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

*Rabbi Asher and Henya A"H Federman,
Chabad of the U.S. Virgin Islands*

Henya's Everlasting Legacy (Part 1)

By Chaya Chazan

Shlichus was a dream we'd shared from the very first moment we met. The day after our final sheva brachos, we opened our computer and Googled, "countries with a Jewish population and no Chabad house."

A few striking options came up, but Cuba caught our eye. We were excited to spread the Rebbe's message to a "new" country, especially one we knew would challenge us in so many ways. We received special permission from the Bush administration, who approved our visas to visit the fledgling Cuban Jewish community. Unfortunately, these plans fell through and we weren't able to make the trip.

"Can you help us find a place?" we asked Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky, CEO of Merkos, the umbrella organization for shluchim. "We'd happily go anywhere in the world!"

Two weeks later, Rabbi Kotlarsky called us back, recommending we check out the Virgin Islands. We weren't sure of its exact location, or what Jewish life looked like there, but we took Merkos' recommendation as our marching orders, and a short while later, we were packing for our Caribbean move.



The island is just 9 miles long and 3 miles wide, and as the first shluchim to move to such a small area, geographically speaking, we were excited to take on the challenge. The general population is small, and the Jewish portion, even smaller. About 300 Jews live on St. Thomas, the island we call home, with another 100 Jews on the other two islands we service as well. Those numbers are amplified by the "snow birds" who stay in their winter homes in the colder months, as well as hundreds of thousands of tourists who visit our beautiful island on the regular.

The Virgin Islands boast a proud Jewish history. In the 1800's, a shul was built, still standing and functioning today. Three Jewish governors served the island, and they, as well as a few other Jewish families, were instrumental in developing the Virgin Islands into the tourist mecca it is today.

It was a difficult adjustment at first. Everything was foreign and new, kosher food was hard to come by, and at the time, we didn't have the resources that are now available for shluchim in small cities.

So, we couldn't blame the Richters* for not wanting to meet us until we'd proven we were there for the long haul. The Richters were familiar with Chabad from their previous hometown, but were skeptical about Chabad longevity in St. Thomas. Finally, after we'd proven our mettle by "toughing it out" for six months, they agreed to meet us.

They attended an event in our Chabad house, and were pleasantly surprised to see that we'd formed a small, but tight-knit, community. They invited us out on their boat, where Dr. Richter sat us down for a heart-to-heart talk.

"I say this out of love," she began, "and because I admire you. But seriously, what are you guys doing here? How will you ever raise a Chassidic family in the Caribbean? It's just not sustainable, financially, socially, or culturally. For your own sakes, I urge you to leave!"

While we appreciated Dr. Richter's heartfelt advice, and knew she wasn't alone in her beliefs, we knew we were in it for the long haul. Our mission was clear - to reach each Jew, one at a time, by any means necessary, and show them how to enhance their connection to Hashem.

The Richters' previous association with Chabad had been with a long-established Chabad house, and a flourishing community. We were determined to prove we'd grow into that as well. Over the past 18 years, they've been close friends and a constant support.

This year has been one of tragedy for my family. It's been just 8 months now that my wife, Henya A"H, and our beautiful baby Shterna A"H, were taken from us. In the aftermath of a water accident, in which Henya attempted to save our 4-month old daughter, she lost consciousness. She was airlifted to a hospital in New Jersey and battled for her life for another two months, until Hashem ultimately called her neshama back home.

My family is still reeling from the shock, and we've relocated to the US, to be near family and allow ourselves time to process and, eventually, heal. While I'm still in touch with many on St. Thomas, doing whatever I can from my current location, I'm prioritizing my shlichus as a father.

With the approaching Yomim Noraim, I'm filled with a maelstrom of emotions. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is a time to focus on the power of each person's yechida - the highest level of their neshama. On Yom Kippur, the yechida shines and connects with the highest levels of G-dliness that are revealed on this auspicious day. It's a connection that can never be broken; a connection that spans both time and space, from the moment our neshamos cried "Naaseh v'nishma" at Har Sinai, to the present day.

A shliach must look at every Jew that walks into his Chabad house as more than a potential donor, or how he appears externally. A shliach must see him for the pure neshama he has inside, allowing him to connect on a Yomim Noraim-type level. Their connection is one neshama speaking to another.

It gives me comfort to reflect on this unbreakable bond. Over the years, Henya, the children, and I have created a community. We've helped countless neshamos reconnect with Hashem, one mitzvah at a time. Those bonds will last forever; a shatterproof chain that continues to resonate, reverberate, and live on. With these lasting connections, Henya is, and always will be, the shlucha to the Virgin Islands. Her impact continues to live on, in the thousands of shining neshamos connected to their Creator.

Judge Fischer* was a well-respected federal judge on the island. He was something of a by-word in the community, so when he began visiting our Chabad house every week, we were honored and overjoyed. Word spread fast, as is common on such a small island, and others began stopping by too, now that we had Judge Fischer's stamp of approval.

