

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Rabbi Levi and Leah Baumgarten, Chabad Lubavitch Mitzvah Tank, NY Chabad on Wheels

The Rebbe's revolutionary Mitzvah Tanks completely changed the landscape of Manhattan, and, by extension, the world.

The first mitzvah tanks were rented moving vans that spent Fridays on the streets of Manhattan, asking passersby to stop in for a quick mitzvah. Eventually, these trucks evolved into RV motor homes, so people could put on tefillin in comfort and privacy.

In 1988, following the passing of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, there was a push to have an all-day, full-time mitzvah tank driving through the streets of Manhattan. The Rebbe valued the "tankistim" very much, promising them that he would be with them the entire time they were on the Mitzvah Tank. However, making this a full time shlichus comes with its own set of unique challenges. Manhattan is a difficult city to traverse, with constant traffic snarls, scarce parking, frequent disruptive parades and events, and an atmosphere that encourages

selfishness and materialism. Everyone is always racing to the next big thing. The fast pace of city life seems to foster impatience and competition, until all anyone cares about is who has the fastest car and the sleekest phone. The barriers to success are many, but such is the price for true innovation.

I was on shlichus on Long Island, but was receiving constant pressure from my friends and bochorim to accept the role of a full time "tankist." They, for whatever reason, thought I would be a perfect fit.

I first consulted with my uncles, Rabbis Leibel and Yitzchak Groner. They advised me that it would be difficult and I needed to be prepared. I know that if you want to be connected to the Rebbe, you have to do what the Rebbe wants - not what *you* want, no matter the hardships. They urged me to ask the Rebbe, and Rabbi Leibel Groner helped me draft a letter detailing the challenges, goals, and daily workings of the mitzvah tank. Since Rabbi Groner was the Rebbe's secretary, I gave him the letter for delivery. "Don't get your hopes up," my uncle warned me. "The Rebbe hasn't answered any letters asking about shlichus in three and a half months. I'll do you a favor and put your letter on top of the stack, but don't expect an answer."

45 minutes later, he called me into his office. "The Rebbe replied," he said. The Rebbe's letter was a complete *haskama* for the shlichus. It was filled with amazing *brachos* and encouragement. "You should know," Rabbi Groner added, "that because of *your* letter, the Rebbe also responded to all the other shlichus letters of the past four months."

The first two years were the most difficult. It was lonely and hard and every little thing felt like a huge struggle. Every month I wrote a *duch* - a report - about whom I had met and what mitzvos had been done. The answers I received were amazing. The Rebbe would circle certain sentences in excla-

mation and make notes in the margins. From the moment I climb into the tank to the moment I hit the brakes for the day, I feel the Rebbe at my side. As long as you're doing the Rebbe's *ratzon*, you can feel the Rebbe's *brachos*.

I took many of my "repeat customers" to Sunday dollar distributions to get a dollar from the Rebbe. Harvey* was very involved in Eretz Yisrael's struggles and fought for their right to keep every inch of land. When I took him to the Rebbe for dollars, the Rebbe called him back, handed him a second dollar, and told him, "This is for all your activities and your hard work in the Holy Land." He turned to me, right then and there, in front of the Rebbe, and asked, "How does he know?" I tried to pull him away, but Harvey kept shaking his head in amazement. "How does he know?"

Mark and Linda* had been married for years without any children. During one of our many conversations on the topic, I suggested that he go to the Ohel and tell the Rebbe that he was taking on the mitzvah of *Taharas Hamishpacha*.

He dismissed the idea entirely. "That's crazy! How will further separation help us and our marriage?"

Undaunted, I continued to explain to him the benefits of the mitzvah and how it enhances a marriage and the ability to have children. My wife spoke to Linda as well, describing all the details and the unique power of life and sanctity that lie in the woman's hands.

"I'm not religious," Mark said, continuing his campaign of refusal.

"What does that have to do with it?" I answered. "Start the process and see what happens!"

After much convincing, the couple agreed to try it out for two months. I continued to meet with them every week in the mitzvah tank. Sure enough, just about two months later, Mark happily informed me that they were expecting!

After the baby was born, I spoke with them about continuing their commitment to *Taharas Hamishpacha*, even though they already had the child they desired. They clearly saw the powerful effects of the mitzvah and agreed to keep it.

For the last 30 years, Mark and Linda have kept their promise. When they shared their story, many of their friends were convinced to keep the mitzvah as well. Their family, now *shomer Shabbos* and *kashrus*, has grown.



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Recently, Mark admitted to me, “Rabbi, Taharas Hamishpacha has absolutely saved my marriage. Everything has turned around.”

The Markowitz* family is completely frum today, with children and grandchildren who attend Jewish schools and keep Yiddishkeit. But in 1990, when I met Gary Markowitz*, he had never put on tefillin in his life. He was powerfully affected by that first encounter and returned to the tank regularly to put on tefillin and chat. We began to learn together and his commitment to Yiddishkeit started to grow. He began routinely putting on tefillin on his own, wearing tzitzis, going to mikvah, and more.

