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

*Rabbi Yaakov and Mushkee Raskin,  
Chabad of Jamaica*

## The Jewish Pirates of Jamaica

By Chaya Chazan

**My grandfather was born in Russia and was sent by the Rebbe to Morocco in 1960. My father was born there, but in 1986, the Rebbe sent him on shlichus to Montreal, where I grew up.**

My own children were born in Jamaica. This right here is the Chabad story – four generations in four countries; a Chabad dynasty of which to be proud.

My father-in-law was the shliach in Panama. He moved back to New York after war chased him from the country. He soon became a renowned educator and leader, heading the mesivta of Oholei Torah, the largest Chabad yeshiva in America.

Both of us grew up on shlichus, where every Shabbos and Yom Tov table was filled with guests, showing them the light of Judaism, so we knew when we got married that we wanted to open up a Chabad House of our own. It didn't matter where; we were just ready to go. We reached out to Rabbi Zarchi from Puerto Rico, who told us to check out Jamaica. We were only vaguely aware of where Jamaica was even located, and knew next to nothing about its culture and history. We were amazed and delighted to learn that Jamaica has a rich Jewish



history. In 1880, they closed the Parliament for Yom Kippur because so many of its members were Jewish. Even more fascinating were records of the Jewish band of pirates that frequented the harbor at Kingston, including a Captain Raskin – possibly a pirate ancestor!

Our first contact was a man named Raymond Dowek a”h – the only Jew that kept kosher in Jamaica. He'd been hospitalized that day for a stroke, so, in addition to the exciting prospect of meeting our first Jew, we also had the opportunity to be mevaker cholim and put tefillin on him.

The lady who answered the door just stared at me. I stared back at her - a Jamaican standoff.

“Chani's brother?” she finally exclaimed. “What in the world are you doing in Jamaica?”

It took me a moment, but I soon recognized the lady as Mrs. Flacks from Monaco. My sister runs Chabad of Monaco with my brother-in-law, Rabbi Tanchum Matusof. When I was in yeshiva in Manchester, I visited them for Shabbos, where I got to meet Mr. and Mrs. Flacks. Three years after meeting in Monaco, we were now reunited in Jamaica, at the bedside of their uncle, Raymond.

Sitting by his bedside, I saw the spark of Raymond's soul, yearning to connect to Judaism. Unfortunately, he was unable to talk, but we did put tefillin on him. The second the tefillin hit his skin, Raymond visibly perked up, and we could see how much good it was doing for him. We continued to chat with the Flackses, who told us that Raymond had always dreamed of a Jamaican Chabad House.

With so much inspiration to begin, we continued scouting for Jews. After lots of door knocking, research, and hard work, we came up with a list of 71.

Shortly after returning to New York, we received another offer to open a Chabad house elsewhere in the country. So, we had a choice to make - open another US Chabad House and join that network, or become the one-stop Jewish resource of Jamaica? As many chassidim do when in doubt, we went to the Ohel and wrote to the Rebbe about our predicament, asking for a sure, clear answer.

That very day, Mr. Flacks messaged me. Raymond had passed away. He told me they were taking the body to Israel, and they wanted me to be at the funeral.

I quickly booked an in-and-out flight. I probably spent more time in the air than on the ground!

When the funeral was over, Raymond's brother Albert – who I'd briefly met before in the hospital room – grabbed me by the shoulder.

“Rabbi, are you opening Chabad in Jamaica?” he asked, with intense eyes. I murmured that I wasn't sure yet. “Rabbi, if you agree, I'll give you my brother's house to start from, and promise to be your first supporters!”

I was floored. On Sunday, I'd asked for a clear sign. By Wednesday night, we'd been answered. It seemed Hashem wanted us in Jamaica.

We started off in Raymond's house in Kingston before realizing we needed to move to Montego Bay. A few years later, we opened the Kosher HotSpot, a kosher restaurant which also became our welcome center. Visitors came straight from their cruise ships for classic kosher food, and, of course, a Jamaican local delicacy, Jerk Chicken. Opening and running the Kosher HotSpot kept us busy for a while, especially as we continued all our other regular programs, events, and shiurim.

As Jamaica cemented itself as a popular winter retreat, we realized people weren't leaving their all-inclusive resorts. It became clear that if we couldn't bring hotel guests to Chabad, we would have to bring Chabad to the hotels.

So, every Shabbos in the winter, we would set up in a different hotel, trying to reach everyone. Sometimes we'd show up and find five Jews, while other weeks kept us on our toes, trying to meet and service fifty guests!

After Covid shut the borders, we started receiving mikvah requests more frequently than ever before. My wife was taking women to the ocean every week after curfew. We knew we needed a more sustainable option. My uncle, Rabbi Pesach Sperlin, director of Chabad in Montreal West, came that December to visit.

His steadfast determination kicked everything into high gear. He spoke to the contractors, and suddenly, I was

receiving bewildering calls about budgets, building materials, and scheduling I wasn't in the least prepared for.

