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

Rabbi Levi and Chana Banon, Chabad of Morocco, Casablanca, Morocco

Continuing a Great Legacy

By Chaya Chazan

I was actually born right here in Morocco. My father served as a dayan, working alongside great men like Rabbi Raskin, Rabbi Eidelman, and Rabbi Shlomo Matusof A"H. We moved to Montreal when I was just three, but my grandparents remained in Morocco.

My wife and I got married in the early 2000's, and I was devastated that my grandmother wouldn't be able to make the long journey. Instead, I brought my wife to meet her in her home in Casablanca. The trip was amazing, but it was sad to see just how great a void had been left by Rabbi Raskin's passing a few years before. Rabbi Raskin was a pioneer shliach and built up the community in Morocco with utter mesiras nefesh. It was hard to imagine anyone filling the shoes of this incredible man.

One woman we met asked us to plead her case to Merkos.

"I grew up with Chabad," she said, tears gathering in her eyes. "Rabbi Raskin taught me everything I know about Judaism. Now, what will be with my children? They need to grow up with Chabad, too! Can you please ask the central office to send shluchim here?"

When Merkos received her email, they offered us the position. It seemed so daunting at first, we decided to start with just a summer camp. I knew the camp had over 200 campers for many years, but I didn't think we'd get more than 20. When our expected registration tripled, we realized just how much Casablanca needed a shliach.

There has been a Jewish presence in Morocco for over 2,000 years, since the days of the second Beis Hamikdash. There's even a legend that an unknown kever is the burial spot of one of Shlomo Hamelech's sons!



The community is mostly Sefardi, and have remained deeply traditional. Although there have been ups and downs for Jews living in this Muslim country, today, the community commands the respect of their Muslim neighbors.

Morocco, as a center of shlichus, received the Rebbe's attention as early as 1950. Just after assuming leadership of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, the Rebbe sent Rabbi Michael Lipskier to Morocco as his shliach. Over the years, a few more couples joined the Rebbe's delegation in Morocco, in various cities, to focus on education for Morocco's Jewish youth.

Soon, educational institutions sprung up all over the city. Preschools, primary schools, yeshivos, and high schools taught the next generation of leaders, following an educational standard comparable to any long-standing American school. Mrs. Raskin and Mrs. Eidelman, may they live long and be well, are the pillars of the community, and their inspiration drives the continuance of these important institutions.

Rabbi Eidelman established a kollel for all the teachers and rabbis in the community. He emphasized that when the leaders of a community maintain a high level of learning and education, the result filters down to everyone else, elevating their standards as well. Rabbi Raskin's *Bais Rivka*, like its sister school in New York, educated its students in Torah, Halachah, and Chassidus.

These hallowed institutions were still running when we arrived in 2008, but, unfortunately, were greatly reduced in number. There were a lot of young couples living in Casablanca, and we hoped that an infusion of new, young blood would help perpetuate the legacy of Morocco's great shluchim for the next generation.

Every Shabbos, I visited another one of Casablanca's 22 functioning shuls, meeting with a wide, diverse cross-section of the community. We concentrated on extracurricular activities for children, families, and young professionals, keeping in mind the Rebbe's directive for Moroccan shluchim to concentrate on chinuch.

"Rabbi, you *must* meet my surgeon!" one woman gushed. "He's Chabad!"

My eyebrows lifted.

"No, really!" she protested. "He told me all about it! He used to live in France, and he was very close to Chabad there. He wears his tefillin the Chabad way, but he hasn't put them on in two years because he couldn't find anyone here to fix them the Chabad way. Without a connection, he slowly drifted away. But he really wants to reconnect! He told me he even has a letter he received from the Rebbe 30 years ago!"

I'd heard more than enough. I immediately called and made an appointment to meet with him the next day.

When I came into his office, I began reworking the knot in his tefillin shel yad and retying it according to minhag Chabad. As I worked, we chatted. He confirmed every detail the woman had told me. When I finished retying the tefillin, he was excited to put them on again after so much time.

"I heard you have a letter from the Rebbe," I hinted, after he'd finished with the tefillin.

"Yes!" he affirmed. "Thirty years ago, my wife and I had twin boys. Unfortunately, one of them became very sick. I wrote to the Rebbe and got a beautiful letter in response, giving me a bracha for my son's recovery. Of course, things changed after that for the better, and my son had a miraculous recovery."

"That's amazing," I said. "Would I be able to see it?"

"Of course!" he answered. "It's right here in my wallet. I've carried it with me every day for the past 30 years." He pulled out his wallet and searched through the pockets. A frown puckered his brow. "That's weird," he said. "It's always right here." As he emptied out every pocket of his wallet, building an ever-growing pile of cards and change on the table, the frown remained in place. He shook out his empty wallet with a frustrated groan. "Now you probably think I made the whole thing up! I don't understand it. It's been in the same place for 30 years, and now, when someone asks to see it, it disappears?"

"Don't worry," I consoled him. "I'm sure it will turn up. In the meanwhile, are you available on Thursday to have a Chassidic study session?"

The doctor's face lit up. We maintained a weekly chavrusa session, where we learned various sichos and maamarim, often delving into deep discussions that sometimes continued into the small hours of the morning.

It was incredible to watch his neshama burst into bloom again after so long in the desert. Torah and Chassidus filled his mind, and it never took long for any conversation with him to veer off into an analytical discussion of the latest maamer he'd been learning. The entire surgical staff he worked with soon became fans of Avraham Fried, his preferred music in the operating theater. We continued learning together for the next two years.

