

ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Zalmy and Musia Plotke, Chabad of White Plains, NY

From One Army to Another

By Chaya Chazan

Hashem must be tickled by the irony that my upbringing, which relegated shlichus to the furthestmost regions of impossibility, has actually been the greatest preparation for shlichus I could've asked for.

My parents grew up in homes with middling to little proper Jewish observance, but as teens, both decided to commit to a life of Torah true Yiddishkeit. After they married, they moved to Los Angeles and raised me and my siblings in the heart of L.A.'s Jewish community.

My parents, personifying the dictum "Chanoch lenaar al pi darko," transferred me to a Modern Orthodox school. I was happy there, and did very well. As my middle school graduation approached, I was looking forward to continuing high school with all my friends.

Everything changed that summer.

I went to *Camp Yeshiva Outdoors*, run by Rabbi Michael Harari - a Chabad chassid. It wasn't my first year there, but it was the most transformative. At one late night bonfire, I was talking with my counselor, Mendel Popack. Conversation flowed freely as the light danced

over the darkened woods, and I mentioned my plans for high school.

"I think you'd do well in a mesivta," Mendel said, kindly. "I can recommend some if you'd like."

It was an offhand comment, put forth without any pressure, and, at first, I laughed it off. But later that night, just before falling asleep, I couldn't help thinking, *What would mesivta be like?*

I never brought the subject up with Mendel again, but when I returned home, I asked my parents to send me to mesivta instead of high school.

I continued in Chabad yeshivos for the next few years, and, as I finished my year on shlichus, I was ready for something different, yet meaningful.

After spending a week in Israel and a Shabbos in Chevron, I solidified my plans: I wanted to help Am Yisrael in the most literal way I could - by laying down my life to protect theirs. I enlisted in a frum unit in the IDF, and resolved to make it my shlichus by committing to act, dress, and behave in a manner where I'd serve as a "dugma chaya," a living example.

I already stood out, my long beard an anomaly, especially in those days. I knew it would be tough to make sure my conduct matched the image I portrayed. No matter where we were, I made sure that I always davened with a hat, and I diligently kept up my daily learning despite the exhausting days of belly crawling through mud and leaping over obstacle courses.

When everyone groaned as the commander outlined the path of our ten-mile hike through the blistering heat, I sat up straight. Regulations demanded that in such intense heat, the uniform - and absolutely nothing else - could be worn. Everyone dutifully removed their tzitzis, but mine still dangled from the sides of my neatly tucked uniform.

"Mah zeh?" roared the commander. "Why didn't you take off your tzitzit?"

"I'm a Lubavitcher," I replied, quietly, but firmly. "And I don't take off my tzitzis - ever."

The commander nodded and dismissed me. When the other soldiers saw I'd been granted permission to keep on my tzitzis, they too, put their tzitzis back on.

I'd always admired the idea of shlichus, but never pictured myself amongst its ranks. Even after marrying the daughter of shlichim, it still felt like a far off dream.

It was Covid, and the community in and around White Plains was upset that social distancing regulations would prevent the majority of them from participating in Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur davening. Their local temple chose 40 members to sit in its pews; everyone else would have to fend for themselves at home.

The community reached out and asked if there was someone that could lead services for them.

My wife and I had only been married for a few months when this opportunity fell into our laps. How could we say no to a community thirsting for a chance to daven on the Yamim Noraim?

That was the first of many events we held as the newly established Chabad of White Plains.

Westchester has a large Modern Orthodox community, so it almost felt like a homecoming of sorts. My years in Modern Orthodox schools made me extremely comfortable amongst their circles, and they accepted me and took pride in the rabbi who'd served in the IDF.

In addition to serving the community of White Plains, we also spend our time visiting patients in both local hospitals, as well as helping and supporting their family members.

Our shlichus became even busier when Rabbi Levi Welton, a good friend, asked if I'd be willing to take his spot in the Manhattanville College University. He'd served there as chaplain for a few years, working with the Jewish students, but was relocating to another part of New York where the commute would make it too difficult to continue his work. We were happy to step in. We host lunch 'n learns, dinners, tefillin booths, one-on-one meetings, and holiday events. We even arranged the first public menorah lighting event on campus last Chanukah!

My wife and I spend much of our time in the Westchester Behavior Health Center, a psychiatric facility.

Entering the doors of the hospital feels like stepping into another dimension. The facility receives patients with all types of mental health issues, and, like all other mental health institutions, has strict protocols in place to ensure the safety of their patients and staff.

First, the harsh buzzer allows you entrance to a hallway, where you need to be let in through another set of heavy metal doors before entering the hospital proper. Both sets of doors are never opened at the same time, and you can feel the eyes of dozens of security cameras picking up your every move as you awkwardly wait.



Security is extensive, as is the search through anything you bring in. Metal, sharp edges, and even string are immediately removed, as the staff is only too familiar with the harm they could bring.

Although the hallway is lined with rooms on either side like any other hospital, there are only curtains for doors, beds are nailed into the ground, and the windows don't open.

Even as a visitor, the walk through the hallway feels jarring. For a patient and their family, already overset with anxiety for their loved one, every step feels laden with doom, like voluntarily diving into quicksand.