I raised the first \$10,000 in seed money and we brought out a tractor which dug a massive hole in our backyard. We didn't have the money to do much more than that, and the hole remained. As Covid restrictions eased, tourists began returning in droves. Slowly, that hole filled - with love, support, and donations. It was a beautiful sight to see so many people uniting to help us. We soon raised enough to complete the construction of a beautiful mikvah.

Just before Purim of last year, we held a wedding here. The bride was the first to inaugurate the brand new mikvah! She was so excited to commit to taharas hamishpacha, and have a beautiful facility to support her commitment.

In December, before we started digging the mikvah, a lady named Lydia\* approached my wife about going to mikvah. While the temperature in Jamaica is usually balmy and beautiful, the ocean is wild, rough, and dangerous in the dead of winter. One look at the choppy surf and the whitecaps of the waves crashing into each other was enough for us to try to dissuade Lydia from going that night. But, no matter what we said, she wouldn't be discouraged. So, in the pelting cold Motzei Shabbos rain, and, after the Covid curfew started, my wife took Lydia to the beach. Her mesiras nefesh reminded us of the stories we'd heard of chassidim in Russia breaking the ice to toi vel. Lydia came out safely, glowing with pride that she'd completed the mitzvah.

Six months later, I bumped into her husband in New York.

"Rabbi, for five years, my wife and I have been trying to have a child. We've tried absolutely everything. That's why it was so important for Lydia to go to mikvah that night. If we'd pushed mikvah off even one more night, we wouldn't be where we are now. You guessed it; she's pregnant!"

Lydia gave birth four months later, on Sukkos, to a healthy, beautiful baby.

When we dug the mikvah foundation, I sent a picture to all 2,000 of my phone contacts. Among the replies of encouragement and support was one from Mr. Flacks. *Rabbi, call me in a few weeks. I want to help.*

About two months later, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of Adar, he told me he wanted to dedicate something.

"Don't you realize what today is?" I told him. "It's your uncle Raymond's yartzeit. It would be such an honor for him to have something done in his memory."

Mr. Flacks asked, "Well, who took the name of the Chabad House?" I told him it's still available. "And who took the mikvah?" I said it's also available. "Then I'll take both!"

Gemara Ta'anis describes 20 Adar as the date Choni Hameagel stood in a circle and demanded that Hashem send rain. In a sicha, the Rebbe explained that each of us must be Choni Hameagel; to brazenly demand that Hashem take care of us. I remembered this sicha the morning before I spoke to Mr. Flacks and was inspired to beg Hashem to help us finally finish construction of the mikvah. Baruch Hashem, our tefillos were answered that night, by a timely and generous donation from Mr. Flacks in memory of his uncle, who'd been the catalyst for our move to Jamaica seven years before.

Albert - Avraham - grew up in a traditional Sefardi home, but had drifted from the teachings of his youth and married a non-Jew. Every time I put tefillin on him, he would break down in tears. He was emotionally connected, and we knew to expect him around the Yamim Tovim.

Last year, we received the heartbreaking news that Avraham had died on his boat, while on a fishing expedition. Jamaican standard practice calls for an autopsy. With a prayer in my heart, I called the Minister of National Security and said that absolutely no autopsy could be done, as it violated our religion. We overnighed tachrichim and personally did the taharah. Avraham merited a burial k'halachah, the first on the island in many years.

At the funeral, Avraham's brother - connected to Chabad in Morocco (my father's old stomping grounds) - sent me a letter sharing how the deceased felt so grateful to be connected to Chabad and spend his last few years surrounded with Torah and mitzvos.

It was difficult to make headway in the beginning. We knew there were local Jews around, as well as many Jewish tourists, but no one seemed to know about us. We were ready to offer whatever Jewish services were needed, but no one was asking.

It was a Friday afternoon. The sun was already setting when the phone rang. The caller was seeking a warm bowl of chicken soup, like the one currently bubbling on the stove. I looked at my wife and chuckled. Of all the questions I'd expected from a last minute caller minutes before Shabbos, this certainly wasn't one.

"We'd love to have all of you join us for our communal meal tonight!" I invited him. "We'll have hot chicken soup, and many other Shabbos delicacies! Come on over, and I'll show you around!"

A group of nine Jewish tourists showed up at the door a few minutes later. I quickly brought out my tefillin, and urged them to utilize the last precious moments before Shabbos would begin. For two of the group, it was their first time putting on tefillin. We farbrenged long into the night - over bowls of steaming chicken soup, of course!

When people question my decision to live in Jamaica, I'm reminded of my grandfather, Rabbi Leibel Raskin A"H, who was once asked a similar question. By the early 2000's, Morocco's Jewish population had shrunk considerably, and there were only about 2,500 Jews left.

"Why do you stay here?" a reporter asked my grandfather.

"The Rebbe sent us here, and we will stay here until the last Jew is left," my grandfather explained.

Moshe ran after just one sheep, and that's why Hashem made him the leader. The Rebbe taught us to run after every neshamah. We are not here for quantity. One Jew can light the menorah, put on tefillin, and go to the mikvah. Moshe Rabbeinu was just one man, and Moshe Rabbeinu just had one mother. The power of the individual is what keeps us going.

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