

# IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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*Rabbi Moshe and Bracha Leah Sasonkin, Chabad of Metula, Israel*

## Turning the Switzerland of Israel into Bnei Brak

*Back when my now-husband and I were still just dating, I was the first one to bring up shlichus.*

“Wow!” He said, “It’s exactly like the Rebbe said - the women are the initiators, leading us to the geula! Of course I want to go on shlichus.”

We were both really eager to get our plans in motion. While spending a few weeks in Eretz Yisrael after our wedding, we traveled the length and breadth of the country, looking for shlichus opportunities.

We were up north, in the city of Kiryat Shemoneh; the shliach, Rabbi Tzipori, offered us an opportunity to work with him. We got along really well, but we wanted to go out on our own, bringing light to a city that had no established frum presence yet.

“Is that so?” said Rabbi Tzipori. “Why not check out Metula? It’s just ten minutes away, but it’s its own city!”

As advised, we visited Metula and were completely taken by its beauty. Metula is called “*The Switzerland of Israel*.” Its beautiful mountains and greenery are serenely picturesque.

Living in Metula also comes with a unique set of challenges. Our house is just 100 meters from the Lebanese border. During the war, when Lebanon was launching missiles at Israel on an almost daily basis, they very often flew right over our heads. Some residents complained of hearing scratching in the walls. They hired exterminators to get rid of the mice they were sure were burrowing tunnels under their floorboards, but, as it turned out, the noise was actually *Lebanese terrorists*, who planned to tunnel their way into Israel, cut us and some other small towns off from the rest of the country, and use us as hostages. They dug right in front of our home! Baruch Hashem, Tzahal was waiting for them by the exits and neutralized the threat.

We received a beautiful brachah from the Rebbe for “bracha v’hatzlacha” on our shlichus and prepared to make aliyah, and on Chanukah of 1990, we arrived



in Metula. Our first concern was finding a place to live. Most of Metula is made up of single family villas. We were looking for a significantly less expensive place to live, but there’s only one road in the city with apartment buildings, and eligibility for apartment rental was determined by a committee that met twice a year.

As soon as the committee laid eyes on us, a frum couple with sheitel, black hat, and jacket, they immediately denied us. “We don’t want Metula to turn into Bnei Brak,” they explained.

So we went to visit individual community members, explaining our vision for the future. Most of them greeted us warmly and expressed their support. With the strength of their backing, we appealed to the committee. Although they weren’t scheduled to meet for another six months, miraculously, they reconvened a short time later. The majority voted to accept us, and we were allowed to rent an apartment.

Metula has a shul, school, and community center. The grocery stores are almost completely kosher.

Our biggest issue occurs during a year of shemittah, when we can only buy fruits and vegetables in Tzefat.

It may seem strange to those in chutz la’aretz, who assume that everyone in Israel is familiar with many aspects of Yiddishkeit, but the average secular Israeli is only slightly more knowledgeable than the average American. When we first approached the principal of the school in Metula and offered to make some holiday programs or teach some classes, she shook her head in annoyance.

“We have Yahadut up to here!” she said, indicating high above her head.

I remembered her assertion when I was teaching the children about the Kotel Hama’aravi.

“Ah, mashehu Aravi?” they nodded knowledgeably. They lived three hours from the holiest site in the world, and they’d never even heard of it. Our work was truly cut out for us.

When a new principal took over years later, she reached out to us about programming for these students. The local JCC, which had at first coldly refused us entry, now also calls us up before each holiday and asks us what event we’ll be planning.

As I left the mikvah in nearby Kiryat Shemoneh with a local kibbutznik, she turned to me. “Bracha, when you build a mikvah in Metula, I’ll come again.”

I returned home, fired up with inspiration. We had space in our backyard, so... why not? It took six years to raise the money and finish construction, but our mikvah is our pride and joy. We’ve seen so many brachos and miracles come through it.

One of our neighbors, a professor at a nearby college, was uninterested to the extreme. He refused the matzos we offered on Pesach, the shalach manos we brought over on Purim, and the menorah we gave him on Chanukah.

One morning, he knocked on our door. He was shaken by the suicide bomber attacks that ravaged the country after the Oslo Accords in 1993.

“I need to do something Jewish,” he told us.

“Would you like to put on tefillin?” my husband offered.

“Yes. Let’s do it right now,” he insisted, already rolling up his sleeve.

Now he comes to shiurim, Shabbos meals, and many of our other programs, and has thawed considerably in his feelings towards Yiddishkeit.



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"Why didn't our parents teach us the beauty of Yiddishkeit?" He passionately cried after one class.

Liat, a young kibbutznik, wanted to try out the mikvah experience. After she emerged, she casually mentioned, "Oh, by the way, I live with my boyfriend. I'm not married. I just wanted to see what the mikvah was like."

