

IllumiNations

Issue 21 | Bamidbar / Shavous 5782

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



DollarDaily.org

One by One Rabbi Mendel and Esther Lifshitz & Family of Boise, Idaho

Our shlichus is not an assembly-line shlichus; it is handmade. Every neshama is hand-crafted. We wouldn't trade it for the world. We had the incredible opportunity to build up our community from the ground up.

We absolutely won the lottery. The Rebbe chose us to be the Shluchim in Boise, Idaho. There was no logical reason for us to end up here. My wife and I have no connection to Idaho. She was raised in South Africa, I'm from Cincinnati, and had never even been here as a (bochur to visit Jews which is how many shluchim in remote areas form their connection).

When I mentioned Idaho to my wife as an option, she said, "Where's that?" "You know, the potato place!" I answered. She literally had no idea what I was talking about.

We had other offers for Shlichus, but we wanted to be pioneers. We wanted to serve as Shluchim in a place where there was a critical need and we could make a pronounced difference.

Prior to arriving in Idaho, it had been over a decade since a Chabad center was established in a new state. Our closest neighbors, Rabbi Benny & Rebbetzin Sharonne Zippel, had moved out to Utah twelve years prior. None of my peers were exploring shlichus in the remaining far-flung and remote states. It was a new and, at the time, un-



popular challenge. We embraced it and arrived, together with our eldest son Dovid, in 5764 (2004) as the first shluchim in Idaho.

On our initial preparatory visit to Boise, we met three Jews. By the time we actually moved, one of them had left the city, and another was terminally ill r"l. We had very little to work with. To this day, Idaho does not have a Jewish Federation, JCC, or any other typical community-based, Jewish organizations.

Surprisingly, Boise's Jewish history was very different from the other Western States. On the one hand, Idaho was the first state to elect a known Jew as governor when Moses Alexander became governor of Idaho in 1915. And, the Reform congregation of Boise dates back to the 1890s.

On the other hand, there was never any organized Orthodox community. The small Jewish community had a storied history but remained very secular. Until today, there isn't a kosher Jewish cemetery in Boise, something we are fervently working to create. When we arrived it was Idaho's first-ever "Religious" organization.

Boise is also the most remote metropolitan area in the continental USA. Seventy-two percent of the land in Idaho is wilderness, with limited roads traversing the mountainous terrain. Boise is an up-and-coming city, currently experiencing an explosive growth spurt. With the metro population inching toward a million, it nonetheless has been able to retain its western, small-town feel. People here are incredibly friendly and polite.

As we were considering the Shlichus, our biggest concern was not the remoteness, the lack of kosher food or the ten-hour round-trip drive to the nearest mikvah. Our key question was, would we be able to successfully raise Chassidische children

in this spiritually undeveloped corner of the universe. We deliberately, yet organically, strived to operate our Shlichus as a family, with our children as critical partners.

With the Rebbe's brachos, we have Baruch Hashem been able to maintain our children's active role in our Shlichus. Preparing Shabbos meals, going on mitvtzaim, and running our Hebrew School are all examples of our children's shared ownership of our Shlichus. Our 12-year-old daughter's email signature is "Proud Shlucha to Boise, Idaho."

Baruch Hashem, we have been blessed with a large family. Our daughter is learning in New York. At a Shabbos seudah with a local Crown Heights family, she was asked, "How many Shluchim are there in Idaho?" Matter-of-factly, she responded, "Thirteen," referring to our family (the only shluchim in the state), which has grown by ten bli ayin hara since moving to Idaho.

When our eldest son, Dovid, was about five years old, we brought him to the East Coast for a few weeks in the summer and enrolled him in a Jewish day camp. After his first day, he excitedly came home and declared, "All the kids in my bunk are my cousins!"

When I asked him why he came to that conclusion, he innocently asserted, "All the boys were wearing yarmulkes." That was one of our first wake-up calls that we were raising Shluchim in a heretofore midbar.

For the first couple of years, we ran our Chabad activities out of our home. We started with personal shiurim, Shabbos meals, and children's programs. Since there was no Jewish network and a small Jewish population, building up our community was contingent on our knocking on doors and word-of-mouth.

During our first year, my brother came to help us out for Tishrei. We sent him to downtown Boise to knock on doors and find Jews. Boise's Jewish population was so small that in a 20-story office building it was unlikely any Jews would be found. A true Chossid, my brother did his best. When he inquired in one office whether there were any Jews, the secretary thought for a moment and said, "Yes, hold on. I think there is someone Jewish!" She called the person in question and told my brother to wait for him outside.

A few minutes later, the man came dashing out the door. "What is it?" he asked urgently. "Why are you here?"

"I just wanted to tell you about the new rabbi in town and High Holiday services that are coming up," my brother replied. "I also have tefillin, which I'd love to help you put on."



DollarDaily.org

This encounter bore fruit, as the man became a dedicated regular at our Chabad House for many years thereafter.

In a candid moment, I once asked him why he rushed out so fast during that initial encounter.

“Rabbi,” he said. “I haven’t stepped foot in a synagogue in 20 years. When I heard a rabbi was waiting for me, I thought they had come to tell me that my father passed away!”

That is how rare rabbi sightings are here. And how uninvolved many Jews have been. Baruch Hashem is changing.

