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

Rabbi Shlomi and Racheli Tabib, Chabad of Taiwan

Shalom and Ni Hao: Jewish Life in Taiwan

By Chaya Chazan

“You know, there’s this place in Hong Kong that could really use a Shliach. It’s called Kowloon,” a yeshiva friend of mine told me, after he visited the city.

My wife and I, then just recently married, were intrigued, and we decided to check it out. We contacted Rabbi Avtzon, a long-time shliach in Hong Kong who happened to travel to Israel a short while later. After interviewing, he invited us to serve as the shluchim to the newly-opened Chabad in Kowloon, Hong Kong. We lived in Hong Kong for three years, helping serve the Jewish community there, as well as traveling businessmen and tourists. We noticed that, quite often, we’d receive an influx of businessmen flying in from Taiwan. Since there weren’t any Jewish services available there, they came to Hong Kong instead.

Towards the end of our third year in Hong Kong, we visited Israel for a family simcha. I was driving on the highway,



when I was rear-ended by a young driver in a fancy car, who ran out, apologizing profusely, and begging me not to involve the insurance companies.

“My father is an important businessman,” he assured me. “He’ll pay for everything!” He gave me his father’s gilded business card, and we parted ways.

The next day, I visited his father’s swanky office.

“Where are you from?” his father asked, politely making conversation.

“I run Chabad in Kowloon, Hong Kong,” I answered.

“I often travel to Taiwan on business,” he said. “Why isn’t Chabad there? There’s a small Jewish community, but no one to guide them. There’s no shul or kosher food!”

“I’m well aware,” I admitted.

After writing me a check for the damage to my car, he handed me another envelope, with \$1,000 cash. “This is for the establishment of Chabad in Taiwan!” he said.

We already knew what a great need there was, and we couldn’t ask for a clearer sign. A short while later, we moved to Taiwan, opening a Chabad center there, and supporting their Jewish community.

In the 60’s, Taiwan boasted a roaring export economy, and many Jews, drawn by business prospects, made their home there. A couple of decades later, that cultural and financial momentum transferred to China. The majority of the community moved to China, Hong Kong, or Singapore, leaving only a small remnant in Taiwan. Merkos shluchim had been visiting Taiwan yearly, since the early 70’s. When we first moved there, we used the list they’d compiled of Jews they’d met. There were just 70 names.

A couple weeks later, we hosted our first Shabbos meal in Taiwan. Over 100 people attended, far more than we’d been expecting! We’d been questioning whether a Chabad house in Taiwan was sustainable, and that Shabbos proved there was plenty to keep us busy!

You’d think it’d be easy to spot a Jewish-sounding last name in the Taiwanese telephone book, but unfortunately, so many have married non-Jewish women, a Jewish-sounding last name doesn’t count for much. Nevertheless, we persisted, and we now count over 2,000 members in our community, and we’re sure there are many more!

In the times of the Beis Hamikdash, Sukkos was the time when 70 bulls were offered, an allegory for the 70 nations of the world. Taiwan is a frequent subject of discussion as of late, as people argue whether or not war will break out. (I don’t believe it will.) As the haftarah points out, the only thing worth worrying about is serving Hashem, and focusing on winning the battle against the darkness of galus.

When we first arrived, we stayed in a hotel until we could find more permanent lodgings. Our first move was to advertise our presence.

We were excited to get our first email in reply to our ad, from a Jewish businessman.

I’m staying at the Hyatt hotel, his email read. There’s absolutely no kosher food here! Would it be possible to arrange a hot, kosher breakfast for me?

He included his room number, and I laughed aloud. He was staying just 3 floors directly above us!

I had some time to get a small induction cooktop and visit the market for some fresh vegetables and eggs.

My wife woke up early and made a salad and eggs and packed it up, including some pita bread and pastries we still had from Israel. I took the elevator and delivered it to the person’s door with a handwritten note.

To this day, he sends us a yearly “payment” for that breakfast, always adding that it was the most enjoyable breakfast of his life!

Jeffrey Schwartz came to Taiwan as a 20-year-old college student. He’s been living here ever since, and is now 72 years old!

Jeffrey had a traditional, Conservative upbringing, so when I approached him about my dream of building a mikvah, he was hesitant. He couldn’t understand why we couldn’t just use a bathtub, swimming pool, or the ocean.

A few years ago, we qualified for a governmental program for a long-term lease of a beautiful property in the center of town. Real estate in Taiwan is exorbitant, so a long-term lease is the most practical option for most. We really wanted to grab the offer immediately, but we’d still need to put down a considerable sum before we could accept.

I approached Jeffrey and explained our vision to him. He was encouraging, and promised his support, but with one caveat: our center would have to include the Conservative community and their needs.

I enlisted the help of Rabbi Yosef Kantor, Shliach to Thailand, who explained to Jeffrey the significance of a Torah-true mesorah. In gentle terms, he showed him how watering down the ancient, holy tradition resulted in a



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pseudo-Judaism that simply *couldn't* co-exist with Torah-true Yiddishkeit. It took a while, but Jeffrey was finally convinced. He pledged his support to the future Jewish center unconditionally.

A few weeks later, Jeffrey took a trip to his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. He visited the temple he'd grown up in, and the rabbi took him to task for partnering with Chabad.

