

ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Dovid and Talya Goldshmidt, CTeen of Atlanta, Atlanta, GA

Coming Full Circle, CTeen of Atlanta Part I

By Chaya Chazan

It was thanks to my paternal grandmother that my father had a bris at eight days old.

In Communist era Moldova, finding a mohel was no simple task, but my grandmother felt very strongly about it and somehow managed to get it done. She even arranged for the mohel to give her neighbors' sons brissim as well.

My father's hometown had a large Jewish population, but the long years of Communism had done their job too well, and they were all equal in their utter ignorance of anything Jewish. The only memory my father has of Yiddishkeit growing up is a quiet knock on the door on Pesach night, and a newspaper wrapped package containing shmurah matzah delivered surreptitiously.



When he was a teenager, his parents applied for exit visas. They were denied and maintained their "refusenik" status for the next eight years. As my father approached 18 - conscription age - it became imperative to get out before it was too late. A well-placed package of brandy managed to delay my father's conscription for a while. Baruch Hashem, just a few months later, my grandparents finally received their visas for the United States.

They relocated to Chicago, where my father met my mother, also a recent Soviet immigrant from Tajikistan. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society helped them find an apartment in West Rogers Park. My older sister was already five years old, so they looked for a preschool nearby. They were happy to find a Jewish preschool in the area, not really caring - or even fully understanding - that it was Orthodox-run.

When my sister came home from school on Friday afternoon, she'd ask, "Mom, why aren't you lighting candles? Dad, why aren't you making kiddush? My teacher said that's what we do!"

My parents had never heard of these mitzvos before, but they were ready to learn. Under their five-year-old daughter's instructions, they began taking on a few commitments.

Eventually, my parents decided to join a shul, and they started researching various options around them. As little as they knew, they still felt uncomfortable attending a shul whose rabbi didn't wear a yarmulka. None of the temples or synagogues they visited resonated, and their search remained unresolved.

A while later, my father received the shock of his life when the new boss walked into his office - with a yarmulka perched proudly on his head. Amongst the thousands of employees in the company, he was

the only one visibly Jewish. He took the opportunity to ask for a shul recommendation.

"You should try Chabad!" the boss suggested. "You'll love it!"

We met the shluchim at their Lag Baomer event, and were sufficiently hooked to return for Shavuot, and then Chanukah. We soon started going once a month for Shabbos, which then turned into weekly visits.

The Chabad house was five miles away, but my parents weren't even aware of the prohibition against driving on Shabbos. As soon as they learned of it, they were determined to make the walk to shul, week after week, no matter what weather Chicago threw at them. I remember accompanying my father on the weekly trek, even as young as four or five years old. One week, while trudging through a terrible downpour, a cab pulled up alongside us and offered us a ride, purely out of pity. My father resolutely shook his head. *We don't drive on Shabbos.* This dedication impressed upon me the conviction that when you do something, you do it all the way.

A couple of years later, we moved down the block from another Chabad house, so the long walks to shul were over. But our journey to Yiddishkeit was just beginning.

My siblings and I attended Modern Orthodox schools, and our family slowly began committing to various mitzvos. We kept Shabbos and kashrus, and my father got a pair of tefillin of his own. While I gained a lot of *knowledge* from my teachers, it was the shliach who inspired me with passion for Yiddishkeit. His weekly speeches in shul, paraphrased directly from the Rebbe's sichos, opened new worlds of thought and emotion to me. Even as a young boy of 11, I sat in shul, listening attentively to the rabbi's speech. Sometimes, I even transcribed his messages after Shabbos.

That summer, my mother asked if I wanted to go to a camp called Gan Yisroel.

"Do they have hockey?" is all I wanted to know.

"Yes," she answered.

I was happy to go to any camp that would allow me to enjoy my favorite pastime, so I enrolled in Gan Yisroel for the summer. After a whole year as the child of an immigrant household who lived a very different lifestyle than all my classmates, I finally felt like I belonged.

My counselors were the biggest influence on my life. They greeted me with so much warmth each day, I knew they truly loved and cared for me and accepted me exactly as I was. It was clear they found joy and fulfillment in their Yiddishkeit, while, at the same time, also being able to have fun and do "normal" things. I knew I wanted to be exactly like them when I grew up.

But when I confidently answered *a rabbi* when my classmates were all discussing what we wanted to be when we grew up, I got some raised eyes and barely concealed smirks. My parents were also confused by my ambition, and gently pointed out the very large gap between where I was now and where I'd have to be before becoming a rabbi. And although my religious observance waxed and waned throughout my high school years, and my behavior, dress, and friends didn't always reflect one with such a goal, my determination never wavered. Even while allowing myself to be distracted by parties and other experiences that took me further from my goal, I never compromised on Shabbos or kashrus, and I never missed a day of putting on tefillin.