In addition to visiting patients in the facility as often as possible, we also help their relatives adjust to the uncomfortable reality in any way we can. Our guest room is often occupied by parents and siblings wanting to stay near their ailing loved one. We are extremely discreet, and are careful to never mention who our guests are, or even that we *have* guests altogether. We understand when families are hesitant to share their personal details, and welcome them into our home even when they're too nervous to tell us their last names.

On both days of Rosh Hashana, I make the forty minute walk to the Behavioral Health Center to blow shofar for the patients and nurses. The units are small, with a limited number of patients in each ward, so it often involves me blowing the shofar upwards of 30 times in a single visit!

Although I'm already used to the other-worldly ambience, entering the Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) is still disconcerting. It reminds me of a prison, with befed up security, closely guarded rooms, and patients relegated to solitary confinement, not allowed to leave their rooms on their own.

I knew there were a few Jewish patients in the PICU, so I made sure to stop there as well so they could hear the shofar. Mr. Frankel*, an elderly man from Queens, couldn't help sobbing as he thanked me over and over.

"You don't know what you've done for me," he cried. "You're the first person not wearing scrubs that I've spoken to in *months*. I'm stuck in these endless cycles of thoughts that give my brain no rest, but the sound of the shofar pierced through them and gave me a moment's respite. Thank you for coming today!"

"My friend is in the PICU in the Behavioral Health Center. Would you be able to visit him on Shabbos? I know he could really use the company."

I didn't know the caller, but I was happy to agree.

When he saw me enter his room, his eyes lit up.

"Rabbi! Gut Shabbos!" he cried.

I was prepared to shmooze about anything and everything, but I was surprised when he asked to "talk in learning." He reveled in the review of Chumash, Mishnayos, and Gemara, and listened in fascination as I explained the Chassidic explanations behind the familiar concepts. For over two hours, he relived his yeshiva days, and, as I left, I knew the Torah learning had been an elixir as potent as any of his medications.

Of all the residents I visited in the nursing home, Lloyd* was my favorite. He was cheerful, friendly, and young at heart. He loved reminiscing about his younger days as a CIA agent, and the missions he carried out for the US government in Israel. He gave me his eyewitness testimony of historic events, and described his meeting with General Moshe Dayan. I loved listening to his stories as much as he loved telling them, so we made the perfect pair.

Lloyd often agreed to put on tefillin when I offered them, but it was clear that his Jewish knowledge was limited - as was his interest in developing it.

After visiting him regularly for over two years, I thought I knew Lloyd pretty well. When I entered his room one day and saw him sitting in bed, a vacant stare on his face, and food dribbling down his chin, I knew something was terribly wrong. I quickly called a nurse to help, and he soon perked up and began chatting - almost as usual. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

I looked up the number for Lloyd's daughter and introduced myself over the phone.

"I know we've never met or spoken before, but I know your dad pretty well," I told her. "I don't know how to say this, but I think something happened to him."

She thanked me for my concern and promised to get it checked out. Unfortunately, once Lloyd was examined, he was immediately whisked off to the hospital. It was touch and go for a few days, but ultimately, we received the tragic news that he'd passed.

"I don't know the first thing about Jewish burial," his daughter confessed to me over the phone. "In fact, you're the only rabbi I know! Would you be able to conduct his funeral?"

As the Sages taught, "one mitzvah leads to another." My concern for Lloyd's health compelled me to call his daughter, which meant that when the time came, she had a rabbi's name and contact. I was then able to perform the ultimate altruistic mitzvah and give Lloyd a keverus yisroel.

Matt* is a precocious young boy with maturity and knowledge far beyond his years. He often struggled with social anxiety, so his mother asked me to tutor him one-on-one. We studied together once a week, learning the weekly parshah and about yomim tovim as they came up.

"Matt loves your classes!" his mother gushed. "They're doing so much good for him. Can we possibly increase it to twice a week?"

I could tell Matt was really internalizing everything he was learning.

"Rabbi, I made sure our menorah candles lasted half an hour!" he shouted as he ran through the door on our first study session after Chanukah.

As we progressed to deeper and more complex topics, Matt's confidence grew. I noticed how he carried himself differently, and his mother marveled at the change that'd been wrought in his disposition. His sincerity and wholeheartedness affected his family as well. Each week, when he shared what he'd learned in our sessions, his family learned as well, and slowly began implementing small changes, incorporating Yiddishkeit into their lives and home.

Roy* was friendly, but resistant to any suggestions I made to increase his commitment to Yiddishkeit. So when I was planning a farbrengen for my birthday, I hesitated before inviting him. I worried that it would be too intense for him, but in the end, I decided to include him.

It was a real chassidische farbrengen, with a speaker sharing words of inspiration, heartfelt niggunim, and flowing lechaims.

"Wow, Rabbi! That was amazing!" Roy raved after the farbrengen. "We gotta do this again! Can we invite that rabbi back next month to farbreng at my house? Oh, and we definitely need to sing those melodies! That was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before!"

Unsurprising, as Roy simply paraphrased the well known Chassidic aphorism, *what a Chassidische farbrengen can accomplish, even the angel Michael can't accomplish.*

*Names changed to protect privacy



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