

# IllumiNations

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Shnas Hakeil

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

*Rabbi Benny and Sharonne Zippel, Chabad of Utah*

## A Life-Changing Birthday Gift

By Chaya Chazan

***A month before the Rebbe's 90th birthday, Merkoz, the branch of Chabad Lubavitch responsible for sending shluchim all over the world, decided to give the Rebbe an especially meaningful gift: an official shliach to the state of Utah.***

Utah had been previously visited by Merkoz shluchim, bochorim who spend a couple of weeks in the summer assisting shluchim and visiting Jews in rural areas, and had met a few people.

When we were asked to join the shluchim family, I immediately wrote to the Rebbe, asking for a bracha and approval for the exploratory trip I was planning for the following week. The Rebbe visited his father-in-law, the Friediker Rebbe's Ohel over the next two days, and didn't answer any letters. The next day was Shabbos. On Motzei Shabbos, my travel agent called.

"Rabbi, I've got these tickets on hold for you. You've got to tell me if you're taking this trip or not!"

"I'm waiting for the Rebbe's answer," I told him.

"I need an answer Monday morning, one way or another," he warned me.

I went past the Rebbe for dollars on Sunday evening, Chof Vav Adar. The secretary told the Rebbe who I was and what I was

asking. The Rebbe gave me a bracha for "hatzlacha rabba umuflaga." *Immense and tremendous success.*

The very next day, the Rebbe suffered a stroke, after which he could no longer speak. We feel so zoche to have received perhaps one of the last direct shlichus mandates from the Rebbe.

On the following Wednesday, as planned, me, my wife, and our six-month-old son, traveled to Utah. We met with several influential people and formed important contacts. When we returned to New York, we again wrote to the Rebbe, asking for a bracha to move to Utah on shlichus.

We will soon be celebrating our thirty-first shlichus anniversary.

When we first moved, we were overwhelmed with the magnitude of building a community from scratch. Although there was a Reform/Conservative temple, there was no frum infrastructure in place - no schools, no kosher food, no mikvah, and, significantly, no mohel.

A few months later, an Israeli woman told me she was expecting a boy, and wanted to know what to do about a bris.

It hadn't even crossed my mind, but I knew I needed to solve it right away. I asked a mohel in Los Angeles to accept the position of mohel in Salt Lake City. We would fly him out whenever a bris needed to be performed.

Baruch Hashem, the arrangement worked out beautifully. In fact, this same mohel recently came to Salt Lake City to perform a bris on my own grandson!

My wife has a close friend, Linda, who is married to a non-Jew. Their first son was circumcised by his pediatrician, but by the time Linda was expecting her second son, she and Sharonne were already close friends. She asked us to help organize her new baby's bris, and also to make sure her older son was ritually circumcised. Linda was popular in the community and part of many committees. Everyone was excited for her new baby and bris!

Baruch Hashem, Linda delivered a healthy baby boy, and preparations for the bris began in earnest. But then, on Gimmel Tamuz 1994, just two days before the bris, we received the shocking news of the Rebbe's histalkus. Time seemed to stop.

I called the mohel's home in Los Angeles.

"He's getting into a taxi right now, taking off for New York," his wife told me. "He told me to tell you not to count on him."

"He's supposed to do two brissim here in two days!" I answered.

"He wants to be at the Rebbe's levaya. Sorry. Try to find someone else."

I immediately called Delta and tried to book a flight to New York. That evening's last flight had just left, but they had another, leaving early the next morning. I took advantage of my stopover to try and make some emergency arrangements. From the airport payphone, I dialed a non-Chabad mohel and asked him to do both brissim the next day, apologizing for the last-minute notice. Baruch Hashem, he was available and willing to fly to Salt Lake City.

Great! Next, I called my wife and asked her to update Linda about the change of plans.

"I'm actually on the other line with her right now," she said. "Hold on one minute."

When Sharonne got back on the phone, she sounded downcast. "Linda said that if you and the original mohel cannot prioritize her sons' brissim, she'll cancel the entire thing!"

I had no choice. Despite the life-altering news we'd just received; despite the fact that the entire Chabad world was rocking; despite the fact that I myself barely had time to process the loss, nevertheless, two Jewish neshamos were waiting to be ushered into the bris of Avraham.

My flight landed in New York late Sunday afternoon. I headed for 770, where thousands of chassidim were preparing for the Rebbe's levaya. While I prepared, I kept my eyes peeled for my friend.

When we returned from the levaya, it was late. Everyone's spirits were shattered, and with heavy hearts, they sat on floors and low benches, reciting Tehillim. I longed to join them, but instead, I was searching the streets for my elusive mohel.



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Someone told me they thought they'd seen him on Montgomery Street, so I immediately headed there. I knocked on door after door, disregarding the incredibly late hour. I finally ran him to earth at 1:00 AM.

"Benny?" He looked at me in shock. "What are you doing here, at this time of night?"

"What do you mean? In a few hours, you're supposed to do two brissim in Salt Lake City!"

"Benny, our whole world just turned over! Nothing is normal anymore. Didn't you get my wife's message? She told you not to rely on me; to find someone else."

"Yes, I got that message," I retorted. "And I found someone else! But the baby's mother said that if it's not important enough to us, she won't give her son a bris at all. It's either you or no one! There's a flight at 7:00 AM. We both need to be on that plane. I promise you, after you do these brissim, I'll fly you back to New York so you can continue sitting shiva."

