

# IllumiNations

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- KINUS HASHLUCHIM

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

*Rabbi Menachem and Rivkie Block, Chabad of Plano, Plano, TX*

## The Thirty-Year Mission

By Chaya Chazan

**I grew up in London, Ontario, where my father, Dr. Yitzchak Block, A"H, taught philosophy at the University of London.**

My father had a special connection with the Rebbe, and on many occasions, the Rebbe gave him personal guidance, extra attention, and encouragement to continue his academic career. The Rebbe explained how much influence a respected professor can have over his students, simply by living his life as a Torah-observant Jew.

We saw this influence at work constantly. Every Shabbos, we hosted students around our table, drinking in the Chassidic atmosphere, stirring melodies, and, of course, the delicious food. My mother, Laya, A"H, was the Founder and Director of the Gan Gani preschool, and community Mikvah, and the

two of them had a tremendous impact on London's Jewish community and the University students.

Although my parents weren't *officially* shluchim per se, our home was inundated with a shlichus sentiment, and I knew I'd be a shliach, too.

My first personal experience on shlichus was when the Rebbe sent me to Morocco in 1985. Every two years, a new group of bochurim would visit Morocco to assist the shliach, Rabbi Raskin, A"H, and infuse fresh passion for Yiddishkeit into the youth. My group was the last to set out on this shlichus, and we spent the next two years learning with young

students, attending and teaching shiurim, and getting to know the community.

After my wife and I married, we immediately began looking for shlichus options. Rabbi Mendel Dubrawsky was the shliach to the Dallas - Fort Worth area, one of the top five largest metropolitan areas in the country. He was looking for someone to take responsibility for the Plano - Collin County area, which was becoming an increasingly popular option for those who found Dallas too expensive or noisy.

We asked the Rebbe, and received an affirmative reply and his brachos. We joined Rabbi Dubrawsky as the second shluchim to the area. Today, we number 25 shluchim families, five of whom are my own children Ka'h.

Plano was a rapidly growing city, with a population of 100,000. To our knowledge, we were the first Rabbi and Rebbetzin ever to step foot in the city. There was virtually no established Jewish infrastructure. It was challenging, but it also gave us the opportunity to build everything from scratch.

We started in a small house, holding tiny minyanim in our garage. We offered holiday events, shiurim, Hebrew school, and more, renting out larger spaces each time, since we could hardly fit in our house.

Baruch Hashem, we were soon able to purchase property and build a two-story building - more than thirty times the size of our garage! In the past 34 years, we've continued to expand, growing to meet the community's needs.

When we first started, the dot-com era was barely dawning. When we wanted to advertise our summer camp, we had to pull out the white pages and call one number after another. The only "virtual" program we were able to launch was *Dial-a-Story*, where calling a hotline would direct you to a recorded Jewish story.

Now, the landscape has changed drastically. Social media connects Collin County's one-million-plus residents, and many other Jewish organizations have established themselves here as well. But no matter how different things seem, one thing has remained constant from the very first day we touched down in Texas: the love for every Jew driving our shlichus. We've built relationships that are just as strong now, over thirty years later, as they were



when we first started. For shluchim, it's not about numbers or statistics; it's about reaching each precious Jewish soul.

"Oh, Rabbi! You're here!" my secretary commented in relief. "A nice couple was just looking for you."

"Did you get their contact information?" I asked.

Her face fell. "Don't worry about it," I assured her. "Im yirtzeh Hashem, they'll be back."

Baruch Hashem, I was right. A few days later, the couple, Donny and Rebekah, returned. This time, I was there and happy to meet with them.

"So, how can I help you?" I asked, showing them to seats on the other side of my desk.

"I think it would be best for me to explain my background," Donny began.

"I grew up in Houston, Texas, in a warm, traditional home that always felt close to Chabad. I was raised with loving parents, Shlomo Chaim and Chaya Sara Ohana, A"H, alongside an older sister and younger brother, Raphy. My father was born in Casablanca, a proud Sephardic Jew who later served as a sergeant in the IDF and fought in the Yom Kippur War. My mother was born in Harbin, China; her family fled Russian communism and eventually made their way to Israel. At home, we had pictures of the Rebbe on the walls and a steady undercurrent of Yiddishkeit. My parents enrolled us in Chabad's Torah Day School in Houston because they believed deeply in Jewish education.

"I was a very active child and had a difficult stretch in my learning. When I reached Bar Mitzvah though, I remember really enjoying learning from Rabbi Feigenson, who was a Chabad Rabbi and my brother's teacher. My Bar Mitzvah was a moderate one, so much so that Rabbi Lazaroff, who is the head Shliach of Texas, mentioned during his speech, *This is a real bar mitzvah - no balloons, no head table... this is the real deal!*



"After eighth grade in public school, my parents sent me to a yeshiva in Miami. It was a shock to my system: dorm life, full-time learning, and a frum schedule I hadn't been living. But somewhere in all of that, Gemara caught fire for me. It was the first time I felt genuinely *good* at something that mattered. I started to imagine a future of real learning, maybe even kollel.

