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

Rabbi Chanan and Tuba Chernitsky, Chabad of Newfoundland, S. John's, Canada

We're Here for Reb Yisrael

By Chaya Chazan

While we hold the distinction of being the easternmost Chabad house in North America, the Newfoundland (or Newfie, as it's more colloquially known) Jewish community is quite small.

Separated from our sister territory, Labrador, by an island, all of Newfoundland is like one extended family, where everyone knows everyone else.

Although I was born in Argentina, my family moved to Winnipeg, Canada when I was 14. It was there that I was first introduced to Judaism, and slowly took on more and more Torah commitments. After finishing high school, I continued on to yeshiva.

My wife is from Winnipeg too, although she attended high school in larger, established Jewish communities.

We got married in 2013, and, while we searched for shlichus opportunities, made our home in Montreal. We researched a couple places, but nothing panned out. A friend told us he'd heard about a Newfie businessman who regularly paid for bochorim to fly out to the island for yomim tovim. They made a Pesach seder, read the megillah, and blew the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

"Maybe it's time for Newfoundland to get its own full-time shliach?" he suggested.



"We'll check it out," I promised.

He put us in contact with the businessman, and we flew to Newfoundland on a fact-finding mission. What we found was a small community, and very few affiliated Jews. That told us there were many more Jews who knew nothing of Yiddishkeit. It was for them that, in early 2017, we moved to Newfoundland to open its first Chabad house.

From the beginning, our children were part of our shlichus. Two weeks after we moved, our son, Menachem Mendel, turned three. Our first event for the Newfoundland community was his upshernish.

With such a sparse community, and moreover, one that's spread and scattered throughout the island, our shlichus focuses on individual connections. We had four or five guests attend the upshernish in those early weeks, and the ensuing years haven't swelled our numbers by too much. For us, it's about recognizing the power of the individual. Our one-on-one interactions are that much more potent for being personal. We're not here to care for *klal* Yisroel; we're here for *Reb* Yisrael.

While we used to make the long trek to the furthest corners of the island to visit every Jew we knew, Covid restrictions have since put a stop to that. We do what we can by sending packages out before every Yom Tov.

We're pretty isolated here; the nearest shliach is a two-and-half-hour flight away. Kosher food has to be imported, and there's little Jewish presence around. Frum tourists from major Jewish communities receive a bit of a culture shock. As one visitor so aptly summed it up, "Everything here is so *goyish!*"

On our initial research trip to S. John's, we'd heard there was an Argentine Jew living in the city. As an Argentinian myself, I was doubly excited to find him and connect.

We found his address and showed up with a package of matzah. When he opened the door, I was overjoyed to converse in my mother tongue, Spanish.

"Hello! My name is Rabbi Chanan Chernitsky!"

"Chernitsky?" he repeated, his forehead furrowed. "I know a *Laura* Chernitsky."

"I have an aunt with that name," I said.

"I know her well!" he replied, with a delighted smile. "We worked together in Argentina for many years. I moved here to earn my PhD, and I've been here ever since. What a small world!"

Finding a countryman who knew my aunt on the other side of the world was an amazing stroke of hashgacha pratis that felt like a hug from Hashem.

Change happens incrementally, and we celebrate every step that brings one closer to Hashem. For some, it's a subtle shift: they come in as the She'aino Yodei'ah Lish'ol, and it's up to us to make them aware of Yiddishkeit. Over time, they transform into the Tam, their interest sparked, and their thirst for knowledge awakened. It brings us such nachas when we get Chacham-level questions that show their deep connection to Yiddishkeit.

Eddie* didn't know much about his Jewish heritage, but he was very proud of being a kohen. I don't remember having specific discussions about the laws pertaining to kohanim, but Eddie was a guest at many of our Shabbos tables, and it must have come up in divrei Torah about the parsha, or other connected topics.

When Eddie asked what halachah said about him being around the cremated remains of his friend's relative, it highlighted the very real impact we can make, simply by living our lives according to Torah. It's shlichus by osmosis!

We'd been in Newfoundland just over a year, when two families we counted amongst our closest friends moved away.

Our son, Menachem Mendel, then just four years old, turned to my wife and asked, "Mommy, can't we just move somewhere I can have more friends?"

It was heartbreaking. As his parents, we'd chosen a path of mesiras nefesh by moving to such a remote location. How could we explain the depth of feelings that went into our decision to a four-year-old?

My wife knelt down beside him and gave him a hug. "Why don't you write to the Rebbe about it? Tell the Rebbe that you want more friends," she suggested.

Menachem Mendel was delighted with the idea, and immediately sat down with his paper and crayons.

A few days later was Rosh Hashanah. We invited the community to shofar-blowing on the first day, followed by Mincha, and the Yom Tov seuda. We were preparing for our guests, when we heard a knock on the door. There was a family we'd never met before standing on the doorstep.

