

# ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

*Rabbi Nochum and Fruma Schapiro, Chabad of the North Shore, Sydney, Australia*

## Living a Joyous Yiddishkeit

By Chaya Chazan

**My first shlichus experience tested my mettle as a shliach, but it taught me that if I could make it there, I could make it anywhere.**

For years, individual bochurim had been traveling into Soviet Russia, trying to find Jews and teach them about Yiddishkeit, all while also dodging the KGB. To avoid detection, they couldn't meet with any one person consistently, or even stay in the same city for too long. They used every second at their disposal to infuse Russian Jewry with pride and knowledge, but their schedules were unpredictable and erratic.

In the mid 1980s, a plan was made that would ensure more consistency. A rotation of pairs of bochurim traveled to the Soviet Union every month, so that the next group arrived as the first ones left.

The new group was able to pick up the shiurim right where the previous group had left off, so the Russian Jews brave enough to attend were able to gain true insight and understanding into what they were learning.

I was privileged to be one of those bochurim, and those years of teaching Tanya in hidden basements, after switching taxis three times, suddenly doubling back and crossing unexpected streets, and knocking with pre-arranged secret passwords still live vividly in my memory.

After the tragic death of Rabbi Tzvi Kogan, HYD, I participated in a Zoom call to be menachem avel his father.

"The zechus of living in a Chabad community, just blocks away from a replica of 770, is what gave you two children who are shluchim!" one of the other well wishers commented.

"No; that's not why," Rabbi Kogan shook his head. "It's because I learned Tanya with Nachum Schapiro in Soviet Russia."

Every Jew we met in Russia was thirsting deeply for Yiddishkeit, and the impact we were able to have was enormous. I asked the Rebbe's permission to return to Russia a second time, which was granted, with the Rebbe adding a reminder to "be careful."

I returned a third time after my engagement for the whole summer. I asked the Rebbe's permission to open an official - albeit underground - yeshiva so the learning could continue even more intensely and with additional consistency. The Rebbe agreed, again, urging caution, and even allowed the fledgling yeshiva to bear the name *Tomchei Temimim*, continuing the legacy of the first Tomchei Temimim established by the Rebbe Rashab.

After my wife and I got married, I asked the Rebbe's permission to take advantage of a new law allowing Americans a three month visa to enter Russia. This time, the Rebbe refused, explaining that Russia was no place to spend our shana rishona.

Instead, I enrolled in kollel, as was customary for newly married men.

A few months later, my father-in-law, Rabbi Pinchas Feldman, invited us to join him on his shlichus in Sydney, Australia.

I was sure I knew what the Rebbe's answer would be - after all, the Rebbe had just clearly insinuated that the only place for a shana rishona couple is in kollel. To my surprise, the Rebbe encouraged us to take the position, adding that it did not contradict his former response to me. Even as a bochur, the Rebbe encouraged me to



earn my semicha and even dayanus, so I'd already learned the requisite knowledge most only acquire in kollel.

So, before we'd even celebrated our four month anniversary, we were headed on a transatlantic flight to the other side of the world.

Sydney itself already boasted a large and flourishing Jewish community, complete with primary and secondary schools for both boys and girls. However, the suburb of St. Ives, about a 40 minute's drive over the bridge, had little to offer by way of Yiddishkeit. We took over a struggling minyan and began to build our community.

My experience in Russia taught me how important Torah knowledge is to our people, so we began by giving weekly shiurim, hosting lecture series featuring world renowned speakers, and inviting families to join us for Shabbos meals.

In the summer of 1991, I started a day camp for local kids. Of course, I wrote to the Rebbe, asking for a bracha for hatzlachah.

Over time, I gave over the directorship to others, and eventually, many years later, to my son and daughter-in-law.

Camp registration had fluctuated from year to year, and that year, their first year of directing camp, there were only seven campers signed up. Of course, that didn't stop them from giving it their all and pouring all their time, energy, and attention to every camper and activity. Still, my daughter-in-law was disappointed with the low attendance, and she wrote to the Rebbe, detailing her frustration.

The next day, her mother excitedly forwarded her a publication that had just been released, featuring letters the Rebbe wrote to various individuals. Her mother was excited to point out one of the letters included that had been sent to me almost thirty years prior.

"In response to your news regarding the summer camp in S. Ives, may it be with lots of hatzlacha and with much growth." The Rebbe had even underlined the word "growth."

The Rebbe's response was as comforting and galvanizing to my daughter-in-law as it had been to me, thirty years earlier.

Today, the success of the camp has led to many other programs, including CKids, CTeen, JewQ, and more, a true fulfillment of the Rebbe's bracha.

While door knocking can often be a shliach's most dreaded task, in Australia, where people are more open and friendly, it feels a little less daunting.

I sent two merkos shlichus bochurim from door to door. When they got to the Roeber's\* house, they knocked on the door and were greeted by the friendly, smiling man of the house.

"Can I offer you a mezuzah for your door?" one of the bochurim asked.

"Sure!" Mr. Roeber agreed.

They invited him to shul, and, after meeting his young son, gave him the information about our Hebrew school as well.

