

# IllumiNations

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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

*Rabbi Sholom and Mushki Reindorp, Neshama, Baltimore, MD*

## Lighting up Every Neshama, Neshama Part I

By Chaya Chazan

**I grew up in England, in what you'd call a "traditional" Jewish home. We kept the basics: we bought meat from the kosher butcher, avoided pork and shellfish, and went to the local shul on Shabbos mornings and festivals. But halachic observance wasn't really on our radar.**

One big gift of growing up in England, though, was that the government funds faith-based schools as part of the public system, so I was able to attend Jewish schools throughout my childhood. That meant Jewish friends, Jewish teachers, and a basic Jewish education.

Everything shifted after my grandfather passed away. My father wanted to say Kaddish for him, and began going to shul every day and putting on tefillin. That daily commitment slowly changed all of us. As his learning and observance deepened, so did the atmosphere in our home. Judaism stopped being just a "tradition" and became our way of life.

When I entered high school, I met my first Chabad Rabbi. A couple of Shluchim would visit every week, meeting with students and offering lunch-and-learn shiurim.

They had a huge impact on one upperclassman in particular - let's call him Jacob\*. He was so taken by what he learned, he started coming to school every day in a black hat and jacket. You could see something inside him had ignited.

I got to know Jacob, and was intrigued by his transformation. One week, I asked if I could come to shul with him for Shabbos.

That Shabbos, I walked three miles to the local Chabad House Jacob attended. The moment I stepped inside, I felt I'd come home. The warmth, the singing, the sense of purpose and joy - it was unlike anything I'd experienced. The Chassidic way of looking at the world, the focus on the neshama, spoke straight to my heart. I knew I'd found right where I belonged.



Over the next few years, I learned more about what it means to be a chossid and slowly adopted this vibrant, joyful way of life as my own. The shliach there became my mentor and role model. Watching his tireless devotion to every Jew, and the quiet power of his influence, a seed was planted: I wanted to be a shliach too.

After my wife and I were married, we kept our ears open for any shlichus opportunity that might be the right fit. In the meantime, I got a job, our family began to grow, and we started thinking more seriously about where we wanted to raise our children.

We eventually chose Baltimore. It offered a sizable but close-knit Chabad community, a relatively affordable cost of living, and access to rich Jewish resources in a flourishing frum city. It felt like a place where we could both raise our family and, bezras Hashem, find our shlichus.

Our inspiration came from Rabbi and Mrs. Sheiman in Chicago, who serve Jewish prisoners and their families in Illinois state and federal prisons. Their dedication to Jews in such forgotten places left a deep impression on us.

In our State, there's only one federal prison, but there are many county detention centers, state facilities, and juvenile centers within driving distance. None of them have a large Jewish population, but our shlichus is not about numbers. It's about finding each individual Jew, wherever they may be.

Over time, our work has grown far beyond the prison walls. Today, we also serve patients in mental health treatment centers and rehabs, residents of group homes and halfway houses, and people walking through moments of crisis or housing instability. And just as importantly, we are there for their families too, often people who are quietly searching for something spiritual but would never have reached for it if not for the pain they themselves are carrying.

Francis\* had almost no active Jewish connection before her life was overturned by her son's severe mental health struggles. When he was placed in isolation in a psychiatric facility, we began visiting him - bringing books, kosher food, and, just as importantly, a sense that he wasn't alone.

Francis was deeply grateful. For years, she'd been carrying it all alone - caring for this son, while also raising another child with a disability. She needed support just as much as he did.

Slowly, she became part of our extended family. She came for Shabbos meals, joined us for Yom Tov, and stayed connected, even after her son was released.

A few months ago, we went out for coffee. I gently brought up the topic of end-of-life plans, and she told me, very matter-of-factly, that she planned to be cremated, G-d forbid.

My heart dropped.

We spoke at length about the kedushah of the Jewish body, the eternity of the neshama, and the deep spiritual significance of a halachic burial. It took time, patience, and many conversations, but baruch Hashem, she ultimately decided to purchase a burial plot and wrote into her will that she wants a Halachic Jewish burial.

Miles\* wasn't the only Jew in his prison, but he was the only one in his housing block. The blocks never mixed, so he spent his days completely isolated from other Jews.

Being visibly Jewish came with a heavy price: constant jokes, slurs, and occasional beatings. After October 7th, when the war in Eretz Yisroel broke out, things got so much worse. At first, some of the media was sympathetic to Israel, but soon the narrative flipped. Israel was painted as a genocidal, apartheid state, and open antisemitism became "respectable" again.

