

IllumiNations

Issue 34 | Parsha Shoftim 5782

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



DollarDaily.org

Rabbi Moshe and Devorah Wilhelm, Portland, Oregon We Are Firefighters!

After we got married in 1980, we moved to Australia for a two-year kollel.

We were asked to stay a third year, but because we were thinking ahead, we asked for the freedom to look for shlichus opportunities throughout that year. This way, we could seamlessly transition from our kollel year to our shlichus life.

With the agreement of the rosh kollel, we went to New York for Tishrei. Not only would we spend the Yomim Noraim with the Rebbe, it would also give us the opportunity to seek out viable shlichus options. I wrote a letter to the Rebbe, detailing our plans and asking for a bracha.

A short while later, Rabbi Chadakov, the Rebbe's secretary, called me in to give me the Rebbe's answer: it was a bracha for hatzlacha for our shlichus.

"Nu, so when are you going?" Rabbi Chadakov asked.

"Well, our plan was to finish our year in kollel in Australia. In six months, we'll pack up our stuff and move to Portland."

"Absolutely not!" Rabbi Chadakov asserted. "If a building is on fire, would the firefighters say they'll be there in six months? Yiddishkeit is burning in Oregon! You've been appointed as the Rebbe's shliach. The 'fire' is now your achrayus! You can't go back to Australia for six months!"

We immediately arranged to travel to Portland and begin our shlichus. All of our furniture and household items were left in Australia, so our friends there kindly packed it up and sent it by boat. We made do for ten months until our shipment finally arrived.

Oregon is one of the most liberal states in the country. For many people here, "religion" is simply not in their lexicon. I discovered this for myself when I went to a local university and asked the dean about the Jewish student demographic. She gave me a pinched smile and said, "We don't talk about things like that here."

Fast forward thirty-eight years. We currently have fifteen shluchim in each major city in Oregon and are looking to grow. The fact that we were at all successful here, where religion is anathema, is a complete miracle. We see Hashem's hand in every step we take.

A couple months after we moved, the city built a new square downtown, which we figured would be the perfect place to host our public menorah lighting. We contacted the city officials, and even managed to get a state judge to agree to light the menorah.

I didn't know it at the time, but the Reform rabbi tried his best to undermine all my efforts. His Temple members were well-connected, and they pressured the state judge to bypass the event. The Oregon Board of Rabbis put out a statement disapproving of the menorah lighting. I wrote to the Rebbe asking if I should change my plans, but Rabbi Chadakov told me, "Continue!"

The rabbis' interference resulted in a large turnout, far greater than I'd been expecting, especially for such a freezing day. Our menorah lighting was published in the largest Oregon newspaper, as well as the national paper, *USA Today*, which used to highlight the major news in each state. Rabbi Krinsky would often clip newspaper articles about Chabad and show them to the Rebbe - and Oregon's biggest news was our menorah lighting! We were even featured on the national evening news on TV.

Our oldest was three when we first moved, and we needed to send him to school.

So, we started a small playgroup in our living room with three children. Over time, our school grew too large for our home and we needed a proper building. We knew that opening an additional Jewish school would create concern amongst the locals, so we asked the Rebbe what to do. The Rebbe advised us to consult with Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch.

Their decision was to buy a building outside of Portland proper. Instead, we looked for a building in Beaverton, a twenty minute drive from Portland.

Shortly after we bought the building, the Rebbe proclaimed the year as "Shnas HaBinyan" - "the year of building," and encouraged everyone to build and expand their centers. Although we'd just bought our property, I decided to buy the adjoining acre to fulfill the Rebbe's wishes. One of our regulars was the treasurer at his shul, and they'd successfully expanded their building through humble pledges of \$18 or \$20 a month. Over time, the entire sum was covered. He volunteered to set up the same system for us, and we bought the land. Thanks to the Rebbe's directive, we now had an extra acre to expand.

Portland had its own mikvah, but we wanted to build one whose kashrus would be unimpeachable. The only question was...where would we build it?

Our Chabad House was in Beaverton, and all our activities were centered there - but we didn't want to build the mikvah there. It was too far from the community, and it wouldn't be easily accessible, especially on Shabbos. Based on the Rebbe's instruction to consult with Merkos, we asked Rabbi Kotlarsky to check out our situation. He told us it was time to move back to Portland proper.



DollarDaily.org

There were very few appropriate buildings available, especially since we were limited to a two-block radius. On a walk through those blocks with a realtor, we found a suitable building - though the owner needed some coaxing before he agreed to sell. It was a block of three buildings right in the heart of the community, across from the JCC, all owned by the same elderly gentleman. Miracle one: finding an appropriate building so quickly. The owner took his time, checking our references and thoroughly researching us for months. Miracle two: he *didn't* check our financial resources.

