

# ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

*Rabbi Moishe and Layah Kierman, Chabad Chayil,  
West Aventura, Miami, FL*

## The Shlichus that Found Us, Chabad Chayil Part I

By Chaya Chazan

**We didn't choose shlichus; shlichus chose us.**

As a bochur, I did a stint of merkos shlichus for Rabbi Dovid Bryn A"H in North Miami-Dade County in Florida. The Rebbe referred to Rabbi Bryn as *the tzaddik of Miami*, a moniker well earned due to his humility, tireless dedication to the community, and endless stores of chessed.

While I enjoyed merkos shlichus, especially under such an incredible role model, it was only ever meant to last a few weeks, after which I returned to yeshiva. I remained in contact with Rabbi Bryn over the next few years, recalling the weeks we'd spent together with warmth and appreciation.

In the autumn of 2001, I was the proud recipient of a freshly inked semicha certificate, and I could finally enjoy some time at home with my family after being away in yeshiva for several years.

As I strolled towards my house on my way home from the airport, I passed under the open kitchen window. I could hear my mother tell someone on the phone, "No, he's not home right now." I quickly ran up the steps and inserted my key in the lock. "Hold on, I think this might be him now," my mother told the caller as

she heard me enter. She held out the receiver. "It's for you."

It was Rabbi Bryn asking me to cover for him for a few weeks, as he was scheduled for surgery the following week in New York.

I tried deferring, as I already had plans and commitments. I tried explaining that I was looking forward to spending time at home with my family. I tried recommending other friends who could do it. Rabbi Bryn refused to hear it.

"No. I want you!" he insisted.

I did *try* to get out of it, but Rabbi Bryn's persistence won out in the end. I met with him to discuss what goals needed to be met, and a friend and I flew to Miami for four weeks.

During that time, we ran miyanim, gave shiurim, taught boys for their Bar Mitzvahs, ran teen clubs, continued his weekly mitvzoym routes, and whatever else the shlichus demanded of us.

Unfortunately, four weeks quickly turned into eight, and then several more. A few months later, on Vov Iyar, Rabbi Bryn returned his holy neshama to its Heavenly home.

Though I'd originally planned on staying only four weeks, the community begged me to stay. It was impossible to do anything else.

A couple years later, I met my wife. It turned out she was very familiar with the community as well! A few years prior, she'd worked in the local day school and taught many of the children from our community. We both agreed that the overwhelming hashgacha pratis made our choice clear. After our wedding, we officially moved to the area and took on the shlichus as our own.

The Rebbe was fiercely passionate about the *Mitvoch Sha'ah - Jewish Hour* started by the Friediker Rebbe in 1941, during which Jewish children attending public school were released for an hour each week for religious instruction.

When we noticed Sunday Hebrew school registration rates declining, and parents and children complaining about using their weekend to attend *more* school, we realized it was the perfect opportunity to bring a version of Released Time to Florida.

We offered an after-school club each afternoon where children could learn about Judaism. For many parents who struggled to find childcare for those early afternoon hours, it was too convenient to pass up. The program gained in popularity, and soon, we were serving over 500 students.

Having regular Jewish instruction proved life-changing for many of these students. Over the years, we helped hundreds of students transfer to Jewish schools. Some of our alumni went on to learn in the most prestigious Chabad yeshivos!

Rhett\* was a graduate of our teen program, and maintained the friendship throughout the following years. As has become our custom, we met one afternoon for our annual catch-up lunch at a local cafe.

"What's new?" Rhett asked, sipping his coffee.

"I have to tell you a story that just happened twenty minutes ago," I told him, excitedly. "From the window of my office, I saw a mother and her teenaged son walking up to the door. I knew the kid looked familiar, but it took me a second to place him. Then I remembered. It was Noah! Noah attended our after school program for a while. His father passed away when he was in middle school, and we helped his family with the burial and shiva. I hadn't seen them in four years though, ever since he graduated from our program."

"They were actually in the car on their way to drop Noah off at college. They'd stopped because Noah wanted a mezuzah for his dorm room."

"Of course, I told them I'd be happy to help, but I was curious - I knew they'd passed two Judaica stores on their way to the Chabad house. Why had they come to me, when they could've easily bought a mezuzah elsewhere? When I asked them outright, his mom chuckled. *For Noah, Judaism always meant your Chabad house. He specifically wanted a mezuzah from you and to take a moment to say goodbye.*

"I appreciated the reminder of the impact we can have on a person's life. I hadn't spoken to Noah in years, but he held such strong memories of and associations with Judaism from those afternoon hours."

"That's really amazing," Rhett agreed. "I think Noah's really onto something there with the mezuzah in college. I can't help but think how different *my* college experience could have been if I had a mezuzah on my door, reminding me to make good choices every time I passed by." As he spoke, Rhett grew more and more animated. "In fact, I think every Jewish college kid should have a mezuzah! Let's start a mezuzah club



right now! I'll sponsor the first 50 mezuzos." He pulled out his phone. "And I have a friend who I know will want to join!"

