

ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Moshe and Miriam Moskovitz, Jewish Community of Kharkov, Kharkov, Ukraine

An Everlasting Covenant, Chabad of Kharkov Part III

By Chaya Chazan

"You've got to meet my rabbi, Misha*!" Nochum* urged his friend.

Misha rolled his eyes dramatically. "We've had this conversation so many times, Nochum! As I've told you before, I'm sure your rabbi is really nice, but I'm just not interested in meeting *any* rabbis at all!"

"But you've really got to meet him!" Nochum insisted. "I promise - it'll change your life."

Misha groaned. "If I agree to meet this rabbi one time, will you finally stop hounding me?"

Nochum grinned. "Of course!"

"Fine! I'll meet him! I'll shake his hand and ask him about his children, but after a half hour, I'm gone!" Misha warned.

"Fine!"

"And then you'll leave me alone?"

"And then I'll leave you alone."

I met Misha in my office and we chatted easily for half an hour. I glanced at the clock, but Misha seemed comfortable and showed no signs of wanting to leave. We continued talking about a variety of topics for the next three hours and emerged mutually pleased with one another.

Just before Misha left, he shocked me by declaring his interest in undergoing a bris.

"That's a big commitment!" I stammered, after I finally found my voice. "Misha, there are 612 other mitzvos in the Torah! You can start with an easier one than bris!"

"I know, but I want to have a bris. I'm Jewish by birth, but I want to belong to my people, body *and* soul."

"I admire your conviction," I told him, my voice quiet and suppressed. "I will speak to the mohel and see what we can arrange. In the meanwhile, this week is Purim! Please join us on Sunday afternoon for the megillah reading and a festive meal!"

Misha promised to come, and I immediately phoned the mohel, who told me he could come a couple of days after Purim.

When Misha entered the shul on Purim day, he expected a staid congregation sitting silently in pews as he often experienced when attending church with his non-Jewish wife. Instead, he found a jubilant crowd, dressed in wild costumes, loudly cheering and booing Haman's name. He was taken aback at first, but was quickly swept up in the infectious joy and celebration.

At the seuda, Misha stood up and announced that he'd soon join the Jewish people by having a bris, and the crowd responded with thunderous applause, lechaims, and back slapping.

"I hope he really goes through with it," Nochum remarked quietly to my husband. "I know his wife is really anxious about it, and the church definitely doesn't want to lose such a generous supporter. I'm afraid he'll chicken out at the last second."

Nochum's warning put me on edge, but on Tuesday morning, on the dot of 9:00, Misha showed up, excited and ready for the procedure.

"Last night, a priest from the church visited my home," Misha told my husband. "He sat me down and tried to explain what a mistake I'd be making. He told me having a bris would forever connect me to a cursed nation, and that I'd regret joining a people so degraded by humanity and G-d. I was *incensed*. I picked him up by his shirt and yelled, *I sat with Rabbi Moskovitz for three hours and he didn't say a bad word about anyone! Get out of my house!*"

"He may have thought he was persuading me to cancel today's appointment, but, if anything, his words made me more determined than ever to carry through with this bris."

The mohel began the procedure, interrupted every few minutes by the incessant ringing of Misha's phone. Nevertheless, the bris carried on, and soon Misha - now named Moshe* - became the newest entrant into the bris of Avraham Avinu.

"The priest called me ten times," he said, checking his phone a little while later.

"What will you tell him?" I asked.

"That it's too late!" Moshe responded, a big smile spread across his face.

Every year, we host a big circus-themed Purim party for thousands of people. Male acrobats jump around to festive Jewish music, kids from our school prance around in clown costumes, while others perform feats of their own. Every participant receives a mishloach manos gift basket to take home and share with family and friends.

One morning, a couple of days after the Purim party, 85-year-old Boris* approached me in shul.

"Rabbi, I'd like to have a bris," he stated, the simplicity of his words belying the magnitude of his request.

I was nonplussed for a moment, and I finally blurted out, "Why?"

"I come to the Purim party every year," Boris explained. "This year, I wasn't feeling so well, so I asked my wife to go instead of me. I reminded her to make sure to bring back the mishloach manos basket!"

"Well, she brought the basket, but it was mostly empty wrappers by the time she came home. All that was left was a brochure detailing all of your projects and events. With nothing else to do, I perused it carefully."

"Your preschool and camp look great, but I'm too old for that. I see you have a lot of classes and shiurim, but it's hard for me to get anywhere these days. Finally, I saw



that you offer brissim. *Perfect!* I said to myself. *That's something I can do!*"

"As it happens," I responded, slowly. "The mohel arrived in Kharkov this morning to perform another bris. If you're really serious about this, we can schedule you immediately."

A few hours later, 85-year-old Boruch* was resting in the recovery room after a successful bris.

In the early years of our shlichus, we bought advertising space on every subway line in Kharkov. We printed a large picture of the Rebbe, with the caption reading, *Moshiach is coming. Do a good deed today.*

Mikhail* saw one of our ads, and it reminded him of the days he'd spent in our Sunday school. He'd eventually aged out of them, but he still recalled them fondly. He decided to visit the shul as his good deed for the day and made good on his promise immediately.

