

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.  DollarDaily.org

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Bringing Torah and Tefillin to Russian & Ukrainian Refugees

My wife and I didn't actually start as shluchim. My wife's family came back to Judaism through Chabad and the Rebbe, my family started their journey back to Hashem while still in the Soviet Union.

My father became a shochet and started helping families get kosher meat in addition to his work as an engineer. Eventually, in 1983, my family made aliyah, followed shortly by my wife's family in 1996.

Now we live in Nof Hagalil with our 8 children, running a Chabad house for the robust Russian community in the area. Baruch Hashem, our community is constantly growing and we do our best to provide shiurim, Shabbos meals, and plenty of events for the children!

When we first started our shlichus, we didn't have a shul. This meant that everything was done out of our home: shiurim, minyan, even Shabbos meals. I hosted a weekly women's shiur in our living room, and invited all the women of the community to join me in learning.

One week, a woman who had never been to shiur before came in with a friend. She awkwardly milled around in the back for a bit, and, eventually, caught my eye. I im-

mediately beelined for her, gave her a huge hug, and thanked her for coming.

She introduced herself as Ayala, and her friend as Liat.

The next week, Ayala came back - this time without her friend. She pretty soon became a permanent fixture at the women's shiur. She hadn't grown up religious and didn't have much of an affiliation with Judaism, so the weekly shiur became her only connection to Yiddishkeit.

Over time, Ayala and I developed a close friendship. Slowly, I started inviting her to Shabbos meals and Yom Tov events. We took the time to teach her about Shabbos and kosher, and used our own family as an example of the beautiful power of a Jewish family. It wasn't long before she decided she wanted one of her own.

"I want to get married," she announced one day, a few months later. "But only to a man who's shomer Torah and mitzvos. I want to raise a Jewish family."

With the help of the community, and some shadchanim, Ayala started dating and soon found her bashert. Today, this couple is a staple in our shul and community. They take care of all the technical issues in our shul from kid-dushim, to gabbaus. And Baruch Hashem, they remain incredibly close friends!

A few years back, I ran into Yelena, an old friend at the supermarket. We'd grown up together, but hadn't seen each other in years. Yelena was pregnant with her first child and excitedly shared all her plans for her new baby boy.

"I think I want to give him a bris mila," she told me.

I grabbed her hands and squeezed them. "We can help," I said. "My husband and I run a Chabad in the community."

Yelena shook her head. "It's not that simple," she shared. "My husband isn't Jewish."

A few moments of silence passed before she continued, "He's Muslim."

Yelena told me how scared she was; how important it was to her for her son to have a bris, but how terrified she was at how her husband would react.

As soon as I got home, I discussed it with my husband, and we knew we had to help this woman. Her son was, and forever would be, a Yid. We promised to find a doctor who could perform the bris milah and bring him to her home. We asked a friend of ours in the local police force to accompany us and keep everyone safe. Walking into that apartment eight days after the baby was born was one of the scariest moments we'd ever lived through. But it was a clear nes, because everything went perfectly. The little boy had a beautiful bris, and dad never once lost his cool.

After that, we did our best to stay in touch with Yelena - and her Muslim husband. So, when they called us up two years later to share that they were expecting a second baby boy, we immediately contacted the doctor who had given her first child a bris. It was crazy to see what a difference two years had made. This time, Yelena wasn't afraid of her husband at all. She knew he would respect her enough to let the boys have a bris, and she respected him enough to let him be elsewhere when it happened.

Since then, the family has moved closer to the community and Yelena has become invested in her Jewish identity. A little while ago, she and her husband came to talk about baby names for their third son!

"We want something that will respect both sides," the couple shared, "His Muslim identity, and his Jewish one!"

I couldn't help but remark at their sitting at our dining room table asking about baby names. Six years earlier, we were terrified about giving their first son a bris, and today, the Muslim husband is supporting his wife in recognizing her and their sons' Jewish identities.



Ten years ago, before my wife and I started the Beit Chabad, I was working at a school in the area. We were looking to recruit new students and I was tasked with visiting a number of families in the community. One evening, I visited a very interesting Russian and Moroccan couple. Vlad had bright blue eyes and a long blonde beard, while Sarit looked completely unaffiliated with Judaism.

At first glance, it seemed like a very odd pairing, especially as the rest of the family didn't seem to be keeping Torah and mitzvos either. But a quick tour of the house showed me a beautiful and robust library, jam packed with Torah literature. There were books on Chassidus, parsha stories, and plenty of sifrei kodesh.

