

IllumiNations

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Shnas Hakel

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Hackensack ICU - Inspiring Community & Unity

Hackensack is one of the oldest communities in Bergen County - over one hundred years old. Unfortunately, over time, many of its core members passed away or moved, and the synagogue was in imminent danger of being sold to a church.

The community asked Rabbi Simon, the head shliach of Bergen County, to step in, hoping a Chabad presence could revitalize the Yiddishkeit of Hackensack. Rabbi Simon asked us if we'd be interested in moving there, and, of course, we were!

Hackensack is best known for the Hackensack University Medical Center, the top hospital in New Jersey. We often receive calls from patients and visitors who need guidance, visitation, kosher food, minyanim, and other Jewish services.

Hackensack is also home to the Bergen County Jail, where, unfortunately, there are a number of Jewish prisoners.

For years, Jewish prisoners were forbidden to light candles for Chanukah. Instead, they used stickers, or electric bulbs. I desperately wanted permission for them to light an actual menorah, but it was an uphill battle.

I posted about my struggle on social media. I received a response from an influential person who was able to get me the permission I sought. The approval came in on Friday afternoon, just hours before Shabbos. I quickly rushed to the prison with menorahs and candles.

This was the first Chanukah celebrated with the actual flames of redemption, bringing light and hope to dozens of Jewish inmates.

On erev Chanukah, I answered my door to find a utility worker on my doorstep, informing me their work would block my driveway.

"Thank you for letting me know," I said. "By the way, are you Jewish?"

"Only a quarter. My mother's mother was Jewish."

"Have I got news for you!" I told him. "That's the perfect quarter. You're as Jewish as I am! Would you like to put on tefillin?"

He wasn't ready for that yet, so I offered him another mitzvah - his very own menorah to light at home that night. He accepted it happily.

The next day, I went outside to look for him.

"Hey! How are you doing today?" I asked him. "How about some tefillin?"

"Sorry, not today Rabbi. But I have a surprise for you!"



He whistled and called over another worker. "Guess what? He's Jewish too!"

Baruch Hashem, his friend accepted my offer, so I ended up putting tefillin on one utility worker - and hopefully inspiring the other.

The hospital in Hackensack is well-regarded, and is especially famous for its NICU. We often celebrate the births and namings of newborn baby girls with their tired-but-exhilarated fathers.

One Shabbos, we had two new fathers in our minyan. Perl's father had called me before Shabbos, letting me know that his wife was in labor and he would likely be joining our minyan. The second baby, named Chana Etel, was a surprise. She was born prematurely, at just 25 weeks, and her father's voice broke as he named her.

They had been rushed to Hackensack just before Shabbos, without time to pack food, or even a change of Shabbos clothes! We quickly packed up a fresh, nourishing Shabbos meal, complete with gefilte fish, cholent, kugel, challah, and grape juice, and sent it to the new parents.

My wife gave me a long list of produce to buy for Pesach. I managed to find everything - except for Romaine lettuce for maror. The store's selection was as dismal as the Jews' slavery in Egypt. I couldn't bring myself to buy it.

I went to complete my list the next day, at a different store. While grabbing a cart, I saw someone dropping one off and offered to take it from him. I looked down at my hands, one carrying a box of shmura matzah, and the other, a pair of tefillin.

"Are you Jewish by any chance?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "My name is Morris - Moshe!"

I handed him the shmura matzah gift box. "Here, this is for you. You can enjoy it at the Seder tomorrow night."

He was delighted to receive it. Then I asked him if he would like to put on tefillin.

"I've never done it in my life!" came the reply.

Right then and there, outside the store, we celebrated the first time ever he put on tefillin. It was truly a personal yetzias Mitzrayim, where Moshe led his neshama out of its imposed exile.

After a meeting with the legendary Rabbi Simon of Chabad of Teaneck, I walked outside the Chabad House, and saw an elderly person walking with his dogs.

I said hello and asked if he was Jewish. He was! Would he be interested to put on tefillin? He said no.

We started chatting. Turns out, he was born in Eisenach, Germany on March 7, 1933, just a month after Hitler rose to power!

"Your birth was like telling all the Nazis that *Am Yisrael Chai!*" I told him.

We spoke for a while and then I offered him a second chance to do the mitzvah of tefillin. This time, he agreed. Only *after* we said Shema together did he tell me it was his first time putting on tefillin! A Bar Mitzvah at age 88!

He came to shul with a bruised face. I didn't ask too much - only what brought him to town.

"My wife is in the hospital," was all he said.

The next day, he called. He didn't have tefillin with him and needed to borrow a pair. We started chatting. He told me both he and his wife were involved in an accident. Baruch Hashem, he was fine, and his wife would be released soon.