"Shana tova," they said.

"Shana tova!" We welcomed them. "Please, come in!"

They told us they were living in Toronto, but had been bitten by sudden wanderlust. They decided to move for a while, to get a change of scenery.

While we continued to speak with them, Menachem Mendel was ecstatic to discover they had a three-year-old son, Jamie*. Menachem Mendel soon showed Jamie to the toy room, where they happily played together for hours.

"I don't know why we picked Newfoundland," Jamie's mom said. "But here we are!"

In a tiny, remote community like ours, it's unheard of for Jews to randomly show up at one's doorstep. To find a family so unexpectedly, was, in itself, a wondrous thing. But the timing of their visit, so soon after my son's letter to the Rebbe, was nothing short of miraculous.

The Rebbe promised to take care of his shluchim, who travel to distant and exotic locations to fulfill his mission. This promise most certainly applies to those *born* to the role as well; those who didn't choose it for themselves. The Rebbe takes care of every shliach - even the little ones.

As the easternmost point of North America, Newfoundland and Labrador are the last point of exit for airplanes traveling over the Atlantic. Many planes that have to be diverted for an emergency landing are directed to the airport here - the final landmass before flying over miles and miles of ocean.

On our maiden trip to Newfoundland, we stocked up with kosher essentials we'd need for the events we'd be holding to introduce ourselves to the community.

To initiate our shlichus, an American airlines flight had to make an emergency landing in Newfoundland, stranding its passengers for hours. Onboard were a number of frum Jews. We emptied our suitcases of the precious danishes and cholov yisroel cheese we'd brought from Montreal to feed the stranded Jews.

Since then, we've dealt with similar situations many times, taking care of any Jewish passengers from diverted flights.

One of our kids' favorite traditions is our yearly summer road trip to the Canadian mainland. It involves a nine-and-a-half-hour drive to the ferry, a seven-hour ferry ride, which lets us off in Nova Scotia, and then a continued drive to our final destination.

Last year, our destination was Montreal, with stopovers in New York and Toronto. We planned to stay in Montreal for a few weeks, so our kids could enjoy summer day camp, before heading back home to Newfoundland.

Our very first official stop was the Rebbe's Ohel in Queens, New York. We helped our kids get settled around the tables with paper and pens, and then we sat down to write our own panim. I updated the Rebbe on our shlichus, and asked for brachos for my family. I also included a special request for a bracha to be successful in raising the remaining funds for our long-overdue mikvah.

For the past six years, our only mikvah options have been a last-minute flight to Halifax, Nova Scotia, or the freezing - and often dangerous - coast of Newfoundland, into the Atlantic Ocean. We had a place, plans, and some of the funds necessary to finally open our own mikvah. We just needed to secure the remaining funding. That was one of the goals of our road trip.

The communities in Toronto and Montreal were generous, but we were still significantly short of our goal.

It was the last Sunday before our return trip to Newfoundland, and I knew I had to make a dent before I got caught up in the chaos of driving for so long with little kids, and then, after that, settling back at home and starting the new year.

I called a wealthy businessman and gave him my best pitch. I can't say he was immediately won over, but I managed to persuade him to help us.

"I'll pledge 25% of the remaining deficit," he promised. "But only on the condition that you raise the other 75%!"

"Challenge accepted!" I answered, with more hope than confidence.

A few minutes later, I got a notification. The contact wasn't saved in my phone, so all I had to go on was a vague profile picture of nothing in particular.

Do you still have sponsorship opportunities available for your mikvah? I could hardly believe my eyes.

Yes! I immediately texted back, before they could change their minds. I included a list of all available hon-ors still left.

I'd like to name the mikvah for my loved one. I see the price here - is that in American dollars, or Canadian dollars?

I couldn't believe it. The amount - in Canadian dollars - would *exactly* cover the other 75%.

Hashem had fulfilled the request I'd written to the Rebbe, in just half an hour!

Despite the screaming and fighting in the back seat, I drove home feeling completely at peace.

We'd just sat down to our Shemini Atzeres meal, when a knock sounded on our front door. There was a long-haired stranger on the doorstep. His voice sounded desperate.

"Please," he said in Hebrew. "I'm very worried about my family. I need to pray!"

I was completely clueless. I knew the issue of judicial reform had caused much unrest in Israel, but why would that make him fear for his family? When he shared the devastating news with us, I didn't believe him, but I gave him a kippah, and helped him recite a kapitel of Tehilim. I invited him to join us for Simchas Torah hakafos that night, explaining how simcha can break every boundary.

Although we haven't seen him since, his desperation speaks to the eternity of the pintele Yid. No matter how distant a Jew may seem, when "in the fox's den," his neshama cries out to connect to its Creator.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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