

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Hashem Runs the World

By Chaya Chazan

As a bochur and a newly married couple, I'd been to Russia and Ukraine on multiple occasions. I was a head counselor at a Ukrainian kids' camp, and led Pesach sedarim in Russia.

I felt drawn there. These simple people's neshamos shone so brightly.

It took some convincing, but my wife finally agreed to move on shlichus to Russia. We met with Rabbi Lazar, Russia's head shliach, and, after some discussion, settled on Stavropol. On our initial visit, we were pleased to see a Jewish day school, ensuring us a youthful community with a vibrant future.

We lived in Stavropol for almost two years, happily carrying out what we *thought* was our dream shlichus; our ultimate life purpose. But then, certain events showed us that Hashem had other plans for us. In 2009, the Russian government denied visa extensions to several shluchim couples, effectively expelling us from the country.

Our short-lived Russian shlichus gave us many valuable skills, memories, and inspiration, not least of which being our ability to communicate in Russian as our "secret language" our kids don't understand. We met so many amazing people, each with an incredible life story, and learned how to navigate through shlichus.

We returned to Montreal, hoping we'd soon be able to return to our beloved community in Stavropol. After several months of limbo, we were told, definitively, we'd never be able to return. We desperately missed shlichus; we missed bringing the warmth of Yiddishkeit to starved souls; we missed living every moment of every day with purpose.

A good friend of mine mentioned he was looking for a couple to join his Chabad House in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, a small area in Montreal. We jumped at the opportunity and moved as soon as we could.

Before moving to Stavropol, we were given the contact information for Angelica, whose family lived there. When we arrived, we contacted her, and met her family. They became regulars and we formed a close friendship. They came for Shabbos every few weeks, and I visited their home to put tefillin on Tigran, their son.

A few months after we met, Angelica told us about her deceased brother. It had already been ten years since his passing, but no one had ever made "a Jewish prayer" for him, and she asked me if I could do so.

I looked up the corresponding Hebrew date of his yahrzeit, and saw it was on Chanukah. That immediately gave me another idea: we could invite a minyan to a Chanukah party in their home, and Tigran could recite kaddish for his uncle! Angelica loved the idea, and we immediately began planning. The hardest challenge was convincing eight more men to join Stavropol's first ever minyan! Eventually, after calling in some favors and building up the party as much as I could, we had ten confirmations.

The day of the party, I called each person to remind them of their commitment and to re-confirm their availability. Unfortunately, one man was out of town. I spent the rest of the day trying to find a tenth man willing to attend the party. I hit brick wall after brick wall.

I remembered one time, as a bochur, when we desperately needed a tenth. Someone called a taxi company, asked for a Jewish driver, and asked him to leave the meter running while he stepped inside to answer *amen*. I thought I could easily do the same thing. Every time I'd ever had a Jewish taxi driver in Stavropol, I saved their information in my phone.

I started calling them one by one, but none were available. The party had already started, and I only had one more number to try. In a clear stroke of hashgacha pratis, Refoel happened to be right across the street. I flew downstairs and he drove me to the party.

"I'll pay you whatever you want. Keep track!" I told him. "Meanwhile, come inside and enjoy the party!"

Refoel agreed. It was a beautiful party. Tigran lit the menorah, and recited kaddish for his uncle. When the party was over, Refoel drove me back home. I pulled a wad of cash out of my wallet, and offered it to him.

"I can't take it," he said.

"That's what we agreed!" I argued, confused. "This is your job! I just took up two hours of your time, and I'd like to pay you for it."

Refoel turned around in his seat to face me completely.

"Rabbi, that man that you said the blessing for tonight - he was my best friend."

It's not every day that we're zoche to experience such blatant hashgacha pratis - such a clear reminder that Hashem runs the world.

"You have to come upstairs and tell my wife!" I told him. "She'll never believe it if I tell her myself!"

I was walking the streets of Stavropol when I met Kostya. I invited him for Shabbos and he brought his family and brother's family along with him. They owned a large restaurant at the edge of town. I added the restaurant to my mitzvoyim route, visiting Kostya and his brother every week.

The families were very secular, but over time, Kostya became more and more interested in Yiddishkeit. As soon as I walked in, he would stop whatever he was doing, even if he was entertaining important clients, to put on tefillin.



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We often had long, deep discussions in the restaurant booth.

We were lucky to have a Sefer Torah donated to our Chabad House, but we needed a place for the hachnosas Sefer Torah. Kostya's restaurant was beautiful and spacious, and he graciously agreed to host. I suggested kashering his restaurant, and he easily agreed to that too.

"No problem! You'll come a few hours before the event, bless the kitchen, and we're good to go!"

"It's a bit more complicated than that, I'm afraid," I responded.