As he approached the shul, he noticed a coach bus parked in front, a group of boys chattering excitedly as they boarded.

"What's all this?" he asked the receptionist.

"Today's the first day of Camp Gan Yisroel!" she explained. "All these boys are headed off to camp."

Mikhail wasted no time. He called his mother, informed her he'd be joining camp, and asked her to send his clothes.

Those three weeks were transformative for the teen. He underwent a bris, became Chanoch*, and committed to a life of Torah and Chassidus. He went on to attend yeshiva, and is now a shliach in Moscow!

One summer, Chanoch joined the throng of parents visiting Camp Gan Yisroel of Moscow's ground for visiting day. There, he met a man who looked vaguely familiar.

He introduced himself, and after a few questions, they discovered they were both from Kharkov, were around the same age, and had even attended our Gan Yisroel the same summer!

"So, what brings you to Moscow?" Chanoch asked his friend.

"That summer was one of the most formative of my life," he explained. "At the end, I made two promises to myself: that I'd marry a Jewish girl, and that if and when I had children, I'd make sure to send them to Gan Yisroel, too."

"I fulfilled the first part of my promise ten years ago. Now, my son is eight years old, and this summer is my first chance to make good on the second."

Leibel* had been a steady participant in our minyan for years, but he always expressed his disappointment that his daughter, Irina*, showed no interest in her Jewish heritage.

"She's searching for a preschool teaching job," he told us one day. "Maybe she can work in *your* school! Once she's involved, it'll be easier for her to take interest."

"I'll definitely give her an interview!" my wife promised.

The interview went well, and we were pleased to offer her a position.

"I have a few other interviews and offers lined up," Irina answered. "I'll let you know."

The next day, Irina was on her way to interview for another school that seemed like the best prospect. She settled into her seat on the subway, only to sit up short when she saw the Rebbe's face smiling at her from the ad space.

Taking it as a sign from Heaven, Irina got off at the next stop and returned to our shul to accept the job offer.

As her father predicted, it was the first step of a long journey that eventually led Irina to embrace Torah life as her own. She and her husband are proudly raising a family of shluchim in Moscow, helping others find the path she'd discovered that fateful day.

Sasha* was a bright-eyed, eager student, who listened with rapt attention as his teacher talked about great Torah heroes.

"Moshe Rabbeinu is my favorite," he sighed, dreamily. "One day, I'm going to have a bris, and I'm going to choose Moshe as my Jewish name."

These were lofty ambitions for a second grader, and it was no surprise that he deferred the decision until he was older and braver.

One day, Sasha's parents informed him they'd be moving to America. Sasha spent his last summer in Ukraine in Camp Gan Yisroel, and when his family traveled across the ocean, the yarmulka his counselor gave him accompanied them, tucked away in a suitcase.

Sasha was excited to continue his Jewish education, and his parents enrolled him in yeshiva.

"How was school?" his mother asked after his first day.

Sasha burst into tears. "I didn't understand a word anyone said! It was all English! And when it wasn't English, it was Hebrew! They all knew how to pray and how to learn from these big Hebrew books. I felt so alone and out of place! I don't want to go back to that school!"

Sasha transferred to a public school, where he soon learned the language and made friends. At the begin-

ning, he continued going to shul every week and tried to keep up a connection, but it was tenuous and faded steadily as time went on. By the time Sasha was in high school, he'd nearly forgotten that he was Jewish at all.

In college, some of Sasha's friends told him about Birthright. While the Jewish aspect was meaningless to Sasha, who could turn down a free international trip?

As their tour guide led them from site to site, droning on about the history and significance of every place and stone, Sasha felt bored and restless. Their final stop was the Kotel. Everyone else in the group rushed towards the wall with tears in their eyes, but Sasha remained standing in place.

What's wrong with me? He questioned. *I'm as Jewish as they are! Why can they access an emotional connection I can't? I want to feel connected to my heritage, but I just feel empty.*

As he wandered around the plaza, feeling listless and despondent, he heard a familiar tune. Looking up, he saw a group of Chabad bochurim with their arms around each other, jumping up and down in time to the tune they sang with uplifted abandon.

I know that song! Sasha thought excitedly. *I remember singing it in Gan Yisroel Kharkov!*

He ran to join the group and raised his voice alongside theirs. Memories of his summer in Gan Yisroel flooded back to him and suddenly, the feeling of belonging he'd craved all week struck him forcefully. He left Israel determined to renew his connection to Yiddishkeit.

When he returned stateside, he found a local rabbi and began attending shul regularly once again. His commitment to Yiddishkeit grew, slowly, but steadily. He married a Jewish girl, and they continued their journey of discovery together.

Finally, Sasha was ready to fulfill the promise he'd made as a young second grader. He had a bris and chose "Moshe" as his new name.

He returned to Kharkov for a visit a while ago and came to see the shul, the yarmulka from his counselor so many years before perched jauntily on his head.

**Names changed to protect identity*



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