

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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There Went the Neighborhood

*Rabbi Levi & Rivka Gansburg -
Chabad of Bayview - Toronto, Canada*

Moving on shlichus to Bayview, a neighborhood in Toronto about half an hour's drive from where I grew up, was not a difficult decision to make.

Although I had various shlichus offers to places as exotic as the Caribbean, soon after my wedding, Rabbi Grossbaum pulled me into his office and told me, "You're coming home. You know what this place needs, and there is plenty of work for you to do."

Bayview is an affluent area, primarily inhabited by established Canadian families with homes averaging \$7 million. It's a neighborhood with people set in its ways and averse to change. There were already a few boutique shuls in the neighborhood when we moved in, including a Reform boutique-like Temple, a large Conservative synagogue up the road, and even an Orthodox shul first established by South African immigrants in the 80s.

Our aim was to create an authentic feel of traditional Torah Yiddishkeit for Jews from all walks of life to connect with.

A local developer let us temporarily use an older home in the heart of the neighborhood for six months prior to his developing it. We put up a large sign, went knocking door to door, sent out mailings, and advertised. The calls began trickling in.



Years later, an elderly Jew told me that when he saw a Chabad sign go up at the corner of The Bridle Path, the most expensive street in the country, he called his friend and said, "Did you see the sign? There goes the neighborhood." I often use that line in a positive sense, describing our success and influence. "There went the neighborhood... in goodness and kindness."

The first two years were slow. We didn't have a minyan for Shabbos for the first 18 months, yet I felt it was important to have consistent minyanim and daven for the amud and speak as if there were hundreds in the room. It wasn't easy to break in, but steady hard work and effort soon began to bear fruits.

Slowly, word spread that we were a non-threatening young and vibrant couple who wanted to bring the quiet and often segregated community together.

We soon offered youth and adult programs and events and opened the Hebrew School of the Arts.

Our biggest challenge was finding an affordable home for our Chabad house. After years of renting, a particular Jew who attended our High Holiday services committed to assisting in finding a future permanent home for our Chabad.

It was a long and hard road, full of nissim until we finally accomplished our goal. While we almost had a deal in place to purchase a home from one particular woman, it ultimately fell through. Interestingly, her daughter happened to be married to a Jew who once wrote a story about our center.

Six months later, I bumped into her daughter in the shopping plaza. She began to cry, informing me that her mother had just been diagnosed with cancer. She requested that I visit her mom in the hospital, to which I agreed on condition that she not feel that this was anything related to the property.

A few months later, we got a call from a real estate agent who informed me that the woman had passed away and her daughter insisted that Chabad be given the first option to purchase it prior to it being listed.

While we were grateful for this, we now needed to come up with substantial funds within 60 days. While we had some initial pledges and support, we were far from the millions needed to close on the property.

Years earlier, a community member of ours introduced me to a prominent Chinese businessman. While we were friendly, I never thought that encounter would play a pivotal role in this critical moment for our community.

While out for dinner with my friend and this Chinese man, I pitched him bluntly for our new property. Surprisingly, he looked me straight in the eye and said "Let me talk to the banks. I promise you, I'll ensure you won't lose this property."

Indeed, he came through, and we miraculously closed on the property. His generosity propelled many others to begin donating and soon he himself donated over \$1M which helped us complete our beautiful \$15M 30,000 square feet, Chabad on Bayview - Centre for Jewish Life.

There is a prominent businessman who wanted to make a deal with us whereby a portion of his company's earnings would be gifted to Chabad. This was a way of tying his business with our Chabad, so we would be partners.

I explained to him that the deal is really with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the president of our organization. Until we go to the Ohel and write it on paper, I couldn't fully agree to the deal. I took him to the Ohel but that was far from his last visit. We go together every year.

It actually inspired me to arrange an annual trip to the Ohel for members of the community. Before Rosh Hashana, we fly on a private jet to New York, visit the Ohel, and fly back to Toronto. In the beginning, I had to convince people to come, but now the flight is completely booked. We've also taken groups to the Ohel for Shabbos which was truly uplifting.

It's amazing to see how they can connect to the Rebbe in a very real way and the nissim and niflaos I've seen happen with these visits can fill an entire book.

Whenever I write to the Rebbe, I keep a PDF version of the letter for myself. Every so often, I look back at them and reflect on the brachos and nissim I have had the zechus to experience. We've had highs and lows and, through it all, the Rebbe is a constant presence.



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Even after we bought our miracle property, we had an uphill battle. The neighbors were very unhappy and appealed our development approvals at the state level. It cost us a lot of money to fight and through all the heartaches and challenges, I always promised my daughter that her bas mitzvah, on Hei Elul, would be held in our newly built Chabad center. She was only 10 days old when we opened our Chabad. As completion neared, my contractor firmly told me, "That's not going to happen Rabbi."

