

IllumiNations

Issue 203 | Parshas Vayeitzei 5786

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

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Shlichus Begins at Home: Chabad of Colonie Part I

By Chaya Chazan

I was lucky to grow up on shlichus in Albany, New York, as the youngest of 11 children. As a bochur, I always did mitzvot and Merkos shlichus around Albany and its suburbs.

Although I had many opportunities to join my friends in exotic places, I really felt I could do something important that wouldn't otherwise get done.

When my wife and I got married, we were thrilled to expand the amazing Chabad network of shluchim in the capital region.

We moved to a suburb of Albany called Colonie, and established a Chabad center. It's the best of both worlds: we have our own Chabad community, but still maintain a connection with the community where I grew up. My kids even attend the same school I did - Maimonides Hebrew Day School, founded by my parents, where my wife and I now both teach as well.

There's a college, Siena University, in our area. In addition to serving the community in Colonie, we also offer many programs and Jewish enrichment for students and faculty. Being the only Jewish voices on campus is

a great merit, as we truly are the only home away from home for Jewish students.

After October 7th, I printed a large sign for my campus table proclaiming, *Do a mitzvah for peace.*

One day, a student approached my table, eyed my sign, and looked at me, a small smirk playing around the corners of his mouth.

"What is this about?" he asked.

"As you can see, we're encouraging students to do mitzvot for peace. Are you interested?"

"I'm Palestinian," he said, cocking his head impudently.

I have no doubt that my response was the Rebbe's koach speaking through me. Without even skipping a beat, I asked, "And are you Jewish? Is your mother Jewish?"

His chin lowered. "Yes," he said. He told me that his mother was a Jewish Israeli girl that had been lured from her family. His family lived in the West Bank. He'd never met his maternal grandparents.

"Would you like to put on tefillin?" I asked.

As shocked as I'd been to hear him answer affirmatively to my last question, I was even more surprised when he agreed.

For the first time in his life, the young transfer student from the West Bank put on tefillin and said Shema Yisroel.

I'd just finished setting up my table at my preferred location - a busy thoroughfare with plenty of foot traffic. Just then, Siena staff asked me to move somewhere else, since that area was overbooked.

I quickly packed everything up and set up again elsewhere. My "regulars" all stopped by, but I was there a bit later than usual, since setting up had taken so long.

Foot traffic was dwindling, and I was ready to clean up and head home. Just then, I saw a young man in fatigues passing by. He didn't look Jewish, but I called him over anyhow, and we had a great conversation!

A highlight of my table is my spinning wheel. Any passerby is welcome to spin the wheel, answer the corresponding question, and earn some kosher treats. The soldier asked to spin and he landed on the question, *How many years ago was the Torah given on Mt. Sinai?*

"Oh, I should know this. I'm Jewish!" he said, in mock consternation.

"Oh! Do you want to put on tefillin?" I asked.

"I've never done it before," he answered, nervously.

I patiently showed him how to wrap the straps, and helped him recite Shema. He gladly accepted my invitation to join us for Shabbos dinner that Friday night.

I'd never seen him before, tabling at my usual spot. I understood exactly why Hashem wanted me to switch locations.

"Caught you red-handed!" I shouted gleefully, pointing at Todd.

We'd been introduced a while before by a mutual friend, who brought Todd along for Shavuot. I was impressed by Todd's insightful questions and genuine interest.

As Todd continued visiting, he often expressed how much he wanted to learn Hebrew. When I started a course on just that, Todd eagerly signed up.

It was a busy Friday afternoon, and my wife asked me to run to the grocery store to grab a couple of last-minute items she needed. I went to the store where Todd worked, and as I perused my wife's shopping list, I asked a worker if Todd was around.

"I think he's on break," he answered. "Check Starbucks."

As I neared the coffee corner in the front of the store, I found Todd, bent over his Hebrew flashcards, using his short break to study.

"Rabbi, I'd like to convert," said the woman on the phone.

"Why?" I asked.



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"Everything that's been going on with Israel recently has made me want to connect with my Jewish roots," she answered.

"Jewish roots?" my ears perked up. "Tell me more about that."

She told me her maternal grandmother was Jewish, but the family hadn't been practicing for many years.

