

IllumiNations

Issue 57 | Parshas Yisro 5783
Shnas Hakel

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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

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The Power of the Meshaleach

As a bochur, I had the zechus to be part of the second group of shluchim the Rebbe sent to South Africa. We spent 2 years there, assisting the head shliach, Rabbi Lipsker, and other local shluchim with their work in the community.

Not only did that experience earn me life-long friends, but it also gave me the familiarity and inspiration to continue on shlichus after I got married.

My brother-in-law, Rabbi Yossi Denburg, had moved to southern Florida on shlichus several years earlier, so my wife and I flew down to check out the area and see where we could make the most impact.

It sounds incredible to anyone who's visited southern Florida recently, but 32 years ago, the spiritual landscape of North Broward County was as bare as an arid desert. There was no kosher readily available, and all those shuls and yeshivas that now seem to be on every corner were just being established.

We researched a couple of different options, but for various reasons, they didn't work out. Coral Springs was still a fledgling community, but it was clear how rapidly it was growing. I suggested to my brother-in-law that we join forces: he would concentrate mainly on the Lubavitch Hebrew Academy school, while I took on the Chabad

and shul responsibilities, removing that weight from his shoulders. He immediately and enthusiastically agreed, giving us much encouragement and confidence, and we began finding our own place in the shlichus.

February 14, 2023 marks the fifth anniversary of the tragic Parkland school shooting, where 17 young, innocent souls lost their lives. Meadow Pollack, a senior with so much potential and a bright future, was one of the victims. She was shot six times while attempting to flee the scene, and she died a hero, throwing her body over a friend to shield them from the bullets.

Andrew Pollack, Meadow's father, has been a friend and member of the broader Chabad community for many years. We would often have family learning sessions, attended by Andrew, his sons, Huck and Hunter, and, occasionally, Meadow as well. Each time he moved to a new house, he invited me to help put mezuzahs on his doors.

There are moments in everyone's life that are engraved indelibly in their memory. They remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. For all of us in Coral Springs and the surrounding areas, February 14, 2018 is one of those moments.

Around 3:00 pm, the phones started lighting up. News was rather vague at that time. All I knew was there was an active shooter at Stoneman Douglas High School. The school, on the border of Coral Springs and Parkland, has many students from our community, so I knew that was where I needed to be. I immediately drove in the direction of the school. Parents were crowding the sidewalk, all insane with confusion and the agony of not knowing whether or not their children were alive.

A command center was set up in a nearby hotel, and I and some fellow shluchim tried to do whatever we could to calm and comfort the hysterical parents. A room was set aside for parents who couldn't contact their children; parents in the worst state of uncertainty possible. We joined chaplains from other religions and denominations to try and give these parents some strength and hope.

It was already 9:15 PM. I'd been there for hours, and I didn't personally know any of the families. At that point, many other Chabad shluchim had arrived as well, so I slowly walked out to my car, drained by the extreme emotions of the day. I was just pulling out of the parking lot, when I received a text message that chilled me to the bone. *I think my daughter was murdered, Rabbi.* It was Andrew Pollack. My heart dropped to my knees. *No, no, it can't be,* I thought to myself, my fingers shakily dialing his number.

"Where are you Andy?" I asked him. "They have a whole center set up here for parents!"

"They know where to find me," he answered, heavily. "I'm at home."

"I'll be there in ten minutes," I said, flooring the gas pedal once again.

"No, wait," he told me. "Huck is heading over there. Wait for him, and *then* come over."

While I waited for Huck, Pam Bondi, Florida's then-attorney general, arrived to meet with and comfort the parents. I asked to speak with her and requested two very important things: there were five kedoshim, Jewish students, and a teacher that had been killed. I asked for permission for the chevrah kadisha to be in attendance at the autopsy to ensure that everything was conducted with proper respect, according to halachah, and that the bodies be released immediately upon the investigation's completion. After successfully negotiating these details, I met with Huck and drove to his father's house.

We sat for a while and talked. I left in the early hours of the morning. I was a young, inexperienced man when I start-



ed my shlichus. I received no training in counseling victims of tragedy. All I know is, “*Shlucho shel adam kemoso*,” the messenger is an extension of the sender. Being connected to the Rebbe, and dedicated to his mission helps you keep your own identity or ego in check. With much Siyata Dishmaya, you become an extension of the Rebbe, and every word that comes out of your mouth is inspired by that connection. That day, I learned that counseling is much more about listening than talking. The words you say have far less impact than gestures that show how genuine your empathy is.

Throughout the week of shiva, Andrew received many visitors. Notably, then-governor Rick Scott paid a visit as well. I asked Governor Scott to arrange a meeting with the president, as I believed the chance to voice their grief and demand change would be cathartic. The governor agreed and promised to do his best. He even gave me his personal cell phone number!

