

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 Osher and Sarah Kravitsky, Chabad of Great Neck, New York

Tooting Our Shofars – You’ll Have a Blast!

By Chaya Chazan

Although my paternal grandfather was a shliach of the Friediker Rebbe, my father, the youngest in his family, was mostly raised by his mother, who imbued him with her bitterness about Hashem and Yiddishkeit.

My parents divorced on my bar mitzvah, and the day would’ve proceeded completely unmarked if not for my uncle, who brought me to 770, where I received an aliyah in front of the Rebbe.

As a young man, my days and nights were filled with parties and nonstop fun, accompanied by friends of a similar nature. But after a while, the raucous fun began to feel empty, and I questioned whether this was my ultimate purpose in life. I felt a deep desire for something more.

When I returned to the US, I returned to the alluring world of parties and fun, until I received a visit from Sarah, and the deep conversations we had convinced me, once for all, that I was done.

I soon found a job at the Gap in Midtown Manhattan. To get there, I had to pass through Washington Square Park, an old haunt of mine, where I’d wasted many hours. One day, I was stopped by a young man with a wispy beard, black hat, and jacket.



“Excuse me, are you Jewish?” he asked.

I was extremely discomfited to be so publicly accosted in a place where I was well known. He offered me his tefillin, and although I resisted at first, he ultimately won me over. I insisted we move to the more discrete shade of a large tree, but I allowed him to wind the straps around my arm. This “chance” meeting triggered a domino effect that changed my life forever.

A year later, I went to yeshiva in Morristown, cementing my conviction to live this life and dedicate myself to its ideals. After yeshiva, I had a steady chavrusa with a fellow baal teshuva, Aharon. We learned together, and went on mitzvoyim together every week. Our mitzvoyim route took us through Washington Square Park. I realized that the bochur who’d put tefillin on me, changing the entire course of my life, had been Aharon.

Having witnessed the power and beauty of shlichus firsthand, we knew it was something we wanted to dedicate our lives to. We spent a few years in Cleveland, where we built up an incredible community of young Jewish professionals. For personal reasons, we needed to move back to New York, and I wondered how we could find as vibrant a shlichus here as we had in Cleveland.

Unfortunately, nothing seemed to work out. We were crowded in my mother’s basement with four little kids, and the positions I’d counted on fell through for one reason or another. I felt utterly defeated. My wife and I discussed moving back to Cleveland, where we knew our friends and community would welcome us home with open arms. After long discussions, we decided that was our best option, and I even informed our friends in Ohio that we’d be back soon.

That Friday night, I bumped into a friend from Cleveland in shul. I told him we’d be moving back, and explained why.

“Before you do that, why don’t you call Rabbi Geisinsky in Great Neck?” he suggested. “He’s known to be an exacting boss, but he demands nothing more from his workers than he demands of himself. I think you’d fit in perfectly.”

My friend was completely right. It was grueling, and at times I thought we weren’t cut out for it, but Rabbi Geisinsky insisted we were needed, right where we were. He encouraged my wife to get her Phd and run the preschool, and pushed me to become the youth leader. It took a while to acclimate, but baruch Hashem, we’ve created a smooth, cohesive group of shluchim.

Every Rosh Hashana, we make a quick kiddush after shul, and then spend hours going from place to place, blowing the shofar for those who’ve not yet had the opportunity to hear it.

A few years ago, Rabbi Geisinsky asked me to visit Leah and blow the shofar for her. She’d called just before Yom Tov, explaining she was bedridden, and requesting someone to come to her home. Of course, I agreed.

We went to all our usual spots, figuring we’d drop by Leah on our way home. By the time we got there, after blowing shofar for over 1,000 people, there was just an hour left until shkiyah. It would’ve been plenty of time, if not for the fact that Leah lived in an apartment building, and the door was locked. We waited for a while, but no one came in or out. I sent my wife home to eat and rest up, and waited alone a little while longer.

I was considering leaving, when something I’d read two days before popped into my head. The Rebbe had asked Rabbi Gansburg to print a Tanya, and make sure every member of his family received a copy. Rabbi Gansburg complied, but when it came to his elderly mother, he didn’t want to wake her, so he left it on her kitchen counter. A few days later, the Rebbe asked if *everyone* had received a copy, and Rabbi Gansburg hastily explained about his mother. *I asked you to give everyone a copy*, the Rebbe told him, *not to make excuses*.

With that story in mind, I steeled myself to wait just another 5 minutes, then 10 minutes more... A couple walked by, and I asked them if they were Jewish.

“Yes. We attended Temple today!” they answered, proudly.

“Did you hear the shofar today?” I asked.

“No,” they admitted. “Rabbi Steve didn’t get to that.”

Without further ado, I blew the shofar once again. A window on the third floor popped open, and a man stuck his head out.

“Bravo, Rabbi!” he cheered.

“Thanks!” I called back. “I need to get into the building. Can you help?”

Finally, access to the building granted, I dashed up to the third floor, where Leah’s apartment supposedly was. I didn’t know which one it was specifically, so I knocked on every door. No one answered.



