

# IllumiNations

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Kinus Hashluchim

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

*Rabbi Nosson and Sarah Meretsky, Chabad of Penn State University, State College, PA*

## Passing the Torch of Inspiration

By Chaya Chazan

**In some ways, my unconventional childhood perfectly prepared me for shlichus. When I was a toddler, my parents traveled cross country in a school-bus-turned-motor-home, from Boston to Oregon.**

I grew up in a 165 acre retreat center in a forest 40 miles west of Portland. I first learned about Chanukah when I was five, and had no clue there was more to Judaism until we moved to Portland when I was 11.

We moved into a large house owned by one of my mother's associates. They celebrated Shabbos with a candlelit dinner every Friday night. I loved it, and we continued the tradition for many years.

When I went off to college, a theater conservatory for me, I made sure to bring candlesticks with me (a pair I'd just received for my birthday). Eventually, I ran out of candles, and popped into the local Hillel for a refill.

"Join us for Shabbat!" they urged.

"No, thanks. I do it on my own," I replied. However, I did come the following week. A little while later, Hillel and Chabad on Campus co-hosted a Shabbos with guest speaker Bentzion Kravitz, an anti-missionary activist. His topic, "Missionary Impossible," was riveting, the food was delicious, and the company enjoyable, but the Friday night davening touched my soul like nothing else.

Enchanted, I returned for davening the next morning. Before I knew it, I was hooked. Chassidus spoke to my

neshama, and slowly, my weekly visits to the Chabad house grew into a much larger commitment. A Chabad rabbi there was instrumental in enrolling me in the Ivy League Torah Study Program in the Catskills that summer. Although I had big plans, after everyone else in the program left, I found myself wanting to stay. I joined the Hadar Hatorah summer program, and officially became a yeshiva bocher.

I grew up in a Reform home in Omaha, Nebraska. Compared to my husband's upbringing, I was quite knowledgeable! We didn't necessarily celebrate every Shabbos and Yom Tov, and definitely not according to Halacha, but I'd learned about them.

My belief in G-d remained superficial until my senior year of high school, when my mother suffered an aneurysm. The helplessness was overwhelming, and I leaned on prayer for support. It made me question everything - what even was the meaning of life? What was my purpose in this world? Yearning for answers and a relationship with G-d, I visited our temple religiously.

That summer, I visited Israel. Seeing Judaism come alive, and especially, seeing young men and women my age living a Torah-true life, showed me there was more to Judaism than the four walls of my temple. I was lucky that one of the madrichim was a baal teshuva, and I plied him endlessly with questions. His answers made so much sense! My search for meaning had led me to all kinds of religious dogmas. For the first time, I felt an active interest in finding the answers in my own backyard.

That fall, I attended Brandeis University, a majority Jewish university. I connected with the Orthodox community, and deepened my Jewish education. I enrolled in a semester of Hebrew U, and attended a seminary in Israel, which inspired me to start keeping Shabbos and kashrus.

I backpacked through Europe that summer. In Paris, I met the Azimov family.

"You have a Chabad soul," Mrs. Azimov told me. "You should learn Tanya!"

When I returned to Brandeis for my senior year, I found a Chabad rabbi nearby, and asked him to teach a Tanya shiur on campus. Mrs. Azimov was right! Chassidus opened doors I'd never dreamed existed! Soon afterwards, I attended Machon Alte, a Chabad baalas teshuva seminary in Tzefas.

Our daughter is now a madricha in Machon Alte, a heart-warmingly full circle.

Both of us had been exposed to Torah-true Yiddishkeit in college. When we discussed what type of future we envisioned, we were in complete agreement that a college campus shlichus would suit us perfectly. In the early 2000's, campus shlichus wasn't a popular option. Most shluchim opted for more stable communities, in which they could build ties with the potential to last longer than four years. But we felt strongly that we could make a significant impact on college students, since we identified so closely with their thoughts and struggles.

When we visited the Shluchim office, they showed us a list of available places. Over 120 locations were waiting for a shliach, but only one was a college campus.

The next hurdle was meeting and getting approved by Rabbi Menachem Schmidt, a shliach in nearby Philadelphia. We met at the half-way point - a rest stop somewhere along the New Jersey Turnpike. With the sound of cars and trucks zooming by behind us, Rabbi Schmidt explained what had inspired him to search for campus shluchim. A girl wanted to attend Penn State, and she wanted to continue the close relationship with Chabad with which she'd grown up. Her father had been calling every week to ask Rabbi Schmidt when Penn State would receive shluchim. He invited us to check out the campus ourselves and see if it was a good match.

We should've known that summer vacation wouldn't be the greatest time to visit a college campus. The isolation and emptiness made us feel like we were in the middle of nowhere! We wrote all our doubts and questions in a letter to the Rebbe and placed it in a volume of Igros Kodesh. The letter on that page was an answer to a university professor, explaining what a great opportunity he had to teach Jewish students about Yiddishkeit by inviting them for Shabbos, and influencing them as much as possible.

We had our answer.

