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

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Lifting the Iron Curtain: Chabad of Moldova Part I

By Chaya Chazan

When Communism fell in 1990, the first question on Chabad headquarters' mind was, *Can we send shluchim there now?*

Lishkas Ezras Achim, a grassroots organization started by Chabad chassidim who'd suffered under Communist rule, approached my parents, Rabbi Zalmen A"H and Leah Abelsky, and asked if they'd be interested in seeding a shlichus in the former Soviet Union. My parents discussed it, and then wrote to the Rebbe for approval. Within ten minutes, they had the Rebbe's answer: A line under the word *Maskim - approve*, and an added "*Azkir al hatziyon - I will mention [the matter] at the grave [of the Friediker Rebbe.]*"

My parents were the first shluchim from the "Western world" to venture beyond the barely-lifted Iron Curtain.

This was far from their first shlichus mission. The Friediker Rebbe sent my father to Romania after World War II, to offer Jewish families an escape route across the Russian borders to the West. Although he settled in Eretz Yisrael, the Rebbe respected his father-in-law's appointment, and considered my father the shliach of Romania. Even after Moldova declared independence from Romania in 1991, the Rebbe, when giving my father a dollar for his community, told him it was "for the Jews of Romania."

My parents, already in their 60's at the time, chose Kishinev over other more central cities in the newly-free USSR. In addition to Moldova being a continuation of their previous shlichus from the Friediker Rebbe, it would be safer for an older couple to start such an

innovative venture far from the prying eyes of the barely disbanded KGB, rather than Soviet strongholds such as Moscow, Kiev, or Leningrad.

Throughout the years of Communism, Lishkas Ezras Achim smuggled care packages and aid to the impoverished Jews in the Soviet Union. They'd been active in Moldova as well, and even had bochurim and Chabad couples visit Kishinev. When they heard my parents were moving there, a few couples extended their stay to help my parents with the difficult transition, introduce them to the community, and get them set up in an apartment.

My parents, already grandparents many times over, weren't distracted by toddlers and child-rearing, as many new shluchim are. However, the physical and mental exertion carried a heavier toll for them. I was their liaison, accepting the burden of fundraising and practical matters, so they could focus all their energy on guiding and leading the community.

Moldova had a very large Jewish population, but very few of them had even mediocre knowledge of Torah and halachah. Every Shabbos, my parents would host two minyanim for Shacharis: one early in the morning for those who had to rush off to work after davening, and another, later one, for those who were shomer Shabbos. Both minyanim filled the shul to capacity!

For their first Pesach in Moldova, my parents worked with the Ezras Achim couples to host a public seder in a villa an hour from the city. Over 200 people were expected to join them, including accommodations, two community sedarim, and Yom Tov meals for the whole week!

There was one elderly man, Rabbi Chaim Keiserman, who was a shochet and a yarei shamayim. Although he was 80 years old, he walked to shul every Shabbos - two hours each way! He shechted 250 chickens for Pesach, and gave them to my mother, the only person in the entire country who knew how to kasher them properly.

I noticed my mother limping as she bustled around the kitchen, and asked her about it. It was clear that her foot was broken, and I insisted she go to the hospital.

"Soon!" she said, shooing me away. "If I don't kasher these chickens, no one will have anything to eat over Yom Tov!"

She continued kashering all 250 chickens, despite her throbbing leg. Only after the final feathers had been plucked, salted, and rinsed would she agree to go to the hospital.

I stayed on after Pesach, continuing to help my parents however I could. When Lag Ba'omer approached, I decided to hold a parade - the very first in the Soviet Union! I went to the police station - still functioning as KGB - to ask for a permit. In those days of uncertainty, as Moldova asserted its independence, and the entire USSR tried to accustom themselves to the new reality of a Communist-free society, there was no clear answer. They'd never heard of a Lag Ba'omer parade before; they had no idea how to grant a permit, or even whether or not it *should* be granted.

I decided to go ahead with my plans. We held the parade on a beautiful, sunny day. Jewish children marched through the streets with signs declaring their Jewish pride - the same streets they'd hurried through furtively just a couple years before, hoping no one was watching them too closely.

The following day, I was summoned to the KGB office.

"Where are you staying?" they barked at me.

"With my parents," I answered.

"That's not allowed! You're a *tourist*; you must stay in a hotel! Since you've violated the rules, you must leave the country immediately."

I realized it would take a long time for the country to learn how to operate under freedom, but at least we snuck in a Lag Ba'omer parade!

There was *no* kosher food in Kishinev. The only way my parents could get food was to send packages through Moscow and hope they'd be approved and passed on to Moldova. Whenever anyone came to visit from the U.S. or Israel, they made sure to bring boxes of meat, chicken, and fish with them!

