

# IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.  DollarDaily.org

## Rabbi Mendel Feller - Minnesota

*Being a shliach in Minnesota is all I know. This is home to me. My father's been a shliach here for 60 years, and I, 28.*

I grew up here, serving the Jewish community alongside my father, and returned after marriage to continue the shlichus that started before birth.

My first role was in *chinuch* as a teacher and principal of the Lubavitch Cheder. Spending my days teaching the joys of *Torah* to young minds was quite meaningful and allowed me to share *Yiddishkeit* with the community. I eventually passed the reins of the principal hood to my successor and became the full-time rabbi of Lubavitch House in S. Paul.

The life of a *shliach* contains many beautiful moments. There is nothing quite like watching a grown man discover the power of *tefillah* for the first time. And while these experiences are indeed filled with joy, they're usually more complicated than that. More often than not, it's not as simple as just deciding to keep Shabbos!

During the years I was a school principal, I remember an encounter with a particular teacher. She and her husband were beginning the process of *teshuvah* and

were starting to integrate into the Jewish community. Her husband was a high-ranking professional whose Saturday slowly turned into Shabbos with mornings spent at shul.

Over time we became close and spoke often. He often asked me for guidance for various aspects of his life. He made a point to attend my *shiurim* and was dedicated to his *Torah* studies. He'd grown so connected to his Jewish identity that he even broke down in tears during *Parsha* study one week. The couple was progressing in their journey and actively choosing to grow in *Yiddishkeit* every day. They joined community events, became permanent members of our shul, and took classes to learn more about religious observance. It wasn't until studying Jewish marriage that the couple was given any pause. As it turns out, the wife had been married twice before, making her a *gerusha* and forbidden to a *kohen* - which, incidentally, her husband seemed to be.

I called my Rav, who I've turned to many times over the years, and explained the issue to him.

"Rav," I said. "These two are already married. They've been married for years. They're just looking to be married properly. What can be done?"

The Rav told me his opinion. He felt that the woman's first marriage wasn't *kosher*, and proceeded to give the complex guidelines of what needed to be done.

"However," my Rav said. "To be safe, please contact Rabbi Tziner as well."

I immediately did what the Rav asked and called him. He agreed with the original ruling, and I was able to go back to the couple with the exciting news. Baruch Hashem, soon after that, we got to host a beautiful *chasuna* for two people in their 50s in our shul.

It's not always easy being a *shliach*, but every once in a while, we're reminded that it's worth all the hard work! A particularly wild example happened a few years back. I got a call from a friend - a community rabbi - who told me that someone from his shul ran off with a non-Jewish woman. This man was a *mashgiach*; he was also married with several children.

We asked around to see if he told anyone where he was going. Eventually, we got in touch with a couple of his friends.

"We don't know much," they said. "But he was always talking about the beach."

It took some research, but finally, we found him in quite an exotic location. Thankfully, *Chabad shlu-chim* are everywhere. We found a phone number for the *shliach* in the area and got in touch with him.

"He has a wife," we explained. "Someone needs to speak to him. He needs to go home!"

The *shliach* immediately got to work, finding the man's address, and knocked on his door. Convincing the man to return to his family was challenging (to say the least). The *shliach* was undaunted.

"It's okay to make mistakes," he told the man. "Sometimes, you fall into a puddle. But do you stay there? Or do you get up and dry yourself off? You have a family at home - a wife and children that need you! You need to go home."

It didn't sound like much, but something resonated with the man. Maybe it was this fellow Jew fighting for him, or perhaps it was hearing that nothing is beyond *teshuvah*. It took a couple of days, but eventually, the man *did* go home to his wife, and today he's living a happy and healthy life.

As in most of the United States, most organized Jewish communities in Minnesota are primarily Reform and Conservative. They always felt that Judaism should be limited to the temples and social action. Public practice of Mitzvos was frowned upon, to say the least, and they were uncomfortable with it. They



were opposed to lighting the Chanukah *menorah* in public. It's funny, actually - that today, they hold and sponsor similar public *Chanukah* events. Our goal is to spread the Rebbes' vision of Yiddishkeit and his ideals, but seeing the non-orthodox communities take pride in their Jewish identity, is undoubtedly a source of Nachas!

There are always those who make unfortunate choices or are victims of circumstance and find themselves on the wrong side of the law. As a shliach, prisoners are not beyond our realm of help, and we here in Minnesota had a few instances where we dealt with the prison system on behalf of some fellow Jews. A few years ago, we had some kids from Deal, NJ, who were in Minnesota for a while. They were smart kids - which in this case, wasn't a good thing.

