

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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I closed my eyes and asked G-d for a sign

Rabbi Yossi & Chana Madvig - Chabad of Oswego New York

Neither of us come from an Orthodox Jewish background. I was raised in a Conservative/Reform home and did not have much of an education. In fact, I went through a phase of interest in Christianity in college.

I may have continued to follow along with that path had I not bumped into an anti-missionary group.

When I told my parents that I was involved with Christianity, they urged me to at the very least speak with their (Conservative) rabbi in LA, who said that there was a different side to the story than what I was hearing with Christianity, but he wasn't the best person to speak to about it.

So based on the rabbi's recommendation, I walked to an organization called Jews for Judaism - which specialized in countering missionaries.

I was hesitant and didn't really want to waste my time, but I knew that I would never be at peace if I didn't give this serious consideration.

I entered a humble brick building, and a rabbi with a long white beard and a warm twinkle in his eye



walked me through Jewish responses to many Christian claims. It was the first time I heard those responses from living, breathing Jews and not just Google search answers. That was a real eye-opener, but I was still severely conflicted.

I was in desperate need of guidance, so the next Sunday morning, I went to the chapel that I was attending at the time. Kneeling at the pews, I closed my eyes and asked G-d for a sign. Of course, the irony of trying to find Judaism in a church is apparent, but at the time, this was the option that I had. I meditated and poured out my heart, begging for some Divine Inspiration and direction. As I got up and started heading out, I passed one woman telling her friend about the incredible Shabbat meal she had attended the day before. I stopped in my tracks and almost started laughing. Here is my sign!

I started going around to different synagogues and eventually made my way to a Chabad House. They were incredibly welcoming and had me over for Shabbat a few times. I started going to classes. Once a week started not being enough for me.

I needed to know more, so the rabbi there set me up with the Morristown yeshiva. I threw myself into my studies, and I became a rabbi after five years of study there.

My wife was actually born Catholic. At the age of 12, she came down with a bad case of mono. This caused swelling on the brain that left her unable to speak. Once she recovered from that stage she became determined not to lose her voice again. This led to her prioritizing her spirituality, and she wanted to talk to G-d.

But which G-d? She never liked that women were not allowed to see the Catholic priest and started looking around at Buddhism. Before she got too far down that road, one of her father's friends gave her some books about Judaism, and she really loved the emphasis on family atmosphere.

My wife decided that when she went to college the following year, she would try to convert.

"When I went to university, I met someone who was already in the process in the local Chabad House who showed me how amazing it was.

"Initially, the rabbi pushed me away because he was worried about me not going about it properly. But all it did was pique my curiosity to find out what the proper way was. Eventually, I made a full Orthodox conversion."

We ended up meeting in Crown Heights and getting married in the winter of 2005. While we were dating, we discussed how much we wanted to go on shlichus, and we started looking for a college campus with enough Jewish kids but not too much of a previously established Chabad presence. We actually were seriously considering Virginia Tech when the shooting happened shortly after we were reaching out.

Harry Braha* zipped up his suitcase and squared his shoulders. He was ready to embark on the next step of his academic future at SUNY Oswego, but something was missing. Harry was just beginning to get involved with his local Chabad, soaking up the Torah lessons he picked up from the rabbi he learned with.

But when he checked to see what Chabad he could go to in Oswego, he was sad to see that there was no Chabad House to be found. Never one to sit idly by, Harry picked up the phone and began calling every Chabad rabbi he knew. But the response was invariably the same.

He tried speaking with Rabbi Rappaport in Syracuse and was told "Oswego? That is far from any infrastructure; it's a nowhere town! It has been tried before, but no shliach has been able to make it work. But good luck, see if you can convince someone to come out!"

The challenge was indeed difficult. Oswego was really off the beaten path, and there was no financial network that would be able to support a Chabad infusion; most people there were teachers and not able to make big donations.

But in Harry's mind, all he heard was the rabbi saying that you just need to find someone. With re-



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lentless optimism, Harry decided to filter out the negative prospects and keep trying with the faith that he would find who he was seeking. Every time he picked up the phone, he treated it like this was the one. Harry felt like it wasn't an option not to be able to further his Jewish education at the same time as he was furthering his secular education.

So undaunted, Harry kept calling around until he reached my neighbor in Kollel. This person lived in the apartment just above me and knew that I was looking for an outpost where my wife and I could make a difference - and boom! The connection was made.

Harry was overjoyed! We moved into Oswego in 2007, and three days after we moved in we celebrated a new son - six weeks premature! It was the first bris in Oswego in quite some while.

