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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

Rabbi Shimy and Devorah Leah Heidingsfeld, Chabad of Moorpark, California

I Can't Believe We Live on a Ranch

By Chaya Chazan

From the start, we were dedicated to moving on shlichus. We moved to California almost immediately after our marriage to get right in the thick of things and begin any way we could, even before we'd found our official "territory."

We knew that Moorpark, a growing city about an hour out of Los Angeles, would be a good place to open our own Chabad house. We were also familiar with the area, since Devorah Leah had worked for shluchim near that area for years, and some of the families were from Moorpark.

For the first few years of our shlichus, we hosted the minyan in our living room. We later moved to a storefront, but, a few years later, when the landlord didn't want to renew our lease, we desperately needed a new place, preferably one big enough to keep our home and shul in the same location.

We were in a park when we met Ellen, who was there with her family. Although she was Jewish, she was unaffiliated and knew very little about her Yiddishkeit. We exchanged contact information, and I made sure to keep her updated on upcoming events and programs. Although I texted her regularly, Ellen only came once. I continued to text her, but she never responded, and never showed up.

Before Shavuos, eight years later, I invited her to join for Aseres Hadibros, and, of course, an ice cream party.

I won't be able to make it, Ellen replied. But do you know anyone who wants to move?

"Us!" I almost shouted, amazed by the clear Divine inspiration that inspired her to reply after years of silence.

We gave her almost impossible parameters: a zero dollar budget, no assets, no savings, and no large expected donations. Still, Ellen did her best, showing us a bunch of properties around Moorpark.

"I have an interesting idea," she told us. "I just heard about a great ranch property for sale."

"A ranch?!" We looked at each other in amusement. "Like for horses? We want to build a synagogue!"

"Just come see it," she argued.

It was a real ranch, with a stable, a one-acre arena - the works. We almost laughed when we saw it. But it also had a snug house, and plenty of room for a proper shul.

Any good worker knows to always consult the boss and keep them in the loop. As shluchim, we kept in constant contact with the Rebbe throughout the entire process. In fact, we wrote to the Rebbe so often that Ellen herself knew to ask, "So, what does the Rebbe say?"

We needed a down payment of \$400,000. Our community is small and not particularly wealthy. We'd never raised even 10% of that before!

We made a campaign for \$100,000, the largest goal we'd ever set. Our community was so excited to participate, assuming that with their donation, we'd be able to close. In truth, it was only a quarter of what we needed. We did everything we could to secure the rest, but hit one roadblock after another.

Jonathan*, a friend of Chabad, had pledged \$1,800, but it seemed almost ridiculous to accept such a tiny drop in this impossible ocean. Besides, he'd plainly told me he didn't have the means to give much more than that.

We wrote to the Rebbe again, informing him of the latest setback. We placed the letter in the Igros and opened it to a random page. *You do your part, and leave the rest up to Hashem, the second letter began. But since you're asking for help, I'll ask people to help you.*

With that, I felt re-strengthened, and straightened my tie as I drove to Jonathan's house.

"Come in for some coffee, Rabbi," he invited me.

Seated at the table, I broke the news that the \$100,000 we'd raised was *not* the entire amount, and we were still \$300,000 short.

"You know what? I'll offer you \$200,000 as a loan, if you can raise the last \$100,000," Jonathan offered.

Raising that last \$100,000 was another miracle, but, baruch Hashem, we bought the ranch. Later on, we asked Jonathan what had changed his mind.

"The truth is that I don't have money. But as we were speaking, I felt an urgent sense of responsibility. I don't usually believe in this kind of stuff, but it was just such an overwhelming feeling. It was almost like the words came out on their own."



A few years ago, I got a call from a hospice care center in Moorpark. The director informed me there was a Jewish



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woman in their care that would benefit from the visit of a rabbi or rebbetzin.

"Sure. I'll clear my schedule," I told her.

And that's how I met Cookie. She got her name because she was a "tough cookie" - as I got to know for myself three seconds after I walked through her door.

"Who told you about me? I don't need any rebbetzin!" was Cookie's greeting.

"I'm just here to chat and cheer you up," I told her, with a smile on my face. "We don't need to discuss religion at all."

That mollified her, and we went on to have a lovely conversation. It turned out that I even knew her daughter-in-law!

"So what do you do in Moorpark?" she finally asked.

I told her about our programs, events, and activities. I even mentioned my weekly women's class and invited her to join, although I knew it would be next to impossible.

"Devorah, I am not at all interested in hearing you preach religion. But I'm desperate to get out of this prison, so I'll try."

I promised to try and visit again the following week, and we said goodbye.

The next Tuesday morning, I was preparing for my class, when the phone rang. It was Cookie.

