

IllumiNations

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

*Rabbi Eliyahu and Batsheva Kaminetzky,
Chabad of Taos, New Mexico*

Taos Trails & Jewish Tales

By Chaya Chazan

In typical Chabad fashion, my wife, from New York, and myself, from Melbourne, had a relative on shlichus in New Mexico, who assured us there was a sizable Jewish population in Taos, a desert town in northern New Mexico.

He invited us to participate in the yearly Shabbaton he ran there to help introduce us to the community.

We were lucky to meet Ted Gold, who later became a founding member of Chabad of Taos. When his mother passed, shluchim in Albuquerque assisted him with her burial, and he stayed in touch with them. He'd often asked for a shliach to move to Taos, so when he heard we were interested, he jumped at the chance to show us around.

We were young and idealistic, and, with the promise of a large Jewish population, we were completely sold on the idea. We didn't know what we were getting ourselves into. We'd seen a charming city and the pleasant forest behind it. We didn't realize Taos, ringed by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, was largely founded by artists and hippies,

who yearned to escape the stifling conformity of more urban environments. This secluded region draws tourists who want to "escape from it all," especially during the winter, when the ski slopes are particularly invigorating.

Although we only knew Ted and a couple of other Jews when we first moved, we were determined to find the many others we'd been told were there. We spent the first five years of our shlichus combing through the phone book, knocking on doors, and visiting local businesses. Baruch Hashem, our efforts were crowned with success. Although Taos and the surrounding county hosts a population of less than 30,000 people, we've met over 400 Jewish families!

Of course, as true citizens of Taos, many have chosen to live "off the grid," in mobile homes, deep in the desert, or

on the mountainside. We've had to design a system so each family could be visited as often as they'd appreciate. With the help of bochorim, we've managed to keep up with the sprawling community. We even created an app (that we share with other shluchim) that tracks each person, when they've last been visited, and indicates their location on a map so our bochorim can easily find them.

We respect our community's desires for isolation, concentrating our activities mostly on personal visits, rather than lots of communal events. We often find ourselves climbing rocky cliffs, or wending our way through winding rivers to deliver challoos on erev Shabbos. Although these tactics are an uncommon way of doing shlichus, we find our connections are deep and long-lasting.

When I came across Theo's* number in the phone book, I was excited to have found another Jew - potentially. I called him and introduced myself, asking if I could come visit him, but Theo declined. I tried again a while later, but again, Theo was uninterested. I found out where he lived, and delivered a fresh challah to his doorstep.

Months later, Theo showed up in the Chabad house, unannounced.

"So nice to see you!" I greeted him. "Come on in! What can I do for you?"

"I have a small problem to discuss with you," he said. "Can I make an appointment?"

"No need for that!" I assured him. "Come sit down and tell me all about it."

Theo took the chair I offered, and began telling me about his son, Cam*. Cam had rented an apartment in Williamsburg, and when his lease was complete, asked for his deposit to be returned. However, there seemed to be some issues with that, and Cam was growing frustrated.

"I thought you might be able to help," Theo explained. "I'll donate half the returned deposit to Chabad if you can get it back!"

It took some time, but I managed to contact the shliach in the area, get the number of the landlord, and sort out the difficulties. True to his word, Theo wrote me a check for half the amount. It felt truly miraculous, as we'd had no other way of paying our own rent that month!

By the time I saw Betty's* number in the phone book, I'd already learned that most Taos residents wouldn't respond as well to faceless phone calls as they would to personal meetings. Betty was politely disinterested when I spoke to her on the phone, but I decided to drive to Penasco to meet with her in person.

Penasco is a tiny little village, and as I drove through its dusty streets, I figured Betty was the only Jew in town. To my surprise, when I met her, she introduced me to her mother, sister, children, and niece, who all lived with her! Almost a minyan of Jews lay hidden in that tiny town in New Mexico.



Nathan Burton/Taos News

On one visit to New York, I was suddenly inspired to offer a kosher co-op. I quickly typed out an email, asking if anyone would like to order some nostalgic kosher food for me to bring back to Taos.

I was surprised to get a call from Tina*. Although she'd been on our list for years, she'd shown very little interest. When bochurim went to visit her, she'd barely even allowed them inside.

This Tina sounded like a completely different person. She was bubbly and happy, excitedly sharing all the foods she remembered fondly from her youth. She placed a large order of potato knishes, pastrami, bialys, and more. When she came to pick it up from the Chabad house, she remained as gregarious and open as she'd been on the phone. Even more surprising, she'd brought a friend! As they divided the goods between them, both chatted happily. It was the most productive conversation I'd ever had with Tina, and I got to meet someone new as well!

