

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 III

By Chaya Chazan

Some people think I'm joking when I say I read every bill that's proposed on the Senate floor, but it's proven crucial, time and again.

One morning, I read a bill proposing that county coroners left with an unclaimed corpse could cremate instead of offering a burial.

I immediately called the senator, who authored the bill and explained what a problem it would pose for Jewish people without friends or family. He listened patiently to my explanations about the eternity of the soul and the importance of a proper burial, and then asked one question: "So what do you propose we do instead?"

I was stymied for a moment. Obviously, cremation was a vastly more economical option than burial, and county coroners would be thrilled with the reduction of expenditure.

"Whenever there is a Jew in need, who passed without friends or family, Chabad will pay for the burial," I answered.

"That's a weighty commitment. If you're sure about it, I'll include it in the bill."

The bill passed unanimously, and was ratified with widespread approval. We made sure to word the legislation carefully so it could be easily adapted by other state governments. In fact, the bill is now on the floor of several other State Senates, and is being considered by others.

After the bill was signed into law, I called every county coroner and explained exactly how it would work. They were all eager to support the new law, and promised to call Chabad

so we could ensure every meis mitzvah received kevaras yisroel.

But one coroner was confused.

"I get what you're saying about Jewish burial and cremation," he said. "What I don't understand is why you're calling me! Do you own a funeral home?"

"Not at all! I just want to make sure every Jew receives a proper burial," I explained.

"Even though you don't know them...?"

"Especially if I don't know them. The Lubavitcher Rebbe emphasized how every Jew is a brother or sister; even one we've never met."

"And you're going to pay for the burial?"

"Yes."

"Unbelievable," he muttered, shaking his head. "Absolutely incredible."

I'd worked very hard to get the *Moment of Silence* bill on the docket for the State House. I'd met with every senator and representative individually, passionately explaining the Rebbe's vision for this life-changing daily moment.

"It's on the list of proposals," the sponsoring Representative told me. "I'll let you know when it's coming up for a vote."

I got the call on Taanis Esther, and drove like a madman to Frankfort to get to the Committee Meeting on time. I slipped into a seat just as they called the proposal.

"Rabbi Litvin, an emissary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, is here to introduce the bill," the Representative announced.

I stood right back up and was about to launch into my speech, when one of the Representatives called out, "I know all about this bill, and I'm ready to vote." Since most of the other Representatives agreed, the bill was immediately put forth for a vote. It passed - unanimously.

While I was satisfied the new act had been passed, I was a little annoyed that I'd had to drop everything and rush over

- on a fast day, no less! *Why did I need to come at all? Was this a waste of time?*

As I was about to leave, a man stopped me in the lobby.

"Are you Rabbi Litvin? I've heard so much about you from a pastor in my community!"

"Nice to meet you," I said, shaking his hand. "What brings you to the Capitol?"

"I'm the city planner for Ashland," he explained.

"Oh, great! Then you're in the perfect position to arrange a menorah lighting in City Hall! Have you done so yet?"

"Not yet," he admitted.

"I'll drive over this Chanukah and help you light the first one ever," I promised.

Some months later, I made the two and half hour drive to Ashland, Kentucky to install the menorah. The initial lighting was inundated with city dignitaries - the mayor, city council, city manager, and even a retired judge were all in attendance.

When I had a chance to greet everyone personally, I found out the judge was Jewish. I offered to help him put on tefillin, and he gladly accepted.

"For a moment, I thought attending that Senate meeting was a waste of time. Now I understand it all happened so you could put on tefillin!" I told the judge. "It's an honor to meet you! You're the second most impressive Jew I know on this side of the state!"

His Honor looked affronted. "Second-most? Who beat me for the title?"

"There's a famous lawyer who's dedicated his life to helping others," I explained with a chuckle. "His name is John Rosenberg, and..."

"John Rosenberg is my *best friend!*" the judge interrupted me.

"No way!" I smiled. "I've actually been trying to get in touch with him for a while. I'd really like for him to speak to my students at the university. As a Holocaust survivor and a lawyer who's done so much for the community, I know he'd make a strong impression. Maybe you can help me out with that?"

A few minutes later, the judge shut his phone with a smile. "It's all done, Rabbi. John agreed!"

We set the date for Mr. Rosenberg's speech for Holocaust Remembrance Day. Just before he was slated to go up on stage, I asked if he'd ever put on tefillin before.