"I really enjoyed spending Shabbos here," he told me. I was excited to hear he grew up in Crown Heights! Although he was not a Chabad chassid, he used to go to 770 Eastern Parkway. He recalled one visit, the night of Simchas Torah.

"It was late at night - actually early morning already - after hakafof on Simchas Torah, when the Rebbe taught the chassidim this new niggun. It was called *Hu Elokeinu*."

We sing this song every Shabbos in our Chabad House. When he listened to the Rebbe teaching this song so many years ago, he never imagined that, one day, he would be singing this exact song at a Chabad House!

Everything about Mike - the way we met, and many of our ensuing encounters - prove the Mishna "*Mitzvah gorreres mitzvah*" - one mitzvah leads to another.

Act One: It was a hot Shabbos morning. We had only nine men, so I walked outside to look for someone who could join and complete our minyan. I stood outside in the heat for a while, with no luck. This is when I came across Mike, who was walking his dog.

Was he Jewish? Yes.

"Let me just bring my dog home," he said. But I was too afraid he wouldn't come back.

"Don't worry about the dog," I said. "He can hang out in another room while you come inside the shul." Mike became a friend, and visited Chabad many times afterwards.

Act Two: "Mike is in the hospital; he's scheduled for a surgery. Can you go visit him?"

It was a Friday before Rosh Hashanah when I got the phone call. Of course, I rushed to the hospital to visit Mike. But when I got there, he was sleeping.

I waited and waited until I had to go home. After all, Shabbos was coming in just a few hours. But I made sure someone would visit Mike on Rosh Hashanah and bring the holiday's joy to him, including the mitzvah of the day: listening to the shofar. Mike was very happy to have the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah, even in his hospital bed.

Act Three: An elderly Jewish woman from Williamsburg suffered a stroke, and came to a rehab center near Hackensack. Her son, Yossel, traveled from Israel to spend Sukkos with her. He was worried about finding an available sukkah. He was thrilled to find out we had a sukkah he could use.

Unfortunately, his mother's rehab center was too far from Hackensack to make our sukkah a realistic option, especially on Yom Tov. With just a few hours left before Sukkos, I posted on social media, asking for any leads on an available sukkah. Thankfully, one generous person was able to loan Yossel a small sukkah. He was so happy and so thankful.

I had a request for him. Mike had just relocated from the hospital to the same rehab center where his mother was. Could he visit Mike during the holiday so he wouldn't be lonely? Could he bring Mike a lulav and esrog so he could fulfill the special mitzvah of Sukkos? Yossel was more than happy to do so.

Yossel had a sukkah.

Mike had a visitor and a lulav.

One mitzvah led to another.

Just before Sukkos, Jon asked me to accompany him on a visit to his friend, David, who was in critical condition. David had been hit by a car while riding his motorcycle on the highway. He was thrown into the trees at the side of the road, and then bounced off the cement highway barrier.

Unconscious, barely breathing, and bleeding internally, life saving measures were provided by Palisades Parkway Police and a helicopter airlifted him to Hackensack University Hospital. Even after regaining consciousness, he couldn't walk, talk, or perform fine motor functions.

When we walked into his room, I could see how moved David was to see us, although he could barely talk. He later told me that, in *his* memory, he had stood up, shook my hand, and thanked me warmly for coming, telling me how much joy it brought him. As it was, I had to rely on the light shining in his eyes and the silent tears running down his face to decipher his feelings.

He grunted his assent to putting on tefillin, and I could tell how much it meant to him to have a concrete way of thanking Hashem for his miraculous survival. The doctors, nurses, policemen, and EMTs were sure that David couldn't have survived a high-speed motorcycle accident. David and I knew Hashem still had plenty more in store for him.

I gave him a lulav and esrog for Sukkos, and arranged for a sukkah mobile to visit him as well. Against all odds and doctors' predictions, David began to heal remarkably quickly. Within weeks, he regained his speech, and was able to walk again.

"Tatty, we have a problem! We don't have a shtreimel!"

My son was concerned because it was Simchas Torah, and every year on Simchas Torah, we had guests. They came from Monroe, Williamsburg, and Monsey. So while we were dancing around the Bimah, I'd borrow their shtreimel and wear it on my head. For some reason, everyone would get a kick out of it! And now... we had no shtreimel.

A few minutes after we started davening, someone walked in with... a shtreimel! He got to the hospital the night before and his wife gave birth in the early morning hours of Simchas Torah. He got the usual Chabad of Hackensack warm welcome, and, of course, I got to dance with the shtreimel.

As I looked around the shul, so full of dancing and joy, many people from diverse backgrounds celebrating the Torah together, I was reminded of the true message of Simchas Torah. We dance with a closed Torah to show that everyone, regardless of their ability to read or understand what's written in it, has an equal share in our holy Torah.

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