

# IllumiNations

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Shnas Hakhel

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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

## Rabbi Hesh and Chavi Epstein, Chabad of South Carolina

# Fulfilling Our Marching Orders

By Chaya Chazan

*At every farbrengen we attended, the Rebbe spoke about changing and preparing the world for the coming of Moshiach. The Rebbe encouraged and empowered each chassid to be an agent of change - to go on shlichus and elevate our little corner of the world.*

Attending these farbrengens week after week inspired us to fulfill the Rebbe's vision. It was a foregone conclusion - something my wife and I both agreed was non-negotiable as soon as we met. We just knew, at some point, somewhere in the world, we would one day establish our very own Chabad house.

Nowadays, you can find a Chabad house almost anywhere in the world, but in the early days of shlichus, you could throw a dart at a map and pretty easily open a Chabad house wherever it landed. My dart did *not* land on Columbia, South Carolina. We were offered shlichus positions in various cities, but every time we wrote to the Rebbe, asking for a bracha to move, we received no answer.

When we first wrote about the offer to move to Columbia, we didn't get an answer either. However, almost a year later, when we wrote about a different offer, the Rebbe referenced the original letter, circling South Carolina, and adding in, *if*

*there is a kosher mikvah there. I will mention the matter at the tziyon [of my father-in-law, the Friediker Rebbe].*

We had our marching orders: move to South Carolina and build a mikvah.

We were encouraged to meet with Lee Baker, an affluent man whose approval could significantly impact the early success of our shlichus. I prepared for the meeting with notes, statistics, and a long list of programs we wanted to implement.

"What can I do for you, Rabbi?" he asked when I walked in.

I immediately launched into my "Chabad shliach spiel." After about five minutes of me enthusiastically laying out all my dreams for a spiritually enhanced Columbia, Mr. Baker raised his hand to quell my unceasing fervor.

"Rabbi, have you unpacked?"

I stopped short, surprised by the unexpected question.

"Not fully," I shrugged. "We still have some boxes unopened."

"Don't unpack," he told me, bluntly. "This isn't Brooklyn. People here aren't looking for what you're offering. Columbia just isn't cut out for your kind of Judaism. You should go back to Brooklyn and find another city - somewhere where they'll appreciate what you're offering."

I was dumbfounded for a moment. What could I say to that?

"Thank you for your feedback. I'll take it under consideration and get back to you."

I went straight from his office to the DMV and traded in my New York driver's license for a South Carolina one. Then, I went home to unpack.

Seven years later, Lee Baker was the *guest of honor* at our school dinner for his unwavering support of Chabad.

"I'm here now because of you," I told him. He looked surprised. "Don't you remember what you said at our first meeting?" I asked him. He shook his head, and I reminded him.

"Thank G-d you didn't listen to me!" he laughed.

I was also privileged to meet State Senator Isador Lourie. He was proud and outspoken - a proud Jew, Southerner, and self-proclaimed descendant of the Arizal. He was committed to keeping Judaism alive, both for his own family, and for the community at large.

We wanted to have a public menorah lighting at the mall, but people were worried such a public display would result in anti-Semitism. I went to see Senator Lourie, who was strongly supportive.

"I think it's a great idea!" he told me. "Don't listen to the naysayers. I'll make an appearance, and make sure everyone knows it has my full support!"

Senator Lourie passed away in 2003. Chabad now sponsors an annual lighting of the Senator Isadore E. Lourie Memorial menorah on the steps of the South Carolina State House every year, in his memory, led by his son, former Senator Joel Lourie, and SC Representative Beth Bernstein.

Dr. Stephen Serbin was one of the first people I met. While many people were satisfied with a quick hi-and-bye, Dr. Serbin actually accepted my offer to study! He was interested in Pirkei Avos.

For over 35 years, Dr. Serbin and I sat over lunch and studied Pirkei Avos, with all the mefarshim. Eventually, he wrote his own commentary, and even gave a copy to the Rebbe! All these years later, our weekly chavrusa is still going strong!

Today, Dr. Serbin is a member of the advisory board of the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute's advisory board, the world's preeminent provider of Jewish learning.

Steve regularly came to my classes, but other than that, didn't show too much interest. His wife wasn't Jewish, and his involvement was minimal.

He called me up one day and asked if I would officiate at his funeral.



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"Sure," I said. "How's next week?"

"Very funny, Rabbi," he answered. "But I'm serious. I want to be buried next to my wife in a non-Jewish cemetery. When the time comes, I want you to officiate."

Of course, I consulted a rav, and came up with an acceptable arrangement.

About five years ago, while attending a JLI course in our shul, Steve noticed an advertisement for "Shabbat in the Heights," a JLI Shabbaton in Crown Heights, where visitors can experience a Shabbos in Chabad's central hub. Being a native New Yorker, Steve was interested in attending, and asked me about it. We gathered a group together and joined the Shabbaton. It was an incredible experience, and all of us, including myself, found it inspirational.

On our way back to the airport, I asked Steve for his impressions of Shabbos.

