

# IllumiNations

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

*Rabbi Mordechai and Tsivia Abraham, Tzedoka Vechedes, Johannesburg, South Africa*

## Soulful Healing, Tzedaka Vechedes Part I

By Chaya Chazan

**The Holocaust robbed me of the opportunity to grow up with the warm heritage with which I would have otherwise been raised.**

My mother came from a prominent Vizhnitz family and could trace her roots back to the Baal Shem Tov. After surviving the worst Geheon on earth in Auschwitz, her life took a drastic turn from her innocent childhood.

My father also came from a chassidische family. He never spoke much about his war days, but he may have been involved in the anti-German underground. Certainly, after the war, when he escaped to Eretz Yisroel, he joined the Haganah and the Palmach, fighting heroically for the Jewish nation's future.

I was born in Eretz Yisrael, but, soon after my birth, my parents decided to move to Toronto.

I grew up with a deep respect for the great lineage from which I descended. When I was 16, I spent three months on my aunt's kibbutz, Tzuba. One Shabbos, I had the opportunity to spend it with Rabbi Sholomo Carlebach in Yerushalayim. That Shabbos was transformative. From that moment, I knew I wanted to live a Torah-true life.

After graduating high school, I attended yeshiva in Morristown for a year. Its impact was tremendous. When I got back, I told my mother I could no longer eat at home, as the kitchen wasn't kosher. To my mother's credit, she immediately kashered everything, and the kitchen was kosher the next day.

My mother was okay with me going to yeshiva, but it had always been her dream for me to attend university and get a

degree. To make her happy, I followed her wishes, sandwiching summers in yeshiva between years in college. When I finished university, I returned to Morristown yeshiva for another year, before earning my smicha certificate in Kfar Chabad.

My wife inherited her brilliance and creativity from her father, an engineer who worked on the Apollo Space Mission. She's a skilled and gifted artist. When we were engaged to be married, she had been enrolled in the Pratt Institute of Art and Architecture. The Rebbe instructed her to finish her degree, which she did, 20 years later in Johannesburg, at the University of Witwatersrand. Studies at Pratt were interrupted by the birth of our first child.

Meanwhile, I learned in Rabbi Heller's kollel, while also taking courses in practical rabbanus in Flatbush.

With these credentials, we were soon entertaining offers from all over the world. One - an offer to be a founding member of a fledgling school in Johannesburg - caught our eye. The school had recently purchased spacious premises, and it was full of exciting potential. I'd met many South Africans in yeshiva, and was impressed with their good middos. We understood it would be a worthy place to raise and educate children. (We were right, as it turned out! All 11 of our children have grown up to be exemplary Torah Jews.)

Of course, the reality of leaving friends and family so far behind was challenging, especially since keeping in touch even through phone calls was exorbitantly expensive. We had to budget carefully to afford even one overseas phone call! But we were dedicated to our new path in life and excited to blaze the trail.

Although I was originally hired to work at the school, and spent much of that first year dedicated to preparing and teaching, I was soon made aware of a lack of rabbinical presence for Jewish patients at the hospital. I began visiting regularly, trying to meet with every patient at least once every week or two.

One Purim, I brought my class to visit the hospital. Each student brought a cheerful basket with some Purim goodies to distribute as mishloach manos. Amongst the joyous Purim revelry, one of my students laughingly pointed to the plaque outside my office, *Rabbi Mordechai Abraham and Pastor Ha-*

I was in shul, finishing up Musaf on Shvii shel Pesach. Suddenly, someone ran into shul and tapped me on the shoulder, urgently.

"You're needed. Now!" he whispered, his low voice and wide eyes underlying the pressing nature of his request.

He told me that the Hertzbergs' two children had just been in a terrible accident. Although the hospital was a far walk, I immediately left with him.

The children were fighting for their lives, their parents watching anxiously for every breath. These children were all they had, and they were wracked with grief and worry. I did whatever I could, talking with them, saying Tehillim, and being a listening ear.

I returned a couple more times over yom tov, and I even brought wine and matza along so we could enjoy the Moshich seuda together, along with a couple of other rabbis who'd also come to comfort the Hertzbergs.

Tragically, just a few days later, the children succumbed to their injuries. They were buried on gevurah sheb'gevurah, the somber theme of the day lending gravity to the heartbreaking scene. I'll never forget the Hertzbergs' cries, as their only hopes for the future were muted by falling mud.

We were all so happy for them when we heard that, with much bracha and mazal, Mrs. Hertzberg had given birth to a baby boy.

"I want to be there for you in times of joy, just as I was for those times of grief," I told Mr. Hertzberg. "I'm not missing a single simcha!"

I was there for Joey\* Hertzberg's bris, and I cut his hair at his upshernish. A year before his bar mitzvah, his father asked if I planned on attending.

"Of course!" I answered.

Mr. Hertzberg made sure to reserve rooms for my entire family, so we could all celebrate together.

I still message the Hertzbergs every year on gevurah sheb'gevurah to wish them well. And I always assure them - as soon as I get the invitation to Joey's wedding, I'm booking a ticket!

Rabbi Kesselman, a friend and mashpia in the yeshiva, called me, a grim tone in his voice. "I usually call you for Bikur Cholim purposes, but this time, I'm afraid I'm calling you as Chevra Kadisha."

The high school boys were about to embark on a safari trip, when a car crashed into two of them. For one, the impact was immediately fatal, but for Yossi, it threw him a distance away, and while he was still alive, it was clear that his grasp on life was tenuous at best.