Our 30-strong Hebrew School student body originally started with 3 students. Baruch Hashem, we’ve seen slow and steady progress. Interestingly enough, the two years of Covid brought more people to Boise than in all the previous ten years combined. Just last Shabbos, we had three new families at our Shabbos table. This year, we opened a CTeen chapter. After six months, Baruch Hashem we had 30 teens participating in a variety of events.

For many years we couldn’t even get a regular minyan on Shabbos. Baruch Hashem, lately it has not been as great a struggle, though it still requires effort.

When people from large Jewish communities ask me if we have a daily minyan, I answer, “Our minyan is spread throughout the world. We, Baruch Hashem, have baalei teshuva that daven every day. They just don’t live in Boise anymore. As their commitment grew, they moved to Yerushalayim, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and other cities. It’s hard to maintain a frum lifestyle without a Mikvah or Chinnuch. We are working hard to change that and are ready to break ground to build Idaho’s first Mikvah.”

One of the things we have learned is that our efforts need to be consistent. The brochos and hatzlacha will come, on Hashem’s schedule and plan.

For example, one day, a college student from Northwest Nazarene University called our Chabad House. She told my wife, “I’m looking for a dreidel and a kippah. We’re doing a comparative religion class and I decided to present about Judaism. I am looking for a place where I can get hold of these items. Can I come pick them up?” As one of the only local Jewish listings, we often receive these types of random requests. My wife readily agreed.

When the girl came to the Chabad House, we observed a girl deeply influenced by today’s culture, down to the numerous body piercings. My wife handed her the dreidel and kippah and asked her why she had chosen to showcase these items at this type of university.

“I thought my grandmother would be proud,” the girl responded. “She was a Holocaust survivor.”

Immediately, we responded in unison, “Which grandmother?”

“My mother’s mother,” she answered, a bit puzzled at our obvious excitement.

“What are you doing Friday night?” my wife asked.

It took a few months for her Jewish identity to sink in. She had been raised without knowing she was Jewish. She gradually became more and more involved, attending events and shiurim in our Chabad House. Most of all, she connected with our family, spending countless Shabbos meals at our table. Her spiritual growth continued along with many stations in her journey and she is now living a proud frum life in Chicago with her husband and children.

Another baal teshuva that was influenced in our Chabad house was born and raised in Chicago in a traditional-but-not-frum family. He moved to Idaho some 15 years ago for a one-year medical fellowship. He called to find out about the Jewish community and introduce himself. He said, a bit apologetically, “I hope my wife can participate too.”

I assured him that at Chabad anyone and everyone can participate, wondering why she would feel unwelcome. When I met his wife, I discovered that she had undergone a non-Halachic conversion. Nevertheless, we did our best to make them feel at home.

On the first day of Rosh Hashana, which fell out on Shabbos that year, this fellow hurriedly arrived toward the end of davening, grabbed a tallis and sat down.

After davening, as I extended Yom Tov wishes, I told him that I noticed his rushed and tardy entry. I asked him if everything was okay.

“Rabbi, I have to tell you that my wife is not so comfortable at Chabad,” he admitted. “This morning, we attended the Reform congregation. They have a big service, with music and all. In the middle of the service, the cantor pulled out a shofar and announced that they would be blowing it.

“Now listen, Rabbi, I grew up with some Jewish education and I know that when Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat, the Shofar is not sounded. I proudly stood up and said, ‘No, that’s not right! This year we don’t sound the Shofar on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.’ They would have none of it, and went on to blow the Shofar. At that, I left and came straight here. I’m never going back there.”

True to his word, he never went back there. I, in turn, encouraged him to strengthen his connection to Yiddishkeit by learning Torah. We started learning Tanya every week for the rest of that year. By the time he left, he was well on his path to becoming Shomer Torah u’Mitzvos. His wife eventually converted according to halachah and they now live just a few blocks from the college-student-turned-Lubavitcher in the previous story.

You never know where and when a neshama will wake up. This man lived in Chicago his whole life, but had to go to far-flung Boise, Idaho to commit to a life of Torah.

Our Shlichus and our community have grown over the years. We now have a miniature version of what many large-town Chabad Houses have, with a wide range of programs. As we look toward the future, we remind ourselves never to forget “Reb Yisroel” as we aim to influence Klal Yisroel. Hand-made in Idaho is still our motto.

A shliach’s job is to do our little part, one step at a time, and Hashem figures out the rest with the brachos of the Rebbe.

We will continue watering the flowers we’ve so carefully sown until this spiritual desert turns into Hashem’s beautiful garden with Moshiach’s speedy arrival.

DollarDaily.org

a Project of

**YadLShliach.org
and COLlive.com**

COL LIVE

THINK YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING WITH A DOLLAR? THINK AGAIN.

- Your dollar will help Jewish communities all over the world.
- Your dollar will show shlichim in communities near and far that their dedication is valued and appreciated.
- For less than the price of a cup of coffee, you can make tzedaka part of your day.


DollarDaily.org

\$331 +
DONATING PER DAY

\$57657 +
ALREADY DONATED TO ORGANIZATIONS

\$120815 +
TO BE GIVEN OVER THE NEXT 365 DAYS

JOIN US FOR JUST \$32 A MONTH! www.dollardaily.org