Inside that cell block, Miles became the sole representative of the Jewish people to every antisemite who now felt entitled to act on their hatred. He suffered terribly. There was no one who understood, no one to say, "I know what you're going through."

Our monthly Jewish classes became his lifeline. There, he met other Jewish inmates from different blocks who were each facing their own version of the same hostility. Just knowing he wasn't alone, hearing their stories, and sharing his story, gave him strength.

When he went back to his block and faced the jeers, the curses, and sometimes the punches, he carried those faces with him. "If they can keep going," he told me once, "then I can hold my head up, too."

Shira\* grew up in a home filled with trauma. Her mother was abusive, and from her teenage years on, she struggled with depression, crippling anxiety, and a shattered sense of self.

As soon as she could, she fled - straight to Israel, putting as much distance as possible between herself and the past. She found a lucrative sales job, excelled; after all, she had spent her entire childhood learning exactly how to say just what people wanted to hear. From her bosses, she was finally getting the validation and praise she'd always been desperate for.

But something about the company felt off. She suspected there was dishonesty in the way they dealt with customers, yet reassured herself that as long as she was "just doing her job," she would be fine.

She wasn't.

Eventually, the legal system caught up with the company. The owners disappeared overseas, leaving angry governments and victims behind. The U.S. government sued the Israeli company, and when they couldn't get their hands on the ringleaders, they turned their attention to whomever they could find: former employees, many of whom had long since moved on with their lives.

One by one, these men and women - including Shira - were extradited to the United States to face trial and potential prison sentences.

When I first heard Shira's story, my heart sank. Here was a deeply fragile young woman, whose biggest mistake was trusting that something "too good to be true" was legitimate.

Any American citizen in a similar situation would likely be allowed to await trial under home confinement. But Shira, as a foreigner - far from home, battling severe mental illness, and having already attempted to take her own life multiple times while in custody, was sitting in a detention facility. For her, it was literally a matter of life and death.

We knew we had to act quickly.



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Working with her legal team, we petitioned the court for an alternative to incarceration. After a great deal of effort and coordination, the judge agreed to release her to home confinement under our custody.

We set up an apartment in Baltimore that would give her structure, dignity, and access to real support: a family environment, a community, and trauma therapy.

Because home confinement allowed her to attend services, she would join us every Shabbos.

The first time she came for a meal, she sat quietly on the couch, listening as my wife calmly and lovingly spoke to our children.

"Is that how real mothers speak to their children...?" she asked, completely taken aback. "I've never seen anything like that before."

Over the next six months, surrounded by a small, nurturing Jewish community, she slowly began to heal. She came out of her shell, rediscovered her own worth, and began to feel like a human being again.

Then came the sentencing. Her lawyers asked the judge to consider her fragile emotional state, her religious and community connections, and the tremendous progress she had made.

I sat in the courtroom, whispering tehillim for her, my heart pounding. I had heard this same judge sentence many of Shira's former colleagues to significant prison terms. If the same happened to her, I feared she would not survive.

After reviewing the case, the judge said: "Considering how far you've come in the past six months, continue like this with the Rabbi and his family for another six months, and you'll be free to go."

We could hardly believe it. It was nothing short of a huge miracle.

Half a year later, we stood at the airport and watched her board her flight home, a healthier, happier Shira, with a living connection to Hashem and to the Jewish people.

One thing I've learned over the years is the importance of being present in facilities, even before we've learned of any Jewish residents.

Freddy\* is a perfect example. His father was Catholic, and he was raised in that tradition. He always knew his mother was Jewish, but he had no idea what that meant for him.

I first met him in a long-term treatment center several years ago. I began visiting weekly, learning with him and gently introducing him to his home and identity among the Jewish people.

Four years later, Freddy keeps Shabbos, eats kosher, davens every morning, and learns Torah (in English) day and night.

About a year ago, he told me how much it would mean to him to put on tefillin every day. Getting permission for that in a treatment setting was not simple, but we persisted, explaining how central his spiritual life was to his overall mental health. Eventually, the administration agreed.

A few months later, another Jewish patient arrived and began coming to our classes.

"Freddy, you've got to make a Seder for him this Pesach!" I told him.

His eyes widened. "Rabbi, I've never even been to a Seder myself!"

