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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Moishe and Layah Kievman, Chabad Chayil, West Aventura, Miami, FL

The Shlichus that Found Us, Chabad of Highland Lakes Part II

By **Chaya Chazan**

In my early years of shlichus, I visited an auto shop on my weekly mivtzoyim route. That was where I met Fred*, a Jewish insurance adjustor who visited the same shop fairly often.

Fred was polite, but entirely disinterested. Every time we met, I offered him a chance to put on tefillin. He always turned me down.

One week, I noticed Fred's brother there instead of him, and I realized I hadn't seen him in a few weeks.

"Where's Fred?" I asked his brother, with a jovial smile that quickly faded as I heard his answer.

"Fred got very sick recently. The doctors gave him just a few weeks…"

"That's awful!" I cried out. "Can I please have his number? I want to visit him and offer-"

"No thanks, Rabbi," his brother cut me off. "As I'm sure you know, Fred isn't a religious man. He's never been interested in G-d or rabbis, and I'm sure he doesn't want to spend the last moments he has on earth fobbing one off."



"That may be… but it's also possible his situation has given him a new perspective on life. What about if you take *my* number and give it to *him*? Let him know he can call me at any time."

I wasn't too surprised to receive a call from Fred a few days later.

"Thanks for the message, Rabbi." Fred's voice sounded sad and weak. "I *would* like you to visit at some point -"

"How about now?" I interrupted.

"Oh, no! My grandchildren are here… And I'm in my pajamas…."

"Fred," I chuckled. "I'm not afraid of grandchildren *or* pajamas! Send me your address, and I'll come over now!"

Half an hour later, I was sitting beside Fred, listening to him weep silently over his diagnosis.

"It's all over, Rabbi. I'm dying," he cried.

"Fred, let's focus on the positive. Let's focus on the present. Right now, you're here - alive - enjoying the company of your grandchildren."

"True." Fred sank into a depressed silence. A moment later, he lifted his head. "Rabbi, I want you to officiate at my funeral."

"Of course, Fred. Whatever you want. But let's focus on happier things right now."

"You'll have to speak loudly," he added, hardly waiting for my reply. "My mother is hard of hearing, and you always speak softly. Can you promise me you'll speak loudly?"

I assured him I'd do everything I could - when the time came.

"Also," he added. "There are two pictures I'd really like to be buried with. Would that be okay?"

He shuffled to a corner desk and pulled out a blurry, grainy photo of himself as a young boy, with a mini-tallis wrapped around his shoulders and a silky yarmulkah perched uncomfortably on his head.

"This was taken by my Hebrew school teacher, who was preparing me for my bar mitzvah. But I got kicked out, so I never ended up *having* my bar mitzvah. I know that when I reach Heaven, G-d is going to ask me why I never had one. This picture is my proof that I *wanted* and *planned* to, but couldn't, due to circumstances beyond my control."

"Fred," I said, softly. "If you're truly concerned about reaching Heaven without having had a bar mitzvah - you don't need that picture. I can 'bar mitzvah' you right here and now. You can face G-d honestly, as a man who's worn tefillin."

Fred was silent for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. Let's do it."

As Fred felt the straps of the tefillin wound around his arms for the first time, he broke down in tears. He recited Shema after me, repeating word for word, his voice shaking with powerful emotion.

"What's the second picture?" I asked, after we'd settled back down.

"Ah! This one is of my rabbi," he explained. He handed me the glossy photo and I stared down into a very familiar face.

"That's my rabbi too!" I exclaimed. "That's the Rebbe!"

"Really? Is he a *famous* rabbi or something…?"

"Only one of the most famous rabbis of this century!" I yelped. "Fred, where did you get this picture, and how did the Rebbe come to be your rabbi?"

"A friend of mine kept this picture in their flower shop. Every time I visited them, I was captivated by that picture. It felt like the rabbi was staring into my soul and trying to talk to me. I asked my friend for the photo, and they happily agreed to give it to me. I've kept it by my side ever since. Whenever I'm in pain - which happens more often than not these days - I gaze at the picture, and it calms me down. It always makes me feel better.

"That's why I want to be buried with this picture. I'm scared of dying, and I'm sure it will be painful. Having this picture there will help me deal with it all."

"We can definitely arrange that," I replied, deeply moved.

"I look back on my life now and regret so many of my choices!" Fred cried. "Hitler tried to destroy the Jewish nation and failed, but I did his job for him by marrying

a non-Jew and ensuring another whole line of Jews was obliterated. I'm worse than Hitler!"

Fred started to sob quietly.

"Fred, let's focus on things that are productive and positive. Don't say such awful things about yourself on the joyous day of your bar mitzvah. There's nothing you can do to undo the mistakes of your past - but you *can* help others avoid those mistakes in the future. Would it be alright if I brought a few high school kids along with me on my next visit? I think hearing your perspective about intermarriage would make a stronger impact than anything I could ever say."

