

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 II

By Chaya Chazan

"Mark*, Yom Kippur is coming!" I earnestly explained to a young man I'd gotten to know recently. "It's the holiest day of the year, the day when the highest levels of our spiritual selves connect directly with G-d, unimpeded by any impurities that may stain it throughout the rest of the year!"

"Woah! That's a lot for an elevator pitch! Explain it to me again, slowly," Mark requested.

I took my time explaining the deep significance, importance, and sanctity of Yom Kippur.



"We're like angels on that day!" I gestured excitedly. "Like angels, we don't eat, drink, or worry over our bodily comforts. We wear white, the color of purity, and we spend the entire day in prayer. The final moments, Neilah, is when we are closest with G-d; when the gates of Heaven are open wide to hear our prayers."

Mark was fascinated.

"I've never celebrated Yom Kippur before, but you really make it sound like something special! I'd like to join you this year! What am I not allowed to do again?"

I reiterated the prohibitions against eating, drinking, wearing leather shoes, and using lotions.

"Since we're spending all day praying, there's a special prayer book just for Yom Kippur called a Machzor. Here, take this one, and bring it with you to shul on Yom Kippur. I'll make sure you always know what page we're up to."

"Looking forward to it!" Mark smiled, accepting the Machzor. "I'll see you in shul on Yom Kippur!"

There was a lot on my mind as I surveyed the hotel conference room we'd rented for Yom Kippur services, but I didn't forget Mark's promise, and I looked for him amongst the crowd. I couldn't find his bright smile and boyish curls anywhere.

I was sure he'd show up shortly, but as the day progressed, Mark was still noticeably absent. Mincha and Neilah came and went with no appearance either.

After Yom Tov, Mark explained what had happened.

"I booked a room in the hotel and was all ready to show up, right on time," he began. "As I reached for my shoes, I suddenly realized I'd forgotten to bring a non-leather option. I didn't know what to do! I decided to remain in my room, reading the Machzor you gave me. I spent the entire day reading every word, praying my heart out - shoeless!"

From time to time, I host what I call "farbrengens," and what they call "parties," in our yard. The guys insist on the Scotch, whiskey, and cigars, and I insist on the spiritual part. I try to keep it light and brief, but I always include a short talk about an important concept in Judaism, usually connected to the parsha of the week.

One time, I brought up the "pintele yid," the eternal ember extant within every Jew. I explained how its the pintele yid that will never allow a Jew to completely divorce themselves from their faith, how it remains dormant until a great force awakens it and ignites it to flame.

"Oh, come on, Rabbi," scoffed one attendee. "That sounds like a fairy tale you made up just to make yourself feel better. Look around! None of us keep mitzvot! None of us follow the Torah! I guess our embers must've given up, eh?" He guffawed and elbowed the guys next to him, who joined in his laughter.

"It's true," I answered, softly. "Think about it. No matter how removed you feel from Judaism, there's *something* you keep; some tradition you still honor."

"My mother lit candles every Friday night," offered one man.

"My father wouldn't let pork into our house, even though we ate at non-kosher restaurants," said another.

One by one, each person in the circle shared a mitzvah or tradition their family kept, although they were thoroughly anti-religious in every other way.

Finally, we reached Idan*.

He shook his head. "I don't know. My family is pretty secular," he said. "We didn't observe Shabbat in any way, our kitchen was entirely not kosher - we even ate family dinner on Yom Kippur!"

"Was there *nothing* you can remember related to Judaism?" I asked.

"It's such a tiny thing," Idan finally said, after thinking for a while. "My father bought a warming plate that stayed in storage all year long. The only day we used it was on Yom Kippur. My father insisted that all food be made ahead of time and warmed up, so that we wouldn't be *cooking* on Yom Kippur itself."

"That's the pintele yid, asserting itself," I nodded. "Our job is to listen to its cry and light it ablaze."

One of the most challenging aspects of our shlichus is the utter isolation our children face. There are no Jewish children their age in the entire city; their social life

exists via chat boxes and grainy videos of their classmates from online school.

We make it a priority to visit New York every summer so our children can attend day camp and make friends. It's a long, exhausting - not to mention, expensive - trip, but we know how important it is for them.

One summer, we returned home late at night, exhausted from the 29-hour journey. All we wanted was to collapse in our beds, but the guard at the front gate refused to allow us in.

"You have to wait here," he insisted. "The police are on their way!"

"The police?" I asked, suddenly awake and alert. "Why?"

"A group of thieves targeted this apartment complex. They robbed every single house. The police are on their way to investigate."

A few moments later, a couple of squad cars squealed to a stop and the police officers got to work immediately, dusting for fingerprints and taking statements. They led us to our front door and asked us to identify what had been stolen.

