

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 III

By Chaya Chazan

We got to know David* pretty well over the seven months he spent on business in Chengdu. Originally from New Jersey, David was a Syrian Jew with strong family ties and traditional values.

David's business in Chengdu was coming to a close, and he'd soon be returning to the States. Before he left, I visited and asked him to promise me two things: that he'd find a nice Jewish girl to marry, and that he'd put on tefillin every single day for the next year.

David agreed, and we solidified the commitment with a shared lechaim and fond farewells.

A few months later, I found myself in New Jersey on a fundraising trip. Every minute of my day was strictly accounted for, each meeting rolling straight into the next. Of course,

I remembered David and wanted to see him, but it was impossible to find even half an hour for which I could slip away.

On my final morning in New Jersey, as I was on my way to my first meeting of the day, I thought to myself, *the whole reason I'm here is to fundraise for my shlichus. So if my shlichus is the main goal and driving force, how can I possibly prioritize a fundraising meeting over meeting David and fulfilling my mission?*

I immediately called and canceled my appointment. My next call was to David.

"David! Hi! How are you?" I greeted him jovially over the phone.

"Rabbi Dovi!? Is that you?"

"Yes! I'm actually here, in New Jersey, and I have some free time now. Can I meet with you?" I asked.

"Of course! Of course! I can't believe it! This is crazy! I can't believe you called me at this exact moment. I'll send you the address, and I'll see you soon!"

After David and I finished catching up, I asked him why he'd sounded so shocked and taken aback at my call.

"Your timing was nothing short of miraculous," David said, leaning back in his chair. "I had plans to meet up with some friends at the beach today," he continued. "I quickly hopped in the shower and mentally planned my day. I knew there wouldn't be much time before I'd have to leave, and I still had to get dressed, eat breakfast - and put on tefillin. I'd be cutting it very close.

"What if you skip tefillin today? A niggling thought insisted. Yes, you promised Rabbi Dovi, but that was four months ago! He probably forgot all about it already.

"As I stepped out of the shower, my phone rang. It was you."

"So did you put on tefillin today?" I asked.

"Do you even need to ask?" David laughed. "I'm not one to ignore a message straight from Heaven!"

After the birth of our son, Menachem Mendel, we were honored to host my grandfather, Rabbi Yitzchak Dovid Grossman, who came to Chengdu to serve as Menachem's sandek.

On Friday night, we hosted a large crowd of over 250 guests, most of whom stayed after the meal for the shalom zachor. My grandfather presided, his mesmerizing personality lighting up the room and endearing him to every person present.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. A wet, bedraggled, Israeli backpacker entered, apologetically wiping his feet as he came in. As I showed him where to stow his bag, my grandfather stood up to welcome him.

"You!" the backpacker burst out, and began crying.

After he calmed down, we asked what had prompted his outburst.

"My name is Dror," he began, by way of explanation. "I just finished a long stint in the army and I wanted to travel the world. I decided that, to truly get a feel of the culture, I'd make my way around by hitchhiking rides. I took a flight from Israel to Russia, but from then, I was solely on foot and thumbs.

"My journey took me all over Europe and Asia, and I loved every minute. Yesterday, I decided to visit a nearby city, and so, as is my usual, I walked to the highway and stuck out my thumb. It wasn't too long before a friendly truck driver pulled over and offered me a seat. He was heading home, and his village wasn't too far from my intended destination.

"After a couple hours, traffic came to a complete standstill. The entire highway was being repaved, and traffic was diverted to another road.



"After consulting a map, the driver turned to me and apologized. The detour would double the time it'd take him to get home, so he was going to turn around and return to our city of origin. He asked if I wanted to go back with him, but I figured I'd try my luck and figure out some way to reach my destination.

"The detour wasn't well traveled, and I walked for miles without seeing a single car. And then it started to rain. I don't need to tell anyone *here* what Chinese rain storms are like! I couldn't see five feet ahead of me, and, within moments, I was soaked from head to toe.

"I pulled out a bottle of whiskey I had on reserve and finished the last bit left. Wet, cold, and stuck on an endless road with no end in sight, I felt hopeless.

"Suddenly, I remembered something from my senior year of high school. The school I attended wasn't religious, but before the holidays, they brought a rabbi in. I don't remember his name; I don't remember what he spoke about. All I remember is that he taught us a song about how what *has* happened is in the past, and all we can do is start over again from the beginning.

"I began singing the song as loudly as I could, trying to cheer myself up. Just then, a car pulled up beside me and offered me a ride. He spoke some English, and I managed to communicate that I was an Israeli.

"Ah; I'll bring you to a Jewish place, he told me. He drove here and dropped me off at your front door. Then the door opened, and who do I see? The exact rabbi who came to my school in 12th grade and taught us that song!"

