

ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

*Rabbi Dovid and Stella Eliezrie, North County
Chabad Center, Yorba Linda, CA*

Getting a Foot in the Door

By Chaya Chazan

Convenience is what first led me to Chabad. When my parents moved from Los Angeles to Montreal, Canada, when I was a teenager, they were thrilled to find a yeshiva just a couple doors down from our new house. Although it was a lubavitcher yeshiva, it catered to boys from various backgrounds.

I was still learning my way around Chabad, chassidus, and the Rebbe, when the yeshiva brought us all to New York to participate in a group yechidus with the Rebbe himself. I decided to return to 770 on my own the next day, hoping to meet with the Rebbe again.

The shul was packed and, try as I might, there was no room to push my way in. Instead, I chose to wait in the hallway, hoping to see the Rebbe as he passed by en-route to his office. As the Rebbe crossed the vestibule, the other chassidim pressed back in deference and respect. I, clueless and pushy, immediately followed the Rebbe and slipped into his office directly behind him. Rabbi Chodakov, the Rebbe's secretary, tried to close the door, but I'd already wedged my foot and half my body through the opening. The other chassidim in the hallway, outraged at this appalling breach of protocol, voiced their displeasure loudly and yelled at me to step back.



I looked from side to side, unsure of what to do. It wasn't just my naivete that set me apart; my outfit, my hairstyle, and even my sneakers proclaimed me an outsider. The Rebbe, hearing the commotion, turned around to discover its cause. Sizing up the situation immediately, the Rebbe motioned for Rabbi Chodakov to open the door and let me in. The Rebbe then gestured for me to stand beside him. We davened Maariv side by side - the Rebbe, and the oblivious outsider the Rebbe welcomed in.

It didn't take long for me to embrace Chabad Chassidus and the lifestyle it demanded. I continued studying in Chabad yeshivos, was zoche to attend many more yechidusin and farbrengens, and envisioned myself on shlichus whenever I pictured the future.

During my final year of yeshiva in Israel, I started a group for American students attending Hebrew University in Jerusalem. We'd farbreng and learn about Torah and Chassidus, and ultimately started a Chabad House located in the historic Tzemech Tzedek Synagogue of the Old City.

When I met Stella, who'd also found Chabad as a teen and embraced its lifestyle, I excitedly told her about the group and how much potential it had to grow and impact the student's lives. She was infected with my fervent vision, and we began to think about starting our married life in Eretz Yisroel.

Our wedding was set just after Sukkos of 1973. On Yom Kippur during services, we were shocked to hear that Israel was already deeply entrenched in a defensive war; attacked on their holiest day of the year. And even though Israel won that war within a few short weeks, it left the fledgling country's economy so devastated, starting a new venture so dependent on fundraising and exchange students became impossible.

Although our dreams of shlichus in the majestic Old City had come to an end, we were still determined to build a Chabad house of our own.

A short while later, we grabbed the opportunity to work with Jewish students at the University of Miami in Miami, Florida.

It was the 70's and *Chabad* was not the Jewish household name it is now. Chabad's presence on campuses was even newer, and as we walked through the quad, we were met with many raised eyebrows and curious looks. We had to fight for credibility - both with the university administration and the students. It was uncharted waters, but we were determined to swim, come what may.

Baruch Hashem, with lots of hard work and brachos from the Rebbe, we succeeded, and met many students. We still keep in touch with many of them and reap the nachas of our influence so many years later.

After eight years at the university, we longed for a real community that we could grow with, instead of a constant rotation and dear friends who left after four years. With the Rebbe's approval and brachos, we soon joined the growing network of shluchim in California.

We started off in Anaheim, just a few miles from Disneyland. I soon noticed younger families were moving away at alarming rates, and there wouldn't be much of a community left in Anaheim. With the Rebbe's bracha, we moved to the next city, Yorba Linda, where there was a growing and promising community. We knew it was time to settle in for the long haul!

The decommissioned farmhouse we'd bought was perfect for our needs. However, after a few years we hit a very rough time. The bank holding our mortgage had failed, though, miraculously, for a few years, no one asked for a payment. But eventually, some investors purchased the loans, and we suddenly had to make them due. As the deadline approached ever more quickly, I still did not have the money.

I knew a very successful businessman and philanthropist nearby, and I asked him for a meeting.

"Mr. Fisher*, I need \$300,000 *today*, or we'll lose the property!" I cried.

Mr. Fisher was a no-nonsense man whose long career had taught him the value of toughness in business.

"Are you crazy, Eliezrie? That's not going to happen."

I left the office, defeated. But as I drove away, trying to figure out how we'd manage without a home, desperation convinced me to make a hasty u-turn.

I banged on Mr. Fisher's door, yelling and pleading, "We're going to lose the property without your help!"

Finally, Mr. Fisher opened the door, glaring at me.

"I'll give you the money, but don't you ever try this again!" he warned me.

There was still more to be collected and fundraised, and I spent the next few days contacting every person I could think of that could help us reach our goal.

The day before the total was due, I was still short \$10,000. I'd called every number in my phone; I'd emailed every philanthropist I could. I'd collected the pennies and dimes from every member of my community. Where was I supposed to find another ten grand? If it was just a matter of housing my own family, I knew I could find another solution. But this *wasn't* about us - it was about our shlichus and fulfilling the Rebbe's mission. There were no other options.