"There's no need to convert!" I told her. "You're as Jewish as I am. Come to shul, and we'll give you a Jewish name!"

We made up to meet later that week.

"By the way - how did you get my number?" I asked.

"It was the most amazing thing!" she exclaimed. "I was feeling stirred by all the news lately. I felt a hunger in my soul, but I didn't know what to do with it. I asked G-d to send me a sign. When I went to open my mail, I saw the last thing I expected - a letter from a rabbi! I've never received mail from you in the past, so it felt especially remarkable."

I knew exactly what she was talking about. After October 7th, I decided to expand my mailing list to every Jewish-sounding name in town. I'd barely even looked at the names on my new list, but Hashem knew exactly which address to send it to.

When Rivka Leah* received her Jewish name, it was her first time ever being in a shul. She also brought her son with her, and we made sure to sign him up for bar mitzvah lessons, pronto!

I set out my table on the campus quad at Siena University, and waited for students to walk by. It was early in the semester; campus seemed almost deserted. I checked my watch for the umpteenth time. I had to prepare a shiur for later that night, and I was also due to teach in the school soon. Dozens more messages awaited my attention. Instead, I was sitting at a deserted table, wasting time.

I debated packing up and leaving, but decided to stay for every minute I'd originally allotted.

A few minutes later, a young man passed the table. He read my sign, did a double take, and came right back.

"You're a *rabbi*? And you're *here*?" he asked, incredulously.

"So it would seem," I chuckled. "Are you Jewish?"

In response, he pulled a Chai necklace from under his shirt. "This was my grandmother's," he explained, placing it gently back into place. "She was a Holocaust survivor."

I asked Michael*, as he introduced himself, if he'd like to put on tefillin. He immediately agreed, admitting he'd never even had a bar mitzvah.

"Mazal tov! *This* will be your bar mitzvah!" I congratulated him.

It was the beginning of a long and fruitful friendship. Michael is now the president of our Jewish Association, and, as a respected student in an elite program, garners much admiration among the student body.

Baruch Hashem I stayed on campus that day!

We consider it our mission to reach each and every Jew. So it's not about the numbers for us - reaching a single neshama is just as monumental as hosting an event with many people.

I'm not involved or even particularly interested in sports - neither as a participant, nor a spectator. However, when I found out the assistant coach on the college basketball team was Jewish, I made a point to meet with him. I'd zip down to the court for a visit whenever it lined up. I also saw many Jewish students there, and it was another way to build our trust and relationship.

At one home game, the college president came on at halftime to address the fans. I was excited, since I'd been trying to meet with *him* for a long time! I managed to get his attention before he left, introducing myself as "Siena's rabbi," and we exchanged cards. I was finally able to get a meeting with him, and speak to him about my ambitions to further our reach on campus. Baruch Hashem, he was very receptive, and we were able to start programs on campus we'd wanted to do for a while!

Living in a small community, it takes real effort on our part to find Jews and convince them to come to our programs. So when I got a call from a Mr. Davidson* I had never met, asking if he could come to Rosh Hashanah services, I couldn't believe it.

"What should I bring?" he asked, after I'd given him the time and location.

"Just your smile will be more than enough," I answered. "We'll have yarmulka, talleisim, and machzorim for you; don't worry!"

Mr. Davidson ended up bringing his tallis with him, its yellowed tone testifying to its age. He was an elderly man, and since his children were grown, he lived alone. He was happy to have found a community and a place to belong. Over the next few months, he attended events regularly, and we got to know each other better.

Just before Pesach, Mr. Davidson shared some devastating news. "They found cancer," he told me, a tremor in his voice. "The doctors say there's nothing they can do. They told me I don't have much time left!"

I commiserated with him and wished him a *refuah shleima*. "I'm bringing over some *shmurah* matza," I told him. "Matzah is called '*the bread of healing*.' Eat it at each of the sedarim, and let's hope to hear good news!"

Mr. Davidson defied his doctor's expectations, and maintained his current state of health. Before the next Pesach, Mr. Davidson called, asking for matza. "Gotta get some more of that life insurance!" he joked.

Mr. Davidson has since moved closer to his children, but I promised him I'd continue sending him matza!

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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