

IllumiNations

Issue 148 | Parshas Lech Lecha 5785

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



DollarDaily.org

Dedicated in Memory of Harav Moshe Kotlarsky - Pioneering A Generation of The Rebbe's Shluchim

Rabbi Benny and Sonia Hershcovich, Chabad of Los Cabos, Cabo San Lucas, Mexico

Sunlit Shores & Sacred Spaces Part 2

By Chaya Chazan

Those first years of shlichus were brutal. We questioned ourselves every day. *Are we accomplishing anything here?*

We decided to take it day by day. Cabo was an up-and-coming vacation destination. Surely by the time our son was old enough, there'd be enough children around to begin a proper school. That didn't happen, and by that time, we had more children of our own to worry about!

I once picked up a fellow shliach from the airport. He'd come to attend a birthday celebration of one of his closest supporters. In the car, he told me, "The first years of shlichus are very difficult. I remember when, after ten years, I turned to my wife and exclaimed, *I finally understand what we've been working on for the last decade!*"

I don't think he knows how much his words comforted me during the first decade of our shlichus, and how I encouraged myself and my wife to tough it out, just until we hit that ten year mark.

Baruch Hashem, fourteen years later, we've found our rhythm. We even pieced together enough children to finally open the first class of the school we've dreamed of for so many years ago.

I was strolling the boardwalk, searching for Jewish-looking faces. When I spotted a likely suspect, I stopped him and asked if he was Jewish. He confirmed he was and introduced himself as Andy*. It took a bit of convincing, but he agreed



to put on tefillin, and I invited him to join our minyan that Shabbos.

"Benny, you gotta teach me your tactics!" a fellow shliach called and asked, a couple of weeks later.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, completely mystified.

"Do you remember Andy - the guy who came to shul last week?"

"I think so," I answered, cautiously.

"I've been trying to get him to come to our Chabad house for such a long time! He doesn't even come on Yom Kippur! He goes on a short vacation to Cabo, and, all of a sudden, he's a shul-goer? What's your secret?"

There is no secret, not really. We often find that when people are on vacation, free from the stresses and worries of their regular day-to-day life, they're so much more open to exploring things they'd never do at home. And, if they prove especially recalcitrant, we need only remind them how exotic it will sound when they tell their friends they put on tefillin in Cabo and have a nice selfie to go with it.

One of my favorite "pranks" to play is telling my friends to let me know when people from their communities are coming to Cabo. I show up at their hotel door with a wide smile and a fresh challah, giving them regards from their rabbi back at home. It's always amusing to watch their faces change as soon as they open the door and see me, a Chabad Rabbi, standing there. I remind them to come to shul, and offer them to put on tefillin. They're often so astounded that their rabbi is "keeping tabs" on them, they agree. They find it touching and endearing that their rabbi cares about them, even when they're on vacation far from home.

We'd only been on *shlichus* for a short while when we decided to take a brief family vacation. We rented a house online in a quiet, remote village called Los Barriles, Mexico—far from any bustling city life—and spent a few days enjoying our much-needed break.

Finally, it was time to head back home. We loaded up the car, printed out our MapQuest directions, and set off. Not long into the drive, I noticed a dirt road that I was sure would be a

shortcut to the highway. My wife, in classic fashion, was yelling, "Let's just stick to the regular route!" But, as often happens with husbands and wives, I insisted.

Five minutes in, I realized I was wrong and had to admit it—without even a smartphone to help us out! The bumpy path only led us further into no-man's land. The landscape around us was barren, with little to indicate where we were—except for a small cemetery, the Los Barriles Cemetery.

"Look! A Magen David!" our son called out excitedly from his car seat.

I was skeptical. Why would there be a Jewish star in a cemetery in the middle of nowhere? It seemed almost impossible, especially in such a remote, non-Jewish, Mexican town. But as I looked closer, there it was—a single grave marked with a Magen David. It was unmistakable. I wasn't sure if it was appropriate to enter the cemetery, given the numerous crosses around, but the encounter felt too remarkable a display of *hashgacha pratit* to ignore. We had taken a wrong turn, yet here we were, stumbling upon a Jewish grave in the middle of nowhere.