"Rabbi," he answered me, "It's the Judaism I've been searching for my whole life. I've belonged to many shuls and congregations in the past, but I've never had such a genuine Jewish experience."

"That's great!" I answered. "Let's start putting on tefillin every morning!"

Steve laughed and held up his hand.

"Slow down there, Rabbi," he said. "I'll call you."

I was a little disappointed, and I figured I wouldn't be hearing from Steve for a good while. To my surprise, he called me a few days later.

"I want to go to the JLI retreat," he told me. "But you know my wife isn't Jewish. Do you think she needs to buy a wig in order to go?"

I assured him it wouldn't be necessary. When we returned from the retreat, Steve shared with me how much he and his wife had enjoyed it. I suggested that he take the next step on his spiritual tour - Israel. At first, Steve wasn't interested, but after I sent him a tantalizing brochure, he agreed to go.

When we returned from the trip, he mentioned he might consider buying a burial plot in Israel. Steve's international spiritual journey will hopefully one day result in an everlasting destination - a proper resting place for his neshama.

A shliach in California called me about a Jewish man in a tiny town about an hour away from Columbia. He'd been a professional girl's gymnastics coach for years. One of his former pupils, a Jewish girl, had kept in touch with him, although she was now married and living in California. She heard he was dying, and, knowing he wouldn't have a Jewish burial, told her Chabad rabbi about him.

I drove to meet him. He was very sick and couldn't even talk anymore. I explained to his non-Jewish wife about the pow-

er and importance of a kevuras Yisroel. She was respectful and receptive to the idea.

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, I received the call that he'd passed. I quickly gathered a minyan for the meis mitzvah, and buried him in the Jewish cemetery.

As our kids grew older, we knew they needed a stable solution for chinuch. My wife volunteered at the local JCC school once a week, singing Jewish songs with the kids, and introducing some Yom Tov crafts. But we wanted more for our kids.

We thought about creating our own school, but our board of advisors thought it was a terrible idea that would create discord and conflict in the community. We wrote to the Rebbe about it. The Rebbe replied, *Beware of machlokes; only [start a school] without machlokes. I will mention it at the grave [of my father-in-law.]* We shelved the issue and focused on other things.

A while later, I attended a regional kinus, where I met my former Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Leibel Schapiro. I told him the whole story.

"Nu," he asked me. "So when are you starting your school?"

"What do you mean? The Rebbe told us not to!"

"That's not what the Rebbe said. The Rebbe said to start one - just make sure there's no machlokes!"

"Columbia isn't Miami Beach," I answered. "It's a small community. There isn't space for two schools."

"You'll figure it out," he told me.

A week after I returned, I received a call from the Federation director.

"We're closing our school," he told me. "Would you like to open a school in our building?"

"Let me get back to you," I told him. I immediately called Rabbi Muller, who we'd brought down to Columbia just a year before. "You'll never believe what just happened," I told him, and filled him in.

"It's incredible hashgacha pratis," he said, thoughtfully. "But it's summer now. School is supposed to open in a few weeks! How can we pull off something so big so quickly?"

"We'll never have another chance like this," I countered.

Somehow or other, we managed. We started with just a dozen preschool students. Now we have over 150 students, enrolled from preschool through 5th grade.

Fort Jackson, a basic training camp, is just a mile from our shul, so we have a strong connection to the military. The army chaplain training school is also here, so most Jewish chaplains have spent time with us at one point or another.

We run a service on base every Sunday. Unlike civilians, who need to be coaxed into putting on tefillin, these young recruits are used to obeying every order they're given. A simple, "Come here and put on tefillin," has them marching right over and extending a rigid arm. When they're allowed off base, they come for Yom Tov services, meals, and programs as well.

For a lot of these kids, their religious identity has never played a major role in their lives. Suddenly, when they find themselves the only Jews amongst thousands of army recruits, their Jewish spark is awakened. In some cases, I can help them reconnect to the Yiddishkeit they're running from.

I once "ordered" a soldier to put on tefillin. I came around the table to help him, but he was already mouthing the words, fluently.

"I grew up in Monsey," he explained. "It was just too much for me, and I ran away."

"No problem," I said. "You're the tefillin guy now! Tell all the Jewish kids to come!"

"This is Jared," said the unfamiliar voice on my answering machine. "I have a question. Please call me."

When I called him back, he told me his grandfather was a soldier in World War II. He'd recently passed, and Jared was going through his things. He found a tin canister filled with ashes, which his grandfather had apparently collected from Auschwitz in 1945.

"Don't move!" I told him. "I'm on my way!"

I immediately drove to his house. He was holding a cardboard film canister, faded with age, but still clearly labeled in his grandfather's bold handwriting.

I called a rav, who told me to bury it. I collaborated with the Reform and Conservative rabbis, and we held a community-wide burial ceremony for the canister of ash and bones in the Holocaust section of the Jewish cemetery. The newspaper ran a front-page article about it - *Holocaust victims' ashes laid to rest.*

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