

# IllumiNations

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## *Rabbi Nechemia and Baila Raizel Schusterman, Chabad of Peabody, Massachusetts*

# Doing What Needs to be Done

By Chaya Chazan

*My wife and I both grew up on shlichus, so opening our own Chabad house was a no-brainer.*

We'll soon be celebrating our 20th anniversary in this quiet, suburban, north Massachusetts town.

The Jewish communities of Massachusetts trace back to colonial times, and vestiges of vibrant Jewish life can still be seen in the form of now-defunct synagogues. There are five houses of worship in Peabody - a testament to Jewish growth and expansion over the last 300 years.

Although the community started fully Orthodox, the passing of time greatly eroded the religious fervor of the town. We consider it our privilege to restore Torah-true Yiddishkeit to Peabody.



We moved in 2003 and immediately began our activities. We didn't even have furniture in our house, but we sat on our air mattresses, licking envelopes and sticking stamps for a mass mailer to any Jewish sounding last name.

The first day of Rosh Hashana, we had 25 people. The second day, 35 people showed up. By Yom Kippur, we were already up to 50. Clearly, there was a thirst for authentic Yiddishkeit and plenty of room to grow.

One of the attendees was Stephanie, a recent college graduate. When davening was over, she started heading for her car. I caught up with her and encouraged her to stay for the kiddush so she could get to know other Jews in the area.

She agreed, and ended up hitting it off with Janice, another woman at the kiddush. Stephanie returned for the second day of Yom Tov, and, in the next few months, for many Shabbosim as well.

She told us she'd attended a pre-Pesach primer at Brandeis University a year prior - her first experience with Chabad. When she saw our advertisement in the paper, she figured it was worth checking out.

"I liked the other Chabad couple," she shrugged. "I figured the chances were high I'd like you guys, too."

Fast forward a few years. Stephanie was making great strides in her Yiddishkeit. She was spending Shabbos with us instead of driving over, and was ready to take the next step. She attended Maayanot, a baal teshuva yeshiva in Israel, and returned to Peabody firmly dedicated to Yiddishkeit.

We gently encouraged her to move to New York, where her chances of finding a suitable shidduch were significantly higher. Baruch Hashem, she met and married a wonderful, frum young man, and they now have a beautiful, frum family.

I brought up this success story while schmoozing with my good friend and colleague, Rabbi Peretz Chein, the shlich to Brandeis University.

"You see?" I told him. "You never know where one little action will take you. Stephanie attended one pre-Pesach primer in your Chabad house, and now, she has a wonderful frum family to show for it!"

"Are you kidding me?" Rabbi Chein interjected. "I remember that class so clearly! We'd just moved, and were thinking of ways to try and meet more students. We hit on this Pesach class, but only two girls showed up, neither of which we ever saw again. We wrote it off as a total waste of time!"

Harriet was one of our shul's first members, although she tended to do things a little differently. Unfortunately, Harriet was diagnosed with cancer. We tried to support her as best as we could, regularly calling her for updates and to make sure she was okay.

Harriet attended the sedarim with us, and she seemed to be doing alright. On chol hamoed, we decided to visit my wife's brother in Allentown, Pennsylvania. We'd just completed the five-hour drive, and were sitting down to potato kugel and chicken, when Harriet's name flashed on our cell phone.

"I'm feeling very sick," she said, in a failing voice. "I don't think I'll make it through the night. Please, I'd like to see you before I die."

I shoved a few bites of potato kugel in my mouth, grabbed some matza and avocado, and drove straight back to Peabody. It was past midnight when I arrived at the hospital. She was asleep, and the nurses asked me to return in the morning.

When I came back the next day, Harriet was awake.

"I'm feeling much better today, Rabbi," she said. "Thank you for coming."

We sat and talked for a while, especially about kevuras yisroel and its important effects on the neshama. I said goodbye, and drove back to my family in Allentown. We spent the rest of yom tov with our siblings, and I thought nothing more of the whole thing.

After Pesach, we returned home and found a \$10,000 check in the mailbox. It was from Harriet. At that time, \$10,000 was enough to cover all our expenses for a good while. It seemed enormous to us!

Unfortunately, our relationship with Harriet didn't continue for too much longer. The cancer claimed her just a few months later. Her husband, who didn't have much to do with us before then, has since become a pillar of our community and a loyal supporter.

I don't think she even knew I'd driven ten hours to attend her non-deathbed. All I know is we have to do our part, and Hashem will do His.

When you're on shlichus, every family simcha becomes an opportunity to introduce new aspects of Jewish life

to the community, and to draw in people who wouldn't necessarily come in otherwise.

For my son's hanachas tefillin, we invited everyone to join our weekly tefillin club and celebrate this important milestone. My father-in-law, Rabbi Sholom Spalter, came in from Morristown for the event.

My son shared a maamer, a Chassidic discourse, with the crowd, about the mitzvah of tefillin. He'd worked hard to memorize it in its entirety in the original Yiddish, but no one really understood what he was saying. My father-in-law offered to share a brief synopsis of the maamer in English.

