

IllumiNations

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Starting a Community From Scratch

Rabbi Mendy and Shternie Deitsch, Chandler, Arizona

Twenty-four years ago, after the traditional year of kollel, my wife and I were eagerly looking to go out on shlichus.

We met with Rabbi Levertov, the head shliach of Arizona who told us about a beautiful area outside of Phoenix called the East Valley, which consists of a few small cities. There was no Jewish infrastructure at all and very little information about how many Jews even lived there. My wife and I were thrilled! Building a community from scratch was exactly the challenge we were looking for!

When we first moved, Rabbi Levertov introduced us to a handful of people. To build our community, we wanted to meet people organically, on their turf. My wife would take our baby to children's play places and try to meet other Jewish families. I would frequent local establishments looking visibly and proudly Jewish, and that alone was enough to invite curiosity. People would get excited at the sight of my black hat and suit and inevitably start up a conversation. Once we got to know them, we would invite them for Shabbos and the classes we were offering. From the six people we originally met, our Chabad House has, Baruch Hashem, grown to around 300 families.

Although our local grocery has some basic kosher products, it wasn't until recently that Cholov Yisrael milk and kosher meat became easy to find. Today, Baruch Hashem, we, along with our growing



community who now keep kosher, get shipments of meat and dairy from California.

Our children go to school in Phoenix, about a 30-minute drive. Through the duration of our shlichus, we've been taking community families to and from school daily and are thrilled that many families have taken advantage of this opportunity to send their children to a Jewish Day School. Phoenix also has the closest mikvah, which makes it difficult for women to take on this mitzvah, especially when it involves a Shabbos or Yom Tov. We are currently running a fundraising campaign to build a mikvah for the East Valley communities.

When we first arrived, we advertised in the local newspapers about our programs and upcoming events and sent press releases about our larger events. Once, a new family came to Chabad, and when they began to come more regularly, we asked how they'd found our shul.

Their answer astounded us.

"We've had your number on our fridge for five years," they answered. "We saw a press release in a newspaper years ago. It interested us, so we clipped it and put it on our fridge. We passed by that newspaper clipping every day for five years, but we never had the guts to actually call or show up."

Today, the family is completely frum and their son attends yeshiva.

Never underestimate the thirst of a Yid to connect with Hashem. We also cannot understand the challenges that may keep someone from coming closer to Yiddishkeit. Ultimately, the pintelev yid will have the power to overcome the challenges and seek out Hashem. We just need to be patient; we'll be there to accept them with love.

I recently returned from Eretz Yisrael where I was privileged to officiate at the wedding of one of the young people who visit our Chabad center. I first met the chosson and his family on Chanukah, many years ago. His mother was shopping with him and his sister in the same shopping center as our annual menorah lighting. The music and menorah intrigued her, so she stopped by. We spoke with her for a few minutes, and of course, invited them for a Shabbos meal. That sparked a deep connection and reunion with their Jewish heritage. Today, he is, Baruch Hashem, married to a Jewish girl and living in Eretz Yisrael.

As our activities and community grew, we outgrew the living room where we were holding services and desperately needed a larger space. We had our eye on the perfect place. Unfortunately, the price tag was over \$3.5 million.

We made a list of potential donors and called each one, setting up meeting after meeting. I was particularly excited that I'd managed to schedule a meeting with a wealthy businessman who could contribute greatly to our building fund. I thought the meeting went well, but was disappointed when he ended the meeting by saying that it didn't sound like something he was interested in. He declined to contribute.

As I was in my car on the way home from what I thought was a disastrous meeting, I received a call from another businessman who had heard about our building campaign. On the spot, he pledged an even bigger donation than the one I had asked from the first man!

We don't know what Hashem has planned for us. All we can do is put in the work and make ourselves a keili for Hashem's bracha, and Hashem will take care of the rest.

Brendon was a typical, secular, Jewish teenager. He attended shul once a year, and never had the opportunity to give much more thought than that to his Yiddishkeit.

His friends from his public high school invited him to a game night one Friday evening. Brendon was excited to join, but he was taken aback when he arrived and found that the event was held in a church. His pintelev Yid protested, telling him, "You're Jewish. A Jew shouldn't be in a church on Friday night. A Jew belongs in a shul!"

Brendon now comes to shul every week. The world's attempt to draw him into their clutches is

what gave him the impetus to reconnect to Hashem.