I was only interested in one building to house our mikvah, but his accountant advised him to sell all three as a bundle. I didn't even have the money for one, but the Aibershter has His ways, and we managed to buy the full trio - miracle number three.

We technically no longer needed our Beaverton building, but once we were moving, we wanted to build our "dream building." We'd been on shlichus for fourteen years, and we dreamed of a gorgeous building to house our school, shul, and community activities, instead of small houses.

Our school had been in existence for many years, and had transformed the entire Jewish community of Portland. Other frum communities were able to grow and flourish knowing there was a frum school for their children to attend.

While I was at the Ohel, I wrote to the Rebbe and asked what to do about our two buildings.

The very next day, we met the principal and director of the school in the local kosher bagel shop. They asked to rent our new property for extra space.

Then we thought, "Why should we stay in Beaverton while they rent our building? Why can't we figure out how to make it work for us?" In addition to the buildings we originally bought, we'd also acquired a small piece of property behind one of our houses. Its individual makeup earned our Chabad House the name, "The Campus."

Two years ago, there was a series of fires set in religious buildings throughout Portland. The police suspected arson, but couldn't get a definite arrest. Our Sifrei Torah were usually housed in our main Chabad house, but because of Covid, they were moved to another building across the street - a smaller Chabad House we'd purchased some years before - to accommodate our outside minyanim. They were spared the fire due to this hashgacha pratis.

About 15 years ago, I got a letter that read:

"Dear Mrs. Wilhelm,

"You probably don't remember me. I visited you years ago. During my visit, I needed to use the mikvah. The other mikvah wasn't working, so I called you. You told me that there were some heating problems with the mikvah and you'd need some time to get the water to a bearable temperature by pouring in boiling water. The water was still cold, but I was grateful that you gave me the chance to fulfill the mitzvah.

"At that point, my husband and I were childless. Exactly nine months later, we had a beautiful baby girl. I am writing to tell you that the miracle baby born from your mikvah will be coming to visit Portland this summer."

There was one girl, very invested in Yiddishkeit, who came to one of our programs. Our only concern was that only her father was Jewish. Eventually, I had to have the difficult conversation where I informed her that, unfortunately, she was not considered a Jew according to halachah. Her face froze and her eyes glazed over. I wasn't even sure if she had heard me. But I knew halachah must be followed, even when it was uncomfortable or difficult.

A few years later, we received a call from the Bostoner Rebbe, asking for details about this girl's character. She was interested in undergoing geirus, and he wanted to make sure she was a good candidate before going further.

She, along with her beautiful Jewish family, visited us for Shabbos some years later. She told me she'd repressed my words. She simply couldn't process them; it was too painful for her. Eventually, she was able to address the issue and get her geirus settled.

Our entry hall is called "Gateway to Education, in memory of Allan Feltcorn." Who was Allan Feltcorn? Well, my husband walked into his hospital room one Friday on one of his weekly visits and cheerfully introduced himself.

"I can't believe you're here, Rabbi," Allan said with wonder. "My wife of many years recently passed away. Since she wasn't Jewish, my family sat shiva and cut all ties with me. I was feeling lonely and forlorn, so I asked G-d, *If there are still Jews in the world, let me see a sign.* And then, you walked in."

Allan became a regular in our Chabad House after that. When he passed away, he left us his small estate, which we used to renovate the pavilion, naming it in his honor. He left a huge mark on the world, showing how the pintele yid can be awakened, no matter how far the person has wandered from their roots.

Chava Perلمان* hadn't seen her sister Helen in fifty years, ever since Helen got involved with a cult in Portland. She completely cut contact with her family and gave her life to the cult and its leaders. Towards the end of her life, Helen chose a friend from the cult to be her guardian and take care of her end-of-life needs.

Somehow, Chava learned of her sister's passing. Mourning for the sister she barely had a chance to know, Chava was doubly horrified to learn that Helen had asked to be cremated - and the cult's cremation ceremony was to be carried out *the next morning*.

It was already late and she knew there wasn't much to be done, but she called us crying, asking to at least say Kaddish for her sister's departed soul. We knew that it would be virtually impossible to stop a cremation in just a few hours, but we wanted to try our hardest.

A *chesed shel emes* organization in New York quietly and efficiently took care of everything. They contacted a worker in the funeral home and somehow managed to convince him to smuggle the body out before they officially opened for the day. Despite the fierce snowstorm raging over the east, they flew the body to a small cemetery in upstate New York. Helen was buried with dignity. The entire operation was over in hours.

A neshama that was lost for over fifty years managed, at the last possible second, to find her eternal resting place amongst her true people. (Picture attached)

DollarDaily.org
a Project of
YadLShiach.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

\$398 +
DONATING PER DAY

\$86428 +
ALREADY DONATED TO ORGANIZATIONS

\$145270 +
TO BE GIVEN OVER THE NEXT 365 DAYS

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