They found a way to manipulate the Apple store to scam them out of merchandise. They hit three stores relatively quickly, but by the fourth one, the police caught up to them, and the boys were arrested.

I got a call from Rabbi Tzvi Gluck of Amudim asking me to help out. I put up the boys' parents for Shabbos, contacted a lawyer, and managed to get them out on bail and a slap on the wrist. These boys were lucky. They were let off easy because of their young age. But the law isn't always so lenient as we found out ourselves.

A few years later, US Marshals detained two Israeli men from Romania, and Lubavitch House in Minnesota became the closest thing they had to a *frum* life while they sat in a US jail.

They had been selling narcotics through online pharmacies - which they believed was legal if done for medicinal purposes (ultimately, they were exonerated on those grounds). When I was informed of their arrest, I drove down to visit them. There I discovered the men were not allowed to put on *tefillin* without the presence of a Rabbi.

"It's dangerous," the prison officials informed me. "The straps can be used as a weapon."

Given that, I decided to make that two-hour trip every day, so they could fulfill the *mitzvah* of putting on *tefillin*. This went on for two months.

One day when I arrived, the men were shackled by the waist. A brown leather belt connected their hands and legs to X-shaped chains. This meant minimal movement, so I had to get creative. I couldn't figure out how to get the *ritzua* on without them lifting their arms. In the end, I had to completely pull the

strap from the box, wrap the *ritzua*, and then reassemble the *tefillin* with it on them. Nothing is impossible - you just need to care enough to figure it out!

Ironically, the court case ended up being thrown out, but not before some drama tested their growing connection with Yiddishkeit! One of the many bail hearings was held on *Tisha B'av*, which meant we had to show up to court in sneakers and suits. Thank G-d today they are both observant gentlemen.

There was also the time an Israeli tourist got pulled over for speeding and ended up in jail an hour before Yom Kippur. I remember getting that call and simply not knowing what to do. I was in touch with another rabbi nearby who told me he would deal with it.

"I want the *Mitzvah*," he said. "As it's so close to Yom Kippur, I can't pass up this opportunity."

I called him directly after the fast to find out what had happened.

He made it to the jailhouse with barely an hour to spare. He had food packed away and money to post bail. As quickly as he could, the Rabbi freed the tourist before sitting down to a small meal outside the jail. Food was spread between them on a short bench. The two ate as quickly as they could and then welcomed in the holiest day of the year.

As the sun set, the rabbi knew he would miss the Kol Nidrei he was meant to lead. The pair walked back to town, taking their time and conserving their energy, and made it back after davening.

To many, it may seem unfathomable to miss Yom Kippur davening, but this rabbi understood that the wellbeing of a fellow Yid was far more important.

The miracles of the Rebbe are everywhere, and shluchim are often first-hand witnesses in unfolding stories. I remember hearing one particular story when I was growing up. My grandfather of blessed memory, who was a car salesman, got a call from the Rebbe. He said that a patient in a nearby hospital needed kosher food. Without hesitating, my grandfather packed up a box and tucked it into the trunk of his car.

Back then, highways were few and far between, and Waze was the technology of a distant future. Armed with a map and some written directions, my grandfather made the three-hour drive to the hospital. He made his way to the patient and presented him with his package of goodies.

"Where did this come from?" the man asked. "Who even knows I'm here?"

My grandfather shrugged and placed the box on the floor beside the patient's bed. "I got a call from the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He told me a Jew was in need."

The patient was shocked. He had no idea how the Rebbe got wind of his far-away hospital stay. That mystery was never solved, but my grandfather was always confident that the Rebbe just had a way of making sure every Jew was taken care of.

I always like to finish on a positive note, so I want to share this story about a lovely young couple who went above and beyond to be honest about their new religious identities. A young engaged couple was living in Minnesota and had made the decision to grow in *Yiddishkeit* together. As they came from non-religious backgrounds, they'd already been living together for quite some time.

I developed a relationship with this couple and began to learn with them on a regular basis. It eventually led them to want to be more careful about *yichud* and live separately until their wedding. I didn't push them on this, but through our study, the couple became more aware of the issues at hand.

They had four months until their wedding and a mortgage on a house. Paying a second rent wasn't feasible, and neither wanted to move home. But as I said earlier, with enough determination, every problem has a solution! In a stroke of genius, this young couple built a second entrance to the home and put a wooden gate - sort of like a *mehitza* - down the middle. This temporary structure was enough to solve any *yichud* problems.

As is clear from these many anecdotes, Minnesota's *Yiddishkeit* is flourishing, and my family is honored to be playing our part, bringing the Rebbe's vision to fruition.

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