

IllumiNations

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

Miles and Miles of Shlichus

Rabbi Yossi and Malki Rodal, Newcastle, Australia

Shlichus in Australia is unique. Apart from Sydney, Melbourne, and a few other big cities, the rest of the population is spread out over wide areas of wilderness.

That's why RARA - Chabad of Rural and Regional Australia was started. You are essentially the shlichus for hundreds of cities over thousands of miles. Much of the shlichus is done virtually, but the highlight of our work would be the month-long road trips, where we visit one or two Jewish families in each area. These are done every few months, so each area is visited once or twice a year. It's a very challenging shlichus in many ways, but it also comes with its own share of rewards.

When we first moved to Australia, we worked with RARA for five years. During that time, we were approached by SBS, one of Australia's primary television networks, who wanted to work with us on a documentary, detailing our Jew-finding road trip adventures. Making "Outback Rabbis" turned out to be quite the experience. We learned that not much on "reality" TV is actually real.

As our family grew and our kids got older, it became increasingly impossible to drive that long that often. It was also difficult without a set and stable community. We really wanted a more active shlichus, where we could meet people on a more consistent basis.

Newcastle was one of the cities we regularly visited during our RARA trips. Located conveniently near Sydney, Newcastle boasted an existing Jewish community and shul, which was more than we could say for most of our other RARA stops. Our shlichus technically covers two areas: Newcastle and Central Coast, which, together, is roughly the size of New Jersey. That means that we have two communities and need to do double of everything - two Hebrew Schools, two Chanukah parties, two Sedarim, and any other services we provide. It's a lot of work, but we don't intend to back down from a challenge.



One of our RARA trips had us running a seder in Alice Springs for the 40-odd Jews that lived there. It's one of the remotest and furthest locations that RARA reaches. Five years later, a woman named Linda moved to the Central Coast and called the current RARA shlichus to find out what was near her. He directed her to us. She shared with us that she had been lighting Shabbos candles every week for the last five years - all because of a "nice young couple" who had come to do a Seder in Alice Springs and had inspired her. Although she didn't remember our faces or names, the impact of our shlichus and that one Pesach seder was strong enough to influence the rest of her life.

What may seem like one small action to you can mean a world of difference for someone else.

We were at the tail end of a month-long road trip for RARA on the Sunshine Coast, a strip of oceanside communities 112 miles long. The day before we were set to begin our 17-hour drive back home to Melbourne, we heard about one Jew named Nebby. He lived on the north end of the Sunshine Coast, an extra hour and a half out of the way. We debated back and forth about visiting, but I knew this would be his only opportunity to meet frum Jews. He didn't sound overly enthused on the phone, but told us we could come by in the evening, while he was closing up his shop.

We met and began talking, and of course, I offered to put tefillin on him. He informed us that he wasn't just uninterested, but was *anti-tefillin*. His brother had become frum and was constantly harassing him about it. "What makes my brother think he's the 'spiritual' one?" he fumed. "Every Friday night, I go to my backyard and commune with nature and the trees. But just because my spirituality doesn't include some ritualistic black boxes, it's not good enough for him. He thinks he's somehow 'more religious.' He's always looking down on me for it."

He was an elderly man and had never put on tefillin in his life. At the end of our conversation, something told me to try again. "Listen, I don't want to bother you, but I have my tefillin right here..." I began. I explained what tefillin were all about, and how they bind us to Hashem. I'm not sure why, but this time, he agreed. I wrapped his head and arm and began to say Shema with him. Suddenly, he burst into tears that streamed down his cheeks, unchecked. "This is life changing," he said, over and over again.

A week later, back home in Melbourne, I received a call from Nebby. He asked, "Rabbi, what is this verse, 'V'erastich?' I don't remember saying that one with you." I explained that there were different customs, but commented, "Don't worry about it. It's really only a question when you're actually putting on tefillin."

"Of course I am, Rabbi!" he said, to my absolute shock. "As soon as you left, I ordered myself a pair! Haven't missed a day since!"

I spoke to him again three years ago, and he still hadn't missed a day - including Shabbos and Yom Tov, until I corrected him. Even with those beginner mistakes, his dedication is inspiring.

Sharon is an incredible testament to the value of chinuch from a young age and the pintele yid that can never be extinguished.

Sharon's father isn't Jewish, but she and her brother have grown very close to our family and are slowly but surely learning more and more about their Jewish heritage. Sharon currently attends a Christian high school where they have mandatory religious studies and prayer time. Throughout the entire chapel service, as the sunshine beams through stained glass versions of saints and various Bible stories, and everyone around her chants their prayers dutifully, Sharon closes her eyes. This young, brave girl, just starting her journey to Yiddishkeit, spends the entire service concentrating on the one Jewish puzzle piece she holds - she recites Shema over and over, exactly as she learned in our tutoring sessions. Now she's an assistant in our Hebrew School and is planning a trip to Israel in the summer.