During shiva, Andrew asked me to accompany him to the home of another Jewish victim, whose family was also sitting shiva. While we were driving, the White House secretary called to invite Andrew to Washington.

“I’m only coming if I can meet the president himself, privately,” Andrew insisted.

While the president ended up meeting all the victims’ families in a famously televised broadcast, Andrew was the only one to meet with him personally, in the Oval Office.

During the week of shiva, Hunter, Andrew’s younger son, had a chance to meet with the president as well. He walked into the White House with a yarmulke perched proudly atop his head. When he returned, he told me, “Rabbi Friedman, I wanted to make you proud. I wanted to honor my sister by wearing a yarmulke to the most powerful desk in the world.”

Meanwhile, I was also ignoring calls and texts from CNN, who wanted to interview me. *I can’t*, I replied. *I’m too busy assisting the bereaved families.* We set a date for a few days later.

I prepared for the interview by reciting a kapitel of Tehillim, and asking Hashem for bracha and hatzlacha. I then closed my eyes, pictured the Rebbe, and asked for guidance to say the right words.

I asked the Parkland shliach, Rabbi Shui Biston, if he wanted to join, but he had prior engagements and told me to do it myself. I brought along one of my community members and good friends instead.

In the commercial break before the interview went live, my friend motioned to me by rolling one arm around the other and nodding significantly at Wolf Blitzer. He was being broadcast live from a studio in Los Angeles, so I tapped on my mic.

“Wolf,” I said to him, “I wouldn’t be a Chabadnik if I didn’t ask you about tefillin. Next time you’re in Florida, let’s get together for some tefillin. What do you say?”

The commensurate TV personality, Wolf graciously smiled.

Throughout the interview, I felt a force higher than myself influencing me and guiding me. Baruch Hashem, it was a tremendous kiddush Hashem.

In the months following the tragedy, Andrew and his son, Hunter, gained notoriety as outspoken demanders of social change. They each amassed followings of hundreds of thousands on social media.

We grew even closer after the tragedy, so, when it came to public policies on Jewish issues, Hunter often reached out to me for advice. When President Trump declared the Golan Heights as undisputed Jewish territory, Hunter asked me to compose a Tweet for him. This gave me an incredible opportunity to spread the Rebbe’s unique outlook on Eretz Yisrael to hundreds of thousands. The Rebbe firmly stated, on many occasions, that shleimus ha’aretz, defending every inch of Israeli land, was of foremost importance. As rabbis and shluchim, we have a limited scope of influence. Hunter’s tweet reached more people than I would’ve ever been able to. This was the Rebbe’s vision of *shliach oseh shliach*, one shliach creating another.

The White House held a Menorah lighting ceremony, honoring the families of the victims. I flew to Washington D.C. to accompany Andrew and his family. En route, I got a call from Andrew.

“Rabbi, the White House wants to see your speech and what you’re going to say.”

What speech?

The event was in just a few more hours. I hadn’t been told I’d be giving a speech - *in the White House!*

I immediately composed a letter to the Rebbe and sent it to the Ohel. Then, I frantically texted my family WhatsApp group. *I was just told I’ll be speaking at the White House tonight. What should I say?* My family was very supportive, and together, we cobbled together a nice speech. I sent it to Andrew to forward to the White House staff.

It’s too long. It should be more of a glorified “thank you” and happy Chanukah wishes.

A rabbi has to be quick on his feet and flexible. No problem. I amended my speech to a short and simple “thank you.”

There were actually two parties scheduled that day. I was invited to the later one. While I sat in the hotel lobby, waiting for Andrew, a notification popped up on my phone, giving me a link to the rabbi’s speech at the first party. His was no simple “thank you” speech. He gave a whole drasha! If he could share *his* thoughts, surely I could share the Rebbe’s perspective on Chanukah! And so, as we drove to the White House, I changed my speech one more time.

Giving that speech was one of the most nerve-wracking experiences in my life. The pressure of knowing that thousands of eyes were on me, including the most powerful people in the country, almost froze me to the spot, especially since I hadn’t had time to even compose my speech, let alone practice it one or two times! I took a deep breath, recited Tehillim, and reminded myself that I was a shliach of the Rebbe, and I was speaking with the koach of the Rebbe, not my personal capabilities.

In a private meeting with President Trump, shortly before my speech, I thanked him for releasing Sholom Mordechai Rubashkin the year prior, amongst other things. I also thanked Vice President Pence for his unequivocal support of Israel.

May the immediate coming of Moshiach prevent any more tragedies, and bring everyone’s loved ones back.

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