"Then, everything changed - my father suddenly fell ill and went to the hospital. What they first thought might be a stroke turned out to be a stage-four brain tumor. I headed back to Houston for specialized treatment.

"Overnight, Yeshiva plans became hospital corridors, chemo and radiation schedules, and sitting at my father's bedside. Just when he began showing improvement, my mother was diagnosed with cancer, too. Mine and my siblings' anchors were slipping, and, in the chaos, our observance frayed. We didn't stop caring - we were only just holding on. After eight years of fighting, my father passed away a month after his fifty-fifth birthday.

"At his funeral, Chabad showed up for us in a way I'll never forget. Rabbi Lazaroff and other Rabbis carried my father's casket; Rabbi Marinovsky, who is the adult education Director at Chabad Houston, spoke with such warmth and respect. They visited our home, explained the grieving process, and gave us language for the pain. I appreciated it. But grief can make you retreat, and that's what we did - further from the community, further from Yiddishkeit.

"My mother's cancer eventually returned - stage four - and we knew where the road would lead. I stopped everything to be with her. That year was searing and clarifying. She had this intuition that could see around corners. She spoke to me about coming back to Hashem, with a certainty that seemed impossible at the time.

"As my mother's life was drawing to a close, I reconnected with Rebekah, a childhood family friend, to see if she could bring me something from the store because I couldn't leave my mother's side. Our mothers had met when we were little; a simple

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menorah necklace had sparked their first conversation.

"Rebekah came, helped care for my mother, and even lit Shabbos candles for her, though Rebekah wasn't Jewish. My mother, ever intuitive, had said, *You and Rebekah will be married, and you will have children, a boy and a girl.* It was the furthest thing from my mind and impossible to understand at the time, but she kept at it. Thirty-six days later, my mother passed away, with Rebekah and I at her side.

"Once again, Chabad was here for us during another difficult time. Rabbi Marinovsky spoke at her funeral, just as he did for my father, and shared beautiful memories of her and our days in Torah Day School.

"After that, I packed the house and boxed up the remnants of the life we didn't know how to live anymore. Everything we felt Chabad could benefit

from, we sent over. We had no more use for it at the time.

"By this time, I had become completely secular, setting aside Shabbos and kosher, and marking holidays that weren't mine. Rebekah and I decided to marry and move from Houston to Dallas. My mother's constant encouragement to become closer to Hashem and Torah before she passed sparked something in both of us, and we started a journey together.

"We spent time in very welcoming places, took a short course, and they told us we were fine as we were. For a while, it felt sufficient, but the more we grew, the more Rebekah sought a path that was true and complete.

"Rebekah researched Orthodox Rabbis in the area, and found Chabad of Plano. Seeing the name *Chabad* took me right back to the warmth of Rabbi

Lazaroff and the good old days. When I came into the lobby, there was a large picture of the Rebbe on the wall. I can't explain it logically, but the moment I saw it, something inside me settled. I had a vision, clear as day, of our family growing here.

"So that's what brings us to you, Rabbi. Rebekah wants to convert *properly*, k'halachah. We understand it's serious and demanding. We're ready for that. We want a Jewish home, real Shabbos, real halacha, and real commitment. We want our future to match the spark my mother instilled in us. We're asking for guidance, and we're willing to do whatever it takes."

Donny and Rebekah had a look in their eyes, full of hope, yearning, and understanding. Like most Orthodox rabbis, I was hesitant to accept a convert. In fact, in over 30 years of leading Chabad of Plano, I'd only helped a handful through a conversion. But as I looked at Donny, I saw a neshama deeply connected with the Rebbe, yearning to come home and bring his family with him. In Rebekah, I saw a pure, sincere soul. I saw a family that needed healing; a family that deserved to be together.

"Okay," I told them. "I'll guide you through the conversion process. But I have to warn you. You'll be asked to make hard sacrifices. You'll have to make *lasting* commitments to prove your dedication. A religious Jew must be within walking distance of shul, so they can come every Shabbos. To show me you truly mean to carry this through to the end, buy a house nearby!"

A month later, Donny called. "Mazal tov, Rabbi! It looks like we're going to be neighbors!"

Over the next two years, Rivka (formerly Rebekah) learned everything there is to know about keeping halacha in every aspect of life. Rivka and Donny committed to a completely Torah-true life. He came to morning minyan regularly and even began learning the Rebbe's sichos with me after davening.

