

# IllumiNations

Issue 26 | Chukas 5782

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

## Bringing Light to A Historic College Town

*Rabbi Shlomo and Mrs. Devorah Elkan, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio*

*My wife and I knew, early on, that we wanted to be shluchim on a college campus. Rabbi Alevsky, the head shliach of Cleveland, suggested Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, just an hour outside of the city.*

Our research made it sound perfect for us! Oberlin College is a historic institution, founded in 1833. Famous for its progressive views and social activism, it was the first college in America to accept black and female students. Those who attend are socially conscious youths seeking meaning in their lives. Fraternities and sororities are banned from Oberlin college life to foster a more serious, inclusive, and introspective campus culture.

But of course, the most exciting news was about its Jewish population. Among the small student body of around 2,000 students, about 700 are Jewish, and although many of them are completely unaffiliated and have only one Jewish parent, they are learning to embrace their heritage at Chabad of Oberlin.

We organically built our community through Shabbos meal invitations and cementing relationships. Now, in our twelfth year, despite COVID, we recently finished our new Chabad House, welcomed a new Sefer Torah that we'd commissioned, and opened a kosher dining hall in partnership with the college.



We moved in just two days before Sukkos. I visited Oberlin a few days earlier to meet our realtor and sign our lease. I was a little early to the meeting, so I ventured into a coffee shop to kill some time. Before I even sat down, a man approached me and asked, "Are you a Lubavitcher?"

"What gave me away?" I chuckled in reply.

He sat down and told me a little about himself. "You're right on time," he told me. "I've been searching for spirituality and have experimented with Buddhism and ashrams across India. I realized recently that I don't know much about my own Judaism, and was wondering how to find out more."

Of course, I invited him for Sukkos. He brought some friends with him, so we ended up with six students in our tiny, hastily erected sukkah. He now lives just blocks away from 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, and still maintains a connection with his Jewish heritage.

One day, a group of freshmen walked into our Chabad House. "We heard you teach Kabbalah," they said. I had given a Tanya shiur in the past, but it fizzled out because everyone interested had graduated - or so I thought at the time. I invited these students to a Tanya class on Thursdays, and they started coming every week. We completed the first section of 53 chapters and are about to finish the second. Two students from the group came to the Ohel with me to make a siyum on the first section of Tanya. One group member currently attends yeshiva, and another two will be attending yeshiva in the fall, after they graduate.

The impact of this Tanya shiur continued to spread. It became "cool" to learn Tanya. Students were talking about it around the Shabbos table and all across

campus. Another student asked to join the group, but I told him we were too far ahead; he'd missed all the fundamentals. I assured him, though, that with enough interest, I could start a new group. That's how the Monday class started. Then, some more students asked about it and, long story short, I now give five Tanya shiurim every week to different groups.

I look forward to these classes all day long. It has totally changed my avoda. I've been learning Tanya for years and always knew that it was - and is - an amazing sefer, but learning six or seven different chapters within the same week have made me appreciate how every perek is masterfully woven together, and how each concept connects to the others. It has made an impact not only on me, individually, as a person, chassid, and shliach, but it has also changed the atmosphere of our campus. Students now sit around the table and almost casually discuss deep concepts in Tanya.

For two weeks during the winter, there is a "winter term" program, where students are given time off from classes to enroll in an enrichment program that will enhance their lives. My wife and I were approached and asked to create a winter term program through Chabad. We set up a *Yeshivacation* style program for two weeks.

One student was supposed to attend a program abroad in Italy, but because of COVID, this program was unfortunately canceled. His friend asked if he could come to us instead. I asked to meet with him first.

During our meeting, he told me his father was Filipino and his mother was Jewish. He was raised without a shred of Judaism. I informed him that he was a full-fledged, card-carrying member of the Jewish nation, and officially invited him to join our winter term program. His first exposure to Judaism threw him right into the deep end with an intense, two-week study of Parsha, Tanach, and Jewish holidays, along with a tour of a mikvah, kosher restaurant, and grocery. This kid, who would have denied his Jewishness just eight months ago, is now growing in his Yiddishkeit. He became a member of one of our five Tanya shiurim.

Shortly after moving, I was contacted by the Aleph Institute, who'd received a request from some inmates in a prison near me. Prison work was never on my list of things I planned to do. I thought I was signing up to work with college students. I hardly

spared Oberlin's Jewish adults a thought. But the nature of shlichus is filling any void, whether or not it had been part of your initial plan. I worried that I had nothing to offer the inmates. Some of them had been sitting in prison for longer than I'd been alive! But Aleph convinced me. They told me either I provide my services, or these inmates would receive no care at all.

