

ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Dovi and Sarahle Henig, Chabad of Chengdu, China

Carrying on the Disco Rabbi's Legacy, Chabad of Chengdu Part I

By Chaya Chazan

As a grandchild of Rabbi Yitzchak Dovid Grossman, the founder of Migdal Ohr, the number of "siblings" I counted as my own was constantly growing.

My grandfather poured his heart into the school and the orphaned and at-risk children it served. Every so often, he'd knock on our front door and tell my mother, "Here is a child that needs a bed and a home. Please take him." Suffice to say, I always had room-mates.

Being raised in a household where our lives were dedicated to the wellbeing of others made shlichus - when I first learned about it many years later - a foregone conclusion.



Although my grandfather was a Lelover chassid, he was very close to the Lubavitcher Rebbe and asked his advice on many occasions.

The most memorable of these was when my mother was a young girl. She was happily playing with her friends on a school trip, frolicking around a date palm with loosely dangling fronds. One of her friends bent a palm frond back and giggled as she let go and it bounded back into place. Her laughing stopped abruptly as the palm branch hit my mother squarely in the face, scratching her eye badly.

My grandparents rushed my mother to the doctor, but they shook their heads grimly.

"The eye is badly infected," they explained. "She'll never see out of that eye again. She'll need extensive surgery to ensure the infection doesn't spread even further. No one here in Israel can perform such a complicated procedure. You'll have to take her to the United States for treatment."

With a heart weeping in pain, my grandfather penned a letter to the Rebbe, detailing the horrible accident and prognosis.

Check the mezuzahs, came the Rebbe's reply. When the sofer opened the scroll that'd been hanging on my mother's bedroom door, he gasped aloud and beckoned to my grandfather, pointing soundlessly. The words *bein eynecha* - between your eyes had been smudged by water and were illegible.

It took time and effort to arrange a trip and appointment overseas. My mother remained sightless in that eye and it caused her constant pain.

Finally, they arrived in New York and met the specialist. After a careful examination, he echoed the prognosis of the Israeli doctors.

Discouraged, but not entirely deterred, their next stop was 770 Eastern Parkway. As the Rebbe's car returned from the Ohel, my grandfather leapt out and pointed to my mother.

"This is my daughter. She needs a refuah shleima!" he cried.

The Rebbe looked at my mother carefully, wished her a "refuah shleima" and "bracha v'hatzlacha" and gave her a dollar bill. The Rebbe continued on his way to mincha, which started a few minutes later.

As my mother sat waiting for my grandfather to finish davening, her vision suddenly sharpened. Hazy objects became discernible, and she realized she was able to see out of her injured eye for the first time in over a year and a half. As soon as her father exited the shul, she ran to him, crying joyfully and relaying the incredible news.

Stunned by the miraculous and immediate fulfillment of the Rebbe's bracha for recovery, they returned to the doctor the next day for another examination.

"Which other specialist have you seen?" the doctor demanded, wonderingly. "He must be a miracle worker to have achieved such fantastic results so quickly!"

"He is!" my grandfather chuckled. He explained what had happened, while the doctor sat listening carefully. He sat for a few more moments in stunned silence.

"I wouldn't have believed you if I didn't see it with my own eyes," he admitted. "This is a different child than the one I examined yesterday! This is a true, undeniable miracle! I must learn more about the Rebbe! Can you direct me to where I can find out more?"

Soon afterwards, the doctor became a fully Torah observant Jew and chassid.

Although my family were Lelover chassidim, at 15, I attended a Chai Elul farbrengen where I heard Rabbi Deitch speak about teshuva and the Yomim Noraim according to Chassidus Chabad. I was fascinated by everything I heard and wanted to learn more. I began a regular chavrusa session where I delved more deeply into Tanya and maam- orim. The more Chassidus I learned, the more certain I became that I wanted to live my life by its doctrines.

I transferred to a Chabad yeshiva in Argentina and continued learning in Chabad institutions. Throughout my years in Chabad yeshivos, I heard a lot about shlichus and the Rebbe's mission to reach every Jew across the four corners of the world. As a grandchild of Rabbi Grossman, it made sense to me, and developed the ambition to join the ranks of the Rebbe's shluchim.

I also visited my cousins, Rabbi Gavi and Rivky Holtzberg OB"M in their Chabad house in Mumbai, India. I watched them greet travelers and visitors like family, warmly welcoming them into their home and caring for their every need - both physical and spiritual. Their door was open 24/7 to anyone and everyone. As the only Jewish presence in Mumbai, they weren't simply the address for spiritual guidance or kosher food. They were the center of everything, from food, to chatting with fellow Jews, to suggestions for excursions. It showed me what it truly meant to live a life of shlichus and inspired me to follow their example.

When I met my wife a short while later, she shared my ambitions. She'd been raised on shlichus and had always dreamed of opening a Chabad house of her own.

It was hard to find a place without any family connections, and I cried to my mentor, Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky A"H.

"Dovi, calm down," he reassured me. "You've only been married for two weeks! There's no rush! Submit your resume to the shlichim office and see what happens! Don't worry!"

A few months later, at the Kinus Hashluchim, my wife and I had 14 interviews set up with shlichim from around the world.

I was thrilled when Rabbi Mordechai Avtzon, the head shliach of China, told us he had a position available. From watching Gavi and Rivky at work, I knew how all-encompassing a shlichus in Asia could be, when you're the one and only source of anything Jewish for miles.

