

IllumiNations

Issue 71 | Shavous 5783
Shnas Hakhel

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 Gadi and Avigayil Louzoun, Chabad of Foshan, China

Made in China

By Chaya Chazan

For us, shlichus was a way of expressing our gratitude to the Rebbe for everything his shluchim gave to us.

Neither of us was born in a Chabad family, but I remember shluchim coming to my gan classroom and blowing the shofar, visiting my Tzahal army base with menorahs and donuts, and being there for us with a pair of tefillin or Shabbos candles anywhere we traveled, no matter how remote. By the time my wife and I met, we'd both been deeply impacted by Chabad and knew our future home would be found in the Chabad community.

After getting married, I attended kollel for three years and earned my semicha. We then started actively searching for shlichus opportunities.

I attended university in China, and, after I was married, my wife and I visited China on business. We saw how much potential it had to become a flourishing, thriving community. It's the perfect place to take a kernel of an idea, develop it, and find resources to bring it to fruition.



I spoke some Mandarin from my university years, and we had quite a few contacts through our business trips, so moving to China on shlichus just made sense. For the most part, the Jewish community is part businesspeople, or traveling salesmen. The community in Foshan, just an hour's drive from the large metropolitan center of Guangzhou, requested a shliach of their own, and asked us to move there permanently. Although Guangzhou has a shul, they wanted something more local.

When we first arrived in 2018, the Jews in the city were so spread out, many of them had never met. We've drawn together a cohesive community and started hosting minyanim, shiurim, and programs. Baruch Hashem, we've had a steady minyan every Shabbos for over two years!

Obviously, Covid was a tremendously difficult time in China. There aren't that many shluchim in China to begin with, and many of them were denied re-entry. At certain points during the pandemic, we were the only shluchim left in the entire country. Jews from all over China were relying on us. It was incredibly demanding, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

The Chinese New Year is a month-long celebration, during which almost the entire country shuts down. So, just before January 2020, we visited Israel. Reports of a wide-spread pandemic started to creep in, and I told my wife that if we didn't cut our visit short and return home soon, the borders would be closed. We flew back with eighteen of our community members that Sunday. By Tuesday, the borders were sealed shut; no one was allowed in or out.

Before we left Israel, I was a guest on a radio show with Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu. Many callers asked about davening for non-Jews, and I was quick to point out examples in Tanach where this was done. In fact, I led a prayer for the Chinese people at the Kotel, with thousands of attendees, including Chinese officials. Videos of the ceremony were posted on Chinese video and news sites, and soon became viral. It earned us the respect of our Chinese neighbors when we returned.

Many lockdown centers prohibited outside food, so it was an exhausting process calling each center and begging them to allow one parcel of food to pass through. In some cases, we had to throw packages of food through upper-story windows! Even centers that allowed food packages had various restrictions. Some wouldn't allow any cooked food, and none allowed alcohol or candles. One businessman flew in for some important meetings but ended up in quarantine for over a month. He was stuck in an airless, windowless room, and they wouldn't allow him any cooked food. When he was finally released, he canceled all his meetings and took the first flight out.

Many of the quarantined people who reached out to us were hours away. We couldn't send food by taxi, not only because of the prohibitive cost but also because taxis needed special permission to cross provincial lines. We hired a courier service and started sending out Shabbos packages on Monday. All week long, the smell of freshly baked challah filled our house as we packaged meal after meal for those stuck in isolation.

We didn't see how a communal seder could work, but three days before Pesach, the government lifted restrictions on restaurants and bars in our province. We searched and found an available bar. We now had three days to clean it and prepare it for Pesach. The bar counter became the buffet, and the DJ booth became the aron kodesh. At that point, almost every country on the planet was deep in lockdown. Ironically, our Pesach minyan in China may have been one of the only ones in the world!

During Covid, only residents of each complex were allowed in the building. We'd been holding minyanim in our living room until then, but we clearly needed a new place. Thanks to the pandemic, finances were hard, and the country was almost completely shut down. We decided to go "L'chatchila Ariber," - to follow the Rebbe Maharash's counsel to leap over obstacles instead of avoiding them. So, we searched for a place and found one in the most perfectly-central location, right next to the Metro. The problem was, it was old and run-down, and clearly needed a lot of work.

It took over a year, but we completely renovated the space and made it look beautiful. We were so proud of our handiwork! With Pesach coming up, we carefully chose a new paint for the walls, to give the shul a fresh, new face.

On Motzei Shabbos 5783, we hosted a farbrengen for Yud Alef Nissan, the Rebbe's birthday. It was incredible to see such a diverse crowd, many of whom seemed far removed from Yiddishkeit, gathering together for inspiration. The farbrengen lasted late into the night, with people staying past 4 AM!



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The next morning, I got a call from the workers I hired for the shul. "Rabbi, come quickly! The building is on fire!"

