

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Rabbi Yossi and Chana Eta Turk, Chabad of Cordoba, Argentina

Revitalizing the Shtetls of Argentina

In 1989, Rabbi Zvi Grunblatt, the head shliach of Argentina, came into kollel looking for a shliach for Cordoba.

I had already been to Caracas and Uruguay as a shliach and summer camp counselor, so I was pretty fluent in Spanish. Rabbi Grunblatt told me a bit about the history of the Cordoban community.

Most Argentine Jews are originally from Ukraine and Russia. In the late 1800's, Sir Moses Montefiore and Baron Hirsch, two wealthy and international philanthropists, tried to help their Jewish brethren who were suffering under the double threat of anti-Semitism and poverty. They bought enormous tracts of land in Uruguay, Brazil, and, of course, Argentina. They offered this land to the beleaguered Jews of Russia as an oasis of peace from their persecution.

Shtetl life was transported from Russia to Argentina, complete with Yiddish speaking residents on their little farms, where they would raise some chickens and, perhaps, a cow. Even now, over one hundred years later, there are villages that still bear the names "Moises Ville" and "Colonia Montefiore."

The shtetl life of Argentina was incomplete. The transported Jews set up shuls, but there were no rabbis to lead them and no yeshivas in which to train future leaders. The few teachers who came were mostly socialist inclined, who saw Yiddishkeit more as a culture than a way of life.



As so often happens, the succeeding generations started aiming for broader horizons. While the grandfathers were content to plow their fields, the grandchildren wanted a college education and a fancy degree. Cordoba is actually home to the oldest college in South America. Many of these second and third generation Jews came here to realize their ambitions. After successfully establishing themselves as lawyers, doctors, and professionals, there was little hope of their returning to their humble farms and the frum Jewish life it represented. Over the years, the shtetlach emptied out. The older generation faded away, and the new generation settled themselves in Cordoba and other big cities.

We wrote to the Rebbe about the proposed shlichus, explaining that there were about ten thousand Jews in Cordoba. All observant Jewish presence had almost completely died out. The Sefardic temple followed the path of the big Ashkenazi shul, which had evolved into a Reform temple. There was no mikvah or kosher food available. The first time I wrote to the Rebbe, I did not get an answer. I wrote in again, committing to building a mikvah in Cordoba as soon as possible. I requested a bracha for "hatzlacha b'gashmiyus ub'ruchniyus."

In the response I received, the Rebbe drew an arrow after hatzlacha, adding in "rabba," meaning much success, also attaching a message to the foot of my letter. "Azkir al hatziyon" - "I will mention it at the kever of the Rebbe Rayatz."

My wife, our baby, and I arrived in Cordoba in December 1989, Kislev 5750.

The first morning, as the real estate agent turned the key in the door of what would become our new home, a woman from across the street hurried over.

"Are you opening a shul here?" she asked, in Yiddish, no less.

"Yes! Come over tonight for an inaugural l'chaim!"

She brought her husband over that evening, and we sat on boxes and suitcases, hosting our first guests in our new Chabad house.

Her husband was a well-respected international nuclear doctor. Their friendship opened up many doors for us, as their association with us influenced others to join us as well.

Today, we have two Chabad shuls on either side of the city. They both have daily minyanim. We also have a beautiful kindergarten, *Gan Meorot*, as well as a professional and highly regarded school called *Maimonides*. I kept my promise to the Rebbe and built a mikvah, established just five years after we arrived. We recently renovated it with a modern, fresh facade.

In the beginning, we established weekly Thursday night shiurim in our home. While I was teaching, my wife was baking challah for the Shabbos meal. The delicious aroma drifted over to our shiur. Everyone wanted a challah for themselves. I offered them the loaves for free, but they insisted on paying for it. We started selling challah every Thursday night. Eventually, we added more products to our list of wares, growing the little business into what is now an independent kosher grocery, bakery, and butcher store in Cordoba.

Meat is relatively easy to find, since there are large kosher meat plants in Buenos Aires. Cholov Yisroel was much more difficult to get hold of. It was an adjustment, getting used to meat for two meals every day, while spending years without access to dairy.

When we hosted our first Chabad house bar mitzvah, we knew it was time to address the issue of our lack of a Sefer Torah. Until then, we borrowed a Torah from the Reform Temple, whose Torahs were carried in the arms of the original immigrants over a hundred years ago. They had over twenty Torahs in their Aron Kodesh, so we searched through the ancient scrolls until we found one that was preserved well enough to be kosher. However, this arrangement didn't last.

So, taking the idea from other Chabad houses, I searched for fifty-four donors, each of whom would sponsor one parshah. Baruch Hashem, the community was eager to participate in the exciting venture of writing our own Sefer Torah and the sponsorships poured in.



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Now, with fifty-four co-sponsors, we couldn't decide whose house would be honored for the completion ceremony. How could we choose a household in which to begin our joyous procession, welcoming the Sefer Torah to its new home?