"I think so," he responded, hesitantly. "I know my father did, and I remember watching my grandfather put them on every day. I can't remember if I've ever done it myself."

"Can I help you do it now?" I asked.

He nodded, and stuck out his left arm. As I wrapped the straps around his arm and forehead, his body shuddered, and he closed his eyes tight.

"No; I've never done this before," he whispered, emotionally, as I wound the final straps through his fingers.

I became emotional myself, as this 93 year-old Holocaust survivor repeated the words of Shema after me, fulfilling the mitzvah for the first time in his life.

Needless to say, his lecture was a great success. Many of my students still talk about the impact of his message to this day.



It was only our second year in Lexington when I got a call from Mr. Rober*.

"I'll be in Lexington next week, from Monday to Thursday. I'm still within the year of mourning for my father, so I need a minyan to say kaddish three times a day. Would you be able to help me with that? I know it's a lot to ask, but I'm coming with two other Jewish men, so that should help."

Even including myself, that was still less than half the minyan. Was it possible to arrange a daily minyan in a city that hadn't seen one since 1980?

I spoke it over with my wife, debating how to respond. When I asked my father for advice, he asked, "Shlomo, do you want to help this Jew?"

"Yes," I replied. "It's just—"

"Then do it," my father replied, simply. "Don't think about the obstacles. Think about how you *can* get it done."

"I can't get ten people to come three times a day," I said, slowly, thinking it over. "I doubt I can even get twice a day. But maybe I can manage one early evening gathering! If we meet for Ashrei and U'va Letziyon from Shacharis, he can recite the mourner's Kaddish. Then we'll daven Mincha just before shkiyah, learn a sicha to pass the time until tzeis, and daven Maariv! It won't be easy, but I think I can make that happen!"

That Monday, exactly ten men gathered in our home for the strange Shacharis-Mincha-Maariv marathon. On Tuesday and Wednesday, we managed to gather another quorum, but on Thursday, disaster struck. One of the professors in the university was displeased we were involving students in our "archaic, outmoded way of life," and she informed the city we were hosting illegal religious gatherings in a private, residential area. The city had no choice but to respond, and warned us they would shut down all synagogue activities.

Within the hour, I received another piece of troubling news. Our landlord informed us the rent check had bounced, and if we didn't immediately cover the discrepancy, he'd evict us.

These two stunning blows in such quick succession left me reeling, and I knew we had to turn to the Rebbe and ask for a bracha. Since there was no local mikveh and I couldn't prepare myself properly, I asked my wife to write on our behalf.

This is your Chabad House, Rebbe, she wrote. We are merely your shluchim, carrying out your mission. Rebbe, take care of your Chabad House that is now under threat!

After some quick math, I realized that just \$1,800 would get us through the month. I decided to ask Mr. Rober, who'd be attending the last Shacharis-Mincha-Maariv minyan that evening.

After davening, I invited him into my office and launched into my fundraising speech. I showed him our brochures, explained the work we do, and outlined my financial goals.

"Baruch Hashem, Mr. George Rohr grants us \$36,000 a year in seed money," I explained. "We hold a yearly fundraiser every summer for another \$36,000. Throughout the rest of the year, I have to raise another \$36,000 from individual donations."

"Sounds good," Mr. Rober replied.

"Um... What do you mean?" I asked.

In reply, he pulled out his checkbook and wrote a check for \$36,000. As he ripped it out and handed it to me, he added, "If you can have a new visitor in your Chabad house every week this year, I'll double my donation next year!"

It was quite the challenge, but every week for the next year, my wife and I pushed ourselves to find someone we'd never met before and invite them to join us for Shabbos. Mr. Rober helped us - not just financially - but in expanding our reach and growing our community.

My brother, Rabbi Chaim Livtin, often known as *the Bourbon Rabbi*, includes, among his many talents, a penchant for building and construction. He helped me build Chabad of Lexington's first sukkah, a classic structure of heavy wood panels and boards.

When we moved to our new Chabad house, my wife convinced me it was time to upgrade our sukkah to a store-bought pole and canvas one, with Sukkos motifs printed throughout. Despite my misgivings about the cost, we bought it, and, I had to admit, it was a lot easier to set up, and, when it was done, was bright, fresh, and airy.