I leaned out of the window as far as I could and took a picture of the gravestone. The name was Alan Gordon, and I could make out his *yahrzeit*—Daled Teves. I recited *Tehillim* for his *neshama* right there, feeling moved by the moment.

I drove around, trying to find someone in charge of the cemetery or anyone in the small village who might know about this grave, but there was no one to ask.

Since then, I try my best to visit this lonely *neshama* every year on his *yahrzeit*, feeling Hashem surely guided us there for a reason. I still don't know who Alan Gordon was, and I have no additional information. But the connection feels deeply meaningful—one of those moments where Hashem clearly guides our steps.

We were finally ready to find a place we could truly call our own. Mr. S. and the board were prepared to offer financial backing, but locating a property that met all our needs was anything but simple. Out of the limited properties available, even fewer fell within our price range.

Adding to the challenge, we couldn't agree on what kind of property would be ideal or what we each considered a prime location. We envisioned a spot as close to the city center as possible, allowing us to attract the maximum number of tourists. The closer to the heart of town, the better. The board, however, preferred a quiet, residential neighborhood. We found ourselves at an impasse, each side with a different vision for the future of our new space.

One day, a property suddenly became available. The owner was very old, and just wanted to get rid of it, so it was being sold at a shockingly low price. The board immediately pounced.

"Rabbi, we must put in an offer! *Now!*"

I was hesitant. Yes, the price was excellent, and the property was spacious enough to grow with us. But it was located off a highway and only accessible by car. How could we open a shul that would, in effect, require members to drive on Shabbos? The thought didn't sit well with me, and I couldn't shake the feeling that this move wasn't the right one.



DollarDaily.org

"You've already been looking for a property for a year and half! If you don't commit now, Mr. S. is going to lose patience and pull funding!" they warned me.

They kept pressuring us to agree, despite our explanations. We decided this was something best left to the Rebbe's Ohel. We wrote a letter describing all the circumstances, and asked the Rebbe to show us the way. Then, with a heavy heart, we gave the go-ahead to the board.

They immediately called the owner to put in the offer.

"You just missed it!" he told them. "Yesterday, I agreed to sign an exclusive contract with a real estate agency. I can only sell the property through them!"

The hiccup got me excited, but the board determinedly forged on. They called the agency to put in their offer. To their chagrin, they found the price had increased by more than double. Incensed by such mercenary price gouging, Mr. S. told them to keep looking.

While others mourned the loss of the "perfect property," I felt only gratitude, thanking Hashem and the Rebbe for so clearly orchestrating a set of divine circumstances that spared us from these potential issues.

Not more than a week later, one of the board members called to tell me he'd just seen a property for sale in the center of town. It couldn't have been more perfectly placed. Mr. S. looked over it, and approved of it immediately.

We now have a beautiful Jewish center that houses our shul, hospitality suites, mikvah, and restaurant. Sometimes, we still pinch ourselves in disbelief at how perfectly everything came together! Had we found the property just a week earlier, we would have ended up far from the city center, limiting our accessibility to tourists.

The contract on our property was signed, architects had sketched the most magnificent dream of a building we could ever imagine, and we were excited to begin building. Tishrei was fast approaching, and we were soon expecting a new baby, as well. Life was as happening as it could be, Baruch Hashem!

Hurricane Odile struck Cabo on September 14, 2014, as a powerful Category 3 storm, causing widespread devastation. It severely damaged hotels, homes, and infrastructure, leaving 92% of the area without power. Roads flooded, trees uprooted, and thousands were evacuated. The storm's impact knocked out power and water for days, plunging the region into chaos.

Three calls managed to come through. The first was from my family, checking on us after the storm. The second was from the Israeli embassy, with a list of Israelis and their last known locations. They asked me to check on them and help if I could.

I had to wade through waist-high mud to reach the hotel, and while I eventually made it, my sandals fell victim to the sludge. I walked through the hotel lobby, barefoot and muddy, calling out their names. When the other tourists saw an outsider walk in, they swarmed me, asking which organization I was from. When I told them I was representing the Israeli government to help my fellow Jews evacuate safely, they were amazed and impressed at how much Israel cared for its citizens.

A few years later, I met an Israeli tourist whose name I recognized because I'd called it incessantly while looking for him. Although I'd searched multiple hotels, I hadn't found him in the aftermath of the hurricane.