The surgeons shook their heads grimly. There were just too many things to patch up. Yossi's kidneys, skull, multiple broken bones, loss of blood... they were just about ready to give up. One doctor, a friend of the family, refused to allow them to throw in the towel, and encouraged them to do everything they could to save Yossi. The blood bank ultimately sent more than 80 units of blood, and it still wasn't enough.



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It was past midnight, but we nevertheless managed to find a minyan, finding the tenth in a man whose only experience with Yiddishkeit was eating the shmura matza I'd give him for Pesach. We fervently recited Tehillim, praying for a miracle. It felt like Hashem was listening to every word.

"Yossi will pull through!" one friend insisted. "Look at the Chumash in today's portion. The pasuk says, *Od Yosef Chai* - Yosef is still alive!"

We called the Rebbe's office in New York to ask if a name should be added to aid the poor boy's recovery, but were told no.

With one miracle after another, Yossi pulled through, despite the fact that there were five major complications that could have - *should* have - been fatal. Tehillim was recited on his behalf around the clock, and the community supported his family every step of the way. When people picked up food orders for the family from the local grocery and bakery, the owners refused to accept payment.

A few years later, I organized a Purim party in the hospital for all the patients and doctors. The neurosurgeon who'd cared for Yossi noticed a costumed clown pushing a patient's bed through the corridors.

"Happy Purim, Dr. Miller!" he greeted him with a smile.

"Who are you?" asked Dr. Miller.

"I'm Yossi!" the clown grinned. "Why, don't you recognize me?"

The neurosurgeon's mouth dropped open in absolute shock, and he refused to believe it for some time.

"Unbelievable!" he shook his head in amazement. "You're walking and talking *normally*? Unbelievable!"

It was a timely reminder to thank Hashem for the miracles He does for us - back then, and every day since!

I was asked to visit a patient in a hospital, and while I was there, I perused the list of patients, looking for other Jews. I saw one name I recognized - Lazar Sudelsky. He was a Jewish lawyer, who'd articulated Nelson Mandela. He was also the father of one of my congregants.

I also saw that his children had come from overseas to be with him. When so many people make such a long journey, it can only mean one thing. I wanted to do something for him, so I called Solly Krok, another congregant who I knew was close friends with Nelson Mandela. I asked him to arrange a visit. Of course, it wasn't easy to arrange, but the next day, Nelson Mandela walked into Lazar's hospital room, crying out, "My boss! My boss!" with outstretched arms.

Lazar was so happy to see him, and even sat up in bed and chatted for a long time. It was a day no one soon forgot! Lazar pulled through and lived another eleven months!

I don't fundraise unless I have a specific purpose in mind, and I don't elicit donations. Somehow or other, Hashem always comes through.

Susan\* was diagnosed with advanced cancer. I visited her as often as I could, and, over the course of many visits, we became good friends. When it was clear that the time was near, I helped her recite Viduy. I felt a heavy burden descend upon me as we recited the age-old words, and I had to stop outside her room to gently remove it and place it down, so I could continue to be there for everyone else who needed me.

I received news of her passing on Shabbos, Yud Shevat. The fact of her passing on such a special day stuck with me.

About twenty years later, on Yud Shevat, I met her son, Stuart\*. I asked him to put on tefillin, and as I wrapped the straps around his arm, I mentioned, "Today is your mother's yahrzeit. May her neshama ascend on High."

Stuart was amazed that I remembered his mother *and* the date of her passing. He started sending monthly donations, and is now one of our regular supporters!

Another time, I brought my daughter to her friend's birthday party. I wished the father a hearty "mazal tov!" and asked after his "business." He ran a Simchas Shabbos V'Yom Tov fund, and I knew fundraising was a difficult task.

He sighed deeply. "We are struggling," he shared. "There are so many people relying on us. I wonder how we'll manage."

I understood exactly what he meant, as my finances weren't particularly robust either. However, his sighs touched my heart, and I pulled out my checkbook, writing out a major sum I couldn't really afford.

"Watch what happens," I told my daughter, explaining what I'd just done.

When we returned home from the party, another daughter brought me an envelope. "My teacher told me to give it to you," she explained.

In the envelope was a check for the exact amount I'd just given my friend. I'd officiated an event for my daughter's teacher some time before, not expecting any remuneration. She'd just remembered that she'd wanted to give me something for my services - the day I'd decided to put someone else's needs above my own.

Blake and Shelly\* had been married for five years without any children. We were all so happy when we found out they were expecting - *twins*! I saw Blake every day and helped him put on tefillin regularly.

One day, I noticed Blake looked troubled.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Blake turned to me, his eyes blank and unseeing. "Shelly's been having some complications. The doctors say there's a risk of losing the pregnancy."

I felt sick to my stomach and knew I had to do something. "Blake, can we put mezuzos on every door in your house?"

"Nah," he replied. "We're moving very soon. What would be the point?"

I couldn't sit back and do nothing. I checked with my accountant to make sure we could afford it, and paid for the mezuzos myself.

"Blake, I'm coming over with the mezuzos!" I told him over the phone as soon as the mezuzos arrived. He tried to dissuade me, but I drove over anyhow and hung up every last one.

Almost immediately, Shelly began feeling better. A few days later, she had a checkup with her doctor. The complications had improved dramatically. A few months later, she gave birth to two healthy babies.

Blake became a huge supporter of Mitzvah Mezuzah. He gives me a significant sum of money annually for the express purpose of supplying mezuzos to those who'd otherwise struggle to afford them. When his business took off and moved to a larger building, he asked me to hang mezuzos on each door - and there were over 150! He made sure to buy only the most mehudar mezuzos for his home. Whenever something goes wrong or someone feels unwell, Blake immediately calls to ask me to check his mezuzos!

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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