"Devorah, are you sending someone to pick me up? I want to come to your class."

I was shocked.

How did she get permission to leave hospice, just like that? Was Cookie that persuasive - or incorrigible - or were there Higher elements at work here? I asked Marsha, another woman from our community, to pick her up.

Marsha arrived, pushing Cookie in a wheelchair, halfway through my shiur. We were talking about the ability of a Jewish soul to transcend the physical limitations of the body and reconnect with Hashem.

"Devorah, be quiet. I need to say something," Cookie interrupted. She turned to the group of women. "When Devorah came to visit me last week, I wasn't interested in anything to do with Judaism. I always thought of Chabad as crazy people! I only agreed to come to this class because I was desperate to escape my 'prison.' As soon as I heard what the class was about, I wanted to keep interrupting and pointing out how foolish she sounded! But then - I don't know how or why - but something changed. I was enveloped by the most incredible warmth I've ever felt in my whole life. It just all made sense to me. I understand my soul for the first time in 92 years! Finally, I feel like my body and soul have found peace, and I can die tranquilly."

Marsha continued bringing Cookie, until she passed away a few weeks later. I was at Cookie's side to say Shema and viduy with her. When I came into her room, she was shaking uncontrollably. With every word we said together, she relaxed more and more.

The neshama that had wandered for almost a century, emphatically denying her connection all the while, was reunited with her Creator in the last weeks of her life, allowing her to, finally, be at peace.

Avery is a walking inspiration. At 10 years old, she had a medical emergency, and had to be airlifted to a children's hospital. It was there that she was diagnosed with an inoperable mass in her brain, with over one hundred active aneurysms. Her doctors gave her a 50% chance of surviving the year, and told her flatly that even if she lived past that, it would be in a vegetative state.

Obviously, Avery, or Rivky, as we now call her, and her family were distraught. I helped her compose a letter to the Rebbe, asking for a bracha for a miracle. Rivky opened *Letters to the Rebbe*, a book filled with letters the Rebbe had written to people over the years, in English. The letter on that page talked about kashrus, and encouraged the person to be strong in their resolve, even if others around them were more lax. It ended off with a bracha, that in the zechus of keeping kosher, they should enjoy good health.

"That's perfect! I can totally do that!" Rivky said.

In the coming weeks, Rivky made major changes to her life. When she was well enough to go back to school, she stopped eating the lunches they provided, and inspired her family to keep kosher at home, too.

Rivky's had more treatments and surgeries than most people have in a lifetime, and before every procedure, she made sure to slip a picture of the Rebbe and a Rebbe dollar we gave her under her pillow. She says Shema every time, and, if the doctor treating her is Jewish, Rivky makes sure they say every word of Shema together with her. As she is wheeled into the operating room, Rivky holds *Letters of the Rebbe* close to her chest, gaining comfort and confidence from the words she reads.

Miraculously, by making herself a keili for Hashem's bracha, Rivky is still alive and flourishing, *twelve years* later.

Robert* and Pam* Fischer were frum for many years, but at some point, they had a crisis of faith and dropped it completely. Religion meant so little to them, their daughter, Debbie*, married a non-Jew and moved to a remote city, far removed from anything Jewish. In the summer, they moved into Robert and Pam's home. Debbie's daughter,

Ivory*, attended our camp. When her bunk learned about Shabbos, Ivory dismissed it with a scoff. "We're not Jewish, so we don't do any of that stuff."

"Well, your mom is Jewish," her counselor responded. "So you are, too!"

When Ivory came home from camp that day, she approached Pam. "Grandma, we learned about something called Shabbat in camp today. Can we have Shabbat dinner this week?" Pam began to cry, remembering the warmth of Shabbos so many years before.

That Friday night, for the first time in fifteen years, they lit candles, made kiddush, and enjoyed a Shabbos seuda.

"I wish we could do this every week!" Ivory sighed.

When the next Shabbos came around, Debbie couldn't deny her daughter, and the entire family celebrated Shabbos again.

The next week was a special celebration. Ivory was enthralled when she learned about the importance of having a Jewish name in camp, and we encouraged her to pick one for herself. She was so excited about it, she even convinced her friend to join her and receive a Jewish name as well! Her whole family attended the celebratory kiddush, including Debbie's twelve-year-old brother. Robert and Pam really wanted him to have a bar mitzvah, although he was less than enthusiastic.

"When is your bar mitzvah?" I asked him.

"Well, before I came here, it was my parents pressuring me to have one," he answered, thoughtfully. "But now, I want one!"

One short lesson in camp inspired three generations to return to their roots and restored the entire family's connection to Hashem.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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