Esther is a elderly woman in her 90's from Jindabyne, a remote town near Sydney. One day, she called the Great Synagogue of Sydney and asked to "see a rabbi before she dies," even though she was born Jewish, but isn't anymore. Since she lives far out in Jindabyne, they directed her to our RARA offices. We made Jindabyne a priority for our next trip, and got there on the third night of Chanukah. Esther surprised us by arranging a party for Jews in the area whom we hadn't even known about. We had a lovely time, and at the end of the party, I asked Esther why she had called for a rabbi, especially since she didn't consider herself Jewish.

"I was brought up by my grandmother in the hills of Austria," she told us. "During the war, I was heavily involved in the Austrian underground. I was the guide for groups who needed to escape over the border. Most of my groups were Jews, running for their lives.

"I eventually got married and had a baby boy, but I still kept smuggling groups over the border. I must have taken a total of over 50 groups to safety. After a while, my husband was drafted and sent to the frontlines. A few months later, I was informed that he was killed in action. I mourned his passing, but I was a young, single mother and needed

a husband's support. I remarried and was looking forward to rebuilding my life with my new, blended family.

"It turned out that my first husband had not actually died, a fact I learned when he *showed up at our home*. Now I had two husbands and a child from each of my marriages. I chose to stay with my second husband, hoping for a peaceful future. However, he was annoyed that my son from my first marriage was still living with us when his father was alive and able to take care of him. He wanted me to give my son away. I obviously refused. We had many bitter arguments about it, resulting in him taking our daughter and running with her to Australia. I followed them, of course, and that's how I ended up here.

"I met my third husband here, and lived a good life with him for 30 years. After he passed, I moved here to Jindabyne because it reminds me of the Austria of my childhood. Rabbi, I am definitely not Jewish, but ever since last year, I've been getting these feelings and hearing voices, telling me to return to my *Jewishism*. I tried ignoring them, but they got even worse. I ended up in need of medical intervention. I had to speak to a psychiatrist! Finally, I decided to give in and call a rabbi and here you are!"

I told her how amazing it was that she saved so many lives and that their merit would stand her in good stead. I explained to her how a neshama remains pure, despite conversion and asked her if she wanted to light the menorah.

"I'm not Jewish, but I'll listen as you light," she answered. We lit the menorah and began singing Ma'oz Tzur. Esther got very emotional and began to cry. "What's wrong?" I asked her.

She told us that one of the groups she had smuggled over the border consisted of an Italian father and son who had nothing but the clothes on their back - and a menorah. Their dangerous journey took place over Chanukah and they asked her if they could light the menorah, even if just for a minute. "Absolutely not!" Esther had refused. "It's incredibly dangerous! It's basically suicide!" They begged and convinced her it would be just one moment - just so they could say the bracha. "Fine," she agreed. "But if I hear anything or anyone approaching, I am leaving and abandoning you to your fate - just so we're clear." They agreed, lit the menorah,

and quietly sang Ma'oz Tzur, the faint strains of which Christina could still hear as we sang it in her modern, well-lit dining room.

It was a very emotional evening for all involved and Esther didn't want us to leave. She put us up for the night and kept us the next day, asking many questions. She had rediscovered her "Jewishism" as she called it, and was excited about it. She also introduced us to her son who lived next door. We informed him that since his mother Esther was Jewish, he was Jewish as well, and he agreed to put on tefillin for the first time in his life. We put mezuzahs on her doors and remained in touch with her.

We made Jindabyne a permanent stop on our RARA trips and continued visiting Esther. She embraced her Jewishism and chose Esther as her Jewish name. She even kashered her kitchen so that we could stay with her and eat her food on future visits.

Esther is practically blind and had eye surgery scheduled in Melbourne a couple of years ago. She was very anxious about it, but we invited her to stay with us. We promised to care for her while she recovered. She stayed with us for a month, becoming an honorary grandmother to our children. We're still in touch with her today, and have arranged a kosher kevera for her after 120.

Filming "Outback Rabbis" wasn't easy. Every aspect of our lives was on constant display for ten days straight! We agreed to it because we thought it might reach people who would never know about Yiddishkeit otherwise. Baruch Hashem, our efforts paid off, and there are many people who have taken massive strides in their Yiddishkeit because of that fateful documentary.

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