Unfortunately, Sheila, his wife, was dissatisfied with the sudden changes he was making. She didn’t want his newfound faith and connection to his heritage to disrupt their peaceful lifestyle. Her friends were starting to make snarky, judgmental comments about her husband. She was getting pretty uncomfortable.

I took them both to the Rebbe for Sunday dollars, and the Rebbe gave them a bracha.

Sheila remained antagonistic, threatening that she would leave Gary if he continued his journey to frumkeit. “How can you say you’d leave me for trying to be a better person?” Gary answered gently. She was silenced, realizing that Gary was deeply sincere and genuine in his interest.

It took a long time and a lot of persistence, but seeing how real Gary’s dedication was, she eventually committed to Yiddishkeit, as well. Her friends who all made fun of her now complain that they have no nachas from their children, all of whom are focused on their careers, with no promise of grandchildren in sight.

I usually wait for people to approach *me*, rather than stopping passersby on the street, but one day, I was compelled to open the door and ask a passing man, “Excuse me, are you Jewish?” He stopped in his tracks and stared at me, completely stunned.

“I... think I am,” he finally answered.

I invited him into the mitzvah tank. I saw he was wearing a cross, so I asked him to take it off before entering.

“I’m a minister in a church a few blocks away,” he told me. “I never walk on this side of the street. The one time I wasn’t paying attention and passed by

your van, you stopped me - and asked *me*, specifically, if I’m Jewish.”

We chatted for a while and I convinced him to put on tefillin - the first time he’d ever done so. As the tefillin straps were wrapped around his arms, he began shaking and crying uncontrollably. It took me twenty minutes to calm him down.

I never saw that man again, but I know those twenty minutes changed his life. I could see his essence change before my eyes.

Every Monday, I parked on Broadway and Liberty, a block away from the Twin Towers. Many people who worked there would stop in, and, over time, I got to know many of them. On Monday, September 10, 2001, I was parked in my usual spot. Josh, one of my regulars who worked in the building, came in and brought a friend with him. Josh cheerfully put on tefillin, but his friend was hesitant.

“If you put on tefillin today,” I promised him, “I guarantee that you will see its benefits in a very short time. By putting on tefillin, you are making a pact with G-d. He’ll show you blessings within a day, week, or a month.”

He agreed to put on tefillin and was very emotional while saying Shema.

After the shocking events of September 11th, I tried to contact each of my friends who worked in the towers, to check that they were safe. Baruch Hashem, most of them had survived. I tried calling Josh a few times, but wasn’t able to reach him. Finally, a few days later, he answered and assured me that he was okay. “What about that friend you brought with you that day?” I asked. Josh paused. “He has to call you himself,” he finally answered.

Josh’s friend called Thursday night, absolutely hysterical. “You saved my life!” he exclaimed tearfully. “On Monday, you convinced me to put on tefillin and you told me that I would see Hashem’s blessings in no time. I worked on the 78th floor of the Twin Towers. My desk faced the window, right where the plane crashed.

“I’m a very punctual person. I always arrive exactly on time. I’ve never missed my train or been late to work. Tuesday morning was the first time I missed my train - by 30 seconds! I was so upset and annoyed when I realized I had to wait for the next train. True to New York transit style, the next train was delayed and I was frantic about how late I

would be. By the time I got to Manhattan, I saw that the towers had been hit. I would have died instantly, Rabbi. You absolutely saved my life.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I answered. “It was the Almighty G-d and the Rebbe.”

The mitzvah tank had racked up many miles and endured much foot traffic. It was in dire need of replacement. I was having trouble getting funds, because the organizations I appealed to didn’t agree with my methods and the way I had my tank set up.

I went to the Ohel and wrote a heartfelt letter to the Rebbe. “I know I’m doing the right thing, since I got brachos and guidance from you,” I wrote. “I’m not going to listen to the changes they’re demanding of me, but I want a sign that you are with me.”

The next day, during mincha in my parked mitzvah tank, I got a call from a billionaire who said he needed to talk. “I’m davening now,” I answered. “I’ll call you back after mincha.”

When I returned his call, I was astonished to hear him ask, “How much would a new mitzvah tank cost?” I had never mentioned the issue to him or asked him about it at all. Realizing that this was the Rebbe’s sign to me, I gave him a large number.

“I’ll send half today and my ex-wife will send the other half.”

Later that day, holding the check in my hands, I realized: when you do what’s right, the Rebbe’s brachos are clear.

Having a shlichus that’s constantly on wheels is challenging, but I feel the Rebbe’s presence so strongly. I can see the Rebbe’s brachos and kochos in everything I do, and know that as long as I follow the Rebbe’s will, I will continue to see brachos.

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