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ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Shneur Simcha and Moussia Landa, Chabad at Netanya Academic College, Netanya, Israel

Lost on Campus, Chabad at Netanya Academic Campus

Part I

By **Chaya Chazan**

I grew up in Bnei Brak. My father was the Rav there for 33 years, following in the footsteps of *his* father, who also served there as rav.

My grandfather was close with the Rebbe Rashab, so I was lucky to grow up with a strong sense of belonging in the Chabad world and an ingrained understanding of mesiras nefesh for the sake of shlichus.

My wife, Moussia, was born in the US and moved to Israel when she was five. Her family settled in Kfar Chabad, where she was raised with the same values I was. When we got married, the decision to go on shlichus was the only natural choice.

When we were searching for our shlichus, Rabbi Moshe Shilat, who runs the Shluchim on Campus program in Israel, suggested a few different cities. At that time, campus shlichus was still in its infancy, although Rabbi Shilat was working hard to develop the program into a full-fledged organization. With the Rebbe's brachos, Rabbi Shilat succeeded and helped establish Chabad centers in every college throughout the country!



We had no specific interest in one city over another, and we wanted to make an informed decision, so, with a list of Rabbi Shilat's suggestions in hand, we checked out the campuses for ourselves. One of the ones on our list was Netanya Academic College.

The college campus was a far cry from the yeshiva campuses I was so familiar with. It was way bigger than I'd imagined it would be, and I wandered around, looking up at the buildings in confusion. Seeing my apparent bewilderment, a kindly man stopped and asked if I needed directions or help. I demurred, but he invited me to walk back to his office with him anyhow.

"You're Chabad, right?" he asked.

I nodded and was amazed to see how quickly his face lit up.

"My family is from Georgia," he shared. "The only reason my family is religious today is because of the Rebbe and his shluchim. If not for them, we'd probably know nothing about Yiddishkeit at all!" His face grew thoughtful for a moment and then lit up with a brilliant smile. "You should open a Chabad house here!" he exclaimed.

I was flabbergasted. I hadn't mentioned *why* I was there, but here was this stranger, suggesting the very same thing!

"I can speak with the head shliach in Netanya and arrange everything," he went on, excitedly. "The students here could really use a Chabad house! Oh - I'll check with the school administration as well. My family has always felt hakaras hatov towards the Rebbe and Chabad, and we'd be honored to help!"

As I left the building, I looked down at my list in wry amusement. Netanya was just one of the colleges on my list, and we hadn't made any decisions one way or another, but it looked like the shlichus was choosing *us*, instead of the other way around.

I'd discussed it only cursorily with my wife when my phone rang a few days later.

"I spoke with the administration, and they would be happy to have you!" enthused my new acquaintance. "When can you guys come?"

I laughed. "We're getting a little ahead of ourselves! Let me come back with my wife and see what she thinks."

We did come back together and decided Netanya was the right choice. Within a short while, we had set up shop. Meeting that man was nothing short of hashgacha pratis.

At the beginning, we used a couple of classrooms on campus to host shiurim and events. While it was convenient in many ways, we also saw that students didn't want to return to yet another classroom after spending a whole day in them. It also meant we had a strict curfew of 9:00 PM, since campus was closed after that.

Although campus shlichus inherently means not having or being able to set up a community, we knew we had to find our own place. We managed to get a storefront in a great location - near the entrance of the college, neighboring the dormitory building. This was made possible by support from Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky A"H and his son, Rabbi Mendy Kotlarsky, who spoke to Mr. Moshe Tabacinic, a well-known philanthropist and friend of Chabad, and asked him to lend us his support. Rabbi Shilat also convinced Mr. Itzchak Mirilishvili to invest in our shlichus.

We made the storefront our own with cozy, comfortable furniture that reminded students we were meant to be their home away from home.

We arrived over summer break, so our first few weeks were quiet. We got to know the administration, learned about Netanya, and tried to help the people on campus get comfortable with us being there.

When the semester started in November, we got to work. We worked together with Agudat Hastudentim, the Student Union, knowing that being officially recognized by the union was the best way to reach students more easily.

Many of the students on the union board had traveled after their army service and had warm memories of the Chabad houses that had helped them along their adventures, so they welcomed us warmly.

To introduce ourselves to the students and get our name out there, we set up a welcome booth in the lobby. It was a chance to "meet and greet" the rabbi and rebbetzin, and we also asked each student to fill out a short survey asking what they wanted to hear and learn about.

We were lucky to secure a donation of ice cream bars, and the students answered the allure of free ice cream

in droves. By the end of the week, we had 400 filled-out surveys. We used them as a launching pad, reaching out to students and inviting them to our shiurim and programs.

The winter semester always begins around the same time that the International Kinus Hashluchim is held in New York. On the plane to New York, I was still working my way through the hundreds of surveys when a young woman named Agam* called.

"I filled out a form last week," she said, "and no one ever got back to me. But I'm serious. I want to start learning Torah."

"Of course!" I said. "Bring some more students, and let's put a shiur together."

