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The Unconventional Approach

By Chaya Chazan

I'm originally from Ottawa, Canada. Both my parents were baalei teshuva, and I owe much of my shlichus to my father's A"H influence.

He sang opera in his youth, and gave it all up once he discovered Yiddishkeit. My father was aching to go on shlichus, and expressed this to the Rebbe on multiple occasions. Each time, the Rebbe advised him to maintain a 9-5 job instead.

This never stopped him from devoting every moment outside of work hours to helping those in need, and bringing Jews closer to Torah. He reached out to immigrants and helped them find their place in the community. He visited nursing homes and hospitals every Yom Tov, to bring some holiday cheer to the residents. He was ready to give his last dollar to anyone in need.

Shlichus meant more to him than anything else. He was searching for a job - with some difficulty. His background in opera, while impressive, wasn't exactly the qualification employers were looking for. Finally, he was offered a job.

"Can I help you put on tefillin?" my father asked his potential employer.

"I can only give you one thing today. Will it be the job, or putting on tefillin?" the man replied.

My father didn't hesitate for a moment.



"Tefillin," he responded, and began removing the black boxes from their velvet pouch.

Growing up under such an influence made shlichus a no-brainer. It was the ultimate life mission, and those who carried it out were the luckiest people alive. I never even considered any other path.

As I graduated through the Chabad yeshiva system, I followed in my father's footsteps by finding unconventional ways to do mitzvot. While other bochurim visited Jews on their prescribed routes every Friday, I explored a new route every couple of weeks, marking down Jewish businesses so other bochurim could take over, allowing me to continue to explore new avenues once again.

In my early twenties, I fulfilled a life-long dream by moving to Eretz Yisrael. There, I continued my unconventional shlichus. I attended soccer games, and during breaks, I learned with both teams. Most motza'ei Shabbos found me on Ben Yehuda, making Havdallah for passersby. A favorite pastime was orchestrating "pop-up farbrengens" on random occasions.

After we got married, and I finished a year of kollel, we began looking for shlichus opportunities. In the meantime, I worked seven jobs to put food on the table, each with some aspect of shlichus involved. It was exhausting. When the chance to become Beijing's newest shluchim appeared, we grabbed it. Without thinking too much, we immediately sold all our furniture and headed off to China.

It was a major adjustment, but we enjoyed our time there. For many reasons, after seven years, we realized that living in China no longer made sense for ours or the community's needs. So, we traveled back to Israel and began researching shlichus options once again.

Luckily for my love of the unusual, Chabad on Campus was just starting its expansion into Israeli colleges. We were offered a post at ORT in Karmiel, a small city nes-

tled in the north of Eretz Yisrael, home to ORT Braude, a small engineering college.

In many ways, the transition to shlichus in Eretz Yisrael presented greater challenges than the move to Beijing. Beijing's small community and foreignness made each visitor to our Chabad house feel like family. Being so far from home, anything Jewish drew everyone closer to feed their hungry neshamos. We only had to announce an event to be sure of it being well-attended.

We started our shlichus in Karmiel assuming we'd find the same. We quickly found out we'd have to change almost everything we knew about shlichus to succeed. For many students we met, living in Israel was quite enough Jewishness for them. In Beijing, we'd hardly ever encountered resistance to putting on tefillin; in Karmiel, it was a daily occurrence.

That's to say nothing of trying to put down roots and start over in a new place with four young children to take care of as well.

When we finally thought we were starting to get the hang of it, manning a tefillin table on the campus quad, a new administrator was hired. He believed that religion belonged in shul; not in public spaces, and he sent me a stern warning to that effect. Even when students came to me, asking to put on tefillin, he reiterated his warning. Although I tried to find the most quiet, unobtrusive corners in which to help students put on tefillin, he eventually issued an expulsion, and I was no longer allowed on campus at all.

We tried everything to appeal this decision, even petitioning the secretary of education and mayor of Karmiel! Nothing seemed to work.

Our activities were severely limited, but that's where I shine! I love finding atypical solutions! Armed with the Mittler Rebbe's motto of "Lechatchiler ariber," to jump over obstacles rather than finding a way around them, I came up with a plan.

I gathered a group of bochurim and equipped them with levivot, sufganiyot, dreidels, and chanukiah. They burst into each classroom with joyous Chanukah songs, handed out their goodies, and asked the professor to do the honor of lighting the menorah.

A while before, I'd instituted a program for bochurim to visit Karmiel weekly to learn one-on-one with students. This practice continued, even after my expulsion.

"Isn't it strange that your rabbi isn't allowed on campus?" a bochur asked a student.

The students accomplished what we never could. They marched straight into the administrator's office and demanded an explanation.

"I never said such a thing!" he declared, cornered. "I only meant for the rabbi to be more unobtrusive when on campus. Of course he's welcome!"

With access granted, we were back on track! Slowly but surely, we adjusted, and soon began to enjoy the fruits of our labors.