We were all deeply inspired by this incredible tale of hashgacha pratis. My grandfather and I spent the rest of the night farbrenging with Dror, who was still shaken by the uncanny occurrence. He felt it was a message from G-d, and took it to heart. He began learning more about his Jewish heritage, and today, Dror is committed to a Torah-true way of life.

Mr. Emek* was a successful businessman whose meetings often brought him to Chengdu. I was overjoyed when Mr. Emek informed me that he was about to close a very big deal, and he wanted to donate 20% of his profits to Chabad of Chengdu.

"I've enjoyed your hospitality so many times, and I see how important the work you do is," he told me. "I want to partner with you!"

Mr. Emek asked me to meet with him and his lawyer and sign an agreement detailing the donation and its use. I made sure to read it over carefully, and bells began clanging in my ear. While there was no legal issue with Mr. Emek's deal, it was possible that it would violate the halachos of taking interest.

I spoke with rabbanim and was assured that, since I wasn't the one involved in the deal, and was simply the recipient of the donation, it was halachically fine to accept Mr. Emek's generosity. However, when I told my grandfather about it, he reminded me of his oft-repeated refrain from Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk: *Man's purpose in the world is to rise above his nature.*

"Saba, you don't understand!" I pleaded desperately. "In a couple of days, the yearly tax on my Chabad house is due. It's thousands of dollars that I don't have, and this donation couldn't have come at a better time!"

My grandfather gently pushed me to do the right thing, acknowledging how difficult it would be to say no, given the context. His words left a profound impact on me, and, by the end of the conversation, I'd agreed to decline Mr. Emek's donation.

I knew I'd done the right thing, but as I busily prepared for the massive Purim seuda we'd be hosting the next day, the worry of how I'd pay the tax without this windfall clouded my mind with anxiety.

Hundreds joined us for Purim, feasting and celebrating deep into the night. It was already quite late at night when we were finally able to start cleaning up. As I swept the floor and stacked folding chairs, I kept thinking, *how am I going to pay the tax tomorrow? What am I going to do?*

A knock broke my reverie, and I hurried to the door, expecting someone looking for an object they'd mistakenly left behind. It was Oren*, a frequent visitor at our Chabad house, who'd enjoyed the Purim celebrations just a couple of hours before.

"Hi Oren! Did you leave something here?" I asked.

"No Rabbi. I came to give you this." He held out an envelope filled with crisp bills. "I don't need this money right now. You can borrow it and repay me next year." He waved goodbye and left once again, leaving me staring at his retreating shadow in wonder.

"You were right!" I told my grandfather, laughing and crying at the same time. "When you overcome your nature for Hashem, Hashem overturns nature for you."

Odelia's* travels throughout the Far East introduced her to a whole wealth of spiritual paths she'd never encountered in Israel. She found herself drawn to a sect that practiced Hindu philosophy through yoga.

Despite her connection with the group and its spiritual leader, Odelia did not forget her Jewish roots. From time to time, she visited the Chabad house and paid homage to her heritage.

As Chanukah was fast approaching, I made sure to remind everyone of the mitzvah to light menorah. I gave out hun-

dreds of menorah kits and encouraged everyone to light it, wherever they were.

On the first night of Chanukah, we hosted a massive public menorah lighting, and there were a million details to arrange and oversee. In the midst of the chaos, Odelia called.

"Tonight is the first night of Chanukah, right?" she asked.

"That's right. Do you have a menorah?"

"No; I don't. But I light the menorah every year, and I don't want to skip it this year. I'm at a yoga retreat now. What should I do?"

"Maybe this is the exact reason G-d *wanted* you at this yoga retreat!" I told her. "It's your job to spread light in *that* corner of the world. I'm sure you can find a candle and a match. Light the candle, and don't forget to say the three brachot!"

Odelia promised she would, and hung up the phone feeling reassured. I went back to arranging the public menorah lighting and almost forgot all about it.

Odelia quietly asked for, and was given, a candle and a match. She looked for an unobtrusive spot to light her lone candle, but the guru noticed what she was doing and insisted she light it in the center of the room, in full public view. Odelia sang out the brachos and answered amen, a lone voice in a room full of yoga enthusiasts.

The next day, I received a call from a young man I'd never met before.

"My name is Gilad*," he introduced himself. "I left Israel at fifteen and began wandering through Asia, trying to find my place. I cut off all contact with my family and, of course, all connection to Judaism. I found this Hindu yoga group and have stayed with them ever since.

"Last night, all that changed. At first, I couldn't believe my eyes and ears. Was it possible that someone was lighting a *menorah* in the middle of a yoga retreat? As she lit the candle, I felt a responding flame ignite inside my soul. Memories of Chanukah nights, gathered around the menorah with my family, filled my mind.

"I was lost for so long, but the light of the menorah brought me home."

*Names changed to protect privacy



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