I barely slept for those final two months, but I insisted that with the Rebbe's brachos that it would happen, and that we would have a beautiful bas mitzvah, and subsequently Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in our completed Chabad House.

Friday morning, just hours before the large Friday night bas mitzvah dinner, with over 40 workers on site scrambling to complete everything on time, we had all the city inspectors arrive. The contractor called me frantically and said, "They're all here! The inspectors are here!" I told him to hold off for a few minutes.

I went to my office, sat down, and wrote a letter to the Rebbe. "Please, let the inspection pass b'ofen nissi, in a miraculous way". It would be impossible to get the approvals in a natural way, that's for sure. The contractor and building supervisor thought I was crazy. But I knew the Rebbe's brachos would result in nissim. How could it be otherwise? I wrote with tears streaming down my face, knowing that this was it. It had to be.

The inspectors walked around for two hours. There were many things that were still missing, but they somehow didn't seem to see them, or mark them down. Literally 20 minutes after the last inspector left, the caterers arrived to begin the preparations. And boy, was that a Shabbos to remember. With over 230 people celebrating our community's brand new building and our eldest daughter's bas mitzvah, exactly 12 years since it all began!

Boruch Hashem, aside from our sold-out daycare and Hebrew school, we run many programs and events for young professionals. It gives us the opportunity to ensure young Jewish men and women meet other Jews, and start their lives inspired by Torah.

There was one couple whom we connected with, though were not particularly close with, who one day reached out asking to meet with my wife and me.

They confided that they were struggling with infertility and no treatments were successful thus far. They wanted our advice on surrogacy, as they had already lined up a surrogate in the event their final IVF treatment would not succeed.

While in discussion, we encouraged her to focus on the upcoming IVF treatment and to spiritually prepare to appropriately receive Hashem's bracha.

She committed to going to the mikvah and to begin lighting Neiros Shabbos. We also checked their mezuzos and managed to add a few missing and replace some pasul ones, including the mezuzah on the door of the soon-to-be baby's room which was upside down.

While I didn't hear from them after their imminent round of treatment, I made nothing of it, as COVID just hit and the world shut down.

A few months later, on the Rebbe's yahrzeit, just as I finished my *pan* to be sent to the Rebbe's Ohel, my phone rang. The husband's name lit up on my screen.

"Rabbi, we have some news we wish to share with you," he said with a barely suppressed tremor of excitement in his voice. "We're pregnant!"

"That is amazing news!" I said.

"That's not the whole story, Rabbi," he continued.

He went on to relate that they had gone through the final round of IVF, but sadly, it failed. They were completely despondent and realized they had no choice but to continue with their surrogacy plans. They contacted the surrogate and signed the contract and sent it off to her to sign as well. Then COVID hit. Their surrogate called and told them that with everything so unsure in the world, she didn't feel she would be able to continue with the surrogacy.

"We were devastated," he told me. "We had done everything, everything, and nothing worked. The next morning, my wife was in bed and she wasn't feeling well. 'I wish I wasn't feeling well because I was pregnant,' she half-jokingly said, and then decided to take a pregnancy test... and it was positive, Rabbi! After four years of trying and many rounds of IVF and a failed surrogate deal, after years of trying everything, we became pregnant naturally during the cycle following my wife's mikvah experience."

That is the Lubavitcher Rebbe's child.

We live very close to two hospitals, and I often visit patients there.

One day I got a call from Rabbi Yanky Raskin, shliach to Jamaica. He told me about a member of his community, originally from Toronto, who had been living in Jamaica for 25 years. Unfortunately, he was diagnosed with cancer and had returned home for treatment. Rabbi Raskin asked me to visit him.

It was Friday afternoon, so my wife packed up a warm fresh challah and I headed over to visit him. He was very weak and was already in the advanced stages of his disease. But I told him that there was still some time to put on tefillin and he agreed to do so. After reciting Shema, I snapped a selfie to send to Rabbi Raskin and wished him a "Good Shabbos."

The following week he passed away. Rabbi Raskin called me to say that this man's son was sitting shiva nearby, so I went to the shiva house. I showed his son the selfie of his father's final mitzvah in this world.

"Actually," I said, "I have those exact tefillin with me in my car. Your dad was the last person to wear them. Would you like to put them on?"

He agreed and was very emotional and moved by the experience. "Rabbi," he asked, "can I please keep these tefillin?" "Absolutely!" I said, "On condition that you'll wear them everyday."

A couple of years later, he messaged me that he was now living in a city an hour from Toronto and connected with the local shliach there.

The power of one mitzvah, done in just a fleeting moment in the final daylight hours, can have a continuous and endless effect.

The Rebbe cared for every neshama, no matter their story, background, or circumstances. That is the mission of every shliach - to fulfill the Rebbe's vision of reaching every neshama, going wherever we are needed to uplift a fellow Jew.

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