Last year, we received a brand new Torah as a gift. Of course, we were grateful, but we already had a Torah, and it was very difficult to get a minyan.

Somehow, since the new Torah arrived, we've had minyanim more often than ever before! Each one was its own seemingly random sequence of events.

One week, a community member asked to say kaddish for his father. Since it was personal, we managed to gather a minyan of his friends.

Another week, we had a pair of bochurim flying out, and another coming to replace them. Their tickets overlapped so that both groups were there for Shabbos. Seeing as we already had half a minyan, I decided to take advantage and gather the rest. I advertised one bochur as a famous cantor, and invited everyone to enjoy his singing. With the additional promise of deliciously steaming cholent and kugel, we were able to take out the Torah that Shabbos as well.

On another occasion, our son was visiting from yeshiva while we had a bochur staying with us. A man from the community needed to bentch gomer. Four out of ten may sound like a good start, but in Taos, that means there's still a rough road ahead. I managed to secure five more commitments - I just needed one last person.

I asked Joe*, a fireman helping with the wildfires in New Mexico last summer.

"I'd love to help you out, Rabbi," he told me. "I'm not available Saturday, but I can come to the Friday night meal!"

On Shabbos, we had nine men in shul - missing just that last person to allow our friend to bentch gomer. Suddenly, the doors opened, and in walked Joe!

"I'm here, Rabbi! Let's do this!"

As is the case with many shluchim, providing a proper chinuch for our children can be challenging. However, with the Rebbe's promise to take responsibility for the chinuch of shluchim's children, we feel reassured.

In 2020, our eldest son was set to attend yeshiva in Dnieper, Ukraine. He needed a passport, but because of Covid, the passport agency was awfully backlogged, and it was impossible to order expedited service. We sent off the application with a prayer, hoping it would arrive in time for him to at least attend the second zman!

Clearly, as the Rebbe said, he takes achrayus for our children's chinuch. Miraculously, within just a couple weeks, our son's passport was in our hands! Baruch Hashem, he was able to join yeshiva on time, and start off on the right foot.

He attended for a few years, including last year, when the war broke out. We knew the yeshiva was planning to evacuate and relocate to Germany, so we asked our community to pray for our son and his friends to reach safety. The local paper ran a headline about the community prayer effort. To this day, I still get questions about my son and how he's doing.

I was flying to Albuquerque, with a stop in Dallas. I sat beside a friendly looking fellow. His name was Nolan*, and he was Jewish! He was inspired by our talk, and enjoyed our conversation.

"If this conversation is truly from heaven," he said, "on our next flight, we'll be seated in the same row!"

We both pulled out our boarding passes. I was in 11A. Nolan was in 11D.

Nolan is now an active member of the Chabad house in Albuquerque.

I'd tried reaching out to Zach* a few times, but he always brushed me off. The last time I tried to talk with him, he was angry that I wouldn't take his hints to leave him alone. I wasn't sure what else I could do. I knew he lived somewhere in the forest, but had no idea where exactly to find him.

That Simchas Torah, only one person showed up for hakafof. As we chatted, I found out he wasn't actually

Jewish. Since he was there, we danced together, and continued a friendly chat. He lived in a very remote location, somewhere in the middle of the forest. I asked if he knew Zach, and he responded in the affirmative.

A few weeks later, we were visiting another Jew we knew in that area, and decided to visit our Simchas Torah friend to see if he could direct us to Zach's house. He wasn't home, but knowing Zach must be close by, we didn't give up, and ultimately obtained his Google Maps location from another individual in the area.

The drive there was treacherous, with a road that could've easily destroyed our vehicle, but we eventually arrived. I wasn't sure what Zach's reaction would be, so I told the kids to stay in the car.

I knocked on his door with trepidation. The man who answered the door seemed quite friendly.

"Are you Zach?" I asked him.

"Yes, I am!" he answered.

We began chatting, and, to my amazement, Zach was friendly and hospitable. I'd been trying to meet with him for *thirteen years*, and now that I saw he wasn't going to bite my nose off, I decided to press my luck.

"Would you like to put on tefillin...?" I asked him.

Zach looked unsure. "I'll be honest with you," he answered. "I don't mind putting them on right now, but I don't want you getting any funny ideas that I'm ready to become religious!"

"Every time you put on tefillin is an incredible mitzvah," I assured him, "Even if you only do it this one time."

Zach allowed me to help him wrap the tefillin straps around his arm for the first time in his life. We parted on the best of terms, and he thanked me warmly for coming to visit.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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