

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 II

By Chaya Chazan

With such a small community, and many of the residents elderly septuagenarians, there were times when we asked ourselves what we were doing in Dania Beach.

Were we making a difference? Was such a small shlichus sustainable? How would we manage financially when the pool of donors was virtually nil? But we pushed aside the doubts and continued trying to meet people, host meals and shiurim, and teach our community about Yiddishkeit.

Every Shabbos, I made my way from our rented three-bedroom to our rented Chabad house storefront, a 45 minute trek through South Florida's muggy humidity. Not only was the walk exhausting, it also meant we couldn't invite shul comers to join us for the seudah.

"We have to buy a house closer to shul," I told my wife. "Renting is a waste of money, which is why the Rebbe encouraged his chassidim to buy property. It will also show that we're fully dedicated to this shlichus, no matter what."

My wife agreed, and we began looking for a house. Unfortunately, there weren't many viable options. Most of the houses were not built with large families in mind. Finally, after a long year of searching, we found a house that was large enough, and a comfortable distance from our Chabad house. The only thing left to do was figure out how we'd pay a \$100,000 down payment with nothing.

I confided my worries to a fellow shliach who advised me to ask Mr. Moshe Tabasinik, a great friend and supporter of shluchim all over the world.

"I heard he's partial to Florida shluchim," my friend added. "It can't hurt to try! Contact Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky. He's Mr. Tabasinik's good friend and can connect you with him."

Of course I knew of Rabbi Kotlarsky, the head of Merkos, which was responsible for every shliach around the globe. With so much on his mind, would he have time for a small-time shliach he'd never met before?

I underestimated the kindness and dedication of that great man. Rabbi Kotlarsky not only spared me a few minutes of his time, he talked with me and heard me out for almost an hour.

"I'll be very honest with you," he sighed, after hearing my request. "I know Moshe Tabasinik very well. He loves helping shluchim who live in the middle of nowhere, Florida. Those, like you, who live in the hub of the Jewish community should have ready access to a donor base that can help you."

"Geographically, Dania Beach is in the center of the Jewish community," I conceded. "But in every other way, it's as much 'Yehupitzville' as any town on the panhandle."

"I understand. I'll speak with Moshe Tabasinik and let you know what he says," Rabbi Kotlarsky assured me.

The days passed by without any word from Rabbi Kotlarsky. With all the myriad details he had to oversee, had he remembered us?

We continued preparing for our Lag Baomer program, a barbecue in the park. It was later that night, after everyone else had left, and only I remained in the park, heaving folding tables back into the trunk of my car, that I received Rabbi Kotlarsky's call.

"He agreed! Moshe Tabasinik is going to help you buy your house!"

At a time when I doubted if our shlichus was valuable, this was a clear and direct sign from the Rebbe that if we just accepted our mission and did what we were supposed to do, he'd make sure we had all our needs met. Anytime I question what we're doing in Dania Beach, I just have to look



around my house to remember - this is clearly where we're meant to be!

"Hi; my name is Jamie*," read the email. "I'd like to eat in a sukkah this holiday and I was wondering if you knew of any in the area."

Of course, we invited Jamie to join us for the yom tov meal. I thought we hit it off, and Jamie came to shul and events a few more times after that.

A few months later, I realized I hadn't seen Jamie in a while. I messaged him, inviting him to join us that Friday night, but my message went unanswered. I tried contacting him a few more times after that, but either he never saw my messages, or he chose to ignore them.

A while later, my wife mentioned that she saw an Instagram post from Jamie with pictures and details of their new home, quite close to our Chabad house.

"I privately messaged him and asked if we could help him put up a mezuzah on his new house," she said. "Hopefully he'll answer."

To my surprise - and delight - Jamie answered that he'd be happy to have a mezuzah.

"Jamie! It's good to see you again!" I said, greeting him heartily. "What happened? Why'd you drop off the face of the earth so suddenly?"

At first, Jamie tried to fob me off with excuses about traveling for work and just getting caught up with life, but he soon admitted that he wasn't "feeling" Yiddishkeit.

"Please join us on Friday night," I begged him. "It's a really great ambiance! You'll meet a lot of other young professionals, and I'm sure you'll enjoy the singing, lechaims, and camaraderie."

Jamie reluctantly agreed to come, and I watched him carefully that Friday night as he circulated the crowd. He seemed to be having a good time, which his return the following week verified as fact. Slowly but surely, he began to get more involved. He brought his wife and children to shul as well, and started attending other programs and events. We also began a weekly chavrusa where we learned Tanya together.

When Jamie told me he'd be taking a business trip to New York, I urged him to visit the Ohel if he had time.

"You can ask the Rebbe for blessings for anything you need and take on a new commitment in your Judaism!" I explained.

"I'm not sure I'll have time," Jamie responded, noncommittally.

A few days later, Jamie texted me. *I just visited the Ohel. I bragged all about you to the Rebbe, and asked for blessings for you.*

It seemed that Jamie was finally "feeling" his Yiddishkeit.

When I met Moish*, I could tell he was uncomfortable. When he gave me a brief sketch of his childhood, I completely understood his disquiet. Growing up in Meah She'arim, his childhood had been filled with threats and punishments for daring to step a toe outside of the approved line. Yiddishkeit had been rammed down his throat with vivid retellings of the horrors that awaited the poor soul that forsook his sacred heritage. As soon as he was able, Moish left Meah She'arim - and his peyos, upbringing, and family - behind.

"Can I help you put a mezuzah on your door?" I asked him.

"I came to Dania Beach to escape at that," he answered, somewhat curtly.

"I understand," I replied, softly. "How about if I come over just to chat and share a coffee?"

"Fine," he agreed. A moment later, he paused and added, "You know what? While you're coming over, you may as well bring a mezuzah for the door."

I showed up a short while later with the mezuzah and coffee in hand. Moish shifted from one food to another and chewed his lip as he watched me affix the mezuzah to his doorpost.

"What are you really here for?" he burst out, finally. "What do you want of me?"

"Nothing," I answered, quietly. "I know you grew up with a Yiddishkeit full of terror and trauma. You were taught to serve Hashem through fear. All I want is to show you that it's possible to serve Hashem with love and joy."

We were both quiet for a moment.

"Do you want to come over Friday afternoon for a steak and a beer?" I asked. Moish nodded.

That was the beginning of a long and fruitful friendship. Moish comes to shul every week now, although he usually sits silently in the back during davening itself. He puts on tefillin and is starting to rebuild his relationship with Hashem, step by step.

I soon met a few other "Moish's" in Dania Beach and realized that these precious neshamos who'd been so hurt by their past needed love and acceptance. The ex-Satmar from Boro Park and the teacher's son from Crown Heights and the rosh kollel's son from Lakewood were all drifting, torn from their families and familiar backgrounds, seeking a place where they belonged. I realized it was my zechus and obligation to be their new home.

We met every week, and I encouraged them to share their stories. I tried to show them that they were welcome, loved, and appreciated not for the standard of kashrus they kept, but simply because they existed. They are my brothers, despite the differences between my black hat and beard and their tattoos and shorts.

Although many of them choose not to join the davening, I encourage them to lead the davening as chazan. Those who take me up on it are empowered to forge their own connection and enjoy the nostalgia as they sing the tunes of their youths.

This community we've created has since attracted others, similarly on the journey to find their niche in Yiddishkeit. They know, in our Chabad house, they have a home - and a hot bowl of cholent whenever they want!

**Names changed to protect privacy*



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