It can be intimidating walking through two tall, electrified fences, but once you pass through them, the prison complex almost feels like a college campus in and of itself - although, granted, not a very *wealthy* campus.

I met with the head chaplain, who was familiar with Chabad from other prisons he'd worked in. He saw me and said, "Oh, good. You're Chabad. You guys aren't scared of anything."

I became a volunteer chaplain and have been visiting weekly for the past eleven years. My goal is to make them feel like a human being for the hour or so that I'm there. We talk and do some light learning. Before *yamim tovim*, I bring a few students with me, and we put on a holiday event. We bring *hamantashen* and read the Megillah for Purim, bring a menorah and doughnuts for Chanukah, and dance together on Sukkos. It is highly beneficial to all involved; the inmates appreciate contact with young Jewish folks who are full of energy and life, and the students gain valuable experience, seeing firsthand how immense their impact on others can be.

One inmate in particular, who was 35 years into a life sentence, asked me some thought-provoking questions about the meaning of Pesach. "How can I celebrate freedom, given *my* circumstances?" he asked, gesturing to the yard, hemmed in by imposing fences and saturnine guards.

I quoted the powerful answer given by Rav Ephraim Oshry in *Sefer Mi'maamakim* to the community of Kovno. The chazzan of the Kovno ghetto, when he got up to the daily bracha, "thank you Hashem for not making me a slave," would cry and shout, "How can I make this bracha when we *are* slaves in this ghetto?" The community asked Rabbi Oshry if they should omit the bracha. He replied that the bracha refers to freedom of the mind, spirit, and their ability to connect to Hashem. Whether enslaved by the Nazis, prison walls, or one's own actions, every person still has the ability to take the environment around them and elevate it to a positive experience.

Another inmate, also deep into a lifelong sentence, commented, "I feel freer here in prison than I did on the outside. There, I was a slave to my anger and addiction, but since I've been here, I've freed myself from a lot of that."

I did not need to say anything more.

Although prison chaplaincy was not something I planned, it's so special to see how these two very different aspects of shlichus blend together and enhance each other. One time, I brought a group of students along with me on my visit to the prison. One of the students put tefillin on himself, and then turned to assist an inmate in donning his tefillin. They recited the Shema together, the fusion of their voices a powerful harmony of Jewish unity and spirit.

One of our students had a strong Jewish background and had even attended day school. He made the commitment to daven every day. Even while vacationing with his family in Aruba, he sent a picture of himself with tefillin proudly crowning his forehead, the glistening beaches of Aruba an alluring background contrast. These pictures, sent to a group with a few other students, inspired some of them to commit to putting on tefillin every day, too.

One of our regulars always came by on Shabbos, so even though we got to know him well, we never had the opportunity to put on tefillin. Once, his father came to pick him up before break and they came over to say goodbye. I offered them both to put on tefillin. For the first time in the son's life and the first in a very long time in his father's, they wrapped the tefillin straps around their heads and arms. Together, they recited Shema. His father even teared up. It was an incredibly inspiring and powerful moment.

Our children take part in every aspect of our shlichus. Sometimes, they're even the driving force behind it! When students sit on the floor to read a book to my children, they're learning from the themes and mitzvos discussed in the story. It's not uncommon for students to feel silly about some of their questions. While there's really no such thing as a "silly question," it can still be intimidating to

ask me or my wife. Sometimes, it's easier for them to ask our children, instead.

Our older children engage in deeper conversations about life as a *frum Jew*. Our life events are also great catalysts for exposure to Jewish life. One student said that attending our son's bris was the most raw and emotional experience of his life. For many of our students, our babies are the first they ever hold.

One Shabbos, over Thanksgiving break, we started to sing *Shalom Aleichem*. My daughter, who was then a toddler, began to cry that it couldn't be Shabbos because there were no guests around the table! Right then, someone knocked on the door. It was a student who, unbeknownst to us, had stayed in for the break. My daughter was mollified with a guest now present, and we had a beautiful Shabbos meal together.

Our students are part of our family. One of our alumni was getting married out of town. We all wanted to attend, but my daughter's school would only permit absences for the weddings of family members. "But she *is* a family member!" my daughter told her principal. "She's spent so much time in our home and our Chabad house!"

My wife is an integral partner in our shlichus and my perfect complement. People often assume the rabbi has all the Torah knowledge to share, and they are amazed to find that my wife is just as - if not more - knowledgeable and brilliant. At our Shabbos meals, we ask our students to choose one of seven ways to participate, and the fact that a couple of students have made it a weekly practice to "ask the Rebbetzin" is a source of delight to us all.

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