"N-n-nothing," I answered, stupefied, as I realized everything was perfectly in place. "They didn't take anything!"

The policeman silently raised an eyebrow as he jotted down his notes and wished us a good night. I knew my friend on the police force would keep me updated.

A short while later, the thieves were apprehended. My friend called to tell me the news.

"We asked about you specifically during the interrogation," he said.

"Me? Why?" I asked.

"A few detectives thought it was suspicious that the entire complex had been robbed, while only your house remained untouched. The fact that you were 'conveniently' away in New York only made you seem guiltier. They suspected you of being in cahoots with the gang, reporting on your neighbors and what they had that was worth stealing, while you made sure of your alibi by leaving town. Of course, I defended you and told them it was utter nonsense - which they would know for themselves if they'd ever met you - but you were still a strong suspect.

"When the thieves were caught, the detectives asked about you and why your house had been spared. The thief showed the detective pictures he'd taken on his phone that explained why they'd skipped your house. The gang prided themselves on knowing how

to disarm every alarm system available on the market. When they got to your house, they saw the mezuzah on the door. They were unfamiliar with this piece of tech, and took a picture of it to try to figure out how to disable it later on."

"I guess they learned that they can outsmart technology, but they can never outsmart Hashem's Divine protection."

It was our first Purim in Chengdu, and we invited everyone we knew to a grand Purim party. Matt*, a young American man we'd recently met, walked in with his arm slung around the shoulders of a friend I'd never met before.

"Look! I brought a friend!" Matt laughed. "Rabbi, meet Sam*. Sam, meet Rabbi."

I shook Sam's hand and welcomed him warmly. His features, a curious blend of Asiatic and Western, piqued my curiosity.

"How did you find out about us?" I asked.

"Matt told me he was going to a Jewish center called 'Chabad' for a holiday party. I told him I'm partly Jewish too, so he invited me along. I hope it's okay," he added, hesitantly.

"Of course! Of course! We're so happy you're here! What did you mean by 'partly Jewish'?"

Sam sighed. "It's a sad story. My grandmother was from Lodz. My grandfather was a Nazi soldier, so after they got married, they had to flee to Argentina. My mother was born there, but she moved to Japan as an adult. She met my father there, and I was born.

"With the Argentine, Japanese, Polish, and German blood, Judaism hardly had a fighting chance. As a kid, I rarely heard about it. The only thing I remember is what my mother told me she learned from her mother: Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad!"

The chassidishe accent on the lips of this complex blend of humanity made my heart ache. I put my hand on his shoulder. "Sam, you're just as Jewish as Moses! Would you like to put on tefillin?"

Sam had never heard of tefillin before, but once I explained it and showed him the black boxes, he willingly agreed. For the rest of the night, Sam sat transfixed, listening to every word of the farbrengen that followed the Purim party.

It turned out to be a life-changing night for Sam. We located documents confirming his mother's Jewish identity, and Sam began to learn more about his ne-

glected heritage. He started putting on tefillin daily, and keeping kashrus to the best of his ability.

In an event that moved me to tears, Sam chose a new Jewish name for himself: Simcha - reminiscent of the day he'd learned about his Jewish roots.

Although we'd only been in Chengdu for a few months, we advertised our Pesach seder relentlessly, so that we had 250 registrations weeks before the event. Our Chabad house was nowhere large enough to host such a crowd, so I began searching for a viable venue.

I was pleased to book with one hotel, but they called me a few days later, apologizing that they had to break the contract. I found another hotel, but they, too, canceled a few days later. Every hotel I booked followed the same pattern. I eventually learned government agents had pressured the hotels to cancel the contracts. They were suspicious of the foreigner and his strange holiday events.

I called my friend from the American Consulate and explained my quandary.

"What if you cater my birthday party, which will be... oh, I don't know... say, on the first night of Pesach?" he suggested.

"Perfect!" I laughed. "As long as you're okay with a menu of dry matzah and maror!"

The booking for the birthday party went through smoothly, and we were able to host a beautiful, heart-felt seder in a spacious ballroom.

When the seder ended late at night, I still had to make my way back home. It was over an hour's walk, and I wasn't familiar enough with the city to be confident I'd find my way there, especially at night. I knew I couldn't ask anyone to look it up on their GPS, so my wife came up with an ingenious idea. She wrote our address in Hanzi, Chinese lettering, on my undershirt.

As I made my way home that night, I'd stop a passerby, pull up my shirt and ask, "Excuse me, how do I get here?"

I got a lot of surprised looks, but baruch Hashem, it worked, and I made it home safely!

**Names changed to protect identity*



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