

ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

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From Main Street to Miracles, Chabad of Eastern Orange County Part I

By Chaya Chazan

Although we're just a short drive from Monsey and Monroe, those famed enclaves of Jewish life, our little corner of upstate New York may as well be no man's land.

Most of the Jews who live here are minimally involved in Yiddishkeit, despite their proximity to the hundreds of shuls and kosher stores just a few miles down the road.

When we first got here, we were overwhelmed by the distinct challenges a small town shlichus presents. We were determined to give it our all, of course, but we often questioned, *Is this really where we're supposed to be?*

In those days, before social media became the primary form of communication, I printed fliers with information about upcoming holiday events and lectures. Before mailing them and posting them about town, I always placed one copy in a volume of *Igros Kodesh*, keeping the Rebbe informed about our progress.

Just before Tishrei, I placed a brightly colored flier with all the details of shofar blowings and minyanim in a random volume of the *Igros*. The letter on the page seemed to be

addressed directly to me, answering every qualm I'd silently carried for the past few years.

You've written that you want to move to a place with more Jews, but you should know that the place in which you find yourself has been chosen for you by Divine intervention. If you are creative, you can find ways to accomplish more, even in your current place. Know that you are saving lives, not only spiritually, but physically as well, since a Jew's physical welfare is intertwined with his spiritual wellbeing. The more involved you and your wife get, the more you will come to enjoy it. You enjoy learning on your own, but now is not the time for that; your priority must be to learn with others.

I reread the letter several times, the truth of each word hitting me squarely in the chest. I drove around the city almost in a daze, as if seeing the streets and neat shops for the first time. In a way, it was the first time. The Rebbe's words had granted us a paradigm shift on our entire approach to shlichus.

Never again did we sit at the kitchen table, questioning our mission. Over time, we came to realize just how perfectly the shlichus suited us, and we, it.

That letter is now framed and holds a spot of honor on my crowded desk, always reminding me of the true purpose of our shlichus.

One year, we spent the Shabbos before the Kinus Hashluchim visiting my wife's relatives, and joined the shul for the motzei Shabbos viewing of the weekly *Living Torah*. The *Living Torah* staff had selected a clip of a special kuntres distribution for shluchim, as we watched hundreds of shluchim line up to receive their booklet.

It's not fair that I was born a few years too late to line up for a kuntres myself, I couldn't help thinking to myself. Rebbe,

I also want a tangible assurance of your bracha for our shlichus!

The video continued, transitioning to the next segment, a clip of someone passing by the Rebbe during the Sunday dollar distribution.

"And please," I heard the man on the video ask, "I want a bracha for my grandmother, Bubby Winter. May she have nachas from her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren!"

"Amen!" the Rebbe answered.

And I, a great-grandchild of Bubby Winter, knew my silent plea had been answered.

A few days later, while attending the International Kinus Hashluchim, I received a surprise donation that was quite generous. To me, it was a physical manifestation of the Rebbe's brachos.

We'd already poured a ton of effort and time into our *Art, Wine, and Cheese Night*, which would be the perfect setting to share a dvar Torah and get people more interested and involved in the Chabad house. We ordered for about 75 people, but the RSVPs trickled in disappointingly slowly. There were about 25 registrants, but I couldn't help feeling let down that so much time and effort would go to waste.

A few days later, I came across a story online about Rabbi Brashivitzky, the shliach of Doral, Florida. He hosted a concert by Dr. Laz, renowned author, musician, activist, and proud chassid. After the concert, Dr. Laz noticed that Rabbi Brashivitzky was upset at the low attendance, and comforted him by sharing the following story:

One Shabbos, I was invited to Chabad of Binghamton. It's a huge college, and their events are always well-attended. Friday night, we farbrenged with hundreds of students late into the night, with promises to continue the next day.

From my room adjoining the shul, I could already hear the shliach passionately explaining a point in Chassidus for his morning shiur.

I debated for a moment - would it be too embarrassing to walk past a crowd of people with my eyes still heavy with sleep? The way the shliach was projecting his voice and enthusiastically explaining the Rebbe's answer, I could already picture the hundreds of eyes that would be staring my way...

I didn't have much of a choice. I decided to make a dash for it. I hurried past the door of the shul, only to stop short and stare in amazement. The entire room - all two of them - turned to smile at me and wish me a good Shabbos.

The shliach expended all his energy and care on a shiur for one single attendee.

Dr. Laz's story resonated with Rabbi Brashivitzky, and reminded him that a shliach gives it his all - whether it be one person, or one hundred.

The story resonated with me, too, and I thought about it constantly over the next week. Every time I checked the registration numbers and noted that they were still low, I reminded myself of the lesson - it's about quality, not quantity.

In the end, we had about 35 people at the event, and we made the most of every minute.

The next day, just after my kids had arrived home from school, there was a knock on my door.

"Dr. Laz?!" I almost screamed, in shock, as I opened the door. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"H-hi!" he answered, taken aback at my overenthusiastic welcome. "My wife and I were just flying back from an event



nearby, and our flight was delayed. We were passing the time by driving around a bit, and when I saw your menorah, I decided to pop by and say hi."

"This is incredible! I can't believe it! I've been thinking about you all week!"

"Have we met before...?" Dr. Laz asked, his eyebrow raised.

I quickly explained how reading his story just the week before had helped reframe my disappointment at the low attendance.

"You showing up here at this exact moment feels like a hug from Hashem," I exclaimed.

"I have an even better story for you about the importance of even one attendee," Dr. Laz replied. "Want to hear it?"