During the first few years of our shlichus, we had an opportunity to host a famous speaker. She happened to have an extra night in between other speaking engagements in nearby areas. At that point, our home served as our Chabad House, so it would be complicated to arrange a fitting location. Another challenge was the date - exactly when my wife was due to give birth. Nevertheless, we decided to book her. At great cost and effort, we rented a hotel conference room, set it up beautifully, and spent hours advertising the event, calling people, and sending out individual invitations.

Seven people showed up. We were devastated. It seemed to have been a waste of time and effort.

About seven years later, I was invited to the wedding of a community member's daughter. "Do you know the story of this marriage?" the mother of the bride asked me. "Years ago, you hosted a lecture by a famous speaker. After the speech, she approached me and asked if I was okay, since I seemed down. I told her my daughter was dating a non-Jew and that I didn't know what to do about it. *Light Shabbos candles and see what happens*, she advised me. I didn't know how that would help the situation, but I followed her advice and began lighting Shabbos candles every week. Two months later, my daughter broke up with her non-Jewish boyfriend. Soon afterwards, she met her husband, who, Baruch Hashem, is Jewish!"

What I thought was a failure turned out to be one of our most successful events - with amazing results! You just never know which small moments could change the course of history.

A shliach is with his people both in happy times and sad. When Martin's mother passed away, I called to console him and offer my help with planning the funeral.

"There won't be a funeral," he answered. "My mother asked to be cremated."

I explained the essence of a Jewish burial and how the neshama is affected by the burial, but Martin insisted that he couldn't ignore his mother's last wish.

"That may have been her external wish," I gently explained, "but her soul wants to be buried as a

Jewish person. If she would've known the power of a Jewish burial, that our bodies are holy and that a Jew has the responsibility to return their body to its Creator in the most pristine manner possible, she would never have asked for a cremation."

I could see that he was struggling with the question. Eventually, he came back to me and agreed to bury her according to Jewish law.

"But I don't have the money for a burial," he blurted out.

"No problem," I assured him. "We'll take care of it."

"I already have an appointment with the funeral parlor for cremation," he admitted.

We had to work quickly to raise the funds and arrange the burial before the cremation could take place. Baruch Hashem, we were able to bury her with proper dignity.

A few months later, Martin emotionally told me, "Thank you. I would never have been able to live with myself if I had cremated my mother."

Boris was 65 years old, paralyzed from the waist down, and lived his life in a wheelchair.

"I want a bris," he demanded.

"You're not in the best of health... what does your doctor say?" I cautioned. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

Boris insisted and could not be moved from his position. I called mohalim, but they were all reluctant to take on such a complicated bris. Eventually we found a mohel who agreed to fly out. The next hurdle was to find a medical office in which to hold it. I asked a friend who was a doctor, but he refused, citing insurance issues. No one else was willing to do it either. Boris kept calling every day, asking when his bris would finally happen. He was so determined that, finally, after finding no other options, we decided to do it in our Chabad House, with no access to medical equipment.

"Do you understand the risks?" I asked him over and over.

"Yes," he answered confidently. "I have to do this. This is a mitzvah - a *huge* mitzvah - and I have to return my body to Hashem the right way."

The bris took place in one of our Chabad House classrooms. Boris lay in a place of high honor - a

six foot long folding table. Despite the dangers and the... less than ideal conditions, Boris beamed with happiness and pride. He made no sounds of complaint. His happiness and excitement were contagious. Baruch Hashem, the bris went without a hitch and he recovered fully. Mazal tov.

One day, I called Gary, whom I hadn't spoken to in a while.

"Hey Gary, how are you?" I began our conversation. "I was just thinking of you. Figured I'd give you a call."

Gary started to cry. When he regained control of himself, he asked, "Rabbi, who told you to call me?"

"No one," I answered. "I just felt like it was time to call you."

"I'm in the hospital now," Gary told me. "As you know, I live by myself. I fell yesterday, and I couldn't get up. I didn't know what to do, but then I thought to ask Siri to call an ambulance for me. As soon as I told my phone to call for help, I blacked out due to the pain. When I woke up, there were EMTs surrounding me and preparing me for transport to the hospital. I can't believe that you knew to call me - today of all days! It's a miracle that the EMT's made it in time! Clearly G-d is watching over me, as now, you've also called."

As Chassidim, we must remember to remain connected to our Rebbe, and remember that no matter what we are doing or where we are going, we bring the Rebbe, the tzaddik of our generation, with us. This is both a privilege and a responsibility. We might not have a huge Jewish population here, but our purpose is to be here for each of them. To the Rebbe, every Yid is precious.

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