

# ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

*Rabbi Eli and Mushka Eckstein, Chabad of Dania Beach, FL*

## Florida's Hidden Gems, Chabad of Dania Beach Part I

By Chaya Chazan

**I grew up just a stone's throw from Dania Beach and I was very involved with Chabad in Hollywood throughout my childhood.**

**M**y father was a businessman, but he involved himself deeply in Chabad House affairs and volunteered to do anything and everything the shliach needed.

As a bochur, I assisted shluchim in the Broward County area.

"You know," the shliach mentioned one day, "the next town over is called Dania Beach. Sometimes, I get calls from Jews living there looking for support and guidance. I doubt there's much a Jewish population, but it may be worth your while to visit there every so often to "get your foot in the door." Who knows? Maybe, if you find a large enough community, you can start your own shlichus there after you get married!"

I took his advice and began visiting Dania Beach, knocking on doors, exploring local businesses, and slowly building a rapport with the Jews I found there.

A couple of years later, after my wife and I married, we moved to Dania Beach and officially opened the first Chabad center in the city.

Dania Beach was the perfect metaphor for shlichus itself: it took special foresight to look beyond the shabby, ramshackle veneer and see the potential hidden within. As the first city in Broward County, it had grown into disrepair, and many of the Jews left for greener pastures and more friendly areas. Now, Dania Beach is considered the jewel of South Florida real estate, with land being snatched up by developers as soon as it becomes available.

I'd met just under 100 families through my months of door-knocking as a bochur. Although the community remains small, especially compared to other cities in South Florida, we concentrate on the individual and cherish our ability to focus on each person and pour our love and attention on them.

In recent years, Dania Beach has attracted a large contingency of young professionals who want to remain within easy reach of Miami, but prefer more affordable housing. With the demographic switch, our shlichus evolved and we are kept quite busy, baruch Hashem!

When I first began exploring Dania Beach, I'd drive around, peering at each doorway to see if there was a mezuzah. It was slow going and sometimes I doubted if my efforts would bear fruit.

It was a hot, muggy August day, and my air conditioning was on full blast as I slowly cruised the streets, looking for the telltale rectangular box. It was one of my first days "on the job" so I was overjoyed to espy a mezuzah on a nearby home.

I ran up the steps lightly and knocked on the door. An elderly man opened the door and stared at me for a long moment.

"I've lived in Dania Beach for 40 years," he said, finally. "I never thought I'd see Chabad step through my door."

Another time, the door was opened by another elderly gentleman, but his reception was quite different. He stared at me, his eyebrows pitched downward.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed. "Get off my property!"

I was wholly unprepared for such a vitriolic reaction, and I was left speechless for a moment. He must have seen the confusion in my eyes, because he relented, sighing, and asked, "What do you want?"

"I'm just exploring the area," I told him. "I want to meet new friends. I'm looking for hugs!"

He opened his arms wide for a hug and invited me in.

I knew, then and there, that the Rebbe was telling me to continue my shlichus in Dania Beach.

We ended up spending the rest of the day together, chatting like old friends. He told me about his complicated history with religion. As a child, his father had shoved Yiddishkeit down his throat, and he'd taken the earliest opportunity to throw off what he saw as shackles and heavy handed restrictions. His first marriage, to a Jewish woman, ended in an acrimonious divorce, and he promised himself that was the last he'd ever have to do with Yiddishkeit. He married a non-Jewish woman the second time around, and told himself he'd never been happier.

That summer day was the first of many visits. He's now one of my closest friends, a great supporter of our Chabad house, and a guaranteed attendee on Shabbos. He puts on tefillin every day and is always ready to offer a hug.

One of the privileges of living three minutes from the Fort Lauderdale Airport, in addition to the delight my children take in pointing out every airplane as it rushes overhead, is the opportunity to reach thousands of Jews who flow through its terminals every day.

We host a public menorah lighting in the terminal every year, and I've developed close relationships with many of the aviation staff. There have been so many cases of lost tefillin, the sheriff's office knows to call me as soon as the velvet bag lands on their desk.

One day, the aviation chief called.

"We've got a sticky tefillin situation," he said.

I soon managed to get the whole story. A man, on his way to his gate, made a quick stop in the restroom. Not wanting to bring his holy tefillin in, he found a closed garbage bin just outside the door and placed his tefillin bag on top. During the few moments in which he was occupied, an airport worker cleared the garbage bin and assumed the large bag on top of it was garbage as well.

My heart sank. I knew that airport garbage was immediately taken to the pit, where bags were shoved into a furnace and obliterated within minutes.



The Broward County Sheriff's office was kind enough to help me search through the security footage until we found the location of that exact garbage bin. Then I called the sanitation department and asked if the bags had been taken to the pit yet.

"Not yet," they told me.

I quickly called the aviation chief and explained the situation.

"I could get a bunch of volunteers to search through the garbage, but would you be able to hold it in another location until we've completed the search?"

The chief was empathetic and agreed immediately. Dozens of South Florida Chaveirim volunteers pitched in, ripping through bag after bag of garbage in search of the treasured tefillin. Baruch Hashem, after looking through five or six hundred bags of refuse, the tefillin were finally found and returned to the owner.

