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Rabbi Yitzchak Meyer and Leah Mindle Lipszyc, Gam Zu Chabad

The Shlichus Saga: the Detroit Years Part I

By **Chaya Chazan**

My wife and I got married in the winter of 1970. There was no doubt in our mind that we'd soon be moving and establishing a Chabad house of our own like so many of our friends.

We'd spend the requisite year in Crown Heights, and then strike out on our own.

While I was preparing for my wedding, I was approached by Rabbi Rosenfeld, the principal of Oholei Torah and offered a teaching position. I agreed - with two caveats: I was upfront about the fact that it would be a temporary, one year job. I asked him not to force my hand by writing to the Rebbe, asking for me to stay on any longer after the year was over.

I also requested to teach 3rd grade. The Rebbe had recently started sharing "Rashi sichos," analyzing a different Rashi from the parsha each week. These sichos captured the hearts and minds of the entire community, and everyone learned Rashi with excitement all week, ensuring they understood the background on whichever Rashi the Rebbe would choose to speak about. The Rebbe's questions were always rooted in the fundamental rule that Rashi was written to explain Chumash on a five-year-old's level. Any question Rashi posed was one that would naturally occur to a five-year-old learning Chumash for the first time, and any questions the Rebbe asked on that Rashi would also occur to a five-year-old. I had to know: was the Rebbe referring to exceptional minds, or the average child of that age? Teaching 3rd grade would give me the chance to find out for myself.



I encouraged my students to develop their curiosity and analytical mind by rewarding them whenever they asked questions. The deeper and more perceptive the question, the more points they would earn. And sometimes, they had questions Rashi didn't address at all. As the Rebbe taught, that meant the answers would be so self-apparent to a small child, they didn't even need to be asked. I encouraged them to figure out the answers for themselves and rewarded them accordingly.

At the beginning, the questions were basic and barely scratched the surface of Rashi's brilliant simplicity. But as I trained their minds and spurred them to think more deeply, I found, to my delight, that my young students thought about Chumash just the way Rashi and the Rebbe expected them to.

I still remember one specific question a student brought up that Rashi did not address. I challenged my class to figure out the simple answer; one that was so clear, even a young child would understand it implicitly. But no one could answer it satisfactorily enough. I thought about it myself and researched through many sefarim, but I still couldn't find the answer. I posed the question to many friends and scholars, but none of their proposed solutions satisfied me. The issue continued to bother me for the next twenty-three years. Then, when my daughter was about to embark on her own teaching career, I retold this story to her, hoping to inspire her with a sense of the importance and potential of her new position.

"But Tatty, of course Rashi doesn't answer it. It's so clear!" she replied. She went on to give me an answer that astounded me with its simplicity.

I felt that the nachas I got from my own daughter answering the question was my reward for all the effort I'd invested into my students, all those years before.

When I finished my year of teaching, Rabbi Rosenfeld did try to pressure me to stay, but he kept his word and never wrote to the Rebbe about it.

We had quite a few shlichus offers to consider, and I asked my wife if she had a preference for any one specifically. She claimed she didn't, so we wrote a letter to the Rebbe, outlining all the offers we'd received.

The Rebbe circled two of the options and added a note: *Whichever one your wife prefers.*

Of the two, I wanted the one I thought would present more of an exciting challenge. Although my wife had claimed not to have a preference, after the Rebbe's pointed response, she admitted that she'd rather move to Detroit, Michigan.

I was flattered that Rabbi Berel Shemtov, the head shliach of Michigan, had offered us the position. Many years later, he told me what made him choose us:

In 1967, the Rebbe established the mivzta of tefillin, as a reinforcement for the success of the Jewish army during the Six Day War. A few months later, there was a major book sale event taking place in Long Island. At that time, there was very little Chabad or Orthodox presence there. Someone organized a group of volunteers to run a tefillin booth at the book sale. I was one of the volunteers. Rabbi Shemtov was another, although I didn't know it at the time.

We all spread out, trying to reach as many attendees as possible. As I walked from one person to the next, I noticed one man who kept glancing at us with barely concealed fury. Something made me walk up to him and ask, "Do you want to put on tefillin?"

It was all that was needed to break the mask of self-control he'd struggled to maintain. He yelled, loudly, "No! No, I will not put on tefillin!"

Many people stopped to stare. I looked at him blandly and asked, "Well, why not?"

He sputtered in rage. "Because I'm a Reform Jew, and Reform Jews don't put on tefillin!"

"Interesting," I commented. "In the past, people were embarrassed to admit they didn't put on tefillin. Now, there's a whole *club* dedicated to it!"

