

# ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

*Rabbi Shlomo and Soshi Litvin, Chabad of the Bluegrass, Lexington, KY*

## A Kentucky Calling, Chabad of the Bluegrass Part I

By Chaya Chazan

**I was born and raised on shlichus in Louisville, Kentucky. Sandwiched as I was, between sisters with older brothers sent off to yeshiva before I was old enough to be included in their fun, I often felt I stood alone.**

Still, I knew from a very young age that I wanted to be a shliach, carrying out the Rebbe's mission, just like my father.

The struggles of shlichus were not new to me. Even though my parents opened a cheder when I was 8 years old, I was the only one of my peers who wore a yarmulka day in, day out, who kept strict kashrus, chalav yisroel, and Shabbos. I saw how my father lit up when friends of his would come to visit and farbreng the night away. These visits were few and far between, and my father lived on their inspiration until the next.

But that all paled in comparison to the power imbued in my father from the Rebbe.



I remember waking up one night to a furious pounding at the door. It was 2:00 in the morning, and I knew my parents wanted me in bed, but I couldn't help tiptoeing downstairs and peeking curiously through the banister at the uncanny scene below me.

The visitor was poor Mrs. Hertz\*, who'd recently been widowed from her husband of over 50 years. She was dressed in pajamas and slippers, her hair rolled tightly in curlers, her eyes wide with fear and confusion.

"My Samuel\* didn't come home from shul tonight!" she wailed wildly, striking blindly at the console beside her. "Where is he? Where is Samuel?!"

My parents gave each other a quick glance, and my mother took Mrs. Hertz's hand gently, coaxing her to the couch. She brewed a quick cup of tea, while my father sat across from her, speaking in a calm, even, gentle tone. He talked about Mr. Hertz in the present, speaking about how much he loved him. As Mrs. Hertz's face relaxed into smiles, my father gradually progressed to the past tense, describing how he *missed* Mr. Hertz.

As he spoke, Mrs. Hertz followed this journey of loving her husband in the present... to *missing* him. The crazed look in her eyes mellowed into soft grief, and by the time her daughter came to collect her, she was back to herself.

My father sat still for some moments longer after she'd left, reflecting. He faced a large portrait of the Rebbe hanging on the wall opposite, and to me, it seemed he'd enacted a true miracle, drawing from the Rebbe's kochos to guide the widow through her mental hardship.

I sat on the stairs, deep in contemplation, for what remained of the night. When my father found me there at 6:00 AM and sent me back to bed, I snuggled into my pillow with a newfound determination - I would grow up to be a shliach, just like my Tatty!

I left home just after my bar mitzvah to attend yeshiva in Pittsburgh, in the same institution my grandfather had so lovingly established. After completing my yeshiva education and earning semicha, I had a couple of job offers I couldn't decide between.

I wrote a letter to the Rebbe, explaining my quandary. I placed the letter in a volume of *Igros Kodesh* and opened a page at random. In that letter, the Rebbe directed the writer to seek his mother's advice.

"So, Ma, what do you think I should do?" I asked her, after explaining everything up to that point.

"Well, what do you *want* to do?" she asked.

I didn't hesitate for a second. One of the options was to run the kosher meat counter at the local Krogers. My father had petitioned for the counter to open after the last kosher butcher store had closed its doors. He knew the Jewish community of Louisville, small though it might be, was in real danger of buying treif meat if a kosher alternative was not provided. Since then, many other supermarket chains around the country have followed Louisville Kroger's example, including kosher meat, dairy, bakery, and grocery items within their stores.

"I want to come back home and help with the shlichus," I told my mother. "That's always been my dream."

"So come home!" she advised, pragmatically.

Over the next few years, I gained experience in many different fields. At the Kroger's butcher counter, I learned the ins and outs of kosher butchery and fine meats. When I managed the bakery division, I learned how to braid intricate challahs with my eyes closed. I worked for shlichim all over the world, gaining hands-on experience in giving shiurim, knocking door-to-door, active listening, and a myriad of other skills every shliach must have in their arsenal.