"I'm not sure it's a good idea," the rabbi warned him. "Chabad is known to be an extremely Orthodox group, and, in most cases, not willing to compromise, even an inch!"

When Jeffrey returned to Taiwan, he withdrew his pledge, and we maintained a polite, if frosty, relationship.

We needed to respond to the government's offer, but with Jeffrey's handsome pledge withdrawn, I simply didn't have the funds to commit to such a project.

A few months later, I was invited to say a prayer at a Holocaust memorial event, held jointly by the Israeli and German embassies. In front of the gathered dignitaries and government representatives, I recited *Kel Malei Rachamim*.

A few days later, Jeffrey phoned me.

"Rabbi, do you pray?" he asked.

"Of course! I pray three times a day!" I answered.

"But do you *really* pray? Do you believe in the power of prayer?"

"Absolutely," I said.

"Good. Can you come to my office later today?" he asked.

When I visited, Jeffrey invited me to take a seat. "This will surprise you," he told me. "I was at the Holocaust memorial event the other day. When you got up there to say your prayer, I was struck by the thought, *this man is mumbling some words in Hebrew in front of the highest Taiwanese officials. He's not ashamed of who he is, and although no one understands him, he seems genuine.*"

"It made me start pondering, *what is a Jew?* If you Google *Jew & Rabbi*, you'll get pictures of people who look more like you than like me! I called my family in for a meeting, and told them I wanted to support a new Jewish center. *There's one man in Taiwan who looks and acts like a Jew, I told them. That's the rabbi. If we want to build a Jewish center right, we need to do it exactly as the rabbi says we should.*"

"I'm ready, truly, to pledge my support for the new Jewish center," he concluded. "No conditions at all."

With his donation of over ten million dollars, the Jeffrey D Schwartz Center recently became a reality!

In some ways, it's easier to raise our children here than it would be in a typical Orthodox community. On shlichus, there's a clear delineation between right and wrong. It also helps that our kids are involved in every aspect of our shlichus, and feel they're "on a mission" as well. They know that they're there to be the influencers, not the other way around. We're so proud of their sincerity and their willingness to be the shlichim to other kids.

Our eldest son initiated a mishnayos shiur every week. They recently completed Maseches Shabbos together. Our daughter proudly stands up and gives over a dvar Torah during the Shabbos meal. We typically host between 40-70 people every Shabbos, and her divrei Torah are a major hit.

A friend of ours had an emergency, and had to leave for Israel on very short notice. He didn't even have time to pack up his apartment! I flew to Taitung, a small city across the island, to pack up what he'd left behind. As I stood by the baggage claim, I saw a man staring at me.

"Hi!" I said, walking over to him. "Are you Jewish?"

"Yes," he said, still looking bewildered.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked, laughing.

Larry*, as he introduced himself, was in Taitung on vacation. He was married to a Taiwanese woman, and lived not far from us.

We exchanged contact information, and I invited Larry to every event, shiur, and minyan. He's started coming more often, and I always marvel at the hashgacha pratis of the living proof of *mitzvah goreres mitzvah* - one mitzvah leads to another. By helping my friend pack up his apartment, I met Larry in a tiny little airport in the middle of nowhere, and am helping him rediscover his Jewish heritage.

A few years ago, Pesach began on a motzei Shabbos. Usually, we'd rent the hotel's kitchen, kasher it entirely, and cook for the seder there. Renting the kitchen gave us access to it for the entire day - an option that would be useless over Shabbos, when we obviously couldn't cook anything at all. Instead, we opted to rent just the ballroom, while cooking everything ourselves in our own kitchen.

There was some miscommunication; apparently, the hotel manager didn't realize that we'd planned a whole seder, complete with a three-course meal.

"We can't accommodate that," he argued. "You only paid for the ballroom."

It had been hard enough to find this hotel. It would be impossible to find another venue in such a short time. I tried reasoning with him, but he wouldn't budge. A few days later, he called to tell me he'd canceled our reservation.

"But we have 300 people coming!" I gasped. "You can't cancel!"

"I'm sorry," he said, and hung up.

My wife and I had recently completed a course of study of Shaar Habitachon from Chovos Halevavos. I took a deep breath, reminded myself of what we'd learned, and made two resolutions: 1) I wouldn't tell my wife about the call, as I was sure everything would be alright, and I didn't want to stress her out for no reason, and 2) I'd carry on with our Pesach plans as if nothing at all had happened.

Although it was 6 AM in Israel, I called a friend whose family had business connections with the hotel chain.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, his voice still groggy.

"No; it's not!" I answered. "I need help!" I explained the situation to him, and he put me in touch with Mrs. Noar*, who lived in Taiwan. Mrs. Noar was on the committee that granted star status to various hotels. Although not Jewish herself, she's a close friend and a staunch Zionist. When she heard what was going on, she immediately made an appointment with the hotel manager.

We ambushed the poor man in his office, and she laid into him, telling him that refusing to honor our reservation was an act of anti-Semitism, and that she'd ensure his 5-star rating was reduced to 1-star! She even threatened to organize a pro-Israel demonstration outside his hotel.

A friend of the hotel owner also called the manager on our behalf, asking him to accommodate us.

Within a few hours, everything had been resolved to mutual satisfaction, and we were able to host a beautiful seder as originally planned.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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