

# IllumiNations

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*Rabbi Shalom and Sara Paltiel, Chabad of Port Washington, NY*

## One Pen Stroke Changed My Life

By Chaya Chazan

***While looking into various options for shlichus, we were seriously interested in one specific place. We spent a couple of weeks there - and loved it.***

As per the Rebbe's instructions, we spoke to three friends who were experienced in this topic, and they all agreed it would be a good match. We were ready to sign a contract!

We wrote to the Rebbe, detailing the shlichus, and mentioned we'd asked *yedidim mevinim* (friends who are experts in a specific area) to advise us. We asked for the Rebbe's approval and brachos. The Rebbe returned our letter with the words *yedidim mevinim* underlined. That one stroke of the Rebbe's pen changed my life. When I told the *yedidim mevinim* how the Rebbe had responded, they reconsidered the question and advised us to look for a shlichus where we could open our *own* Chabad house, rather than working under *another* shliach, as this position demanded.

Port Washington, at that point, wasn't a developed option. It had come up in conversation, but we hadn't done much research into it. We wrote again to the Rebbe, mentioning Port Washington, asking if we should accept the tenuous suggestion. The Rebbe underlined the words, "accept the suggestion," and added, "*azkir al hatziyon. I will mention it at the kever [of the Friediker Rebbe.]*"

At first, we thought we could stay in our Crown Heights apartment and commute to Long Island. This way, my wife could keep her job and our expenses would be significantly lower. We held weekly shiurim hosted by various people in the community. The crowds at these shiurim grew from 10, to 20, to 50, and more. We were starting to build real relationships and form a community. I also drove a mitzvah tank to Port Washington every Friday, parking along the boardwalk. I made sure to take down the information of any Jew who stopped by, increasing our database of Jewish residents.

I walked into the *Port Washington News* office, interested to see if someone would be willing to write an article about the new Chabad House opening in town. I was greeted by Sheila, the newspaper's editor. She put out her hand, saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Rabbi." Caught

off guard, I bowed to her in return. She gave me a smile and said, "You should meet Phillip."

She ushered me into the back room and I met Phillip. He'd grown up Conservative, and was looking for a deeper connection to Yiddishkeit. He'd told all his friends, including Sheila, that he wanted to get closer to Judaism. "G-d will send me a rabbi," he told them.

We ended up becoming good friends, and he helped us out considerably. He's now completely frum. In fact, through his connection to us, his brother became interested as well, and is now a well-respected frum psychologist in Long Island.



After a few years, our operations had grown and we desperately needed a building. Real estate prices were sky-high; we were at an impasse.

I was called up for jury duty and resigned myself to a long, boring, tedious day. I spent three hours waiting in court. During that time, I met Artie Diamond, a Jewish lawyer. As we sat on the hard, uncomfortable, wooden benches, waiting for our names to be called, we schmoozed. He was the president of the Reform Temple and had never heard of Chabad. He mentioned he was the attorney for one of the villages in Port Washington. After three hours, we were both dismissed. I practically forgot about the whole thing.

A couple of weeks later, the perfect property went on the market. Not only was it huge and centrally located, the asking price was an absolute steal!

"Why is it so cheap?" I asked the broker.

She explained that the village had put a moratorium on all beachfront properties. They had to be used as yacht clubs, or something else with nautical flavor. The extremely limited possibilities made the property virtually worthless.

"You'd have to get permission from the village to open a religious center here. They're known to be very tough," she said, shaking her head.

"Oh, I know the village attorney!" I answered.

"Wait, really? What's his name?"

"I don't actually remember. But we're friends!"

"Can't hurt to give him a call," she answered.

I got through to Artie and explained the situation.

"No problem, Rabbi," he assured me. "You hit the jackpot."

The next day, he arranged a meeting with the mayor, who shook my hand warmly and welcomed me to the village.

Paulina had started coming to our Chabad house every Shabbos. Although she was Italian, she told us she was interested in Judaism and wanted to convert. For months, she sat in the back, quietly taking in every word.

When we were ready to start fundraising for our new building, I announced it in shul. People offered pledges of a couple hundred, or, in some cases, even thousands.

Paulina called me over. "Rabbi, you can't collect money one thousand dollars at a time. I'll take you to meet my father. It will all work out."

Later that week, she brought me to meet Antonio, her father. His walls were lined with pictures of former clients and jobs he'd completed. I noticed many bearded chassidim amongst the pictures. He sized me up and shook my hand, saying, "Paulina, we're going to help this rabbi!"



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He contacted some key individuals, and had the entire sum raised in a matter of days. He also did a lot of the painting and decorating work for us!

By the time we were ready to close on the building, the village had removed the moratorium. The value of the property soared, and delegates from large corporations were banging on the owner's door, offering hundreds of thousands more.

The owner was candid with me. "I don't know why I'm doing this, Rabbi," he told me. "I have offers for double the amount, but somehow I feel like G-d is pushing me to give it to you."