Around that time, my parents hosted Soshi Biggs, the daughter of shlichim from Long Island, whose father was a yeshiva friend of my father's. She had also spent the last few years working for shlichim in various cities, using her talents for education to teach and inspire hundreds of young minds.

My mother was highly impressed with her, and immediately decided she'd be the perfect wife for me.

And - as the Rebbe advised me - who am I to argue with my mother?

A few months before I met my wife, my father received a call from Samantha\*. She told him she was a student from Lexington, a smaller city about an hour and a half away.

"Do you have a mezuzah?" she asked, hesitantly.

"Of course!" my father answered.

"Phew!" Samantha breathed an audible sigh of relief. "I thought you would also say no. I called the local temple and they only had the cases for sale. They told me to call Chabad for the actual scroll."

"I'll have my son bring it straight to your door!" my father promised.

He handed me the mezuzah like a baton and sent me to find Samantha.

I helped Samantha - and her Jewish roommate - hang the mezuzah on their front door. I gave them a Jewish calendar and asked, "How do you plan to celebrate Chanukah?"

They gave each other blank stares and shrugged their shoulders.

"No problem!" I answered. "You officially have plans!"

We always host a public menorah lighting in Lexington. After the event, I visited Samantha again. She'd invited a few more friends, and we had a cozy little group of five. When I returned for Purim, there were seven. Before Pesach, our group had grown to twelve.

I emailed my father, detailing the growth and progress of my Lexington visits. "I know there hasn't been a steady Chabad presence here yet, but I think there should be a full-time Chabad house," I concluded.

A few months later, Soshi and I got engaged, followed by a summer wedding. We were both dedicated to shlichus, and were considering a few different options, when my father forwarded me the email I'd sent him, adding the line Moshe Rabbeinu said to Pinchas, "Let he who sees an issue within the camp be the one to repair it."

We met with Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky AH, the vice chairman of Merkos. He showered us with patience and care, gently guiding us through every step our prospective shlichus would take.

Just before Purim of 2015, we moved to Lexington and began our shlichus.

We hadn't yet found a house, so we were living with my parents and making the daily drive to Lexington to find Jews and jumpstart our shlichus.

Just a week after we'd arrived, I got a call from a fellow shliach in Massachusetts.

"I just saw an article about the new shluchim in Lexington. That's you, right?" he asked.

"Yes...?" I answered, slightly puzzled.

"What incredible hashgacha pratis! I just received a call from a woman whose father is in Lexington, Kentucky! He just got out of surgery, but something went terribly wrong, and he probably won't last much longer. He desperately wants to speak with a rabbi."

"Got it," I said. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

My wife and I quickly jumped into the car and drove straight to the hospital in Lexington.

"We're here to see Mr. Levin\*," I told the receptionist.

"I'm sorry. Visiting hours are over," she replied, hiding a tired yawn.

"I'm clergy!" I protested. "Please let me see him. He's dying!"

"You're not on my list," she shrugged. "I'm sorry, but that's the policy. You can come back at regular visiting hours, which start at 9:00 AM."

"Okay, fine. I'll be parked in the fire lane, so I can be here on the dot of 9," I told her. "If you need me to move, just knock on the window."

She blinked up at me in surprise. "But - but, it's 2:00 AM now! You're going to stay in your car all night?"

I shrugged. "If that's what I have to do."

She bit on her lip and then sighed, her shoulders deflating. "I'm going to be very, very busy on my computer for the next few minutes," she said, a twinkle dancing in the corner of her eye. "I may not even notice if one or two people walk past my desk..."

We thanked her and rushed to Mr. Levin's room. Although he was clearly terribly ill, he was remarkably sharp and coherent. He was so happy to see us, and thanked us for coming over and over again.

"Do you have a mezuzah?" he asked. "I don't have one here, and I feel so alone without it."