When the Roebers came to shul for the first time, I sensed they'd be receptive to more than just shul visits every few weeks. We invested a lot of time and care, learning with them one-on-one, having them over for Shabbos often, and supporting them as they began committing to one mitzvah after another.

Of course, the nachas Hashem receives from a Jew putting on tefillin once, or a woman lighting candles is immeasurable. But when we have the opportunity to give the gift of Yiddishkeit in its entirety, we are fulfilling shlichus as the Rebbe envisioned.

Today, the Roebers are leaders in Melbourne's Chabad community and proud chassidim!

I was saddened to hear about Vlad's\* declining health. We'd been good friends for years, and it was hard to see him in so much pain.

One motzei Shabbos, I visited him in the hospital. His family, maintaining a constant vigil over his bedside, had drawn faces and gaunt expressions. Machines beeped steadily, giving the mistaken impression of life and vitality.

The family was gathered to say goodbye. Vlad was clinically dead, and the doctors had told them it was only a matter of time. I said a kapitel of Tehillim and recited viduy. I tried my best to impart some words of comfort and strength to his family, but



seeing him in such a condition was difficult, even for me!

As I left the hospital, I thought, *If only I could call 770 and hear the Rebbe's voice giving Vlad a bracha. I wish every shliach had the koach of the Rebbe to give brachos in that way.*

Early the next morning, my phone rang. My heart dropped when I saw it was Vlad's family.

"Hello?" I answered, bracing for the news.

"It's a miracle!" they screamed. "Vlad is doing so much better! He's literally come back to life! The doctors are hopeful that he'll make a full recovery!"

It took a few months for Vlad to recover, but the day he was released from the hospital felt like a taste of Geula.

What cosmic forces were at work to enact this miracle? I can never say. But the Rebbe often quoted that "the shliach has the koach of the sender!"

It was just before Rosh Hashana, and there were a thousand and one details to arrange and tasks to be done. Just then, I got a call from a woman I'd met only a few times before.

"Rabbi Schapiro?" her voice was hesitant. "I know you don't know me very well, but I think we need a rabbi."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"It's my father-in-law," she explained. "He's doing very poorly and the doctors are pressuring us to sign a DNR. Before we do that, we want to make sure he'll be buried the Jewish way. Are you able to visit for a short while?"

I quickly rearranged my schedule and carved out some time to see the patient, James. The pallor of his face was exceeded only by the frailty of his withered skin and bones.

I offered to help him put on tefillin and he nodded with extreme effort. I carefully wrapped the tefillin around his head and arms, trying my best to hide my shock at his emaciated state.

His daughter-in-law whispered to me that he'd been on a hunger strike for the past month, and had refused even a single bite of food. His condition deteriorated rapidly, but he still refused to eat.

"James," I called, praying to Hashem to put the right words in my mouth. "G-d

sent your soul down into this world to *live*. That is your mission. G-d needs you to eat and regain your strength! You must eat!" Seeing a box of cornflakes and milk left on the side by a hopeful nurse, I picked it up. "Will you take a bite?"

James nodded feebly.

I quickly pressed the button, calling for the nurse. "Can you help James eat something?" I asked her.

She shot me a look, filled with compassion and tinged by despair. "The patient has refused to eat anything for the last month," she explained, patiently.

"I know. But he's agreed to eat now."

At my insistence, the nurse tried feeding James the cereal. To her shock, he actually opened his mouth and swallowed it. He wasn't able to eat much, but it was a step in the right direction.

The next day, I was called to the hospital again, to "work my magic" and convince James to eat. Almost as if I was convincing my five year old to eat his dinner, I chastised James for his refusal. Baruch Hashem, he agreed to try some more food - this time, a nutrient dense shake they'd prepared for him.

Slowly but surely, James regained his strength. By Simchas Torah, he was well enough to come to shul.

"James, G-d wants us not only to live, but to live joyfully!" I explained. "What brings you joy? Is there a specific hobby you enjoy?"

"I used to paint," James admitted.

"Wonderful!" I replied. "I've been looking for an artist who could create a mural of the six days of creation for our shul! I'm looking forward to seeing your commission!"

Filled with a sense of purpose and joy, James went on to live many more happy, healthy years. Many of his paintings and art pieces grace our Chabad house walls.

Gilad\* was one of those transient visitors who'd visit Chabad house for a week or so and then disappear for the next few months. I never knew when I'd see him again next, or what prompted his return to shul.

One day, as I was walking to my car, I saw him across the street.

"Gilad! Hi! I haven't seen you in so long!"

"Shalom Rabbi Schapiro! It's nice to see you!"

"While I have you here, do you want to put on tefillin? I can grab it from my car right now."

"No; not now," Gilad replied.

We said goodbye and parted ways.

A couple of days later, Gilad called the Chabad house. "How can I get a pair of tefillin?" he asked.

We were happy to help set him up with a set, but I was curious as to what had prompted the sudden reversal.