My conduct throughout high school closely mirrored that of my classmates. Now, years later, while most of them maintain cultural or tenuous connections to Yiddishkeit, I've realized my ambition to be a rabbi and a shliach. I credit the example my counselors set for me, as well as my parent's simple, yet profound dedication to doing the right thing.

One day, when I was a sophomore in high school, a friend invited me to a barbeque hosted by CTeen. I immediately felt at home. I was surrounded by like-minded teens, and the shliach and bochurim who ran the program not only served as role models, but became trusted confidants and friends. I'd already aged out of Gan Yisroel, but I joined CTeen's summer program and created life-long friends.

The next year, I joined CTeen leadership and became president of the Skokie chapter in my senior year. During that year's international Shabbaton, I ran for the Leadership Awards and got voted Leader of the Year.

After high school, I deferred my college acceptance to attend yeshiva in Israel, and then, finally, a Lubavitcher yeshiva in Los Angeles. For the first time, I learned a maamer from the original text, and was introduced to all the niceties regarding proper yeshiva attire. I continued my yeshiva education in Oholei Torah, and got my first taste of shlichus the following year, when I was sent to South Africa as a bochur shliach.

Everything we do today in our CTeen center is inspired by my own memories of CTeen. As someone who grew up with a very similar background, I can relate to their breakup struggles, talk about their favorite bands, and identify with the dichotomy they're trying to bridge.

When I was a young girl, my parents' divorce saw me endlessly trying to straddle two fences, moving in increasingly opposite directions. In one home, I conformed to the religious rules I'd been brought up with and was learning in school. In the other, mitzvos were treated with more laxity and I was exposed to a world entirely new, and, at times, alluring.

My choice of schools vacillated as wildly as my consistency with regard to Torah and mitzvos. I attended mainstream Chabad schools, modern Orthodox schools, and even considered public school for a space.

I thought I'd found my niche in the modern Orthodox world, which seemed the easiest compromise between my parents' two very different households.

The summer I turned 16, I attended the Jewish Girls' Retreat, led by Rabbi and Mrs. Laber in Albany, New York. There, Yiddishkeit came alive for me in a way I'd never experienced before. Almost before I knew it, a desire to live my life with this conviction took hold of me, and I committed to strengthen my bond to Hashem, despite the drastic changes it would require of me.

I switched to Bnos Menachem High School in Crown Heights, and followed the conventional path of a Lubavitcher girl, including a year in a Chabad seminary in Israel.

I don't blame my husband for rejecting my resume when he first saw it. How was he supposed to know that a YU student of accounting was actually very interested in shlichus?

Baruch Hashem, there were other Divine messengers that brought our paths together. One of my classmates was a Crown Heightser whose home was Dovid's "home away from home." He had an open invitation to join for Shabbos, and he often took them up on it. My friend decided we'd be perfect for each other, and enlisted her parents' help in setting us up.

Despite our differences on paper, we quickly realized our goals and personalities aligned perfectly, and we got married a few months later.

and could see myself dedicating my life to teen outreach.

My wife and I embarked on our shlichus search with open minds. We were willing to take on any type of shlichus, provided we'd be independent and free to carve out our Chabad house as we saw fit. Since most cities in the world with a sizable Jewish population already have shluchim, it was harder to find than we thought.

Friends of mine offered to help us on our shlichus journey, and one rabbi in the Midwest told us about a promising location that had no shliach as of yet. It was an up and coming suburb with a growing population, so we'd be building our shlichus from scratch.

It was a collision with reality that forced me and my wife to re-evaluate our goals. The loneliness and isolation of being the only frum people for miles around had never struck us with quite as much force as it did on that initial visit.

We were disheartened, but not quite ready to give up. We contacted the New Shluchim Desk at Merkos, who match aspiring young shluchim with the cities that need them.

"What type of shlichus are you willing to do?" Rabbi Schanowitz, the manager of the New Shluchim Desk asked.

"Any, really," we answered.

"If you'd be willing to do teens, there are a lot of open options," he said, clicking through his list. "Shlichus with teens can be intimidating, so there are many shluchim desperate to have someone dedicated to run their CTeen chapter."

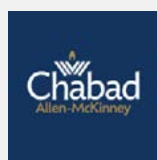
My wife and I looked at each other and smiled.

"If we don't feel qualified to work with teens, I'm not sure who would!" I laughed. "I'm a CTeen success story myself, and Talya perfectly understands the experience of a teen struggling to find themselves between two worlds. Let's do it!"

I knew I wanted shlichus from the first moments of my bochur shlichus in Johannesburg, South Africa. My friend and I were responsible for running events and programs for the high school, which included a diverse mix of Chabad kids, modern Orthodox, and even some with limited commitment to Torah and mitzvos. I enjoyed working with that age range,



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