He was a thoughtful, intelligent man. The Judaism he'd grown up with felt stale and meaningless, and he was searching for more. He found it in Chassidus. We could almost see his soul light up as he thirstily drank in every word.

Within six months, he had committed to being completely shomer Shabbos. Every week, he moved into our apartment, getting a front-row seat to how we prepared for Shabbos, raised our daughter, and welcomed people into our home. He'd lived on the island for decades, and knew most of the residents well. He was astonished to see his friends and neighbors, whom he'd only seen in social or business settings, come to the Chabad house, searching for their own meaning in life, and finding it in the beauty of Yiddishkeit.

Over time, Judge Fischer became a shliach himself, encouraging others to attend shul, and bringing guests along.

One Rosh Hashanah afternoon, our older sons spread out on the island, armed with a shofar, looking for Jews who'd not yet heard its calls that day.

They ended up walking over seven miles to the other end of the island, where they visited the home of Mr. Trent*, who lived in that part of town.

"I'm not interested," he said, despite their crestfallen faces.

"But it'll only take a moment!" they tried to plead with him.

Mr. Trent was firm in his refusal.

"We've walked for three and a half hours, just to blow shofar for you!" my son burst out.

Mr. Trent's eyebrows lifted. "Three and a half hours!? ... well, I guess you can come in and blow your horn."

Another neshama awoken by the sound of the shofar, thanks to our sons' determined spirits.

It was our second Chanukah on shlichus, and we knew there'd be an influx of Jewish tourists. We brought down some bochurim, equipped them with menorahs, pamphlets, donuts, and more, and sent them to various ports throughout the islands.

One of those bochurim, Zalmy Cohen, returned to help us for Sukkos. He had to rush back home, to visit his grandfather in the ICU.

While he sat in the waiting room, another visitor sat down next to him and began to make conversation.

"I see you have a nice tan!" he said. "Where'd you get a tan like that with the weather we've been having lately?"

"I was just in the Virgin Islands, helping the Chabad rabbi there," Zalmy explained.

"The Virgin Islands?" the man repeated, in shock. "I was just there with my family last December! We got off the cruise ship, and were exploring the city streets, when we were accosted by a young rabbi who looked just like you. He asked if we were Jewish, and if we had a menorah for Chanukah.

"I pulled out my wallet, ready to make a donation, but the young man stopped me.

"Instead of a financial contribution, could you give me a mitzvah commitment? Will you agree to light the menorah with your family each night of Chanukah?"

"He was so earnest; I had to say yes. That night, we were back aboard the ship, sitting in the cafeteria all together, when my daughter turned to me and asked, *Dad, can we light the menorah now?* I told her we'd be finished in just a couple of minutes, and then we could return to our cabin to light the menorah. *No, Dad, she insisted. I meant right here, right now.* I agreed, and our family gathered around, saying the brachot, and lighting the first flame.

"We sat basking in the menorah's light, when, to our amazement and delight, another family at a nearby table took out the menorah *they'd* received from the same Chabad rabbi, and lit theirs as well. This was echoed by another family, and then another, until the entire atrium was lit by the glow of seventy menorahs, shining brightly."

When the family returned to Montreal after their Caribbean cruise, they looked up Chabad, and began to get more involved. A few years later, one of their sons, Ryan, now called Berel, was ready to enroll in a yeshiva in Israel. Before leaving, he shared this story, crediting it as the beginning of his family's return to Torah. Among the crowd gathered was his chavrusa of the past six months, Avrohom. As Avrohom heard Berel retelling the story, his face paled. *He'd* been in St. Thomas five years earlier, exactly where Berel had described meeting the bochur who changed their lives. It was most probably *he* who'd handed the menorah to Berel's father, and asked him to commit to lighting it every night.

Unlike many other shluchim who build up relationships over time, many of our encounters are just minutes long. But, as Henya liked to say, our mission is not only to build a Jewish community, but to build Klal Yisroel. That can happen through a single, impactful encounter, rippling change throughout their life.

In the months after Henya's accident, while she fought for her life in New Jersey, I brought down a group of bochurim for Chanukah, to continue spreading light, especially in a time of such darkness.

They put up public menorahs, visited homes, and greeted tourists as they disembarked from their cruise ships.

As a bochur put up a menorah near the dock, an Israeli couple stopped to watch. The wife was so excited to see the familiar icon begin to take shape. Her husband was less enthusiastic.

"Would you like to put on tefillin?" the bochur asked the husband.

"No!" he replied, emphatically.

His wife cajoled, and the bochur explained, and he soon gave in.

"Repeat after me," the bochur instructed. "Baruch, atah, Hashem..."

"No," the man refused. "I don't believe in G-d, and I won't say His name."

After some more gentle convincing, the bracha was complete. The bochur took a deep breath, and began to say Shema, word by word.

"Shema yisroel," the man repeated, dutifully. When he reached Hashem's name, he broke down in tears.

Like this stubborn Israeli man, many who'd resisted our advances for years were suddenly amenable. Everyone who'd heard about the accident was eager to do something as a zechus for Henya's recovery. In this way, Henya continued to impact our community, even from her hospital bed, far away.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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