My father-in-law was visiting at the time, and he helped me kasher Kostya's restaurant. It was one of his busiest nights, so we had to wait until the cleaning staff had finished before beginning our own thorough cleaning of the kitchen. Hours later, we were able to start preparing the food in the newly kashered commercial kitchen.

The hachnosas Sefer Torah marked a turning point in Kostya's journey to Yiddishkeit. He was incredibly moved by the event, and from then on, attended every shiur and event we held.

Even after we were forced to leave Russia, his journey continued. He sent his daughter to a religious seminary in Moscow, and she now has a beautiful, frum family in New York. Kostya was head of the Jewish community in Stavropol for a while, but he now lives in New York as a proud, frum Jew.

I took taxis almost exclusively during the first months in Stavropol. On one of my first rides, the taxi driver commented, "You look Jewish. My grandmother was Jewish too."

"Oh really? Which one?" I asked.

"My mother's mother."

"Guess what? That means you're fully Jewish too!" I told him.

"Oh, yeah? Then why don't I have any money?"

We both laughed and continued cracking jokes for the rest of the trip. I invited him for a Shabbos meal, but he was uncomfortable being a guest in a virtual stranger's house. I took down his name and number and promised to book him for future trips.

Although I used his services often, he never came to any events or even agreed to put on tefillin.

About a year later, I was holding a series of shiurim about davening, hoping to inspire a regular minyan. Before

the shiur, I asked my secretary to call and confirm who was coming that night. When she handed me the list, I was surprised to see the taxi driver's name. How had he even made it on that list? Had he really confirmed he was coming? I'd invited him to countless shiurim, meals, and events, and he'd refused them all!

He *did* show up, and his active involvement in the class made it fun, exciting, and very entertaining. When the shiur ended, he stuck around, and I knew he had a story to share. I invited him to sit and he shared the following:

My sister, Svetlana, lives in the Czech Republic. She and her husband recently had a baby boy. Following Czech tradition, the boy was named for his father, Mikhael. His father was also Mikhael, as was his grandfather, and his great-grandfather! Several weeks later, they went to register the baby's name. When the official asked for the name, Svetlana blurted out, "David." Her husband was surprised. They'd been calling the baby Mikhael for weeks! "Mikhael, you mean," he tried to correct her, but my sister insisted the name was David.

The baby's name was officially recorded as David. Her husband, Mikhael, was furious. She called me, not even understanding what had led her to give that name. "The rabbi here told me that we're Jewish because Babushka was Jewish!" I told her. "Something inside of you must've known that and led you to give your child the most Jewish name possible!"

Jason was a very kind and good-hearted Canadian Jew. He worked for the Canadian phone company, Bell Canada. He applied for a promotion that not only paid more, but also gave him Saturdays off. Jason wasn't shomer Shabbos at that point, but he sometimes attended shul on Shabbos morning.

That Yom Kippur, Rabbi Bernath, the head shliach of NDG, emphasized the importance of keeping Shabbos in his speech. Jason was very inspired and decided to commit to keeping Shabbos, even though he hadn't received the promotion he was counting on. He informed his family of his decision, and declared that he would keep Shabbos even if it cost him his job!

Before he returned to work the next day, he received a call. In the end, the other candidate for the promotion wasn't a good match and they offered Jason the job instead.

"I'd be delighted to accept," Jason answered, "but I just committed to keeping Shabbos. I was just going to ask HR to reduce my hours on Saturdays."

They assured him they would work with his schedule. Jason received a significant pay raise, and hours perfectly conducive to his new resolution!

A very close friend of ours, Olga, called me Thursday night, frantic with worry.

"Chayale, my brother from London, Ontario was just killed in a car accident!" She was worried that, since his wife wasn't Jewish, the family would refuse a Jewish burial.

The next morning, she called me with an update: the family was donating the body to science. She wanted to know if and when she should sit shiva.

I called the rav, Rabbi Ringo, who told me the discussion of shiva was moot - first we had to try and save this neshama!

I called Olga back.

"We have to try to do something," I told her. "At least then we'll know we did whatever we could."

"Maybe I can ask my niece if she'll let the rabbi call her," Olga suggested hesitantly.

Five minutes later, she called me back, ecstatic. "Chayale, I can hardly believe it! She said yes!"

It was already Friday afternoon. I called Rabbi Silberberg, the shliach in London and gave him Olga's niece's number. He promised to call right away.

It was a few agonizing hours until I heard from Olga again. She was crying. "They agreed," she repeated over and over in tearful wonder. "They'll give him a Jewish burial!"

Rabbi Silberberg put the family in touch with Rabbi Zaltzman, the shliach in Niagara, who happened to have a group of yeshiva students visiting for Shabbos. The body was transferred to the cemetery there, and was buried with proper Jewish dignity.

So often we write the end to our own stories, forgetting that Hashem is in charge. We are humbled to be part of the Rebbe's army of shluchim, who don't hesitate to help a fellow Jew, even on a late Friday afternoon.

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