I was a bit dismayed. "We'll be so happy to welcome you back after your wedding!" I told her.

Liat was very upset. "That's what's wrong with all you chareidim!" she yelled. "You're all so square! Who cares if I'm not married?" She stormed out.

I immediately consulted with a rav and explained the whole situation. He paskened that she can toivel, but should not make the bracha. I called Liat and told her what the rav had said. She was so happy to hear that she would still be allowed to use the mikvah and was touched that I'd asked on her behalf.

She called me back the next day.

"I was really moved when you decided to open your mikvah for me," she said. "My boyfriend and I discussed it. We decided to separate for a month, after which we will get married. Then I can come to the mikvah and say the bracha!"

I taught her the halachos she would need to know as a married woman, and their wedding was celebrated at the end of the month.

Liat and her husband still live on the kibbutz. With the tichel that covers her head and their growing attachment to Yiddishkeit, they are known as the Beit Chabad of the kibbutz.

A few parents asked if I could daven with their children before they started their school day. I sang the daily tefillos with them and told them stories in an unused classroom.

"I want you to know," the ganenet told me, "that you're not just davening with those children. When they come to their regular class, they repeat all the songs and stories for all the other children, too!"

Metula is built on a hill, and many of the streets sit atop others.

"I'm your neighbor from the top street," Orah introduced herself to us. "I can see straight into your yard when I sit on my back porch."

"Uh oh," we looked at each other. "Do our kids make too much noise?"

"No; I'm not here to complain. I wanted to tell you that, because of something you *don't* do, I respect you. Every Shabbat, I sit out on my porch and watch all the neighbors. One person is mowing their lawn, another is watching TV - but you sit outside and watch your children play. Everyone is dressed so beautifully, and it seems so peaceful. You read your holy books, relax, and enjoy the company of your family. You're not like the chareidim on TV, who scream 'Shabbos! Shabbos!' at all your neighbors. Watching you inspired me. I decided that from now on, I'm going to skip cutting my grass or barbecuing on Shabbat."

Every frum Jew is a shliach who can bring kedusha into the world even by *not* doing something! It's a wonder how much more we can - and *will* - accomplish with positive, assertive, and conscientious action.

Whenever we have extra money available, we use it to update our mikvah. We wanted to retiling the back-splash, so we contacted Anatoly, a well-reviewed contractor. We specifically asked him to start working in the morning, but to stop before evening time so our mikvah could open for use.

Anatoly got started on the tile, and at 1:00, he poked his head into the kitchen.

"Giveret, I am finished for today."

"Wait, Anatoly - why are you stopping so early? We have a few more hours before we need to open."

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I can't work any longer today. I'm dealing with a lot of back pain."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," I responded. "Maybe you can write to the Rebbe about it and ask for a bracha for a refuah shleima."

Anatoly scoffed, but when I explained how it works and how many people have gotten answers, he reluctantly agreed to let me write on his behalf. After all, it's not like it could make anything worse, right?

I wrote about his back pain and asked the Rebbe for a bracha. Anatoly looked over my shoulder as I wrote.

"You're already asking for miracles," he joked, "Why not request a bracha to win a contract I'm bidding on this Thursday?"

I dutifully added in Anatoly's request.

Thursday evening, I called him to ask what had happened with the bid.

"Oh, yeah, the bid? I won the bid," he answered. "But my back - my *back!*"

"Oh no! What happened?" I asked, worriedly.

"The day after we wrote to the Rebbe, I got up in the morning and immediately called my wife. Something was very wrong. Usually, it takes me ten minutes just to get out of bed. I can feel my back protest every move I make. But that day, I got up and *nothing* hurt! I couldn't feel my back at all! I went to the doctor to make sure everything was okay. I was sure I'd lost feeling in my spine somewhere, but the doctor told me there was nothing wrong. He even canceled the operation I was supposed to have!"

"I'm so glad to hear that, Anatoly!" I said, warmly. "By the way, how much do we owe you for the tile in the mikvah?"

"You don't owe me a shekel," Anatoly answered. "The Rebbe already paid."

Now, I often get calls from Anatoly.

"Shalom. I was wondering if you had a few minutes to write to the Rebbe for me..."

Oded was a sweet little boy who attended our summer day camp. When he returned to his secular school at the start of the new year, he brought a yarmulke with him. Before his class started to learn Torah, he took the yarmulke from his backpack and placed it on his head. The rest of his class laughed at him.

"Dati, dati!" they shouted with glee, pointing at Oded and sticking out their tongues.

His teacher took him aside. "Oded," she said to him seriously, "Why are you wearing a kipa? You're not religious - it's just making everyone laugh at you."

"When I was in Chabad in the summer," little Oded explained earnestly, "we learned about the holiness of Torah. How can I sit and learn without a kipa on my head?"

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