We gathered a few students and found a corner of the library where talking was allowed. It soon became a weekly shiur that continued for many more months.

A few months in, I arrived at our spot at the usual time, and nobody was there. I sat down to wait, wondering where everyone was, especially Agam. She was *never* late! The minutes ticked by without anyone showing up. Finally, a young religious girl sitting a few chairs away turned to me.

"Rabbi," she said, "when is the class going to start?"

"I'm sorry—" I began. "Agam?! I didn't recognize you for a second!" I exclaimed.

She laughed. "It is amazing how a different, modest dress code can transform a person. I hardly recognized *myself* this morning!" She motioned to her new garb. "This is the new me. I decided it was time. I've been learning more and feeling closer and closer to Hashem and His mitzvos. It's time my outside matched my inside and reflected someone who wants to keep the Torah."

I was impressed with Agam's sincerity and integrity, and I hoped she would weather whatever other hardships life would throw at a young, newly religious woman.

A few weeks later, Agam called, her voice low and serious.

"There's this guy," she began. "We've been seeing each other for the past few years. It's getting serious." The words seemed hard for her to get out. "I told him that if he plans on marrying me, he needs to keep the mitzvot. Otherwise, we have to break up. This is who I am now and how I envision my future home. I told him he needed to choose."

"That's very brave, Agam," I said. "I'm sure it took a lot of deep thought to decide this is the future you wanted. Now you're asking him to choose the same. This is a lifelong commitment, not only to each other but to Hashem!"

After a lot of back-and-forth, Gideon*, Agam's boyfriend, decided he valued their relationship enough to at least give authentic Judaism a real try. He began learning and exploring Torah with an open mind.

A year later, we celebrated Agam and Gideon's wedding, honoring the establishment of another Torah-true home.

Today, they have three kids, who are classmates and friends with my own children. Every morning at drop-off, when I see them, I get a little reminder to keep giving my all to my shlichus, as the power of influencing someone at this pivotal stage in their lives can have lifelong effects.

Chabad on Campus in Israel is run as one umbrella organization, with "franchises" all over the country. While we're given the freedom to arrange whatever shiurim, programs, and events we'd like for the most part, there are a few events scattered throughout the year in which every campus Chabad house partakes. Shabbatonim are very popular, and our students love both the ones we arrange on our own and those that join them with students from other campuses.

Chabad on Campus arranges two joint holiday events as well, once for Yom Kippur and once for Simchas Torah.

The Simchas Torah in Kfar Chabad is one of the highlights of the year. The small village is filled with excited students, and the air pulsates with palpable joy and celebration.

On the eve of Simchas Torah 2023, there were over 200 students in Kfar Chabad, along with many campus shluchim and their families.

We danced until the wee hours of the night and fell into bed, exhausted. We were awoken a few hours later by the sound of sirens. The word quickly spread, but we didn't want to believe the horrors we were hearing. As student after student was called away to join their platoons, the painful reality set in.

The few students who were left turned to us with burning questions that echoed in their tear-filled eyes. *What do we do now?*

As Chabad chassidim, we knew the answer, although it was difficult to implement.

It's still Simchas Torah. We have a mitzvah to be happy, rejoice, and dance! Even though our hearts are filled with tears, our feet will lift in song. Joy breaks all boundaries, *and our joy will serve as a zechus for those fighting for our lives right now.*

So, we danced.

After Yom Tov, we quickly turned on our phones and learned the scope of the atrocities committed that day.

The shliach from Sderot was particularly affected.

"Being here saved our lives," he exclaimed. "Our house is only 100 meters from *the* police station - yes, the same police station the terrorists captured and used as their base! I have security camera footage of terrorists roaming through my yard! It's a nes from Hashem that we are here, where we're relatively safe, and our lives were spared."

October 7th awakened something deep and integral in the Jewish people. Israelis are tough and courageous, and the fear we all felt was channeled into action. Thousands took their place in the army's ranks, while those who weren't serving did whatever they could to support the troops. We gathered food, clothing, and supplies and sent them to our friends on base.

The pintele Yid was kindled, and thousands who would never be caught dead even *talking* to a chareidi were suddenly begging those same people to help them put on tefillin. Just after Simchat Torah, when we returned home from Kfar Chabad, dozens of students we'd never met before showed up on our doorstep, asking how they could help.

Our location was a relatively safe zone, so displaced families from both the north and south of the country relocated to Netanya. As so many students were with their platoons, there were plenty of available rooms.

The focus of our shlichus shifted radically and suddenly. There were adults who needed food, clothing, and equipment, and children who needed a productive way to channel their energy and anxiety. Everyone needed to feel tethered to something real after having been torn from their homes so unexpectedly.

We embraced the refugee families as our own and did everything we could to ease their transition and give them a modicum of comfort. We delivered meals, organized children's activities, and donated clothing and supplies. We went around from dorm to dorm, introducing ourselves and asking how we could help. We also offered comfort of a spiritual kind, inviting them to join our minyanim and shiurim and to learn more about Hashem. The community we'd never been able to build was suddenly surrounding us.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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