The oldest shul in Cordoba, built in 1915, had been in crumbling decay for many years and had only recently been demolished. The plot of land, conveniently located in the city center, still held sentimental value to the Cordoban community. We thought it would be the perfect place for our siyum Sefer Torah.

We approached the Reform temple who held the deed of ownership. They were willing to let us use it, but they had just rented it out to a neighboring company to use as a parking lot. We approached the owner of the company. We explained to him the importance of the event, as well as the sentimental value of the plot, and despite our nerves, he was more than happy to let us use it. He hadn't even started clearing the debris or cutting through the weeds to use it as a functional parking lot, and he insisted on doing that for us so we could have a beautiful and clear space for our event. He went out of his way to accommodate us. He hired workers to clear the site and even arranged an extension cord from his building so we could have electricity.

The event was amazing! It was the personal simcha of fifty-four families, each of whom felt pride in and ownership of our new Torah. As we marched through the streets, accompanied by police escorts, we sang and danced, embracing our new Torah scroll. I was excited to witness an amazing transformation. After spending generations ashamed and embarrassed of their Judaism, the members of our community were now loudly proclaiming their pride in their heritage.

About two months after the siyum Sefer Torah, I noticed that the lot's weeds had started to regrow. I was confused. Hadn't the renter planned to use it as a parking lot? I made some inquiries and found out that the gentile neighbor who "rented" the property hadn't started paying rent, so the Reform temple canceled the contract, repossessing it. I realized the wonderful hashgacha pratis in the neighbor "renting" the plot, just to ready it for us to use!

Soon after we moved, I went to introduce myself to the principal of the Reform school. I was stand-

ing in the hallway, waiting for him, along with another fellow, who introduced himself as Bernardo Kremer. He told me he was a medical student. He'd been born in Rio Cuarto, but was now living and studying medicine in Cordoba.

A boy from his hometown needed to learn Hebrew for his bar mitzvah. They turned to Bernardo, who had some basic Hebrew knowledge from a brief stint in Israel. He wanted to help, but felt out of his depth. Although he knew how to read Hebrew, he didn't know what else to teach the boy. So he was here now, hoping the principal could furnish him with some teaching material for the bar mitzvah student.

As a side note, I asked him what he usually does for Shabbos, seeing as he lived alone. He didn't have a definitive answer, so I gave him an open invitation to our home. He took me up on it and was our guest for many Shabbos meals in the ensuing years.

Many years later, after he was already frum, he told me this question was the impetus that led him down the path of teshuva.

"What do I do on Shabbos? What do I do on Monday? Why is Shabbos different from any other day?" he wondered to himself.

In the Hayom Yom of Lamed Shevat, the Rebbe Rayatz writes that many chassidim considered the day they came to the city of Lubavitch for yechidus to be their birthday. Bernardo expressed a similar sentiment, telling me that he celebrates two birthdays - his legal birthday, and the day he first stepped foot in the Chabad house, Yud Shevat 5750.

Shortly after arriving in Cordoba, I met Sarita, a psychologist who'd recently returned after five years in Israel. She attended our women's parshah class and was particularly struck by the concepts I wove in from Tanya and other Jewish chassidic teachings. She asked to learn Tanya, and we started a weekly shiur.

Sarita comes from an extremely leftist background and had never even seen a shul, never mind entered one, despite having lived in Israel for five years! She enjoyed the Tanya classes very much. Over time, as she continued attending shiurim, she began to take on practical mitzvos.

After we finished the first section, Likkutei Amarim, I wrote to the Rebbe, describing our accomplishment. I received a phone call a few days later from Rabbi Groner, telling me that the Rebbe had

responded, "Teshuos chein! Teshuos chein!" *"Very nice news!"*

I told the women about it, and Sarita was very moved. "The Rebbe was so happy to hear about me finishing the first section, I'm committing to learning the entire Tanya!"

Sarita's transformation continued until she became completely frum and returned to Israel. At that time, we were still in the middle of learning Tanya. She searched for a Spanish speaking rabbi in Israel who would help her finish learning Tanya to fulfill the commitment she had made.

There was a teenager in our community who was ill with yeneh machla r"l. My wife and I paid him a visit in the hospital as he underwent yet more rounds of chemotherapy. Seeing us, he lifted his hospital gown to proudly show us the shirt he wore under it.

A few years earlier, we had directed a three-day overnight camp which he attended. Every camper received a camp T-shirt with the camp's logo on it. This experience made a profound impact on him.

"Every time I come to the hospital, I wear this T-shirt," he told us. "It gives me strength to get through the chemo."

It's impossible to measure the effect of our labor. A short three-day experience affected him so powerfully that its memory was what kept him afloat in even the scariest of situations.

As the Rebbe says, the mission of our generation is to spread Judaism to every Jew, even someone who barely bears the title "Yisroel." To achieve this, we have to decide never to forfeit even a single Jew, no matter how lost they may be!

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