"Don't worry," I said. "We'll do a *model* Seder together. I'll walk you through every step, every part of the Haggadah, and what it all means."

That Pesach, Freddy, who had never once attended a Seder in his life, guided his new friend through the night like a seasoned pro.

A few months ago, Freddy set himself a new goal: to learn Hebrew. He wants to be able to daven from a siddur and learn his daily Chitas in the original tongue. We started from the very beginning - first the letters, then the nekudos - and he's already starting to put words together.

These days, we have a daily chavrusa over the phone. He reads to me the first pasuk of that day's Chumash, slowly and carefully. Sometimes it can take him a few minutes to get through a single pasuk, but with a bit of help, he really gets it.

He's hoping to be released within the next year, bezH. For the first time in his life, he'll be able to walk into a shul, and his goal is that, by then, he'll be fluent enough in Hebrew to open a siddur and daven on his own.

Mike\* was a seventeen-year-old boy. His father is not Jewish, and he'd grown up with almost no exposure to Judaism at all. I first heard about him through someone in the community who knew his mother. They mentioned, almost in passing, that there was a Jewish boy, sitting in a juvenile detention center.

I got in touch with his mother, heard a bit about his background and the difficult situation he was in, and told her I would like to visit her son.

When I called the facility to arrange the visit, the social worker was polite but brisk. "Rabbi, you got twenty minutes," she said.

After an hour-and-a-half long drive down to the facility, I walked into his cell, and we sat down. For the first few minutes, he talked quickly, filling me in on his legal situation. When he paused, I said to him, "You're welcome to share with me whatever you'd like about your case. But I want you to know there's another reason I'm here: to share with you about your neshama and your heritage."

I asked if he would like to pray together and do something Jewish. He agreed, a little hesitantly. I opened my bag and took out a pair of tefillin. He'd never even heard of them.

As I wrapped the straps around his arm. I told him, "I can see you have a lot of questions, and we'll get to them. But for now, I suggest you save them for later. Just close your eyes and feel G-d's connection. You only get one chance at your first time putting on tefillin."

He closed his eyes, and a few moments later, tears began streaming down his face.

When he opened them, I helped him say Shema, word by word. When we finished, I looked at him and said, "Mazal tov! This is your bar mitzvah." Hearing that, he broke into a huge smile. I started singing "Mazal tov, mazal tov," and there in that small cell, we danced together.

"Time's up." I had to say goodbye and step out.

As I pulled away in my car, my phone rang. It was his mother.

"Rabbi," she said, her voice full of emotion, "Mike just called me. He said he loved it, and wants to know when you're coming back."

I now visit him every week for tefillin, a prayer, and even just to schmooze.

Many of the men who join our classes aren't Jewish at all. Because of prison rules, we can't choose who participates; whoever wants to sit and learn is welcome.

With the non Jewish residents, I focus on the sheva mitzvos bnei Noach.

Chris\* had been coming for a while. He was clearly not Jewish, but I could see the spark, the way he leaned forward when we learned. The one day he pulled me aside.

"Rabbi," he said, his voice low and slow, "there's this older fella in my unit... poor man's startin' to lose his mind a bit. Folks been takin' his commissary, you know, just pickin' him clean. He don't complain none, he figures it won't help anyway."

He looked down for a moment, almost embarrassed.

"But your classes, they been rattlin' around in my head," he continued. "All that stuff you teach about what's right, what ain't. Took me a bit to work up the nerve, but I finally told the boys straight up, y'all know this ain't no more."

Chris shook his head, still a little surprised at what happened next.

"And Rabbi, they listened. They actually stopped. They respect me because I'm one of em, you know. Ain't nobody takin that old man's stuff no more."

Teaching Torah, our goal is always to reach the Jewish inmates. But when a non Jewish inmate walks in and finds light, carries that light outward, and uses it to protect another human being, that too is shlichus.

Not long ago, I received a phone call.

"Is this Rabbi Reindorp?" the voice asked. It was the director of a detention center I'd never connected with before. "We just got a Jewish inmate who says he only eats kosher. We've never had Jewish inmates before, but I want to do everything right. I've gone and bought a new microwave; do you think you can come and bless it, so he can eat?"

I smiled and explained that kashrus doesn't quite work that way. From there, we spoke about what kosher food actually requires, and I told him about the Jewish awareness and sensitivity courses I offer to educate the staff, so they can better understand and accommodate Jewish needs.

\*Names changed to protect privacy

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