As it happens, I always keep a mezuzah in my car, protected from extreme weather by a special case. My wife quickly ran to the car to retrieve it and brought it back to Mr. Levin. He clutched it tightly in his hands, seeming to draw strength from the parchment. I helped him recite Viduy and Shema, and we talked for hours.

At 7:00, two full hours before official visiting hours had started, Mr. Levin returned his neshama to its Creator. Baruch Hashem, we were able to be with him, giving him the comfort of kedusha to ease his final moments.

We visited the college campus in Lexington, trying to meet Jewish students and others in the city. As we drove down a side street, a *For Rent* sign caught my eye. We pulled over and I dialed the number on the sign.

"When would you like to see the house?" the agent asked.

"Do you have time right now?" I asked. "I'm actually right in front of it, as we speak."

The agent came over immediately and began showing us around the house.

As he threw open the doors to the back porch and showed us outside, he remarked, "Wouldn't this porch be great for a sukkah?"

He got exactly the reaction he wanted. When I found out he'd never put on tefillin before, he became the first "karkafta" in what became Chabad of Lexington's first Chabad house.

"I wouldn't recommend opening a Chabad house on campus," the university president told us, steepling his fingers as he leaned across his desk. "There really isn't a big enough Jewish population to justify one."

"How many Jewish students would you say you have?" we asked.

"Nine," he answered, confidently. We raised our eyebrows in polite disbelief. "I hosted a Rosh Hashanah party," the president explained. "It was very well-advertised, but only nine students came. I'm sorry, but it seems there just aren't that many Jewish students here."

At our welcome barbeque, there were over 100 students, and we realized our new house was barely big enough. A few weeks later, when we hosted our Purim party, the attendees spilled out into the yard, and even onto the roof!

By the next year, we'd already moved to a bigger space, although we quickly grew out of that one, too.

Baruch Hashem, Chabad of Lexington was growing by leaps and bounds!



# Part II

We'd already outgrown the rented property we had and knew we needed a bigger space. When the owner sold the building to the bank, it was the push we needed to actively search for Chabad of Lexington's new home.

As the end of our lease loomed closer and closer, our task became more urgent. As I walked to campus to give a shiur, I saw a *For Sale* sign. The house looked well kept, spacious, and, best of all, it was even closer to campus than our current property!

I immediately called the listing agent and asked to see the house. My wife drove over, and the agent showed us through the property. As we walked through the empty rooms, I could already envision the wall we'd knock down to make the shul, the improvements we could make to the kitchen, and the addition that would make the perfect space for a student lounge.

My wife and I finished the tour with a sparkle in our eyes, but the agent dampened our enthusiasm by letting us know there was already an offer pending, and once it was accepted, the house would be off the market.

I just *felt* how right this house was for us, and I was disappointed. I called Steve Caller, a great friend and supporter of many Chabad houses throughout the world.

"What do you think about this property?" I asked, looking for his experienced advice.

"What did your lawyer say?" he asked.

"I don't have one," I admitted.

"Well then, your real estate agent? Do you have a bank loan?" he pressed. He shook his head when I told him we'd walked into this completely unprepared. "You have to have the Alef, Beis, Gimmel, Daled, all *before* you attempt to build something," he advised.

The next day, the listing agent informed me the house was under contract. We were disappointed, but Mr. Caller helped us prepare for the next possibility by introducing us to a lawyer, realtor, and banker.

I couldn't shake the feeling that the house was meant to be. I called the listing agent back and asked him to let me know immediately if anything changed.

A month later, on a Friday morning, the agent called to let me know the offer had fallen through, and the property was on the market once again. Thanks to the excellent preparations with which Mr. Caller had helped us, before Shabbos came in, we were the proud owners of a new property.

We were excited about our new house and all the possibilities it held, but we had a down payment to remit within 90 days and absolutely no money with which to pay it.

I set up a few meetings with donors, but received only lukewarm support. We were beginning to feel desperate.

With my kids away in sleepover camp and the students home for summer break, my time was free to dedicate wholly to this problem. I took a quick trip to New York to visit my children in camp and

the Rebbe's Ohel. My time was limited, as I had my regularly scheduled shiur Monday evening, back in Lexington. I'd never missed it before, and I wasn't about to make this the first time.