I had no concept of renovations or interior design. I'd planned to keep the building intact, for the most part. Ultimately, I saw the building was too old and decayed, and we ended up gutting it completely. The outside facade was made of grainy stucco, stained from years of ocean spray. I naively thought a fresh coat of paint would make it look more appealing. Antonio took one look at it and said, "Don't worry, rabbi. I got this."

I came by on Sunday morning, and was amazed to see a virtual army of workers, scaffolding the entire building. He'd asked his workers to come in on their day off to redo the entire facade of the building.

Paulina, his daughter, is now completely frum, and has a beautiful family in Florida.

Arnie Herz is now a fully frum Jew, who keeps regular shiurim, and learns Torah and Chassidus daily. When I first met him, he was living in an ashram. He'd grown up with the typical, stale version of Judaism so unfortunately common amongst secular Jews - Hebrew School, Temple for the High Holidays, and bar mitzvah. He'd completely lost interest and had turned to other religions to fill the spiritual dearth.

He'd spent 20 years in the ashram in India, and when he returned to the States for law school, he continued with their American chapter. He'd even risen to the rank of president!

One of Arnie's law professors, a frum Jew, introduced us. At our first meeting, I put tefillin on him for the first time in over 20 years - or maybe even the first time in his life. He was crying, experiencing his first ever genuine Jewish connection.

It was a slow-but-steady process. Arnie eventually bought his own set of tefillin and hasn't missed a day since.

Arnie is a successful, talented attorney. His firm represents many athletes and sports superstars. He was considering

becoming shomer Shabbos, but was worried how it would affect his high profile clientele.

One of his firm's clients was a very famous sportscaster. Although Arnie didn't deal with him directly, he was CC'd on all email correspondence. There was an important contract in the offing, but it was already late Friday afternoon. *We need to resolve this quickly*, Arnie emailed. *I absolutely can't stay late today.*

The newscaster called him directly and told him, "I like you. I see you're a man of conviction and faith. I, too, am a man of faith. I respect your commitment to keeping your Sabbath."

Needless to say, Arnie became shomer Shabbos and kashrus, and now gives a weekly shiur in his home.

David grew up completely secular. He was the child of Holocaust survivors, who left what remained of their faith in the smoking columns of Europe. He'd never even seen alef beis before. A banner over main street, advertising a free scoop of ice cream to all who attended Shavuot services, drew David and his family into our Chabad house. We met every so often, and had many thought provoking conversations.

One day, David ran into shul as we were finishing Shacharis.

"Rabbi, do mitzvos have numbers?" he asked.

"Yes, but why?" I asked.

"I had an incredible dream last night. I was half awake, half asleep, when I saw a blinding light. I saw the Rebbe standing before me, but I couldn't look directly at him because of the light. He told me, *David, to lead the life you want to lead, you need to keep mitzvos 9 through 13.* I didn't even know there were more than just the ten Commandments!"

We looked up those mitzvos in Sefer Hamitzvos. The Rambam lists Tefillin Shel Yad, Tefillin Shel Rosh, Kriyas Shema, Talmud Torah, and Kiddush Hashem. Incredibly, those are the exact mitzvos the Rebbe often recommended to secular Jews looking for a mitzvah to jumpstart their connection to Judaism.

I suggested we visit the Ohel, and David, dazed and somewhat bewildered, agreed. I handed David a paper and pen and urged him to write a note to bring to the Rebbe's tziyon.

"What should I write?" he asked me.

"You'll know what to write," I assured him.

David's last name suggests he's a direct descendent of the Maharsha. Perhaps it was in that zechus that he received such direct communication from the Rebbe.

While COVID brought many restrictions and difficulties, it also challenged us to redefine our programming, and figure out creative ways to keep Yiddishkeit a major part of quarantine life.

For Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we rented a massive tent, set up socially distant seating, and hired a Cantorial choir so the sound would reach the back of the tent. Many other shuls were completely closed, so we had a massive turnout. The Cantorial choir was so popular, we continued to hire them for concerts throughout the rest of the year!

For Chanukah, we rented a huge parking area, often used for drive-in movies. We set up a massive drive-in Chanukah bash, with live music, large screens, and plenty of entertainment. We had cars lined up around the block! It was hugely successful, baruch Hashem. What amazed me most was seeing families with minimal contact with Judaism, who try not to let it affect their lives too much, initiating contact and displaying interest in a Jewish event. It caused our preschool to double in size!

Before Pesach, we made a massive push and sent out over 1,000 boxes of matzah to every Jewish family in Port Washington.

Another silver lining that came out of COVID was the distribution of a weekly sicha of the Rebbe with English translations. Taking advantage of this wonderful weekly publication, I began a study group with some serious-minded men, including the president of the Reform Temple. I send them the translated sicha on Thursday, they learn and review it over Shabbos, and on Sunday, we have a shiur over Zoom, discussing and analyzing the sicha and its implications in our daily lives. This shiur has become the highlight of my week!

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