The man's face grew even redder than it already was and he clenched his fists menacingly. He stomped off the field and left, muttering angrily under his breath the whole while.

There were many witnesses to the exchange, and they all appreciated my quick retort that had silenced him so effectively. They all lined up in front of me, eager to put on tefillin.

Rabbi Shemtov, witnessing the whole episode, was impressed, and decided to include me in his team of shluchim.

There were many jobs to be done in the growing Detroit community. My main focus in the first years was a small weekly publication called A Thought for the Week. It included a short summary of a sicha on the parsha, focusing on the lesson to be learned, as explained by the Rebbe. Rabbi Shemtov, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Kagan A"H, and I formed the team behind the pamphlet's publication. I was in charge of printing and distribution. Since we mailed over 100,000 copies each week to Jews all over the United States and Canada, this was no simple matter!

Rabbi Shemtov also asked me to take on an additional responsibility. A small group of families had moved to Twyckingham, Southfield, a neighboring community, but found there was no Orthodox shul there. They tried asking other organizations to open a minyan in Twyckingham, but no one was willing to invest in such a risky prospect. They finally turned to Chabad and asked if a weekly Shabbos minyan could be arranged. Rabbi Shemtov agreed and asked if we could move to Twyckingham instead of Oak Park, where the rest of the Chabad community lived, to establish a minyan. We agreed, and hosted the minyan in our living room every week. Eventually, after the community grew large enough to sustain its own chapter of Young Israel, we moved on and looked for another opportunity to help Jews come closer to Yiddishkeit.

For a time, I also assisted in the local Cheder, teaching and filling in wherever I could.

Eventually, we took our shlichus in a new direction. We were already used to living outside the main Chabad community, which became the format of Chabad of Michigan's outreach programs. I would start a new outpost, and once it was established, Rabbi Shemtov would bring another shliach to run it and I would move on to the next project, community, and expansion.

One of the more memorable positions I held was tabling and meeting students at the University of Michigan. With over 6,000 Jewish students amongst a population of 45,000, it was the most highly concentrated Jewish student body on any campus in America.

We learned a lot during our years in Detroit, and though we eventually moved to other states, cities, and countries, I credit some of my shlichus notions and strategies to Rabbi Shemtov's guidance and expertise.

I privately thought of the student quad on campus as the "ism center." Just as my table promoted Judaism, there were tables promoting feminism, socialism, communism, liberalism, and others.

My neighbor, a young Jewish fellow, was standing before a table bedecked with the hammer and sickle. Sometimes I overheard him speaking to passing students about communism, and although I disagreed wholeheartedly with his premise, I was impressed by his intelligence, poise, and charm.

Whenever the streams of students thinned and we found ourselves at our leisure, we chatted with one another. It wasn't hard to tell that his overt friendliness was sparked by his ambition to turn a real rabbi into a card-carrying Communist. I could almost see him envisioning the parade of Jewish students who'd come pouring in, once he had a bonafide rabbi on board.

Over time, we had hours of conversation, where he did his best to explain how Communism was the ultimate fulfillment of Judaism and the "ideal Jewish way."

Unfortunately, I was a slow learner. And my rebuttals about what I saw as the ultimate path to serving G-d slowly started sinking in. I never became a Communist; he became a chassid instead.

Today, he lives in Israel, and is watching his grandchildren fulfill Torah the truly ideal way.

Every effort undertaken to promote positivity will generate results. Often, all we see is the presumed failure. But sometimes, Hashem is kind and shows us the results of our actions.

One morning, I was tabling on campus as usual. I saw a likely-looking guy pass by, so I waved the tefillin and called out, "Hey, are you Jewish?"

In reply, he waved me off, and didn't even bother to answer.

I was disappointed, but squared my shoulders and readied myself to ask the next passing student. I quickly forgot all about it.

Recently, more than fifty years after this incident, my wife and I met a nice Jewish family, indistinguishable from any other chareidi family in Israel.

"Rabbi, do you remember me?" the father asked. I looked at him closely, but I couldn't place him.

"Many years ago, I was a student at UM. I walked by your table one day and you asked me if I was Jewish. I waved you away and walked off. But I couldn't get the interaction out of my head. I'd been asked if I was Jewish - and I'd *denied* my heritage! How could I do such a thing? True, my Judaism had never meant that much to me, but how could I deny such a vital part of who I was?

"I decided to learn more about Judaism and what it meant to be a Jew. I enrolled in yeshiva and committed to a life of Torah true Judaism. My wife and I moved to Israel, and now you can see our beautiful family right here."

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