Before our first Sukkos in Dania Beach, we advertised our open-doors sukkah policy in local newspapers and on social media. That's how Morton\* found out about us, and, despite himself, was drawn to join us under the leafy shade of the s'chach.

"I just want to be clear," he said, almost immediately after he sat down. "I'm a Christian."

"Was your mother Jewish?" I asked.

"She sure was! And her mother, and her mother as well! But we never talked about religion growing up, so it meant nothing to me."

"So how did you become a Christian?" I asked, out of curiosity.

"It was back in the day, when I was in the Marine Corps," he reminisced. "A priest walked into our barracks one day and asked, *who wants to get baptized today?* As a soldier about to face war, I knew I could use some G-d in my life, so I raised my hand. I've been a devout believer ever since."

Morton's perspective was typical for Dania Beach, which was mostly filled with the elderly who had little to no association with anything Jewish. I explained that a born Jew can never renege on his heritage. Morton listened politely and didn't disagree, but reiterated his conviction in Christianity.

I asked to meet with Morton for lunch the next week, which soon became a standing appointment. Morton remains conflicted; he attends shul every Shabbos, and services each Sunday. He puts on tefillin, attends holiday events, and is involved in our shul. While I continue patiently explaining the eternity and innate purity of the neshama, we've managed to ensure the longevity of his soul by convincing him to have a kevuras yisroel when the time comes.

"Hello? Is this Rabbi Eckstein?" asked the hesitant voice on the phone.

"Yes, it is. How can I help you?" I asked her.

"I understand you were Robert Mink's\* rabbi," she continued.

I sighed. "Yes. We were friends for a few years before he passed."

"I'm the realtor commissioned to sell his condo," she explained. "I've hired a company to clear out the furniture and personal effects, but I see some Hebrew books here. I wonder if you'd be interested in taking them instead of the company disposing of them?"

"Of course!" I almost shouted. "Please tell the movers not to touch them! I'll be over in a few minutes."

As I drove over to the apartment, memories of Robert - or, as we called him - Reuven - flooded my mind. Like many of our community members, he was an elderly man who'd lived in Dania Beach for years. When we'd met, a few years before, he'd shown great interest in Yiddishkeit and had become a beloved member of our shul ever since. His passing had left a deep chasm in our community.

Reuven hadn't had much Jewish education from what I recalled, so I expected the stash of Hebrew books to amount to little more than maybe a siddur and Chumash. I was nonplussed when the realtor led me to a bookcase, entirely filled with sefarim of all kinds.

"This... this is going to take me some time!" I said, finally, after skimming the rows with wide eyes.

"No problem. Here are some moving boxes. Take your time!" the realtor invited me, kindly.

I began to pack up the precious sefarim, leafing through the pages and wondering how much I hadn't known about Reuven. After working solidly for an hour, my arms began to tire, and I sat on the couch for a few minutes respite. I chatted with the realtor for a few minutes as she supervised the movers.

"Robert was friendly with a family downstairs," she told me. "I'm pretty sure they're Jewish."

"Oh, wow! Do you know their name or apartment number?" I asked.

"Sure! I'm actually in communication with them."

I immediately went downstairs and met Larry\* and Sofia\*, along with their children, Max\* and Elizabeth\*. Larry and Sofia spent much of their time caring for their adult children, who were both special needs and required around the clock care.

The whole family trooped upstairs to Reuven's apartment and we continued chatting. When I found out Larry was originally from Long Island, I was sure he'd had

some sort of exposure to Yiddishkeit, but when I asked him if he'd ever put on tefillin before, he told me he'd never even heard of tefillin! For the past thirty years, they'd been living in Dania Beach, wholly unconnected to anything Jewish, and, unfortunately, not feeling the lack.

"Would you like to put on tefillin now?" I asked, but the question died on my lips as I suddenly remembered this was one of the very few times I didn't bring my tefillin along with me. I'd expected the entire errand to take no more than a couple of minutes, since I never dreamed there'd be a whole bookcase waiting for me! For a moment, I vacillated. Should I ask them to wait while I ran home and got my tefillin? Would they agree?

Suddenly, my eyes fell on a familiar black velvet bag. Excitedly, I grabbed the bag - the very same one I'd given Reuven as a gift a few years earlier.

"These tefillin belonged to Robert," I said, holding them up to show Larry and Max. "It would be a great comfort and merit for his soul if you'd agree to put them on."

Both agreed, and watched in wide eyed fascination as I wrapped the black leather straps around their arms. They repeated Shema after me, word for word, tears glimmering in their eyes.

Before they left, I invited the whole family to join us at the Seder a couple of weeks later, and they promised they'd come.

Weeks later, Larry pulled me aside and thanked me with tears in his eyes.

"Putting on Robert's tefillin was very meaningful and significant," he told me. "Not only was it the first time I put on tefillin in all my 70 years, knowing I was helping a dear friend's soul made it even more emotional. But it's really Max that was affected the most."

He took a deep breath. "Max suffers from schizophrenia and delusions. The voices in his head give him no rest, and his fears make him suspicious of every stranger. Since the day he put on tefillin, the voices in his head have quietened. I feel like G-d - and Robert - are watching over him from Heaven."

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*



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