"So nice to finally meet you!" I told him. "You're the guy I looked all over for!"

The third call was from a businessman who vacationed in Cabo. He knew my wife was heavily pregnant, and had arranged for a military flight out of Cabo for our family. We thanked him for his solicitude, but it was impossible for us to make the flight with everything in such chaos. As soon as I could, I drove my wife and children to safety up North to La Paz. I soon joined them there, and we held Rosh Hashanah services there for our transported community.

I was having a really rough time with some personal matters. Of course, it affected every aspect of my life, including my shlichus. I wrote a letter to the Rebbe, and placed it in a volume of *Igros Kodesh*, a collection of the Rebbe's responses to individuals on a variety of topics.

The answer was striking in its simplicity: *stop overthinking it. Just do what needs to be done.*

It was exactly the push I needed to get me out of my rut and galvanize me into action.

It was our very first Hoshana Rabba on *shlichus*, and I was eagerly looking forward to the joyous Simchas Torah celebrations. In my mind, I pictured it similar to my childhood *shul*—with plenty of *l'chaim* to go around and *farbrengens* that were especially powerful, thanks to everyone's lowered inhibitions.

I went to check my liquor cabinet, but was disappointed to find only one nearly empty bottle of Smirnoff. *We'll need more l'chaim than that for a proper Simchas Torah*, I thought to myself. Every Simchas Torah, *farbrengen*, and wedding in my life had taught me that alcohol was an indispensable tool for lowering inhibitions enough to achieve unbridled joy.

Unfortunately, funds were extremely tight, and we couldn't afford to buy a new bottle.

I whispered a *tefillah* to Hashem and began speaking aloud to the Rebbe, as if asking for help. *Please, Rebbe, help me with*

a bracha to get the funds I need to properly celebrate Simchas Torah and truly reach the people in shul. I'd been running around all day with my lulav and esrog, encouraging people to shake them and say the bracha. I'm doing your shlichus—I didn't have time to call people for fundraising.

I decided to make a *keili* for Hashem's *brachos*, a practical vessel for His blessings, by visiting an Israeli businessman who never let me leave his office without a donation in my pocket.

As I drove, I imagined the open miracle I was sure to experience. I was already crafting the story in my mind, ready to tell friends and family how my prayers had been answered, and that they too could achieve my level of *emunah* if they tried hard enough.

With only twenty minutes left until Yom Tov, I had everything timed to perfection: I'd chat with him for a few minutes, help him shake *lulav* and *esrog*, and with the donation he was sure to give me, I'd have just enough time to dash around the corner and buy a bottle of *l'chaim*.

The first part of the plan went smoothly. We chatted, and I helped him shake *lulav* and *esrog*.

"I'm so sorry, Benny. I don't have my wallet on me right now. I'll give you a donation next time you come," the businessman said.

Disappointed, I trudged back home and gloomily took out that almost-empty bottle. In the end, we had a wonderful Simchas Torah and barely noticed the lack of *l'chaim*. Looking back, the Rebbe gave me a greater gift by denying my request. He showed me that we can succeed with what we have—it's not about having extra *l'chaim*, but about appreciating the "half-full cup." We don't need to compare ourselves to others or wish for what they have. The resources we're given are perfectly suited to the *shlichus* we are meant to fulfill.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

DollarDaily.org
a Project of
YadLShliach.org
and **COLlive.com**



MAKE CENTS OF YOUR NEW YEAR \$1 a day keeps the mitzvahs on the way!

ILLUMINATIONS, A PROJECT OF DOLLARDAILY.ORG, SUPPORTS CHABAD HOUSES WORLDWIDE:

- Provide Tefillin for Yitzhak, connecting him to his Jewish roots.
- Empower Miriam through Mikvah visits, fostering spiritual growth.
- Help the Rabbi's family with new clothes, supporting their selfless service.
- Sponsor Shabbas experiences on college campuses, creating vibrant Jewish communities.

\$715+

DONATING PER DAY

\$635318+

ALREADY DONATED TO ORGANIZATIONS

\$262070+

TO BE GIVEN OVER THE NEXT 365 DAYS



DollarDaily.org

HELP JEWS.

ALL JEWS.

IN ALL PLACES.

Join 700+ people giving just \$1 a day at DollarDaily.org and make a lasting impact!