The more he told us, the more interested we became. The university in Chengdu had just started an exchange program and was about to welcome 800 Israeli students.

"They'll be starting the spring semester in April, just before Pesach," Rabbi Avtzon explained. "I'd love for you to be there in time to greet them."

After discussing it between ourselves and with our mashpikos, my wife and I agreed to take on the shlichus in Chengdu, China.

That Shabbos, we were hosted by my in-laws, and we gingerly broke the news. Their forks fell from their motionless hands, clanking noisily onto the table.

"Chengu, China?" my mother-in-law repeated, stupefied. "China? You're been married barely two months! This is crazy!"

Armed with the conviction that this was the right thing to do, and that it would be the fulfillment of both our dreams, we remained determined. A few weeks later, we packed up the wedding presents we'd just unwrapped and moved across the world to begin our new life.

Located in the center of China, Chengdu is known as the "Silicon Valley of China." It attracts a lot of wealthy Chinese residents, tourists, and businessmen.

When we first arrived, I asked where would be the best place to meet people.

"Try one of the discotheques dotting downtown," I was advised. "Most of them are run by Israelis."

I knew my grandfather had earned his nicknamed, "The Disco Rabbi" by his many visits to bars and discotheques to meet with Jews who'd given up on themselves, but I'd never visited one myself. It was time to step into my grandfather's shoes and take up his mantle.

As I walked into the bar, a group of swarthy Israelis looked at me in surprise.

"You need a minyan for a yahrzeit?" they asked.

"No, not today," I chuckled. "I came to meet you!"

One of them snickered. "Oh yeah? You want to hang out?" he challenged me.

"Of course," I answered, calm and assured.

He looked me up and down and pinned me with a cynical smirk. "We have absolutely nothing in common," he exclaimed. "In fact, I try to avoid datim like the plague!"

"Well, let's drink a lechaim and we'll find out if we have anything in common," I answered, climbing up onto a stool. "Can you pour me a drink?"

It took less than one round of drinks to cement our friendship.

Today, the owner, still one of my closest friends, hosts a weekly shiur in his bar where Jews gather to learn Torah and deepen their connection with Hashem.

"Come with us," said one of the eight policemen blocking the doorway.

"What - ? Why?" I asked.

They simply gestured for us to follow them to the police station. There, my wife and I were separated and grilled for hours. They wanted to know why we met with that person, and what we talked about with the other. Every detail of our months-long stay in Chengdu was combed over rigorously.

"Who is this?" asked the police chief, pulling out my pamphlet about the Ohel and pointing to a picture of the Rebbe.

"That's my father," I answered.

"Ah, that's why you have a big picture of him hanging in your living room." After a moment, the chief asked, "And the rabbi in Hong Kong? Is he your brother?"

I smiled and nodded. Even the Chinese police chief understood that *Chassidim ein mishpacha* - Chassidim are all one family!

After some years, the Israeli government opened a new consulate in China, choosing Chengdu for the office. Knesset member Avigdor Lieberman came to Chengdu to oversee the preparations, gracing our Chabad house with a visit as well.

"There are so many large and important cities in China. Why did you decide to open the consulate here in Chengdu?" I asked him.

"It came from a recommendation from the experienced members at the Foreign Office," he explained. "When they heard you opened your Chabad here, they knew Chengdu was a good choice. 'Chabad always has a finger on the pulse,' they told me. 'If they opened a Chabad house in Chengdu, it means it would be a good choice for us as well.'"

Over the years, our shlichus grew by leaps and bounds. We knew over 500 people by name and our Shabbos table was standing room only, week after week. We ran a successful kindergarten, had multiple shiurim each week, and hosted many holiday programs and events.

But Covid hit China hard. People were literally collapsing on the street, and the government enforced strict quarantine rules. Almost overnight, the city emptied as visitors and expats returned to their home countries, hoping to outrun the dreaded plague.

We weren't sure what to do. There was no one left to bring Yiddisheit to, even if quarantine rules let us meet with other people. But how could we leave our makom shlichus?

I called Rabbi Kotlarsky A"H, who had been a mentor and continual source of support and guidance throughout our shlichus. I felt grateful to be his "favorite" (although many other shlichim feel they more rightly deserve that title).

"Consult with rabbanim and mashpiim," he advised me. Of course, being the powerhouse he was, he set up the conference call himself. The answer was clear: we should leave Chengdu for the time being.

For a couple of months, we wandered from one country to another, as Covid dashed across the world, leaving thousands of casualties and strict quarantine rules in its wake. By that time, China was already waking from its Covid stupor and slowly starting to return to regular life. We heard a few community members had returned to Chengdu, and we delightedly followed.

It was a brand new shlichus, like beginning afresh on a new page. Our community of hundreds had disappeared. The school and all its students were gone; the regular minyan go-ers had vanished. Our Shabbos table was achingly empty of guests. We had to rebuild, one person at a time.

And we did.

Slowly, we began reconstructing our community. Soon, we had a congregation of 25, which grew steadily as businesspeople and tourists returned to the city. Our Shabbos table refilled with guests, and the halls resounded with conversation and learning once more. Now, once again, we can expect anywhere from 40-100 guests for Shabbos, and host regular classes for our renewed community.

It reminded us of our mission in this lonely corner of the world: to find every Jew, one by one, and gather them home.



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