After a brief conversation with Boris and Sarit, I learned that they held very different beliefs, but were committed to making their marriage and family work. It was deep respect for each other's views that allowed them to stay married even when one was religious and the other wasn't.

My wife and I stayed close with this couple through the years, and, as was expected, occasionally saw Boris at shiurim while Sarit remained mostly secular. But every now and again we'd have them over and enjoy a nice Shabbos meal together.

Boris and Sarit were so excited to share with us that their little family was growing! They were expecting their third child.

"We're having a girl this time," Sarit shared. "But the doctors are saying I should abort her. They keep telling me I'm putting myself at risk with this pregnancy. But she's my baby. My little girl. How could I just give up on her?"

It was clear how much pain Boris and Sarit were suffering. They'd waited for a little girl for so long, and the idea of walking away from her felt like more than they could bear. We didn't have the words to comfort them. We suggested they write to the Rebbe. Sarit poured her heart into her letter, begging the Rebbe to intercede on her behalf for a bracha. She asked him to help protect her baby and make sure she got through the pregnancy and birth safely.

It was a miraculous moment to observe. I never thought I would see her turn to anything related to rabbis or Judaism, but at that moment, she understood that Hashem was her only hope.

They sought divine advice from opening a random page of the Lubavticher Rebbe's letter collection (a method

that has secured miracles for many). They found solace and blessings on the page they had randomly opened. The couple cherished this bracha so completely that, against all medical advice, they decided to carry the pregnancy to term. Hospitalizations, bed rest, and one close call too many plagued this couple, but they never let go of th they faith and emunah. They felt they had a divine blessing that their baby would be alright.

Today, that beautiful and healthy baby girl is in 4th grade. And although her mother still isn't observant, her father recently signed her up for one of the after-school programs we run at the Chabad house!

Before I had a car, I used to travel by bus. As a student, I would take the bus to Haifa nearly every day to get to college. Sometimes, I would bring my tefillin with me and offer Jews who hadn't yet put on tefillin a chance to take part in this special mitzvah.

One afternoon, on my way home from school, I sat down next to an elderly Russian man. I took out my tefillin and offered them to him. But he laughed.

"I don't believe in any of that," he said. "I'm an atheist."

I smiled. Having come from the Soviet Union myself, I understood why many of them were atheists - they were forced into it. But the same way my family and my wife's family found Hashem, I knew others could too.

I leaned back into my seat and started asking him some personal questions. Having lived most of his life in Russia, he had amazing stories to share about being in the Red Army. I listened closely as he told me tales of his time as a pilot. I was impressed with this man and wanted to help him, so as he sat there talking, I started reciting Tehillim in a barely audible whisper. I asked Hashem for help and guidance. I wanted to reach this Yid and help him fulfill the beautiful mitzvah of Hanachas Tefillin at least once in his life.

Eventually, the man looked down at me. "I never asked what you do," he said.

I smiled. "I'm a student, studying to become a math teacher."

There were only three more stations before my stop, so I pushed my tefillin bag toward the man again. "Any chance you've changed your mind?"

The elderly man stared at the bag for a few moments before finally nodding. "For you," he said calmly. "I'll do it."

Two weeks later, I was back on the same bus and facing the same man. I smiled and went over to say hello, asking

if he remembered me. A wide smile spread across his face to match mine.

"Of course I remember you," he said. "You're the man who turned me from Communist to believing Jew. How could I ever forget?"

Since war broke out in Ukraine, hundreds of Jewish immigrants have come to Israel seeking safety and shelter. Many of them were placed in a nearby hotel where they were given two weeks to gather their footing. My wife and I, naturally, made a point to visit the hotel and the new immigrants on a nearly daily basis.

While getting to know the families, we discovered that a number of the young boys staying at the hotel were only months away from their bar mitzvahs. These families had just fled a war zone, many of them with nothing more than the clothing on their backs. Paying for expensive tefillin was definitely out of the question.

I immediately got to work fundraising. Even a single pair of tefillin are expensive, and I needed multiple sets! It was a miracle that I came up with the money as quickly as I did.

I wanted to deliver the tefillin as soon as they were ready. With the soft velvety pouches under my arm, I ran into the hotel, even though it was already late in the evening. One young boy took them from me in the lobby and quickly opened them up. He immediately started wrapping the shiny new leather strap around his arm.

"Wait," I said. "It's evening! We don't put tefillin on in the evening. You have to wait until tomorrow morning."

The young boy looked up at me, his eyes wide and a smile spread across his face. "I know; I won't make a bracha - I promise. I just need to feel the tefillin on my arm so I know this is real!"

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