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There were just ten minutes left before shkhiyah, and I still hadn't eaten. *I've done everything I could*, I consoled myself. I walked down the stairs, and was almost at the door, when the Rebbe's words reverberated through my mind. *Stop making excuses!* I chided myself. Running back up to the second floor, I knocked on every door, but again, no one answered. I refused to give up, and made my way to the first floor, where, again, I knocked on every door. Finally, the last door opened.

"Leah's been waiting for you all day!" cried the home aide who answered.

I finally met Leah. I blew the shofar for her, made kid-dush, and prepared to rush out. As I was about to leave, Leah began to cry.

"What's the matter?" I asked her.

"This is the first year I couldn't make it to shul," she told me. "I waited for you the whole day. As minute after minute passed by, I couldn't help but feel that Hashem forgot about me; now that I couldn't go to shul, I didn't matter anymore. Now that you're here, I know Hashem still loves me."

As a child of divorce, I understand the ache to feel tethered and connected. To this end, I became a licensed life coach, specializing in marriage, family, and trauma counseling. I find it enhances our shlichus. After all, ahas Yisroel starts first by caring for another's physical and emotional needs, even before addressing their spiritual ones.

I gave a series of classes on sholom bayis, and how daily life can affect even the healthiest of marriages. A few classes in, Ned* started attending. A few classes later, he brought his wife along.

When we took a trip to the Ohel a few months later, Ned and his wife joined us.

"What do I do here?" Ned asked.

"Just write about whatever's on your mind," I advised him. "It's customary to take on a mitzvah or commitment, to make yourself into a vessel for the blessings you're requesting."

Everyone went in, said some Tehillim, and we concluded our trip.

A few months later, Ned asked to speak with me. He brought me to a corner of the room and began to cry.

"Ned, what's going on?" I asked, concerned.

"My wife and I have been experiencing secondary infertility. We've been trying for years, with no success. Obviously, when we went to the Rebbe's Ohel, that's what I prayed for. A week later, we found out we were expecting!"

Ned was overcome by the clear miracle, and showed his gratitude in many ways.

One Purim, he turned to me and asked, "Rabbi, what are we going to do about all the Jewish kids going to church?"

At first, I thought the l'chaims we'd shared had confused him a bit, but Ned was earnest.

"There's a basketball league that attracts a lot of Jewish youth. Many of their meets are in churches. We have to do something about it!"

"What can we do?" I asked, feeling helpless. What was a Chabad shliach supposed to do about a kids' basketball league?

But Ned wouldn't let it go. "We should start our own league, for Jewish kids!" he said, triumphantly.

Ned pledged \$250,000 in seed money to fund a Jewish basketball league. Within half a year, over 600 kids signed up, and we ran out of space. We finally had to rent basketball courts for our games.

It eventually led to a 5-million dollar JCC building, which not only hosts the basketball league, but many shiurim, and other Jewish functions as well.

It was a beautiful Sukkos day, and we were walking to a friend who was hosting us for the Yom Tov meal. Our two-year-old, however, was having none of it. He began an epic tantrum in the middle of the street, refusing to move or be moved. None of our cajoling, bribing, or threats seemed to work. We were late to our meal, but there was nothing we could do about it.

As we stood there helplessly on the street, nervously shifting the lulav and esrog from one hand to another, a car whizzed by. Something told me to go after it. I began to run as it sped off. I can only imagine the driver's feeling as he glanced in his rearview mirror to see a man in a long black coat and beard, chasing after his car with a spear and lemon in hand. To my relief, he soon pulled over and rolled down his window.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, half concerned and half wary.

"Are you Jewish?" I panted.

"No; I'm Catholic," he answered. "But my mom was Jewish, although she isn't any more."

"What does that mean?"

"I was born Jewish, but after my parents divorced, my mother met a Catholic guy. His family wouldn't let them marry unless she converted, so we were both baptized. I've been going to Catholic schools all my life!" he explained.

"I'm not sure how to tell you this," I smiled, "but you're as Jewish as I am!"

His face clearly showed every emotion as he tried to process this new information. "Well, what does that mean?" he blurted out.

"Right now, it means that you need to shake this palm branch and citron," I laughed. I tried explaining the significance of the mitzvah, but I knew it'd be hard for him to connect with it, especially since he'd only learned he was Jewish moments before. "Next week, we'll be having a party in honor of Simchat Torah," I told him. "Please come! We'll have sushi in the sukkah, and you'll meet lots of other young Jewish professionals."

"I'll think about it," he said, before getting back in his car and taking off.

On motzei Yom Tov of the first days, I found an email from the young man in my inbox.

Hi Rabbi, it read. This is Jonathon, the guy you met the other day. When I got home after meeting you, I immediately told my neighbor about it. "Oh, that's Rabbi Osher!" she said. "He gave me my Jewish name!" She gave me your email. I knew I had to write to you, to explain the significance of that day.

For a while now, I've been feeling like something is missing in my life, but I could never put a finger on what it was. After we met, I told my mom about our meeting, and she asked, "Oh, to which synagogue did the rabbi invite you?" I told her the name of the synagogue. "That's the synagogue your great-great-grandfather started!" she told me.

I will accept your invitation. I'm coming back home.

Jonathon came for Simchas Torah, and stayed for the farbrengen after. That was the first of many visits to his grandfather's shul, and the beginning of his journey back home.

*Names changed to protect privacy

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