By the time we paid for our food and drinks, the Mezuzah Club already had 100 mezuzos to donate and a passionate mission statement: to help every Jewish college student get a mezuzah for their dorm room doors! To date, over a thousand mezuzos have been distributed to Jewish students on campus!

I knew Austin\* for many years through various Chabad clubs and activities. When his father, a successful and respected urologist, became ill, I helped Austin as much as I could. I was there with him as his father took his final breaths, supporting Austin through the grief and shivah.

On his father's yahrtzeit, Austin came to Shul to recite kaddish during Mincha-Maariv. When davening was over, I gathered everyone together and asked them to stay a few moments to say l'chaim and give Austin the opportunity to share a few words about his father, just like we do for every yahrtzeit.

"Austin's father was a good man and a doctor - a urologist," I began. "Austin, please share some memories of your father."

"Like Rabbi Kievman said, my father was a urologist," Austin continued. "In fact, during the 70's, when there was a huge influx of Russian Jews, my father helped hundreds of them have a bris. He was even honored for his contribution by a Chabad rabbi here in Miami - Rabbi Blank."

"Did you say Rabbi Blank?" I interrupted, in astonishment. "That's him - right there!"

Rabbi Blank lived in a completely different part of the city and usually davened in a shul closer to his home. Car trouble that afternoon had made him seek the nearest minyan - the one where Austin shared this memory of his father.

"Of course I remember your father!" Rabbi Blank exclaimed. "I think I even have a picture of the ceremony on my phone!"

Austin and his family gathered around Rabbi Blank, marveling at the marvelous hashgacha pratis that culminated in such a perfect, meaningful moment.

I don't often go fishing myself, but I've become very familiar with the Broward County regulations regarding fishing. Those who breach the strict protocols are given community service hours to fill. Since our Chabad house is on the list of organizations that can sign their

community service forms, we often get calls from offenders asking how they can help.

One call came from Sergei\*, a nonagenarian who'd made the mistake of catching the wrong species of fish. When he asked how he could be of service, I told him I'd count him attending minyan and helping us complete the quorum as his community service hours.

Sergei was happy enough to come and show off his Yiddish, but initially resisted when I asked him to put on tefillin. After persistent offers, he finally agreed, admitting it was his first time ever doing so.

A couple of days later, he brought a friend along.

"See?" he said, smiling. "I caught a bad fish, but it helped me catch a good one!"

His fishing error led to two bar mitzvahs!

Uri\* faced similar charges, and, although he was a staunch secular kibbutznik, he called and asked if he could complete his community service in our Chabad house. I offered him the chance to complete our minyan. Uri wasn't happy about doing anything "too Jewish," but he came every morning, sitting in the back with his arms folded defiantly. Of course, when I asked him to put on tefillin, he firmly refused. I asked him again each morning, but his answer was always the same.

A few days later, Uri entered the shul, a small package under his arms.

"What have you got there?" I asked.

Uri showed me a velvet tefillin bag, dusty and creased from years of neglect.

"These were my father-in-law's," he admitted, a bit shame-facedly. "My wife thought that maybe this entire situation was engineered by Hashem, so her father's tefillin could be used once more."

From then on, I didn't even need to ask. Although sixty years had passed since he last put on tefillin, Uri brought them to shul every day and wore them throughout davening. Although his community service hours were completed a short while later, we continued to stay in touch. Uri returned to shul for his father's yahrtzeit, and, of course, his father-in-law's. He began wearing tefillin every day - without any prompting at all!

When Uri's granddaughter was ready to start preschool, Uri convinced his daughter to send her to our nursery, where she is happily learning all about Torah and Yiddishkeit.

"Moishe, can you help me out?" asked a shliach from a nearby area. "A guy named Roger\* reached out and asked if I could help him learn Hebrew. I'm not able to do that right now, but I thought you might know someone who can."

"For sure!" I answered. "Send me his information!"

When I met Roger, I asked what had sparked his interest in learning Hebrew.

"My parents were atheist and extremely anti-religious," he explained. "Even a Reform temple was too much for them! I was happy to live my life that way too - but something inexplicable changed on October 7th. On October 6th, if you would've asked me my stance on Israel, I'd probably have looked at you blankly. What do I care about a country thousands of miles away? But after the attack, I felt like I had to do something."

"I was going grocery shopping one day, and a rabbi stopped me in the parking lot, asking me to put on tefillin."

"The Publix near Target?" I asked, excitedly.

"Yes; how did you know?" he asked.

"That was my father-in-law!" I laughed. "He spends some time there every day, helping Jews put on tefillin."

"What an amazing coincidence!" Roger marveled. "Your father-in-law gave me a card with Chabad's information on it. I called the rabbi - and here we are!"

Roger made fast progress with his tutor and was soon reading Hebrew fluently. He decided he wanted to atone for the past and have a bar mitzvah - including reading the Torah! He began learning how to lein and was so proud to read from the Torah just a few months later.

Now, Roger never misses a minyan. Even though he davens in other shuls throughout the week, he always returns at least several times a month to lein for our shul!

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*



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