"When I bumped into you a few days ago, I was running an errand. I was really annoyed, because I'd forgotten my wallet at home, so I had to go back to get it and then come all the way back. That's when I saw you, and you offered me a chance to put on tefillin. At the time, of course, I said no. But I've been thinking about it non-stop ever since. G-d clearly wanted us to meet. He even made me forget my wallet so I'd have to come back and be right on time to meet you on the street. And even though G-d orchestrated our meeting, I refused to put on tefillin! I can't believe I ignored such a blatant message from G-d. I decided to make up for it by committing to wear tefillin every day!"

Had Gilad said yes that day, he might've never thought of it again. The guilt pushed him to repent and repair his omission. May we all merit to affect such a complete teshuva that our "sins become merits!"

Last Chanukah, our community was rocked as we grieved the horrific deaths of the Bondi Beach Massacre. Fifteen precious lives were snuffed out by hate, while dozens others fought for their lives in the hospital.

And the world mourned with us.

A couple of days later, I attended a Faith Leaders meeting at the governor's mansion.

"Where do we go from here?" was the prevailing cry.

"We need to increase in acts of goodness and kindness," I explained. "The only thing that can dispel darkness is light!"

The governor was inspired and created the *One Mitzvah for Bondi* campaign, encouraging supporters from all faiths and walks of life to increase light in the world



by taking on a resolution in honor of the souls of the departed.

While Chabad of Bondi was setting up their public menorah lighting on Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach, we were busy setting up a Chanukah party of our own, 45 minutes away.

A high profile government official attended our event, and I asked if he'd be willing to put on tefillin.

"Sure," he answered.

"Would you be willing to do it on stage, in front of everyone?" I asked, pushing my luck.

"I'd be happy to," he answered.

Seeing a famous and powerful figure proudly and lovingly keeping his Jewish faith and traditions alive, echoing the message of the Maccabees, was inspiring to everyone present. The applause gave way to curious whispers and rumors of "an incident" in Sydney.

As we finished lighting the menorah and the last strains of Maoz Tzur faded, we heard the terrible news. Chaos erupted as everyone called their loved ones to check on them and worried about the safety of our own gathering. As the horrible news continued to filter in, it was all I could do to encourage everyone to remain steadfast in their Jewish pride and continue spreading light.

The police barricaded our shuls and schools the next day, but we insisted they be opened.

"We cannot cower in fear and let them win! We need to show up and *strengthen* our commitment to Judaism!" I explained, passionately.

That night, the night following the massacre, we had another Chanukah event scheduled at a local shopping center. They were too worried to hold it there, so instead, we moved the event to an indoor, private location. Unbelievably, we had over 50 people show up, determined to show their Jewish pride despite everything.

I took the opportunity to talk about tefillin, and how it helps frame our response to evil - after all, the straps of the tefillin represent how our logic must rule over our instinct, and not vice versa. I promised to fund a pair for anyone who'd commit to wear them daily.

"Rabbi Eli, the hero who died protecting others last night, would undoubtedly want this as well!" I added. "After a tragic accident in Meron killed 45 people, Rabbi Eli worked hard to get 45 people to commit to wearing tefillin every day in their memory."

A young man I'd never met before approached me after the speech, introducing himself as Eran\*.

"I've always been ashamed to admit I'm Israeli," he confessed. "I've tried everything I could to hide my Judaism. But now, I know I need to be there with my people. Can I please have a pair of tefillin?"

The community continued to show up and pledge their support, night after night. On another night of Chanukah, we lit a me-

norah in the lobby of a hospital. Over 500 people attended that menorah lighting.

The next night, we hosted a lighting in the hospital that had previously employed two health care workers who publicly enthused how they'd refuse treatment to any Israeli and relish their death. Over 100 people were present then, proving that there's always light inside the darkness. Every Jewish doctor on staff agreed to put on tefillin.

Another night, after another public menorah lighting, a woman declared that she wanted to commit to a Torah-true life after hearing my speech and being a part of the event.

The tefillin kiosk set up on the site of the massacre is kept busy constantly, as thousands volunteer to do the mitzvah in memory of the departed.

In a way, the fact that the tragedy happened on the first night of Chanukah was an opportunity and a message - to do *more*; to continue spreading light.

We were so busy arranging events and attending meetings that whenever anyone asked *How are you doing?*, my response was, "I'm doing!"

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*



**KIBID: YOUR CHANCE TO BID ON LIFE-CHANGING SYNAGOGUE KIBUDIM!**

Last year, Kibid raised more than \$217,000 to support Shluchim, while opening the door to stories of new shidduchim and life-changing parnassah across the globe. Join this year! **Kibid.org** via DollarDaily.

Secure the spiritual merit of honors like *Maftir Yonah*, *Chosson Torah*, and *P'sicha of Neilah*—all from the comfort of your home!

#### HOW IT WORKS:

- 1. Browse Honors** – Explore exclusive kibudim from Chabad centers worldwide.
- 2. Place Your Bid** – Bid or "Buy It Now" to secure your honor.
- 3. Receive Blessings** – Support shluchim and gain powerful spiritual merit!



 **DollarDaily.org**

**100% of proceeds go directly to Chabad centers, supporting their crucial work.**