It was a mad dash to get to the airport in time, only to arrive and find out my flight was delayed. My gaze flickered between the stagnant displays and my watch, willing time to stand still. Baruch Hashem, they finally announced boarding for our flight, and I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing I'd make it back on time for the shiur.

When I landed with just enough time to rush home and set up, my phone buzzed with incoming messages. *Sorry, Rabbi. I can't make it read one. I want to spend this Tu Ba'av with my girlfriend*, read another. One after another, all my "regulars" canceled.

A pit settled in the bottom of my stomach, and I turned to the large Rebbe picture on the wall. "Rebbe," I said, "I had many other important things to do in New York, but I rushed back home to give this shiur for *your* shlichus. Now everyone's canceling, and it's a huge letdown. Please, Rebbe, give me a bracha. I need some encouragement. I need a little something!"

The next morning, a wealthy community member called me out of the blue. "I was sitting up last night, and I thought of you. I decided to help you out, and I'm going to give you \$100,000 for your building."

My smile shone through my tears, and I thanked him effusively. I immediately called my wife to tell her about the miracle.

"Why'd you only ask for '*a little something*'?" she chided, jokingly. "Hashem's brachos are unlimited! You should've asked for a bracha for the entire house to be taken care of!"

Baruch Hashem, once we had the initial donation, the momentum built, and we'd soon gathered the entire sum, thanks to generous sponsors like George Rohr.

We rushed to get everything ready for Rosh Hashanah, but without funds to hire contractors, it was

up to me and my "crew" to do the demolition ourselves. My kids were thrilled to wield the hammers, and gleefully ripped into the wall separating the two rooms I hoped to turn into one beautiful shul.

Two days before Rosh Hashanah, the floor was still littered with debris, and the flooring in each room was uneven and unmatching. Rabbi Baruch Sushman, a fellow shliach in Louisville, and my brother, Rabbi Chaim Litvin, pitched in, and, Baruch Hashem, just a couple of hours before Rosh Hashanah began, we had a newly renovated shul with brand new flooring and freshly installed electricity.

As I washed up and prepared to go to mikvah before Yom Tov, I realized that the construction had prevented me from doing all my usual pre-Yom Tov calls. Without those personal invitations, I wasn't sure anyone would actually show up.

"I don't know if we'll even have a minyan," I told my wife as I grabbed my keys.

When I entered the shul a short while later, I was shocked to find the room filled with at least 45 people, some of whom I knew well, and others I'd never seen before. When we sat down to kiddush, it was, quite literally, standing room only. Every single chair we owned was in use, and every table was full.

While Frankfort is not one of Kentucky's larger or more well-known cities, it *is* our state capital. Since it's near Lexington, it falls under my responsibility.

A few years ago, the governor was planning a large-scale event, and he wanted the Jewish community to be represented. Unfortunately, most of his Jewish contacts were on the other side of the political aisle, and they weren't interested in supporting him or his causes.

"I don't understand!" the governor complained to his aides. "I want to show my support and solidarity for the Jewish community! Why is it so hard to find someone aligned with that simple goal?"

"I may know someone," one of his aides piped in, shyly. "I was just walking back to the office after



lunch, when a rabbi on the street asked me if I was Jewish. I have his number saved. His name is Rabbi Shlomo Litvin.”

I was at the Kinus when I got the text, asking if I could participate in the upcoming event.

“Tell me the time and place, and I’ll be there,” I promised.

On the appointed day, my father and a couple of other shluchim accompanied me as well.

We may have remained silent bystanders on the fringes, were it not for Ron Dermer, then serving as the Israeli ambassador. As soon as he spotted us, he yelled, “Chabad!” and threw up his hands.

His obvious approbation made an impression upon everyone at that event, and I was able to form meaningful connections with many in the State Capitol.