I rushed over straight away, and almost sobbed, seeing all our hard work literally go up in smoke. Thick, black, angry clouds billowed out of the windows, and toxic fumes made it impossible to approach.

When the smoke settled, we inspected the damage. Baruch Hashem, we'd made a wise investment in the form of a powerful sprinkler system. Although it didn't put the fire out completely, it prevented any major structural damage... but everything else was burnt to cinders. The tables and chairs crumbled to ash. Miraculously, of all twenty sprinklers installed, only two failed to go off - the ones right above the aron kodesh. Had they gone off, the sefer Torah would've suffered irreversible water damage. As it was, the sifrei Torah were unharmed, and not a single sefer had been burned or damaged.

We'd also just received a shipment of matzah from Israel, which were all stacked in the corner of the shul. For years, the matza had come wrapped in nothing more than butcher paper, but that year, the bakery changed the packaging. Although the area was sopping wet, the matzos inside were perfectly safe and dry.

At that point, word of the fire had spread, and our friends rushed over to do what they could. Side by side, the hired workers and community members removed each ashy item from the shul, all in utter silence. Their silence spoke volumes and expressed their love, care, and reverence more clearly than any speeches ever could.

What would we do now? We had 120 guests coming for the sederim, and nowhere to host them! For a while, we felt hopeless. Should we cancel the seder? Where would all our guests go? For many of them, we were their only chance at celebrating Pesach.

After a few hours, we pulled ourselves together and decided to work with what we had. We

repaired whatever we could, and tried to cover as much of the fire damage as possible. It wasn't the perfect seder we'd planned, but despite the sooty walls and mismatched chairs, it was an unforgettable reminder of our power of perseverance and unity.

Our first Shabbos in Foshan was Shabbos Shuva, just before Yom Kippur. We knew only a couple of people, and they were spread out in all corners of the city. We needed to meet people and get them involved.

We were given Rafi's* number by a relative, but he warned us not to divulge our source, since it was doubtful Rafi would appreciate the interference.

Hi Rafi, my message read. We just opened a Chabad House in Foshan and would love to meet with you. When would be a good time to talk?

There's nothing to talk about, he replied.

Okay, I typed back. No pressure. Just letting you know about Yom Kippur and where we'll be holding our services.

He didn't respond, and I figured that was the last I'd ever see or hear of him. I was surprised to see him show up on Yom Kippur, and decided to give him an aliyah.

"What's your full Jewish name?" I whispered to him.

"Refael," he answered.

"Do you have a second name?" I asked.

"Feivel," he said, with a start.

I called him up with his full name, and he approached the bima, shaking with emotion. He could barely control his voice long enough to read the brachos aloud.

"I'm named after my grandfather," he said, "who passed away in the Holocaust. I never tell people my full name. At most, it would be Refael. When you called me up to the Torah, announcing my full Jewish name, it was the first time I felt really connected to my heritage and to my grandfather. I'm now 77 years old. The last time I was in a synagogue was my bar mitzvah!" His touching speech moved all of us who heard him.

We developed a close relationship, and Rafi started coming to more events. On Chanukah, I offered him a menorah and box of candles to take home. He came back the next day with tears in his eyes.

"I don't ever remember having Chanukah candles at home, even as a child," he told me.

Rafi is now a regular minyan go-er and has put on tefillin many times!

China is a communist country, where religion of any kind is strictly outlawed. It's a police-control state, and we know that everything we do and say is being reported to the government. When we first arrived, I asked for a meeting with the regional director, preferring to report our activities and intentions personally, instead of him piecing it together from gathered intel.

I presented our Chabad House as a cultural center, where expatriates can gather and bond. I described our activities in broad terms, and the official seemed satisfied with my explanation. He strictly forbade us to host or welcome any Chinese citizens, but allowed us to serve Israelis and tourists as we saw fit. Coming to this mutual understanding enabled us to do our shlichus in peace, without too much interference from the government. On the contrary, they seemed inclined to help us. On the night of the seder, we were surprised to see a police guard blocking the street from traffic. Our surprise wasn't due to the fact that they knew when Pesach was; their information is always up-to-date. We were surprised because we hadn't requested a police guard, and our Chabad house is in a very safe area.

One of our sederim was graced by the presence of the Communist leader in our area. I made a short speech, comparing the deep roots of both the Chinese and Jewish people, and how our customs date back thousands of years.

"This matzah," I said, holding up a piece, "is an example of unchanging tradition. For centuries, the recipe has remained the same, and we eat it in the same way our forefathers did." I gave the Communist leader the matzah to eat.

When the Chinese delegation left, I explained to my community how deeply momentous was the sight they'd just witnessed.

"The prophecies about Moshiach all detail how the non-Jews will actively assist us to keep Torah and mitzvos," I said. "Who could imagine the possibility of the Chinese Communist leader eating matzah together with us? It's truly a taste of Moshiach!"

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