

# 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 Vechessed, Johannesburg, South Africa*

## Rehab for the Soul, Tzedoka Vechessed Part II

By Chaya Chazan

**If I'd thought my purpose in coming to Johannesburg had taken some turns, there was one more in store – a life-changing, monumental twist that has redefined my shlichus.**

I was introduced to Jamie when I visited him in the hospital after a failed suicide attempt. Jamie was a victim of a new synthetic opioid sweeping the market. We hit it off, and when he transferred to a rehab center a day's journey from Johannesburg, I went to visit him there. I found out he'd chosen to leave the center, but I met many other Jews there, also trying to regain equilibrium and find themselves again. I kept in touch with many of them for many more years.

I didn't know then, but Jamie had an uncle who was one of the most prominent Jewish philanthropists in the country. His nephew's struggles inspired him to start an organization to help Jewish addicts recover. I was heavily involved in the organization, and have been in the field ever since. Even after the organization folded, I continued.

At one point, Jamie moved in with us. He was on the path of recovery, and was deepening his commitment to Hashem. He davened regularly, and even often went to mikvah. My kids called him "Baal Shem'ske Jamie." Unfortunately, we soon noticed things disappearing from the house. We hoped it wasn't true, but it was impossible to ignore the facts - Jamie had relapsed and was taking

stuff from the house to fund his addiction. When Jamie realized we knew what he was doing, he was deeply ashamed. He knew he needed to make a change - he just didn't know how.

He decided to go to the mikvah, asking Hashem for a sign. There, he was surprised to meet Rabbi Dr. Twerski, a world-renowned psychiatrist and one of the leading experts on drug addiction recovery in the Jewish world. The chances of meeting this American rabbi in Johannesburg of all places, was truly a sign from Heaven he couldn't ignore.

Jamie told Rabbi Dr. Twerski about the crossroads he was facing, and his struggles thus far.

"Give me one minute," Rabbi Dr. Twerski said. "I'll meet with you outside."

When Rabbi Dr. Twerski met Jamie a couple of minutes later, he opened his arms wide. "Give me a hug," he offered.

From that moment on, Jamie stayed straight and true. Even when he was diagnosed with epilepsy, and the doctor recommended he take drugs to manage his condition, Jamie refused. He didn't want to fall down that slippery slope; to put himself in temptation's way. He suffered from seizures from then on, including one that eventually took his life. But he was proud of his dedication to remain clean and sober to the very end.

People like Jamie inspired me to shift the focus of my shlichus, concentrating on this vulnerable section of the population, so desperately in need of life-saving support.

Our organization, Tzedoka Vachessed, focuses on helping Jews dealing with addiction. There was a weekly support group for former and current addicts that gave them guidance, tools, and, most importantly, a network of people

who knew what they were going through to serve as their support.

For years, drug rehabilitation centers weren't covered under any medical insurance. A large part of my goal was fundraising enough to cover the stay of anyone who needed it. I'd pay a lump sum, enough for 10 recoveries, and then I knew I could send likely addicts ready to change their lives to them.

Once insurances started paying for rehab treatment, I set myself a new goal. There were very few halfway houses available, especially for Jewish addicts. I found a house that would be perfect, and I mentioned it to a friend of mine who was a successful businessman.

He sat in thoughtful silence for a moment before calling in his accountant. "How much is the house?" he asked. I told him. "So the monthly mortgage would be...?" he asked the accountant. When he heard the number, he smiled. "No problem. I'll buy it for you."

Our halfway house - *Shana's House* - was born. I hired a frum social worker, and she ran the house. We had meetings twice each week, one a therapeutic session, and one to cover the weekly goings-on in the house.

For our family, this became our new normal. My kids grew up surrounded by recovering addicts, and didn't think twice that we hosted their sheva brachos in the halfway house.

Cliff\* was brilliant. At a young age, he'd become the CFO of a hedge fund. Unfortunately, there was trouble bubbling beneath the surface. Everything came to a head when he was arrested while buying drugs.

I visited him in jail, helped him put on tefillin, and shmoozed for a while. He was remorseful and seemed sincere, so I helped him get into a rehabilitation center when he was released. I even helped him get his job back at that same company. Everything was great for a while, but Cliff regressed. He was fired for using, and we began the whole process over again. I got him into rehab, helped him find *another* job with a friend of mine, but ultimately, he was fired once more for using. Eventually, Cliff burned through all his resources. He was homeless, jobless, and penniless, and the streets became his home.

When he hit rock bottom, he reached out to me for help. I took him to a doctor who prescribed him Methadone, a medication that could help with the withdrawal symptoms.

He didn't meet the requirements for my halfway house - a clean drug test - so I opened my own home to him instead. It was almost Pesach, and we were all busy preparing for the holiday. Cliff was taking the Methadone as prescribed, but when he heard about our family's strict chumros, and how we don't use any processed ingredients in our home



over Pesach, he decided to join in, and stopped taking the Methadone a few days earlier than scheduled.