"Of course!"

Rabbi Spalter, a shliach in Florida, hired me to perform for his Chabad house. My band and I were all set up, but the auditorium was still empty. There was only one family seated.

"Don't worry about it," I told Rabbi Spalter. "This was out of your control. You don't owe me anything. I'll leave my CD here, and you can play it for this nice family."

"No," Rabbi Spalter insisted. "I'll pay you every last penny. I want you to play your full set."

So although the band outnumbered the audience, we played just like it was a full crowd. I did all my usual shtick, which includes me going out into the audience and holding the mic in front of individuals to repeat, I Jew, you Jew, as the refrain to one of our songs.

So I jumped off stage and held out the mic to each family member. When I approached the elderly grandfather, he repeated loudly, I Jew! I Jew! I Jew! over and over. I noticed his family staring at him in shock, tears running down their faces.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Grandpa hasn't said a word in ages," shared the boy. "The doctors have no explanation for it at all. This is the first time he's said anything in months!"

"Can you imagine if I'd just packed up because it was only one family?" Dr. Laz asked. "That miracle wouldn't have had a chance to happen!"

As part of my chaplaincy role in the local hospital, I visit Jewish patients as often as I can. I specifically try to visit everyone on Yom Tov and help them do the mitzvos of the day. For the most part, I can easily make the time. Purim, however, is extremely difficult to carve time from. Between megillah in the morning, mishloach manos deliveries all over town, more megillah readings and a Purim seuda, there's hardly time to sit and breathe, let alone visit the hospital!

But I was determined to find the time, and, although it was difficult, I managed to scrounge up an hour to spare on Purim day itself. Hopping from room to room, I met Mr. Hubner*, who'd been recently admitted. I introduced myself and

we hit it off from the start. I also met his brother-in-law, who was visiting at the time. I read the megillah for Mr. Hubner and gave him mishloach manos.

A few months later, Mr. Hubner was able to attend shul for Shavuot. I honored him with an aliyah, and he told me it was his first aliyah in many years.

Unfortunately, Mr. Hubner grew quite sick a couple of weeks later, and passed away before the summer.

His brother-in-law, whose acquaintance I first made at his bedside, as well as Mr. Hubner's sister and both their families, became close friends and very involved members of our Chabad house. They've made great strides in their Yiddishkeit, and continue to deepen their connection with Hashem.

Hashem was showing me that my efforts to go above and beyond were appreciated and repaid in full.

When we first moved to Newburgh, I was excited to meet Richard* who was very involved within the Jewish community.

"Did you put on tefillin today?" I asked him.

"I've never put on tefillin in my entire life," Richard replied. "I'm waiting."

"Waiting? For what?" I couldn't help asking.

"Before I became bar mitzvah, my grandfather promised to teach me how to put on tefillin. He ended up passing away just before my bar mitzvah. I want to save my first tefillin wrapping for when I meet him in Heaven, so he can still teach me how to do it."

"That's a really nice sentiment," I said. "But I think your grandfather in Heaven understands how great this mitzvah is, and would reap even more nachas watching you do it now, instead of waiting for the World to Come."

Richard thought about it for a bit, and agreed to put on tefillin.

"This is for your Zaide," I whispered, as I showed him how to wrap the straps around his arm.

Richard covered eyes wet with tears and recited Shema with deep emotion.

We became great friends from then on, and I could always count on Richard to be there for every shiur and minyan, even if he was the only one.

"You know, Rabbi," Richard commented, one day, years later. "Ever since we met, I've started saying the bedtime Shema. I haven't missed a night yet!"

I couldn't remember ever discussing Krias Shema with him, but it reminded me of the influence we can have on others, whether we realize it or not.

At a challenging point in our shlichus, I poured out my heart to the Rebbe, transcribing all my feelings and worries in a

letter. At the end, I added a postscript I'd never thought to add before or since: *I want to know that I've been heard.*

A few nights later, I attended a school dinner. The speeches were long winded and never ending, and I was about to text my wife, asking if we could quietly slip away, when the speaker began telling a story that immediately arrested my attention.

There was a chassid in Australia who was writing to the Rebbe regarding his son's upcoming upshernish. The chassid had put together a pamphlet of Chassidic teachings about upsherin and sent a copy to the Rebbe for approval.

As the father sat at the table, rewriting his pan, his little son toddled into the study.

"Tatty, what are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm writing a letter to the Rebbe," his father answered.

"Me too! Me too!" the little boy clamored.

"Sure!" the father agreed. He gave his son a pen and paper and returned to his letter. A few moments later, the son presented his father with his letter to the Rebbe - a page with childish scribbles throughout.

When the chassid sent his letter to the Rebbe, the page of scribbles was included, along with an explanation that it had been done by his son.

Weeks later, the long awaited air mail envelope arrived. In it was a letter for the father, wishing him brachos for the upshernish of his son, and encouraging him to print the pamphlet properly. There was a separate letter included, addressed to the little boy.

"I've received your pan," the Rebbe wrote. "I will mention it at an auspicious time when I visit the kever of my father-in-law, the Friediker Rebbe."

While the speaker went on to explain the importance of treating every childish expression with the utmost interest and sincerity, I sat frozen in my seat.

I was that little boy.

And just days after I'd asked the Rebbe to let me know if he'd received my letter, I'd heard a microphone booming the answer straight at me: *I received your pan. I will mention it at an auspicious time when I visit the kever of my father-in-law, the Friediker Rebbe.*

**Names changed to protect privacy*



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