

IllumiNations

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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 Arieh and Dvora Lea Raichman, Chabad of Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil

Saving the Rainforest – One Mitzvah at a Time

By Chaya Chazan

Although I was born and raised in Texas, South America always felt like home. With a Brazilian mother and Argentinian father – and now an Argentinian mother-in-law and Brazilian father-in-law, we visited often. A few of my siblings married Brazilians, so it was no surprise when I did the same.

After a year of kolel in New York, we began investigating various shlichus options. Overwhelmed by a dizzying array of available options, we wrote to the Rebbe for guidance. We placed the letter in a sefer of the Igros Kodesh, filled with the Rebbe's responses regarding almost every topic under the sun. When we opened up our answer, the Rebbe's letter advised the original recipient to focus on chinuch in South America.



We narrowed our search, and soon found two available shlichus positions. Of the two, Manaus, the capital of the Amazon, seemed to be the better option.

So, on a steaming hot day in July 2009, we flew over miles and miles of rainforest to the magically metropolitan Manaus. The weather in Manaus hovers between 80 - 110 degrees Fahrenheit year-round, with especially oppressive heat and humidity in the summer. Our temporary living quarters unfortunately lacked an air conditioner, but despite the melting heat, we ventured forth to find Jews! Although we met with a few, we realized the community was too small to support a full-time shlichus. We regretfully returned to New York.

Just after our return, we saw a video in which the Rebbe addressed JFK's bold initiative, the Peace Corps. The Rebbe urged every person to seek out those who didn't have the same privileges and help them. It reminded me of Gavi*, from Manaus. He'd been married to his non-Jewish wife for years, and, while he bemoaned the fact that it was too late for himself, he urged us to move to Manaus and guide the next generation. We knew Manaus hadn't had a rabbi since 1908, and even then, only for a short while. It had been 100 years, and we knew we were needed there.

Growing up in the States, we would periodically visit my family in Brazil. On one such visit, we made sure to make the mandatory trek to the Amazon rainforest, which can only be accessed through Manaus. I never dreamed there was a Jewish community there - let alone that I'd find myself living there ten years later.

Being shluchim in a small community teaches you to appreciate the little things. No; we don't have large crowds attending our events, but our joy and satisfaction when we convince one person to fast on Yom Kippur, even if it's just for two hours, is immeasurable. We focus on the future, and keep doing what we have to, never letting the past deter us.

Growth may be slow, but we know that progress is being made. We used to have monthly Shabbos minyanim, but

we recently upgraded to weekly! We have a small summer and winter day camp for local kids, and we host regular shiurim and community events. When we fly in a shipment of kosher meat, we make sure to order enough for over a dozen kosher meat-committed families.

For the past fourteen years, we've been operating out of our home. Baruch Hashem, we recently purchased a large property in which we hope to build a Jewish center, complete with a mikvah, to be a source of refuge and light for both the local community and visitors to the Amazon.

I relayed the following story to my community one Shabbos:

The renowned chassid, Reb Mendel Futeras, was walking down a street in Eretz Yisroel on Shabbos. A bus stopped nearby, and a passenger alighted. Reb Mendel recognized him as a talmid chacham from Russia.

"It's Shabbos!" Reb Mendel chastised him.

"Don't worry. I paid my fare *before* Shabbos," the man explained.

"It's Shabbos!" Reb Mendel repeated.

"I wasn't *driving* the bus!" the man answered.

"It's *Shabbos!*" Reb Mendel reiterated, firmly. The man kept offering excuses, only to be silenced by Reb Mendel's repeated insistence that it was Shabbos. Finally, he realized Reb Mendel's point - all the excuses in the world didn't change the fact that it was Shabbos, and he was not keeping its spirit.

Tal* was in the audience when I told this story, and it affected him deeply. He had an important meeting scheduled the following Saturday. He called in advance and requested the meeting be postponed. They were so impressed with his integrity and strength, they gladly acquiesced.

A good friend of ours introduced us to Chase*. He'd been so excited to learn that Chase was Jewish, he wanted us to meet him as soon as possible. I was happy to oblige, but Chase seemed uninterested, distant, and cold. Although he didn't want to discuss religion, he was happy to show us around some possible properties in a professional realtor capacity.

We were checking out one location that happened to be just two blocks from our current Chabad house.

"Chase, we're so close. Would you drop by the Chabad house for just a few moments?" I urged him. He was hesitant, but eventually gave in. It was Elul, so we blew the shofar, and helped him put on tefillin. Chase remained distant and nothing more than polite.

Around that time, my son, then nine years old, decided to throw himself into mivtza neshek - encouraging everyone to light Shabbos candles. He worked hard to create his little neshek baggies, complete with two tea lights and pamphlets. He called community members, inviting them for Shabbos. When they turned down the invitation, he would convince them to at least come to take one of the



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little bags he'd worked so hard on... it was impossible to say no to him.

Chase never came for Shabbos, but like clockwork, he'd stop by every Friday, to pick up his bag of candles and put on tefillin. As week after week went by, Chase started to thaw.