Of course, we asked for permission to install a menorah in the Capitol, which is now known as “Kentucky’s Menorah.” Yud Alef Nissan, the Rebbe’s birthday, has been declared *Education Day* in Kentucky.

Although much of shluchim’s efforts concentrate on connecting Jews back to their heritage, in keeping with the Rebbe’s mission, there were other directives close to the Rebbe’s heart that apply to the general public. I used my connections to realize these on a state level. The Rebbe spoke passionately about instituting a “Moment of Silence” in schools across the country. While it respects the division of church and state, it also allows the students a moment to meditate, think about what they want to accomplish, and breathe meaning into the rest of the day.

Baruch Hashem, after a lot of back-and-forth, the “Moment of Silence” initiative has been mandated in public schools across Kentucky. In fact, we were able to include the Rebbe’s specific wording and ideas for how the *Moment of Silence* could be most impactful, not only to the child themselves, but to their family and community by extension.

The Rebbe specified that the teacher should not tell the students what to think about for those two minutes, or even to give suggestions. Rather, the teacher should encourage them to go home and ask their *parents* what they should think about. This would hopefully spark important conversations about faith, destiny, and values between the parents and their children.



I serve as the chaplain for the General Assembly. I pray with the senators a few times a year, meet with them to discuss religious issues, and give them encouragement.

Although it’s not exactly my responsibility, I make sure to read every bill that is introduced on the Senate floor. When I saw a bill titled “Criminal Justice Reform,” I immediately sat up and read it with thorough attention.

I remembered how, a few years earlier, I’d been asked to speak at an event alongside a justice of Kentucky’s Supreme Court. She’d asked me what the Jewish view on justice is, and I took the opportunity to explain the Rebbe’s view of justice, criminal reform, and prison.

The justice was so impressed that, several years later, when she formed a commission to rewrite legislation for criminals suffering from mental health issues and drug addiction, she asked me to be part of the panel.

At the first meeting, she introduced everyone seated at the table, along with their accomplishments

and qualifications. After introducing the state senator, the judge, and the triple credited Harvard graduate, she turned to me.

“This is Rabbi Litvin. He studied in Tomchei Temimim of Lubavitch, and is here to share the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s views on criminal justice and reform.”








It was a humbling reminder that a shlich is merely a representative of the Rebbe.

This memory flashed through my mind as I read the bill, growing more excited as I flipped through the pages. It was authored by Jennifer Decker, whom I’d gotten to know as a caring, sincere person, even before she was elected Representative. Her bill proposed offering educational opportunities to prisoners to give them a better chance at re-integrating into society after their release.

It aligned so perfectly with the Rebbe’s view on how prisons should actually function, I asked to meet with Representative Decker to share some of the Rebbe’s talks on prison reform, and became an early supporter of the bill, now state law.

Rabbi Shlomo and Soshi Litvin, Chabad of the Bluegrass, Lexington, KY

## APRIL 2026 DAILY DONATIONS

<p><b>May 13</b> 26 Iyyar 5786</p> <p><b>\$645</b></p> <p>Donating to: Chabad of Colindale</p> 	<p><b>May 14</b> 27 Iyyar 5786</p> <p><b>\$650</b></p> <p>Donating to: Chabad at the Claremont Colleges</p> 	<p><b>May 15</b> 28 Iyyar 5786</p> <p><b>\$650</b></p> <p>Donating to: Chabad of Smyrna Vinings</p> 	<p><b>May 16</b> 29 Iyyar 5786</p> <p><b>\$651</b></p> <p>Donating to: Chabad Young Professionals Portland</p> 	<p><b>May 17</b> 1 Sivan 5786</p> <p><b>\$648</b></p> <p>Donating to: Chabad Lubavitch of Rwanda</p> 	<p><b>May 18</b> 2 Sivan 5786</p> <p><b>\$648</b></p> <p>Donating to: Chabad Riverside</p> 	<p><b>May 19</b> 3 Sivan 5786</p> <p><b>\$648</b></p> <p>Donating to: Chabad of Chesterfield, Inc. Missouri</p> 
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