One night, somewhere around 2:00 AM, we sat back at the table, exhausted but exhilarated from a passionate discussion on the maamer we'd just completed.



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"There's more demanded of me," the doctor said, looking down at the table. "The Rebbe wants me to challenge myself; to go beyond my comfort zones. That's what this maamer means."

I sat quietly, allowing him to work through his thoughts.

The doctor took a deep breath. "I'm going to do it. It won't be easy, but I know this is what the Rebbe wants of me." He named a life-changing hachlata I knew was especially challenging for him.

We drank a l'chaim to his new resolution, and concluded the farbrengen.

The next morning, the doctor called me, excitement rippling his voice. "I found it! I found it!" he shouted.

"What did you find?" I asked, confused and alarmed.

"I found the Rebbe letter!" he laughed.

"That's amazing!" I replied. "I'll come over today to see it!"

"Ask me where I found it," he instructed me.

"Where?" I asked in amusement.

"In my wallet. The same wallet I turned inside out two years ago to no avail. Now, just after I've taken on this major hachlata, committing to follow the Rebbe's words, it suddenly reappears. This is definitely the Rebbe's way of welcoming me back."

Emilie* and Marc* flew in from France to attend their friend's wedding. Emilie was a new Shabbos observer, and was eager to spend Shabbos with us. Marc, though, was nervous.

"I think our hotel is a pretty far walk and I'm worried about walking at night in a strange city. I'll definitely get lost!" he told me. "Maybe I'll just stay in the hotel."

I asked which hotel they were using, and crowded in delight when he mentioned one in easy disatnce.

"You won't get lost," I promised him. "It's a fairly straightforward route. If you go to the business center in the hotel now and log onto the computer, I'll explain everything on the map."

When Marc saw it was basically straight down a long boulevard, he was reassured and changed his mind about coming Friday night.

We had a few other guests at the meal including Mr. Stauber*, a businessman from Kiryas Yoel.

We sang Sholom Aleichem together, and Mr. Stauber commented, "The last time I sang Sholom Aleichem with that tune was in the Chabad house in Costa Rica, about 40 years ago."

After kiddush and Hamotzie, Mr. Stauber spoke more about his visit to Chabad of Costa Rica.

"I remember meeting a man at the Shabbos table," he said. "He had a fascinating story. He told me he was born in Munkac, Poland. Of course, antisemitism was rife, and the community suffered greatly. He hated living in fear, waiting every minute for the pogrom that would claim his life, and begged his family to leave Poland. His father scoffed at the idea, content to remain in the shtetl - the only place he knew to call home.

"After another violent pogrom, the man had enough. He told his parents he was leaving - sailing to South America. They tried to dissuade him, claiming he was too young to undertake such an arduous voyage, but he was determined to escape, once and for all.

"He made it on the ship, throwing off his yarmulka in the ship's wake as Poland faded from sight. When he disembarked in Costa Rica, he was enamored of the beautiful scenery and, more importantly, the freedom. He settled there and was soon the owner of a successful business.

"He wrote to his father, describing the Gan Eden in which he found himself, begging his parents to join him there. After a couple of weeks, his father's reply arrived. The letter contained just two, deeply cutting words: *Shechinta B'galusa*.

"The man was infuriated at his father's flippant disregard of all he'd achieved, and resolved to have no more contact with his family. He met a wonderful woman - she happened to be Jewish, but that was not something he pretended to care about - and they got married and started a new life together. Yiddishkeit was firmly in his past.

"About 40 years later, he was shocked to see a remnant of his shtetl life casually walking the streets of Costa Rica. It was a bonafide chassid, dressed in a black hat and jacket, seemingly unaware just how out of place he looked.

"The man rushed over to greet him to find out who he was. *My name is Rabbi Spalter*, the chassid explained. *I've just moved to Costa Rica on shlichus*.

"But what can you possibly hope to do *here*?" the man cried. "I want to bring the Shechina to Costa Rica," Rabbi Spalter replied.

"Tears stung the man's eyes. 'It's been 40 years since I heard about the Shechina,' he told Rabbi Spalter. 'That was what my father wrote to me.'

"Rabbi Spalter invited him for Shabbos, and the man started visiting often, bringing his family along. When I was a guest at the Spalters for Shabbos, this man was there too. He told me that any connection his children felt towards Yiddishkeit was entirely because of Rabbi Spalter.

"Isn't that a beautiful story?" he asked, turning to the rest of our guests.

Emilie looked thoughtful. "You know," she said, slowly. "I have a great uncle who left Munkac for Costa Rica. Do you happen to remember this man's name?"

Mr. Stauber searched his memory and finally remembered the man's name.

"That's him!" Emilie exclaimed, excitedly. "I can't wait to share this story with my family. They haven't been supportive of me being shomer Shabbos. Maybe hearing about my great-grandfather's reproof and my great-uncle's return, they'll be more understanding and help me keep Shabbos!"

After Shabbos, she messaged her uncle in Costa Rica, and he explained everything, encouraging her to persevere in her shemiras Shabbos.

A while later, I met Rabbi Spalter at the Rebbe's Ohel in New York. I had to share this incredible story of Hashgacha Pratis with him.

"This is the Rebbe's vision," Rabbi Spalter said after hearing the story. "Look how the Rebbe connects Jews from all over the world! A Jew coming closer to Hashem in Costa Rica helps a girl in France keep Shabbos because of a shared Shabbos meal in Morocco!"

**Names changed to protect identity*

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