"I'll make you a deal," I offered him. "If you put on tefillin for three consecutive days, I'll get you your own pair."

To my delight, Chase took me up on it, and soon, I presented him with his very own pair of tefillin. He started putting them on every day. Then, he started attending classes. Soon, he was a regular at every Chabad house event.

Chase will soon take his very first trip to America. Rather than visiting Miami, home away from home for so many Brazilians, Chase will begin his American tour with Crown Heights, New York, the center of Chabad Lubavitch.

When the FIFA World Cup was held in Manaus in 2014, we immediately took advantage of the hordes of tourists descending on our city. We purchased tickets and set up shop as early as possible. We milled around the thousands of spectators lining up before the game, asking if they were Jewish, and if they wanted to put on tefillin.

I was walking the benches, holding my tefillin, when a man holding two beers rushed towards me. "Rabbi!" he greeted me joyfully.

"Sholom aleichem!" I replied. "Did you put on tefillin today?"

"Of course! But," he said, a shadow passing over his face, "my son didn't."

"Well, if he's here, let's fix that now!" I said.

He led me to one of the front rows, where his son, a young man, sat engrossed in the game. He agreed absentmindedly to put on tefillin, never removing his eyes from the football field. His father was overjoyed, and asked to meet with me in the Chabad house later that day.

"We were a frum family," he sighed, as he began his story later that night. "My son went to yeshiva, learned Gemara - the works! But after my wife and I got divorced, he started drifting away. Once he attended university, he basically dropped every religious practice he'd ever kept.

"I was heartbroken, as you can imagine. Wracking my brains for some way to inspire him back to Yiddishkeit, I offered him anything he wanted, in exchange for putting on tefillin every day. He named two tickets to the World Cup in Brazil as his prize. Every day of our trip so far, he's put on tefillin. Today, for one reason or another, he didn't put on tefillin. He promised me he'd make it up in the afternoon,

but the match was expected to start then, and I knew an opportunity would be hard to come by.

"I was so disappointed, and then, *you* showed up, holding your tefillin like a Biblical prophet! I know he didn't seem very enthusiastic, but I cannot thank you enough for helping him keep his promise!"

A friend told me he'd heard about a Jewish woman living "in the rainforest."

"Her name is Ruth. She's a nun!" he told me.

I was skeptical, but followed through with his contact anyhow.

I found Ruth, a 91-year old woman running a school. When I asked if she was Jewish, she nodded her head vigorously.

"100%!" she said. "Over the years, some things have been added, but I'm a Jew!"

The story she unfolded was heartbreaking. Born in Turkey to a frum family, Ruth boasted more Jewish knowledge than her two older siblings. Her family eventually moved to S. Paulo, where she became a nurse. One day, a mother abandoned her newborn baby at the hospital where Ruth worked. Overcome with pity, Ruth wanted to take the baby home.

"That baby is Catholic!" she was told. "If you want to keep her, you need to be Catholic as well!"

Overwhelmed with pity for the poor child, Ruth approached the church, considering a conversion. Once they had her in their clutches, they wouldn't let go easily. They transferred her to the remotest place they could think of: the Amazon. This way, her family had no contact or any chance of influencing her. In a small isolated town, she lived for 50 years, working for the church.

"I have three requests," she told me. "Since Passover is coming up, I'd like some grape juice and matza. I'd also like a mezuzah for my room."

"Of course," I said, my mind racing. "But - where is your room...?"

"In the convent!" she answered.

A short while later, I found myself in the last place I'd ever expected to be - nailing a mezuzah on the door of a convent room.

Later, when Ruth got sick, I visited her in the hospital. I said Shema with her, saying each word slowly and clearly. But she rushed past me, completing the prayer with a smile on her face.

"I remember that from when I was young," she said. "Rabbi, if I don't make it, please say that prayer for me."

"Kaddish?" I asked.

"Yes."

Ruth recovered and went home, but a short while later, needed further medical support. I put a mezuzah on her recovery center door and visited as often as I could. She passed away a short time later - the "Catholic" nun, with the mezuzah on her door.

An Israeli businessman once visited us with an amazing story to share.

"You're a central figure in the story, and you don't even know it!" he said, cryptically. "I met a man named Barak" recently. He told me a few years ago he'd gone backpacking in Brazil with his non-Jewish girlfriend. When he came to Manaus, he visited the shopping mall and spotted you, with your children. When he saw you, something clicked in his mind. *Why am I here with my non-Jewish girlfriend?* He thought to himself. He was disturbed, but tried to ignore it as they continued their trip together.

"They then traveled to Rio de Janeiro, and were walking along the beach. Suddenly, they saw a rabbi walking the beach with his family. *That's it*, he said to himself. *I'm done*. He immediately broke up with his girlfriend, returned to Eretz Yisrael, and married a Jew."

My son had recently celebrated his upshernish, and his yarmulka was as new and shiny as his peyos. I took him along with me on a visit to an elderly man. When he saw my little boy, he began weeping without end.

Although he'd been married to a non-Jew for years, the newly cut peyos reminded him of his youth, and the peyos that had once proudly adorned his face as well.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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