Shlichus means caring for another Jew. Full stop. While the more traditional sense translates to caring for their spiritual needs, it's important to meet them at their level, and assist them with *anything* - physical, spiritual, emotional, mental, etc.

Meidad* was overwrought. He suffered from anxiety at the best of times, so finals week was a huge challenge for him. I racked my brains for a way to alleviate his stress. In the end, with nothing better to offer, I gave him a hug and patted him encouragingly on the back. Surprisingly, that seemed to do the trick. I watched Meidad straighten his back and march into the exam room with a confident air.

Other times, something more dire than test prep arises. One student came from a poor, immigrant family. He wasn't given a monthly allowance for meals, so he made do with whatever he could. Too often, it was scraps from the tables, or nothing at all. When we found out about it, we made sure he was well-fed every day.

Dr. Pelled*, one of the college professors, was always standoffish whenever I approached him. He didn't like mixing religion into academic or social circles, and disapproved of my methods entirely.

After October 7th, Dr. Pelled was called up on reserve duty. We made sure to send him some hearty, home-cooked meals, along with a note assuring him we were praying for him.

The next time we met face-to-face, Dr. Pelled greeted me warmly, like a long-lost friend.

It was just a few days before Rosh Hashana. I was exhausted from all the running around I'd been doing, preparing for the upcoming holidays. Since classes don't officially begin until after Simchas Torah, I knew the campus would be pretty empty. I thought about skipping my campus visit for the day to run some more urgent errands, but I pushed myself to go.

The campus was deserted, aside from a small group attending an orientation. I offered to blow the shofar for them, and they listened in respectful silence.

One of the teens detached himself from the group to speak with me privately. He told me his grandfather had

just suffered a stroke, and he wanted to do something special as a zechus for his recovery.

"I've got the perfect thing!" I answered. "Let's put on tefillin!"

The student agreed, somewhat uneasily, and I helped him wrap the straps around his arm.

"That was the first time I've ever worn tefillin," he admitted. "Some of the boys in my family had bar mitzvahs, but I refused any kind of ceremony at all! I'd get so annoyed at the rabbis outside my high school, asking everyone to put on tefillin. I'm just so worried about my grandfather! My grandmother suggested I contact a rabbi. Honestly, I've never met one, and had no idea how to go about it. It's a sign from G-d that I met you here today! Can I ask another favor?" He hesitated. "Can you make a misheberach for my grandfather?"

"I can," I answered. "But why don't *you* do it? Come to shul on Rosh Hashanah, and pray for your grandfather!"

That was the beginning of a long and fruitful friendship. He started coming every week. Now, when he's released from reserve duty for the weekend, he steals some precious time away from his family to spend his Shabbos meals with us.

One of our students, Nava*, told us her brother, Yaron* was dealing with a critical stomach issue. He underwent many tests and treatments, and spent a lot of time in the hospital. During that time, he became interested in Yiddishkeit. He soon asked for a pair of tefillin.

"Of course!" I answered, while privately wondering how I'd find a sponsor to cover the cost. Relegating that worry for another day, I ordered a set of tefillin and assured Yaron they were on their way.

Weeks passed, and the tefillin still hadn't arrived. Yaron asked me about them every day, and I had no answer for him. I contacted the supplier to figure out what the holdup was.

"You ordered for pickup!" he told me.

I couldn't believe I'd made such a foolish mistake - especially since it had cost three weeks' worth of Yaron putting on tefillin!

Later that day, I was speaking with Mr. Cohen*. His father had recently passed, and he wanted to do something deep and meaningful in his father's memory.

"My father was a kohen," he shared. "He wasn't very religious, and he never even performed Birkas Kohanim. I

managed to put tefillin on him once before he passed, but that was his first and last time."

The frustrating story of Yaron's tefillin was still on my mind. "Why not sponsor a pair of tefillin for a young man who's just committed to wearing them daily?" I offered.

Mr. Cohen was excited, and agreed immediately. When Yaron's tefillin finally arrived, I told him the story of the donor, and asked him to keep Mr. Cohen's father in mind when wearing them.

"Well, I'm a kohen too!" Yaron said. "It would be my honor to think of him while I bless Birkas Kohanim too."

Stunned by the hashgacha pratis, I called Mr. Cohen to update him.

"I had a feeling," he said. "Somehow, I just *knew* these tefillin were going to a kohen."

Words can't describe our horror and worry when we heard about the October 7th attacks. Virtually all of our students were called to serve, and the campus was turned into a makeshift army base. Of course, we sprung into action, providing gear, meals, and comfort to the soldiers.

Three of our former students were part of the 253 tragically kidnapped Israelis held hostage in Gaza by Hamas. One of them was killed, Hashem yinkom damo.

For Chanukah, we began a campaign, urging everyone to light the menorah in the merit of the two other students. Hundreds signed up. Less than two weeks later, they were both released.

May Hashem release all the hostages, and redeem us all from this galus.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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