

ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Levi and Leah Lipskar, The Shul at Hyde Park, Johannesburg, South Africa

Returning Home, Chabad of Hyde Park Part I

By Chaya Chazan

My parents were sent to South Africa to serve as its first shluchim in 1972, and I grew up helping my parents and envisioning a similar future for myself.

The Rebbe instructed my father to wait until a pulpit position was available, rather than just opening a Chabad house in a country that had never heard of them before. Perhaps the Rebbe wanted to indulge the South Africans' preference for traditionalism and formality, and knew they'd be more comfortable with a rabbi in the customary setting.

Although the shul began as a chassidishe shteibel, my parents' circle of influence spread quickly, and the shul was filled with people from all walks of life, including secular Jews, university students, and, slowly, a growing community of baalei teshuva.

Within just a few years, my parents were ready to hire another couple to join the shlichus, and another soon

after that. Today, there are 65 shluchim in South Africa, some of whom have been here for over 50 years!

Over time, the changing dynamics of the neighborhood saw more and more of the core community move away. Many resettled near the new Torah Academy school grounds, which was founded by my parents according to the Rebbe's direction. My parents started a shul on campus to accommodate the growing Anash community in that area.

Although we lived in a different neighborhood ourselves, making the three kilometer walk to shul each week, when there were no longer enough Jews remaining in the area, my parents opened a new Chabad house in Hyde Park, another area of Johannesburg.

In 2009, my wife Leah and I joined my parents on shlichus. We helped them establish and expand their new center in Hyde Park, as well as the overall management and development of Chabad of South Africa.

In addition to opening a chapter of Friendship Circle in Hyde Park, Leah also became the director of the nursery division in Torah Academy. Under Leah's direction, the nursery grew to be the country's largest Jewish nursery school. It caters to children from many different backgrounds, and it's not uncommon to see mothers wearing pants chatting with women in tight kerchiefs and long skirts as they all drop their children off each morning.

Humbled by the enormous impact my parents had on the South African landscape over the last 54 years, I hoped to be a fresh set of eyes that could bring innovative solutions to enhance everything my parents built. When I noticed there wasn't any Chabad presence on campuses or young professional groups, I tried to fill that void myself. We formed hundreds of lasting friendships during that time, and even though we hired more shluchim to fill those specific roles, those friendships continued. We were only a couple of years older than

them, so we grew together. We celebrated their engagements, officiated at their weddings, and cooed over their babies. Now, those college students we met fifteen years ago have become a whole community themselves!

Once we had a shliach or organization focused on each age and demographic, I worked to create a collaborative, cohesive unit, in which a child graduating from primary school is put in touch with a CTeen chapter, who can introduce them to a shliach on campus, who can interest them in young professional groups led by another shliach, who can guide them towards the shliach of their chosen community. We put together various committees to oversee each "branch" of shlichus and organize enrichment events for the mutual benefit of all.

Over Sukkos, dozens of families joined us for davening and festive meals in the sukkah. Amongst the running children, cries of glee, and cheerful conversations, it was hard to ignore the longing glances Daniella* and Mark* threw their way. My heart ached for them. Daniella and Mark had been married three years before, and were so excited to begin building a family. Unfortunately, it seemed G-d had other plans for them. I only knew a fraction of everything they'd gone through, and I marveled at their strength and optimism.

As the months passed by, their chances of finally becoming parents grew ever more dim. They were down to their final embryos; their last chance of fulfilling their dream. The passing of Daniella's father just a few months before added a crushing grief to their already overburdened shoulders.

On Simchas Torah of 2023, while reports about the atrocities in Israel were just starting to circulate, I seized the emotion of the moment and beckoned to Mark.

"I'm going to call you up for the aliyah of Kol Hane'arim, where every child is gathered under the tallis and given the opportunity to take part in the reading of the Torah. While you are under that tallis, talk to Hashem! Tell Him He's taken so much from you and from Am Yisroel, and it's time to give back!"

I wiped surreptitious tears from my eyes as I watched Mark shut his eyes tightly, in deep concentration, as the kids squirmed all around him. I added a plea of my own, asking Hashem to grant him and Daniella the ultimate gift.

Baruch Hashem, ten months later, Daniella and Mark welcomed a beautiful baby boy into the world. A couple of years later, a second miracle baby joined the family as well.

When my parents first moved the shul to Hyde Park, they began services on an estate owned by one of their community members. They even built a beautiful shul on the property which served the community for years. Eventually, the owners decided to sell the property, and my parents had to move on.

As the fate of the estate was being decided, Warren* and his family shook their heads over the unfortunate impending closure of the shul as they sat in our sukkah for a Yom Tov meal.



"It's just not right," Warren sighed. "I know I've only joined the shul recently, but I've already gained so much and enjoyed every minute. We really need our *own* place; one where we won't be dependent on anyone else's good will."

"I wish!" I agreed with him.

"I'm pledging 250,000 rand right now for this cause!" he declared.