The first night of Yom Tov, the sukkah was packed to capacity. The next morning, despite the pouring rain, I went to the sukkah to enjoy a cup of coffee. Just as I stepped out, the entire sukkah gave in to the heavy rains and collapsed, folding almost in two.

This is the only sukkah in the city, I thought to myself, in panic. How am I supposed to eat anything for the next two days?

I rushed to my library and began frantically flipping through various Halacha sefarim, searching for an answer on what to do when a sukkah falls on Yom Tov. I couldn't find a single reference. Then I remembered my back issues of *Compass*, the shluchim magazine created by the main Merkos office. They included a section on modern halachic dilemmas especially pertinent to shluchim living without the benefit of a Jewish community around them. I looked through every Tishrei magazine until I finally found a footnote on fallen sukkos, directing me to look at the Chofetz Chayim's *Mishna Berurah*.

As a collector of old sefarim, I am privileged to have a copy of *Mishna Berurah* which actually belonged to the Chofetz Chayim and was checked by him for accuracy. I quickly flipped to the right section and read his ruling: the sukkah could be rebuilt by non-Jews, with the sukkah owner doing a minor adjustment that was permissible on Yom Tov.

Just a couple of houses down, there were a bunch of kids watching the downpour from the church's front porch. I quickly jogged over and introduced myself.

"Have you guys read about the huts the Israelites lived in and the Feast of the Tabernacles?" I asked. They all nodded, eyes open wide. "Well, I have one of those in my backyard, and I'd love to invite you in for a bite!" They grew excited and had almost started clambering off the porch when I held up

a finger. "The only problem is that my hut has collapsed, and according to the laws of the Bible, I can't rebuild it on the holiday!"

"Can we do it?" asked one of the kids.

"You can do whatever you want!" I chuckled. "I don't think it should take too long."

Immediately, ten volunteers ran over to my house, and within ten minutes, had managed to straighten the bent metal pole and resurrect a small portion of the sukkah. We celebrated with some food and drink, and they marveled at being in a hut "just like it says in Leviticus!"

Although the fallen sukkah had been repaired, I remained on tenterhooks the rest of Yom Tov, watching the sukkah anxiously at every moment, trying to anticipate the next breakage.

So a few days later, when I sat in my shul davening Shacharis, I was worn from the constant worry, the disappointment in the failed sukkah, the financial hole left by Tishrei expenditures, and the strain of the non-stop month of programs, meals, minyanim, and mivtzoyim. I felt depleted and at a loss.

I threw my tallis over my head and said aloud, "Rebbe, show me you love me!"

Just as I finished davening, I got a call asking if there was a minyan for Mincha.

"I'm sorry; we don't have a minyan. You're welcome to use the shul, though."

"Hmm. Actually, I'm attending a conference here in Kentucky, and we have nine Jewish men. Can you bring your Torah to the hotel and be our tenth?"

I was happy to oblige. When we'd finished reading the Torah and davening Mincha, they invited me to stay for dinner, which would be catered by a kosher chef they'd flown in from New York. Of course, I was delighted to accept.

During the meal, the CEO asked me to speak. Never one to shy away from the podium, I shared a short sicha, tying in Kentucky, the weekly parsha, and the company's plans and mission.

"I wasn't expecting such a well thought out speech!" the CEO complimented me. "Thank you very much for coming and sharing your thoughts with us! We'd like to show him our love by donating \$10,000."

I was shocked, not only because of the generous, spontaneous donation, but by his usage of the words *to show him our love*, the exact phrase I'd uttered that morning in shul.

**Names changed to protect privacy*



APRIL 2026 DAILY DONATIONS

May 20	May 21	May 22	May 23	May 24	May 25	May 26
4 Sivan 5786	5 Sivan 5786	6 Sivan 5786	7 Sivan 5786	8 Sivan 5786	9 Sivan 5786	10 Sivan 5786
\$651	\$651	\$651	\$651	\$651	\$652	\$652
Donating to: Lev Chabad Wolfson	Donating to: Lubavitch of Iowa Inc	Donating to: Alaska Jewish Campus - Chabad Lubavitch	Donating to: Chabad Lubavitch of Ames	Donating to: Chabad of S. Lazare - Canada	Donating to: Chabad of Pinellas county	Donating to: Chabad Varna Bulgaria