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When I felt she was ready for geirus, I called Rabbi Yona Reiss from the CRC, who flew down for the special occasion. Just as Donny's mother had predicted, they married and currently have a girl and two boys. Within a few years, Donny internalized the Rebbe's teachings and considered himself a chassid of the Rebbe.

There was still one thing bothering Donny: he wanted more for his brother, Raphy, living in Fort Worth, completely disconnected from Torah life and married to a non-Jew. Baruch Hashem, with Donny's encouragement, Raphy and his wife, now Na'ama (formerly Amanda), slowly came around. Although they had a difficult time with the transition, they eventually moved next to Chabad of Plano, became shomer Shabbat, and his wife later completed her conversion.

That same year, 2022, Texas Shluchim celebrated Rabbi Lazaroff's 50th year on Shlichus. We all gathered in his shul in Houston to farbreng and mark the occasion. At one point, I saw Rabbi Lazaroff sitting by himself, so I sat beside him and asked if he remembered Donny and Raphy.

"Of course!" he said. "They went to my school... I was at their bar mitzvahs. I buried their parents! Of course I remember them!" He sighed. "I was so upset to hear how far they turned from Yiddishkeit after they were orphaned."

"I have good news!" I shared how much had happened over the past few years. I told him Donny was now completely Torah-connected, and that Raphy, too, was on his way back.

Rabbi Lazaroff's eyes lit up. "Mendel, come with me," he said. "I want to show you something."

Mystified, I followed him, and he led me to his seat at the front of the Shul. He showed me a small siddur, sitting on a chair right next to his.

"He told me that, after their parents passed away, they had to clean out the house. They brought me a box of sefarim and said I should do whatever I wanted with them - they weren't interested in keeping anything. It broke my heart."

"Among the books was *this* siddur, the one I gave Raphy on the day of his bar mitzvah. I remember staring at it, torn up inside. Some of the sefarim went to the Chabad house; others to sheimos. But this siddur - I kept. It felt like a message I couldn't ignore, tied to everything shlichus means to me. Donny and Raphy are always with me; I never stop thinking about them and davening for them."

Watching him cradle that small siddur, it was clear to me what it meant to him. He'd taught these boys in his school, stood with the family at their simchas and at their graves, and then watched the sons slip away from everything he'd tried to give them. Moments like that can feel like a final verdict. You pour in time, patience, and love, and are still left to wonder if any of it took root. He kept the siddur. He held onto it the way a shliach holds on to hope - trusting that seeds can lie quiet for years and still come back to life.

At the farbrengen, I relayed the story to the other shluchim as the ultimate **Shnas Hachamishim** gift - a 50-year anniversary - encapsulating the *real* meaning of Shlichus: hearing about his former students' return to Hashem, after all these years.

As Hashgacha Pratis would have it, the night of the farbrengen was the yahrzeit of Donny and Raphy's mother.

I knew they were planning to drive to Houston to visit their mother's kever, so I called them and told them how happy Rabbi Lazaroff would be to see them again. They promised to go to his shul for Shacharis.

When the farbrengen ended late that night, I asked Rabbi Lazaroff for the siddur, which he gave me.

The next morning, Donny and Raphy reunited with Rabbi Lazaroff and the other Chabad Rabbis they'd known in their youth. It was a joyous celebration and deeply healing.

Since Raphy belonged to a Sephardic shul and davened that nusach, I decided to keep his siddur for a short time. Every time I opened it, it inspired me - the dedication and love of a Shliach; the power of teshuvah; the potency of tefillah.

At one point, when Raphy was speaking with Rabbi Lazaroff, he asked if I'd ever returned the siddur. "No," Raphy answered, on my behalf.

Rabbi Lazaroff immediately called me. "*Block!* Give Raphy back his siddur!"

Of course, I complied - after making a copy of the inscription and blessings Rabbi Lazaroff had lovingly written on the flyleaf, including that Hashem should always answer Raphy's prayers.

As Raphy learned the meaning of Rabbi Lazaroff's message, he shared a distinct memory with me, about how one night, he had stepped outside his home in Fort Worth, crying out to Hashem to help him and his family reconnect. Now, we both realized that Rabbi Lazaroff's blessing had come true, and Raphy's prayers were answered.

Today, both Donny, Raphy, and their families live completely Torah-true lives, each in their own Derech. They are both very grateful that Rabbi Lazaroff never gave up on them, and that I was there to help ignite the lamps, until they started to burn on their own once more.

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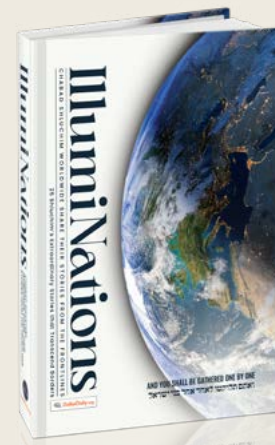
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