We thought we'd be able to settle into a hotel while we searched for a suitable home and Chabad center. When we checked in, we were shocked to hear every hotel room in the area had been booked solid for months, in



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anticipation of the first football match of the year! We had exactly one day to find a place to live.

Baruch Hashem, we quickly found the perfect spot. It was roomy, and, most importantly, close to campus.

“Can we move in tomorrow?” we asked.

They were a bit taken aback, but agreed to let us sign a lease immediately. With that set, we ran to Walmart to “furnish” our new home with some mattresses, card tables, and lawn chairs.

Our first Shabbos davening was held in the “shul” around one card table, and our meager Shabbos meal of frozen challah rolls and tuna fish around the other.

After our festive repast, we took a walk around campus. As we passed one fraternity building, a student poked his head out the window and called out, “Hey look! It’s Abraham Lincoln!”

The first day we set up a table on campus was incredibly memorable. It was September 11, 2001. Across the quad was a TV screen, replaying the horrific scenes over and over again. We handed out fliers for our first Rosh Hashanah minyan, and the tragedy made people more receptive to spirituality than they might have been otherwise. A week later, our tiny room was packed with over 40 students for Rosh Hashanah services!

Before social media and smartphones existed, growing our community depended almost entirely on our campus tabling. Armed with nothing more sophisticated than a paper and pen, we stood for hour upon hour at that table, writing down students’ names and phone numbers. I’d call everyone on that list every week, inviting them for Shabbos. After calling consistently for a while, some agreed to join.

It was an unexpected pleasure to receive a call from Betty\*, asking to light Shabbos candles with us. Of course, we agreed. Betty shared that her mother was an Israeli Jew, who’d passed when she was a little girl. She’d been raised by her non-Jewish father in an isolated corner of Pennsylvania, without a single Jew around for miles. A recent Birthright trip had inspired her to call us.

Betty returned for the following Shabbosim, and soon became an extended member of our family. We encour-

aged her to join Rabbi Manis Friedman’s *Snorkel and Study* summer program, and she even attended seminary in Israel.

When Betty, now Bracha, walked to her chuppah, she asked us to be her escorts, leading her towards her future husband and home as we’d led her down the path of Yiddishkeit years before.

She and her husband have since moved to a Jewish community, and volunteered to host a Tanya shiur given by the local shliach.

Emily\* barely acknowledged her Jewishness, although I saw her whenever I bought bread at the bakery in which she worked. Her father wasn’t Jewish, and her upbringing had never led her to a greater appreciation of her heritage.

Somehow, she was convinced to join us for the Rosh Hashanah meal.

“I don’t like organized religion,” she declared, as she entered.

“That’s okay,” I assured her. “We’re not very organized.”

Emily chuckled, and, the ice broken, even managed to enjoy herself. One thing led to another, and soon, Emily was hooked. She furthered her education and commitment in a baalas teshuva seminary in Israel, and soon afterwards, married Avi\*, who’d learned about Judaism through *his* shluchim in Cornell.

She now teaches in a Chabad school in New York, and loves hosting college students for Shabbos.

“Hello, Rabbi. My name is Greg Kinsley\*. Can I come to your office to put on tefillin?”

I’d put on tefillin with plenty of people, but I always had to chase after *them*. It was a welcome surprise to get a request!

Mr. Kinsley was a professor, and, despite his non-Jewish sounding name, was, indeed, Jewish. Over time, he became one of our “regulars.” When we started holding Shabbos morning minyanim, they were sparsely attended, but Greg always showed up. He gave himself the title of “AGIT,” Assistant Gabbai in Training. He came early

each week to learn Chassidus with me, his eyes lighting up as we discussed novel ideas and concepts.

Unfortunately, Mr. Kinsley passed away last year. He remained a good friend to the end.

Nothing brought out the message of “kasis lama’or” more than Covid lockdowns. Just as olives only produce their finest when pressure is applied, the enforced regulations and cancellation of our regular programs forced us to reinvent ourselves.

That was the first year we made a Sukkah mobile on the back of a truck. We drove around campus, offering students the opportunity to shake the lulav and esrog and make a bracha in the sukkah.

When Chanukah approached, my wife suggested a menorah parade and Chanukah party.

“I don’t know how successful a menorah parade will be on a college campus,” I cautioned. “It works in larger communities, but who will show up to ours?”

My wife insisted, and, as usual, was proven right. Many people who’d never come to any programs before were excited to participate! Registration boomed, and the event was the highlight of the season! The mayor sent a pre-recorded message, and the fire station led the parade with a truck.

These programs proved so successful, we’ve continued them every year since!

Our job is to be there for anyone, at any time, for anything. It is our mission, and our privilege.

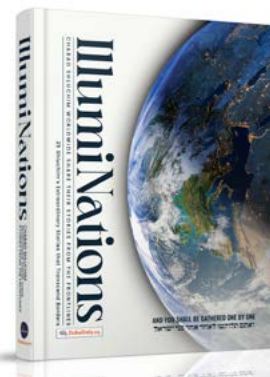
*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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