We made a big ceremony on campus. Members from the community joined us and there was coverage from the local newspaper. It turned everything on its head for us, obviously giving us a lot to do and arrange right from the get-go. It started us off with a bang and was quite stressful, as you can imagine. As the baby cried, we worried about how we were going to bring Judaism to a place like this.

However, the bris actually did smooth the road for the community to accept our presence in Oswego - especially as there were lingering resentments from an existing Jewish Student Union that was more affiliated with Hillel, who didn't like the idea of us coming initially. The new baby made them realize that we were not so scary, and people started warming up to us. This made sure that we hit the ground running. So really, little Menachem Mendel was not premature. He was born just in time!

Oswego itself has some fascinating Jewish history. During WWII, it was one of the only refugee camps in America, housing almost a thousand displaced people - mostly Jews - but basically being a jail. For some reason, they were transferred to Canada and were allowed to re-enter the United States as legal immigrants. Some of these families still live in Oswego, but unfortunately practically all of them had intermarried. An organization in Oswego set up a museum to commemorate this slice of history and I am on the board, helping showcase a more bizarre side to the refugees of WWII and making sure they are aware of current Jewish laws when they make events.

Recently, they made a 70th-year anniversary event, and I made sure that it was all kosher, from the hotel to Shabbat services available for the 300 people who showed up!

Veronica Wheeler* was having troubles at home, and moving to college didn't help matters. She was stuck with problematic roommates and we were able to see it affecting her. We racked our brains for a solution that would help her without it appearing like charity. Boruch Hashem, we came upon a brilliant idea. Schooling in Oswego was always tough. In nearby Syracuse, there are Conservative JCC schools but we homeschooled our kids. As the world accepted online education, we mixed homeschooling with virtual schooling. Our girls are fine with it but the boys never took to Zoom classes.

Therefore, we wanted to hire Veronica to come by our house on a few mornings a week and teach our children some Jewish lessons. I sat down with Veronica the next time I saw her and asked her if she knew anyone who could help us teach some really basic Jewish lessons. Veronica's face lit up. "I went through a few years of Hebrew school! I can show them the Aleph-Bais, and tell them about the Yomim Tovim, etc."

We were thrilled that she was invested, and at 8:00 the next morning, Veronica showed up at our front door with a cheerful enthusiasm. "Come in, Veronica! Let's get you a fresh cup of coffee," my wife offered with an energizing hug.

After a few weeks, we offered to have Veronica sleepover so that it would be easier for her in the morning. Veronica beamed a gracious smile and before you knew it, we integrated her into our home. She would come over most nights and spend Shabbos with us.

I loved seeing how happy she was and how much she was soaking up the richness of a Jewish home. We curtained off a room for her so that she could have her own private space, and we prayed that our home wasn't merely a refuge but a destination to yearn for her own bayit ne'eman biYisroel.

After around a year and a half of living with us, Veronica decided that she wanted to learn and do more. So she packed her bags and, with tearful farewells, left to enroll, first in Machon Alte in Tzfat for a summer session and then Machon Chana for regular yeshiva. She would check in with us from time to time and when she found a nice boy to raise a frum family with, we were ecstatic! My wife believes that she can feel one of her crowning ac-

complishments when she gets to cradle Veronica's children. She's a kiruv bubby!

It's even just the small interactions that can really pay off. We had this girl from Brazil, Estella*, for only one semester. I knew that time was limited here and we needed to expose her to Judaism in a way that didn't feel overbearing. We encouraged Estella to sign up for a program called Snorkel and Study, where the girls of all different levels put in many hours of learning, culminating in a trip to Florida.

She did that and really enjoyed it, and because there was a period of time towards the end of the semester before the snorkeling trip, we got her to spend some time studying at Machon Chana.

Estella was very traditional, and when she went back to Brazil, we didn't know how far she would go. Quite some time passed, and we never knew if we were to hear from her again. So when I answered a phone call from an unfamiliar number one winter morning and heard Estella's rich tones, I called my wife over quickly.

"Rabbi Madvig? It's me, Estella! I wanted to call and wish you a Happy Chanukah." We quickly peppered her with questions and well-wishes, but Estella wasn't finished. "I was really inspired by what I saw in Oswego and the Snorkel and Study program. After I returned to Brazil, my heart kept pushing me to find out more. So I went on to study in a yeshiva in Israel, and am now about to get married to a frum boy!"

We jumped with joy and told her mazal tov, with our hearts full of happiness, that our actions were able to sow such seeds down the road. It definitely has not been easy here but it's these stories that make it worth heeding the Rebbe's call. But there is still so much more to do, so here we are - still changing lives in Oswego, New York.

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