On the second night of Pesach, we all began counting the Omer, marking off the days of our spiritual refinement. Cliff's counted not only towards Matan Torah, but his own sobriety and recovery as well. Baruch Hashem, his many talents and high intelligence, unimpeded by drug abuse, earned him a leadership position at another job, where he helped it grow into a NASDAQ listed company. It's been 20 years, and Cliff has still not stopped counting his personal sefirah.

Every summer, hundreds of tourists flock to Plettenburg Bay, renowned as one of the most beautiful places on earth, with its white sand beaches, majestic peaks, and verdant forests. I was invited to serve as the "holiday rabbi" for all the Jewish tourists who'd make their home there for the holiday season.

They rented a large house for me and my family, with plenty of space for all my children, plus! Since I had extra room, I decided to bring two "bonus kids" I knew from the halfway house, who could use some sunshine and attention.

One of these "uncles" was Jack\*. Jack had a traditional yeshiva education, but had left the entire Torah lifestyle behind him years before. He'd been to rehab and the halfway house, but had relapsed a few weeks earlier.

After the first Shabbos, Jack told us he was having an "existential crisis."

"Seeing Shabbos again after all these years has reminded me of all the beauty and joy. I want to start keeping Shabbos again, but I can't give up *smoking*! I can't last 25 hours without it! I don't know what to do."

The next Friday, I watched Jack light up one cigarette after another, inhaling the smoke, and blowing it out into a Coke bottle, which he closed up tightly afterwards. It was his way of getting the hit he needed without breaking Shabbos.

That was the first of a lifetime of Shabbosim he kept. Jack remained a close friend of the family, and joined us for many Shabbosim, yomim tovim, and vacations, maintaining his honorary "uncle" status.

Jack had been particularly close with my son, Yisroel. I knew it would be a special moment for both of them if Jack could attend Yisroel's wedding. There were just a few problems with that: Yisroel was getting married in America and tickets were astronomical... and Jack had advanced cancer and was very ill.

I asked Jack to speak with his doctors and get medical clearance to travel overseas. With that accomplished, I started fundraising for his ticket and visa. Jack accompanied us to the wedding and did everything with us. The highlight of the trip was a visit to the Ohel, where Jack poured out his heart and soul.

Sadly, Jack passed away a couple of months later. His mother, who'd originally opposed the trip to America, thanked us profusely for giving her son such a memorable and inspiring trip that made his final days so much happier.

I took advantage of some cheap rates and booked a holiday for my family in a remote cabin on top of a mountain. Another family from our community accompanied us as well. We were in the middle of nowhere, but the scenery was glorious, and we made the best of it, setting out on invigorating hikes with the whole family.

We were 45-minutes into the hike, and I didn't notice a puff adder soaking up the mid-day sun on the path. I must've stepped on it, and it struck, biting me twice. I immediately felt the venom burn as the pain rose up my leg.

We were on a deserted mountain trail, the closest civilization being a small campsite. I didn't know how fast-acting the venom was, so I immediately sprinted into action, running back to the cabin as fast as I could. As I ran, my friend keeping pace beside me, it felt like my leg was on fire! It took 35 minutes to reach the car, and another hour to reach the closest hospital. The doctor who examined me had to study the snake bite chart hanging on the wall as a reference, which didn't inspire confidence!

"You need Augmentin," the doctor said, "but we don't have any in stock. It will take some time to find." The fact that they didn't carry such a basic antibiotic further discouraged me.

He left me alone in the room, with a leg swelled in agony and worsening by the minute. I thought I was close to death, and awful scenarios kept playing out in my mind.

I thought I was going to lose it, when a sudden thought came to mind: *You work with so many people who live in extreme pain, or are afraid of dying. Hashem is putting you through this so you can experience what they go through and truly empathize with them.*

That thought acted like a brace, and I found I now had the strength to bear the pain and fear. When the doctor finally administered the antibiotic, the relief spread through my body and made me feel "high." *Like a drug addict*, I thought. *This sudden rush of relief, free from all the pain that was so unbearable just a few moments ago - I can understand why they keep returning to this high over and over.*

"It's time for the antivenom," the doctor announced. He gave me a small injection at first, and when there was no adverse reaction, he administered the full dose.

Suddenly, my limbs started shaking, and it felt like a ton of bricks were sitting on my chest. I struggled to breathe, blacked out, and went into cardiac arrest. I'd never known I was allergic to antivenom.

They were able to resuscitate me, baruch Hashem, but my leg remained black and blue and swollen for a very long time afterwards. I had to relearn how to walk and relied heavily on family and friends' support for even the most basic tasks.

In retrospect, that incident was one of the most important in my life. It taught me humility and gratitude. It put me in the shoes of the people I try to help, making me more empathetic and understanding of their experiences. It was a difficult time, but it made me a better person.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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