Fred agreed and took the mission I gave him very seriously. He exhorted every teenager I brought over the next few months to learn from his mistakes.

I was able to say Shema, viduy, and the Rebbe's kapitel of Tehillim with Fred before he passed. At his funeral, I honored his request by placing his beloved Rebbe picture into the ground beside his aron.

David* had been involved with our Chabad house for years, attending our teen club throughout high school. He was one of the teens I shlepped along on my visits to Fred. As he heard Fred bemoan the making of his own Holocaust, I could see Dale and the other kids listening intently to every word.

The years passed by, and I heard David was engaged to be married - to a non-Jewish girl. A couple of months later, just a few days before his wedding, he abruptly called it off.

"I kept hearing Mr. Fred's voice in my head, crying about the Holocaust he created for his own family," David told me later. "I tried ignoring that voice, but eventually, I knew I couldn't do it."

A few years later, I officiated the chuppah of David and Hannah. I beamed with pride at each of their sons' brissim, and watched with joy as they committed more and more deeply to a life of Yiddishkeit. Fred may have missed out on his own chance to perpetuate his legacy, but his sincere words and persuasion facilitated the establishment of a Torah-true home.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly. Our after school program for Jewish kids was growing steadily, and we were renting rooms across five different public schools in the county. Then came our toughest year.

My father passed away, and I flew to New York for the levaya and shiva. As I stepped out of the Uber to join my family around the aron, my lawyer called.

"Rabbi, you've been served. It's serious."

I told him to ask for a continuance or whatever he had to do - for the next week, I was unavailable.

When I finally got a chance to look through the papers, my face paled and my jaw dropped. Five serious counts were leveled against us. I knew we'd done nothing wrong and could easily prove our innocence, but it wasn't that simple. It was, in part, a political witch hunt against one of our closest supporters, a protest against educational officials, and an antisemitic attack. Powerful figures were pulling the strings, and the justice system failed us, choosing instead to shield the figures in power.

Since we were renting space from the public school, their misdeeds became ours. But the newspapers chose to splash the allegations against *us* on the front page, while the investigation into the public school's conduct was buried under fine print on page 20.

Even some of our friends turned away, hinting that there's no smoke without fire. Although I understood their concerns, it was devastating to feel abandoned by friends and hounded by others.

Whenever things felt hopeless, when we were in flat despair, small symbols of the Rebbe's care and encouragement always came through. The day after receiving a terrible update, my brother found a never-seen-before picture of the two of us receiving kos shel bracha from the Rebbe. After hanging up with my lawyer, a friend texted another picture of me receiving lekach from the Rebbe. It was these, and support from loyal friends that kept us going.

One erev Shabbos, after a particularly ruthless week, my wife voiced the thought aloud. *Maybe we should close the whole program…?*

I had to run to shul for Mincha, but I promised we'd talk it over.

When I returned home, my wife looked serene and certain.

"After licht bentchen, I opened a collection of the Rebbe's letters in English," she explained. "On the page was a letter to Mrs. Devorah Groner, where the Rebbe responded to a letter *she'd* written about the difficulties she faced on shlichus in Australia. Apparently, things were quite dire there, because she wrote to the Rebbe that she wanted to give up and come home.

"The Rebbe told her that her struggles were completely understandable, and he wouldn't fault her for quitting. *But if you stay*, the Rebbe continued, *you have the great zechus of working in my father-in-law's organization.* The Rebbe encouraged her and reiterated the zechus of perpetuating the legacy of the Frierdiker Rebbe."

"Just like we have," I whispered. "Our after school program is an extension of Released Time, which the Frierdiker Rebbe began."

"And my name is also **Devorah** Layah," my wife pointed out. "And there's more! Look at the date the letter was addressed!"

The letter was sent on the same Hebrew date as my birthday.

We continued to fight for our program, buoyed by the Rebbe's clear brachos and encouragement to us.

Baruch Hashem, the legalities were eventually settled (one of the instigator's homes was recently raided by the Feds, and none of the others involved still hold their prestigious titles), and our after school club continued to grow, influencing hundreds of Jewish children.

Every staff member and student in public school knew exactly when the Jewish holidays were. Since we weren't operating on those days, hundreds of children had a sudden change in schedule, and dismissal had to be completely rearranged.

One Rosh Hashanah, one of the bochurim that was assisting us suggested going into the public school to blow shofar. I tried explaining how impossible it would be - I knew the principal well and knew he'd never agree.

I could see the bochur's face fall, and a tinge of disappointment steal across his eyes for a brief moment. I admired his idealism, but *I* would be the one who had to deal with the practical fallout of his idea.

As he began his counter-argument, we heard a loud siren from the public school building across the street. Thousands of staff and children piled onto the street for a fire drill.

I looked at the bochur and smiled.

"Looks like Hashem won this argument!"

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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