The mohel looked at me worriedly. "Benny, are you feeling alright? I'm afraid you're not all there."

"I'm not." I shoved my way into his room, packed his stuff into his bag, and pushed him towards the door. "We're getting a taxi to JFK. Now."

He capitulated, clearly concerned that I was on the verge of a mental breakdown. We paid an exorbitant amount of money for two last-minute, one-way tickets to Salt Lake City, landing at 10:00 AM.

By 10:30, the mohel was beginning the procedure for the elder son. We then drove to the hall for the newborn's bris, where I was sandek. It was a teary affair. Not only was the baby crying, his mohel and sandek were too!

We returned to my home after the bris, and I turned to my friend. "A deal's a deal. Let's fly back to New York."

"And spend another fortune?" he retorted. "We'll sit shiva right here."

So we sat in my basement, crying and mourning our inconceivable loss together. We never ended up going back to New York at all.

I used to give a class every Friday at the University of Utah. Some friends brought Alex along, so I greeted him warmly and asked him if he was Jewish.

"No, I'm not. I mean, my mom is, but I'm not Jewish," he answered.

I could see he had little to no understanding of what it meant to be Jewish, or what it entailed. He started coming more often, attending a few classes, putting on tefillin a few times, and joining us for some Shabbos meals.

Alex worked as a baggage handler at Salt Lake City's International Airport, Delta's west coast hub. This was before 9/11, so

Alex, as an airport employee, was free to fly first-class on any flight with available seats. He took advantage of this every so often, flying all around the world for the weekend.

When Alex told me he'd be taking a much needed break in Zurich, I wished him luck and expected to see him back in a few days, looking rested and relaxed. Instead, Alex looked almost angry.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"Zurich was beautiful. Hot, like everywhere in Europe in the summer, but beautiful. It was the return flight that bothered me. I made sure to check the flight list beforehand, and I was happy to see there were a bunch of available first-class seats. When the gate agent handed me my ticket, I was shocked to see she'd put me in the last row!

"What's this? I asked her. I know there are first-class seats available!"

"It's because of the way you're dressed, she answered. It was summer. I was wearing casual summer attire - flip flops, shorts, and a tank top. I pointed angrily to the other passengers at the gate.

"It's summertime! Everyone is dressed like this! In fact, I see a bunch of people dressed in even less than I am!"

"They're paying passengers, she answered me, coolly. We can't control what they wear. You, however, are a Delta representative. You're held to higher standards.

"So if I run back into town and buy slacks and a button-down, you'll give me a first-class ticket?" I asked.

"Yes, she said, but not the way you're dressed now."

For Alex, it was a simple inconvenience. For me, it was a poignant lesson. We are company representatives. We're held to a higher standard. We must act, dress, and behave as fits a representative of Hashem and the Torah.

It was Chanukah, 1992. I got a call from Mrs. Drey about her son, Derek, who was in school in Provo, Utah. She wanted her son to have a chance to celebrate Chanukah. The only thing I knew about Provo was that it was a major Mormon center and home to Brigham Young University. What was a Jewish kid from California doing there?

When I went to visit him, I found Derek in a residential treatment home for children with behavioral issues.

"Are you the only Jew here?" I asked him.

"Follow me, Rabbi," he said. "I'll show you around."

As we walked around the campus, Derek pointed out various students walking around.

"Jewish. That kid? Jewish. Her? Jewish."

I looked around in amazement. 20% of the student population at this facility was Jewish! I had to do something.

That's how *Project Hebrew Education for At Risk Teens* was born. Project H.E.A.R.T. serves between 300-500 at-risk Jewish youths from all over the world, helping them overcome various behavioral issues and addictions. I travel to treatment centers all over Utah to visit them every week, reminding them that they, too, are Hashem's precious children; that they are loved, that they matter, and that they are important.

Many of the Project H.E.A.R.T. kids aren't well enough to go home for Yomim Tovim. We often host them and become their home away from home.

Barry spent all of Tishrei with us. He was a nice kid, but was lost and confused. He struggled with authority and often behaved oppositionally. At the beginning, he was angry at G-d and wanted nothing to do with religion. As he began to make peace with himself, he became more interested. Our weekly visits developed a close connection between us.

After a year of treatment, Barry eventually returned home. A few months later, his father called.

"I can't believe it!" he repeated, over and over. "Barry and I were talking, and he brought up his relationship with G-d. He told me, Dad, if it was important enough for Rabbi Zippel to drive from Salt Lake City to Provo every week, just to make sure I put on tefillin, maybe there is something more to Judaism. Rabbi, he's decided to go to Israel!"

I kept in touch with his parents over the years, and was delighted to receive an invitation to his wedding to a wonderful, frum, young lady in Israel.

As it happened, his wedding coincided with Governor Huntsman's mission to Israel. Since I was invited to join the mission, I was able to surprise Barry and his family at the kabalas ponim in Jerusalem.

"Rabbi Zippel, is that you?" Barry asked in wide-eyed amazement. "What brings you here?"

"You sent me an invitation!" I answered. "I'm here for you!"

It was a moving reunion for all involved, highlighting Barry's amazing journey and how far he'd come.

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