One Pesach, I brought my family to Moldova. Of course, we brought along dozens of boxes of carefully vacuum-sealed meat and gefilte fish. Our unusual load caught the eye of one customs agent, and he began questioning us.

"What's inside these boxes?" he demanded.

I explained that they contained food for the Pesach holiday.



"And have they been inspected for safety? Do you have a certificate?"

Of course, I didn't.

"Everything must go in the garbage," he declared, a small, satisfied smile playing around the corner of his mouth.

I was young and inexperienced. I didn't know what to do. How could I throw away all this precious food? Not only was it thousands of dollars down the drain, but what would we eat during Pesach?

As I stood there, helpless, a man standing nearby took control of the situation.

"I have a lot of connections in this airport," he told the customs agent. "There's nothing wrong with this food! If you don't let this rabbi and his food through, I will personally make sure today is your very last day of work. If you let it through, you can come to my office, and we'll talk about how I can show my gratitude properly..."

The agent, white-faced, immediately stamped our papers and waved us through.

The man who'd so suddenly come to my rescue became a good friend. We recently celebrated his 75th birthday!

A major part of shlichus in Moldova is caring for our community's physical needs. While under the rule of Communism, it was impossible to prosper. Even after Communism fell, many people remained below the poverty line, lacking money for the most basic necessities. In recent years, the war in Ukraine has made resources more scarce, and consequently, much more expensive.

So while we opened a shul, school, and pre-school, we also made it a priority to open a soup kitchen. The kitchen is open for breakfast and dinner every day. Anyone and everyone is welcome to join, and donations are appreciated, but never expected.

Our kitchen serves over 100 portions of breakfast and dinner every day, in addition to the food we serve to our students and school staff.

Since the day my father assumed leadership of the shul 35 years ago, there hasn't been a single instance of the kitchen closing its doors!

Now, I spend the busy months of the year in Kishinev, and spend the other parts of the year between Crown Heights and Moldova. Baruch Hashem, we have four other shlichim in Moldova, including my daughter and son-in-law, who carry out the day-to-day operations

while we focus on administration, fundraising, and organization. It gives us such nachas to see our grandchildren on shlichus - the fourth generation of Moldovan shlichim!

Gregory and Katerina* were making strides on their journey towards Yiddishkeit. When they had a boy, they named him Aharon. Their daughter, born a couple of years later, was named Miriam.

Katerina taught in our school and continued learning more about Torah.

"Katerina, both of your children have such beautiful Jewish names," I told her one day. "Isn't it time for you to have a Jewish name, too?"

"Sure! Why not?" she answered. "What name should I choose?"

"That's entirely up to you," I said. "I trust you to pick the perfect name."

A few days later, Katerina came to me, a big smile on her face. "If my son is Aharon and my daughter is Miriam, it only makes sense for me to be Yocheved, no?" she laughed.

After her naming by the Torah, I gifted her with a leather Tehillim, embossed with her new Jewish name.

Kishinev had a functioning mikvah, but when the women of the community began requesting a modern, updated building, we knew it was time for an upgrade.

We began construction, and the shell of the mikvah had been completed when funds ran dry. To finish the mikvah, we needed a large influx of cash.

My wife contacted a friend of hers, who was still single after many years of searching for her zivug.

"I'd love to help," her friend said. "I can donate a high-end, beautiful sheitel. You can raffle it off and raise money that way."

My wife thanked her and hung up the phone, staring blankly at the wall in front of her. How could she advertise the raffle widely enough to raise enough funds? Everything was all posts and reels and snaps, and she didn't know her way around that world!

Her friend, Maya, was an influencer, so she called her to ask for advice.

"Perfect timing!" Maya trilled. "I'm actually attending an influencer event this week. You should come!"

My wife felt uncomfortable at first, but decided to go, hoping she'd make valuable contacts and learn the secrets of the trade.

When she arrived, Maya greeted her warmly.

"Thanks for the invitation," my wife began, "But I actually wanted to talk about something specific."

"I can't talk right now," Maya interrupted. "Call me tomorrow and we'll chat."

My wife called the next day and explained everything - the unfinished mikvah, the donated sheitel, and the raffle that needed marketing advice.

"Does your mikvah have a name yet?" Maya asked, a curious tremor in her voice.

"Not yet, no," my wife answered.

"Now it does!" Maya declared. "Yesterday, I decided to honor Liel, my daughter, who passed away a few years ago, by dedicating a mikvah to her. Your mikvah is my mikvah. Don't worry about a thing!"

Construction soon resumed and we began to plan the dedication.

My wife called her friend who'd donated the sheitel to invite her to the dedication.

"That's great news!" her friend congratulated her. "I'd love to be there, but I'll be getting married right around then, so I won't be able to make it!"

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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