I paced my study, abandoning scheme after scheme as impractical, and still failing to come up with a viable solution. Suddenly, my phone rang.

"Hi, Rabbi Eliezer. This is Marcia*. My uncle just passed, and in his will, he left some money to Chabad."

My spirits rose for a moment, before sinking again. The donation would be useful, no doubt, but the likelihood of receiving it in time for tomorrow's deadline was bleak.

"Thank you, that's-"

"I have the check here, and I can bring it over now," Marcia interrupted me.

I whispered a quick *Thank you* to Hashem for this time-lay miracle.

When Marcia came over a short while later, I explained the whole background of our property and imminent foreclosure. Marcia was deeply affected and gave me the check with tears in her eyes and heartfelt blessings and wishes for success.

Baruch Hashem, we were able to pay the amount in full and buy our property outright.

The next day, Marcia called again.

"In addition to the \$10,000 earmarked for Chabad, my uncle left another bequest for any charitable cause. After our conversation yesterday, I understand that you threw everything you have at this mortgage. I have no doubt you could use endowment to pay your bills, buy food, and provide basic needs for your family. I know my uncle would want you to have the second bequest as well."

After the horrific terror attack on Simchas Torah, I knew we had to visit Eretz Yisrael and show our support, love, and solidarity. Everyone who heard about it wanted to join, and we soon formed a group of almost 30 shlichim from all over the world.

Those who couldn't join the group personally still wanted to show their love and support. When I let my community know I was collecting for various organiza-

tions in Israel, the money poured in. Within just a day or two, I already had a sizable sum that would make a vast difference for our brothers and sisters in Israel.

One of the first stops we made once we got there was to Kibbutz Sheufim, where the survivors of Kfar Aza gathered to mourn their losses. It was heartbreaking. There were too many low chairs to count, with every few feet designated for yet another family grieving the loss of their beloved parent or child.

Ideologically, we couldn't be more different. They were Israeli; we were American. They were far-left, anti-religious kibbutznikim; we were Orthodox rabbis.

And yet, as we split up and spent the next few hours going from family to family, crying with them, learning about their departed loved ones, and mourning their loss, we were wholly united - one family, joined by a grief shared by all.

One day, I found out about a Jew I hadn't met yet - Dr. Wilhelm*. Although he was already pushing 80, he still led a flourishing dental practice.

Dr. Wilhelm was excited to meet me. He felt a strong sense of Jewish identity, but the Nazis had robbed him of any opportunity to learn about his heritage when they imprisoned him in a labor camp in his youth. Even after so many years, he felt a strong urge to show the Nazis they'd lost by acting as a proud Jew. He just didn't have the first clue as to where to start.

From then on, I knew I could count on Dr. Wilhelm to attend shul every Shabbos and listen attentively to every shiur. He became quite the fixture around the Chabad house, and continued attending every minyan and shiur until his 102nd birthday!

My wife and I were at our wit's end, when our son's yeshiva called and told us they were sending him home to see a doctor. He hadn't been feeling well for a while, and the local clinic ran some basic tests.

He had leukemia.

We immediately rushed him to the hospital, where the tests confirmed our worst fears. It was a very aggressive cancer, and our son was deteriorating rapidly.

On Shabbos morning, the chief and head pulmonologist shook their heads and told us to say goodbye.

"I don't think he'll survive the hour," one doctor said.

Of course, we placed our trust in a Higher medical power and continued saying Tehillim at our son's bed-

side. By the end of the hour, our son was still holding on, and his stats had even improved slightly.

I interrupted my bedside vigil to find the chief of medicine.

"The Rebbe's father-in-law, the Friediker Rebbe, advised an increase in Torah learning to serve as a zechus for a sick child. I want to institute a weekly class right here in the hospital, as a merit for my son's full recovery."

The doctor tried to sidestep the question, vaguely quoting hospital regulations, technical issues, and other excuses, but I was determined to see it through. Eventually, I got him to agree.

Baruch Hashem, our own Eliyahu Hanavi appeared in the guise of a yeshiva bochur who donated bone marrow that saved our son's life. As I entered the hospital every week to give the shiur, I couldn't help but feel that I was helping my son's recovery just as much as the therapy sessions and transfusions.

At the same time, we had begun making inquiries about expanding our Chabad house and building an extension. I'd already gathered some of the funding and received quotes from contractors. On the day we rushed our son to the hospital, I was supposed to be meeting with the contractor to sign the agreement.

As emotionally draining as it was to watch my son fight for his life, I didn't forget the question of the Chabad house. Should we carry on with the construction? After a deep struggle and inner debate, we decided we had to. Expanding our shlichus and continuing our mission was the surest way to bring the salvation our son so desperately needed.

The next months were spent approving plans, overseeing equipment... and spending hours in the hospital. It was an impossible juggling act that nearly drove us to the brink many times, but, baruch Hashem, our son went into full remission, *and* we cut the ribbon on the brand new extension. I *knew* that one had brought about the other.

**Names changed to protect privacy*



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