caught up a bit, and I told him how much I and everyone at the shul missed him.

A day or two later, I was walking to visit someone, when I bumped into Mr. Mendes again. We both laughed at the strange coincidence and exchanged some friendly banter.

The next day, as I left the bank, I saw Mr. Mendes *again*! When I saw him for the fourth time in one week a couple of days later, it was impossible to ignore the overwhelming hashgacha pratis.

That Shabbos, Mr. Mendes returned to the shul.

"It was clearly min haShamayim," he said. "Hashem was telling me to come back - and He wouldn't let me ignore the message!"

My kids had been begging to go to the park, so I loaded up the stroller and walked to the nearby playground. As I pushed my daughter on the swing, I noticed an elderly woman sitting on the bench, staring at me. Finally, she came up to me, looked at my hat, beard, and jacket, and said, "You're Jewish, right?"

"Yes, I am!" I smiled. "And I'm going to guess that you're Jewish, too!"

Her eyes welled up with tears as she nodded. "My health has made me a homebody for the last few years," she told me. "I rarely leave my house. Somehow, this morning, I felt a strong push to get out and visit the park. Now I understand why G-d sent me here!"

Helena\*, as she introduced herself, hadn't felt connected to her Judaism in a very long time. "I didn't even know there were other Jews in Niteroi!" she exclaimed.

We exchanged contact information and visited her the next day with our children. We put a mezuzah on her door and invited her for Shabbos and women's classes. Helena, finally broken out of her self-imposed isolation, was happy for so many good reasons to leave her house and meet the *many* other Jews in Niteroi!

Isabel Costa\* had left her Judaism behind when she married her Christian husband. They brought up their three daughters as Christians, although Isabel had wanted to blend it with her Jewish heritage as well.

She realized that her unique brand of intersectionality would never be accepted, when her daughter applied for aliyah and was immediately denied when she proclaimed her faith in the Christian messiah.

She was utterly shocked when I not only greeted and acknowledged her, but actually spoke with her about getting involved in our Chabad house. She couldn't believe that a *rabbi* would be willing to overlook her proclaimed faith.

On Chanukah, we brought our family to the Costas for their first family menorah lighting. We ended up spending a few hours together, playing Chanukah games, singing songs, and talking.

Isabel and her daughters were so excited to connect with their Jewish side and learn more about their special heritage.

My wife gave Ines\* a pair of Shabbos candles and an instructional booklet. Ines promised to light every week.

A few months later, she told us what a difference those few minutes on Friday afternoons had made in her life.

"I tell *everyone* about it!" she gushed. "I feel so much more connected to G-d; so much more spiritual. I've told my sisters and friends to start lighting Shabbat candles as well! It brings peace to the whole week! ...but I... want to do more," she continued. "Can you teach me how to pray?"

My wife gifted her a siddur with Portuguese transliterations and translations. She showed her Modeh Ani, explaining how it helps us begin our day on the right foot, infusing each moment with gratitude and acknowledgement of G-d's pivotal role in our lives.

Ines *loved* the siddur *and* the meaning behind Modeh Ani. Soon, she was ready for another tefillah, then another, slowly working her way through the siddur.

Ines is a true example of *mitzvah goreres mitzvah* - one mitzvah brings about another, an everlasting chain of goodness and holiness.

*\*Names changed to protect identity*

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