"In a perfect world, we'd be busy with Torah and mitzvos all day. As it is, we're busy with physical pursuits of livelihood, and we don't have time. The gemara says that Hashem offers us the deal of a lifetime - if we simply put on tefillin every day, He will consider it as if we've done all the Torah and mitzvos."

Irwin, a successful businessman, was listening intently. After my father-in-law finished speaking, he approached me.

"Rabbi, I pride myself on knowing a good deal when I see one. I'm always looking for the best ROI. This seems to be it. I can't commit to doing all the mitzvos, but I certainly can put on tefillin every day! Can you help me get a pair?"

With his permission, I shared his request with the crowd and invited others to follow his example.

"If anyone would like to commit to putting on tefillin every day and wants to buy their own pair, I will subsidize it!"

Another five men took me up on that offer. Irwin is still keeping up his side of the deal, and I'm sure Hashem is keeping His.

Just a mention of Kol Nidrei brings a somber look to any frum face, but for those unfamiliar with Yiddishkeit, it's a short prayer service with not much to do afterwards. We would usually have a kiddush, but obviously that's not an option on Yom Kippur.

People were already straggling out of shul, while others stayed behind to chat a bit. One man tapped me discreetly on the shoulder.

"Rabbi, I need the restroom, but it seems to be occupied. I keep checking back, but it's been locked for quite a while."

I looked around at everyone left in shul, and saw that Charles, an elderly man, was missing. I could see his wife still in the women's section, so I knew he hadn't left. I knocked on the door and asked if he needed any help. Charles sounded weak, and he asked me to go get his wife.

She reappeared a few moments later and pulled me aside.

"I'm so sorry, Rabbi. Charles had a terrible accident. Could you help us leave out the back door without anyone around?"

When I peeked into the bathroom after they'd made their successful escape, I saw why she made such a request. Since there was no kiddush to clean up after, the usual cleaning crew wouldn't be coming. I had no other choice. I went to the janitor's closet and grabbed whatever I could find. I scrubbed the bathroom on my hands and knees, doing the best job I could. I had no idea what I was doing. I think I may have even used some car wax on those floors. It did *not* feel like my finest moment.

As we walked home after shul, my father consoled me, telling me, "This is your Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev moment. When you love Yidden, it's not always wonderful, uplifting moments. Sometimes, it's cleaning up after an elderly man."

A couple of months later, I was teaching a class on Parshas Shemos. I taught a sicha of the Rebbe describing Moshe's leadership, and his outstanding humility.

After the class, Kyle, who'd only joined our Chabad house in the past few months, came over to me.

"My first time here was Yom Kippur night," he told me. "Religion never meant much to me. My wife usually drags me to the Conservative temple, but that night, she said we'd be going to Chabad. I didn't expect to gain anything at all."

He paused and looked me straight in the eye. "When I saw you on your hands and knees, scrubbing that bathroom floor, simply doing what needed to be done, I knew this was leadership I wanted to follow. You're not afraid to get your hands dirty; to clean up someone else's mess. That's why I'm here."

Kyle became a frequent visitor to our Chabad house, and comes often to shul, minyanim, and shiurim.

One innovative program we've started is the JSA - Jewish Support Anonymous. It's a 12-step peer support group that meets bi-weekly to support each other through all forms of recovery, including mental health, addiction, loved ones in recovery, and any other challenge that

could be overcome through the 12 steps. We got a crash course on addiction recovery, the twelve steps, and rehab centers through painfully personal experience. Baruch Hashem, we are now in a much better place regarding that. We used our first-hand knowledge to create the JSA. It more or less follows the conventional twelve steps of recovery, but is also sort of a "catch all" for all arenas where 12-step recovery can be helpful. It's also held in our Chabad house, so the environment is more "Jewish friendly," since Jews understand our own cultural challenges and expectations in a way others cannot.

Following the recovery slogan, "*I recover loudly so others don't die quietly*," we're quite vocal about this topic, and often receive calls from worried parents who feel lost - and often betrayed - by their child's addiction. My wife, who is a positive psychology practitioner, gets these phone calls daily, and uses her expertise to guide parents and addicts on the road to better understanding.

I once received a call from a friend, who called about an unrelated topic. During our phone call, he mentioned that he was done with his daughter's alcohol abuse, and was ready to kick her out of the house.

"I don't know what you *thought* you were calling about, but I know *why* you called," I told him. I was heartachingly familiar with the frustration and desperation in his voice, but I knew I could help him *and* his daughter. I explained to him that alcoholism is a sickness - as much out of the person's control as containing a fever. I gave him some recommendations, and we hung up, both feeling heartened. He later told me that his daughter was being treated, and was on the road to recovery.

Everyone is prone to addiction. It's in every community, no matter how sheltered. Speaking up about it and sharing our struggles gives hope to those who need it, making resources more readily available, especially in the frum community.

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