As the fish plates were cleared and steaming bowls of soup were ladled out, Warren spoke up again. "Let's make that 500,000 rand. This is a worthy cause I feel very strongly about!"

I could tell Warren was still thinking about it. Sure enough, as we sang niggunim while waiting for dessert to be served, Warren burst out again. "One million! One million rand for the purchase of a new shul!"

Baruch Hashem, we found a temporary shul in a hastily renovated garage that, while far from ideal, served our needs satisfactorily enough.

A few months later, Covid shut everything down. Unfortunately, Warren was one of its victims, and he passed away after a short struggle with the virus.

At his shiva, I told his family, "I am going to bring Warren's vision to fruition! I'll start looking for a suitable property now. The project will be in his memory, as an honor for his neshama."

Baruch Hashem, I was able to find a property and raise the rest of the funds. For a while, we had a small, make-shift shul on the property, but I wanted to make a shul of which Warren would be proud!

This year, in time for Rosh Hashanah, we moved into a beautiful, spacious new building, named for our dear friend, Warren. As of now, construction of the second phase is nearly complete as well.

Ever since October 7th, I make sure to always have my tefillin on me, available to use for any Jew that is willing.

I was scheduled to fly home from New York at the end of the week. Because of the long flight and time difference, there's usually only one flight that could get me home on time before Shabbos. When I got to the airport, I was informed there were some issues, and I'd be rebooked on a different flight through a different airline.

Because of the last minute change, I was granted access to the lounge. I relaxed on the comfortable chairs and made a couple of phone calls. As I hung up, a man seated nearby looked up with a smile.

"Glad to hear a fellow South African accent!" he said, smiling. "Hilton Schlosberg," he added, sticking out his

hand. (I later Googled him and found out he's the CEO of the Monster Beverage Corporation.)

We got to talking, and he told me he hadn't been in South Africa for over 30 years.

"Would you like to put on tefillin in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Israel?" I asked.

"I'd love to!" Mr. Schlosberg answered.

"Hilton, we're going to miss our flight!" his companion muttered, checking his watch.

"It's alright. I've got a few minutes," he answered, and rolled up his sleeve.

Mr. Schlosberg was unaffiliated, and I wasn't sure when he'd last put on tefillin. Nevertheless, as soon as he heard he could do something to help Israel, the important business magnate and millionaire covered his eyes and declared his allegiance to Hashem.

"Hi, I'm Levi Lipskar," I introduced myself to my seatmate on the flight.

"Brighton*," he offered, shaking my hand. "Shalom!"

"Shalom! Would you like to put on tefillin?" I asked.

Brighton agreed, and we wrapped tefillin right there in the aisle of the airplane.

"You're Chabad, right?" Brighton asked, once we were seated again.

"Yes," I answered.

"I'm wondering if you can help me... There is no Chabad rabbi on my college campus, but I'd really love to learn more and get more involved with Judaism. I just don't know where to start."

By the time the flight landed, arrangements were in place for a Chabad rabbi to start visiting Brighton's campus regularly.

Timmy* was enrolled in Torah Academy's Nursery School, where he learned all about mitzvos like kashrus and Shabbos. While many of his classmates nodded along in familiarity and offered their own input, Timmy sat silently. His mom and dad didn't do any of the things his teacher was talking about.

One Saturday afternoon, Timmy and his parents were driving when Timmy spotted his classmate, walking along the sidewalk.

"Mom, Dad, stop! I want to wave hi to my friend! Can you roll down the window, please?"

His parents looked at each other and back down in confusion.

"Uh - I don't think that's a good idea, Timmy," his father stammered.

"Why not?" Timmy asked with innocent curiosity.

Later that night, Timmy's parents had a long conversation.

The next Shabbos, Timmy burst with pride as he watched his mother light the Shabbos candles and he walked to shul with his father - just like his teacher explained!

I knew the line to enter the Rebbe's Ohel would be long on Gimmel Tamuz, so I spent my time reciting Tehillim and Maaneh Lashon. There were still many more people in front of me, so I pulled out my phone and texted Gary*, a close friend from the community.

I'm about to enter the Rebbe's Ohel. Is there any specific blessing I can request on your behalf?

My phone buzzed with his reply almost immediately.

I can't believe the timing of this message! My daughter is about to go in for a very complicated back surgery, and my wife and I are very worried about her. Please ask the Rebbe to facilitate a blessing for a successful surgery and quick recovery!

Of course! I replied. *May she have a refuah shleima!*

I added her name to my pan and said Tehillim as I entered the Ohel.

Baruch Hashem, the surgery went off without a hitch and the girl recovered completely.

"Of course, it's all thanks to the Rebbe's blessing," Gary noted. "I still can't believe how propitious the timing was! It was almost as if you were reading our minds!"

A few years later, Gary got to travel to New York and visit the Ohel to thank the Rebbe in person.

**Names changed to protect privacy*



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