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

Rabbi Avi and Mushky Feldman, Chabad of Iceland

The Northernmost Chabad House in the World

By Chaya Chazan

After an amazing one and a half year shlichus opportunity in Berlin, we were back in New York, looking for the next step in our journey.

We were hearing more and more about Iceland, and its need for more Yiddishkeit. Although Jews had lived there for more than 100 years, there's never been a rabbi or any kind of Jewish organization in the country. Beginning more than 50 years ago, groups of Merkos Shluchim visited Iceland from time to time. A Tanya was printed in 1984, and, since 2011, Merkos shluchim had been visiting once or twice per year. It was time for something more.

Our first visit was during Chanukah 2017, when we got to meet some of the local Jews. We hosted a Chanukah event to introduce ourselves to the community. Soon afterwards, we decided to dedicate ourselves to this shlichus. Just before Shavuos 2018, we moved to Iceland.

My wife grew up on shlichus in Gothenburg, Sweden. She noticed a cultural overlap across Nordic countries. Her fluency in Swedish also gave her a bit of a headstart with learning Icelandic. Although most people speak English very well, we make an effort to learn and speak Icelandic, out of respect for the locals and their culture.

The Icelandic Jewish community is small but diverse. There are Icelandic Jews from several generations back, and there are expats from many different countries. Even though the Jews of Iceland come from all different backgrounds, every-



one enjoys Jewish events where we can celebrate what we have in common.

While kosher can be challenging, we're lucky to have some local kosher products, as well as many imported products that have hechsherim. Iceland is famous for its delicious fish, which are easily accessible and very fresh. Kosher meat, chicken, wine, and all chalav yisrael products have to be imported by sea.

Iceland is nicknamed the land of fire and ice. It's famous for its glaciers and natural hot springs. We use the closest one, a 90-minute drive and ten minute hike, as our mikvah. It's quite an adventure, especially in wintertime, but luckily, once you get inside, it's hot. Baruch Hashem, we are now beginning construction of the first mikvah in Icelandic history.

We have four little girls and a son. One of our greatest priorities is to give our kids childhood and social life. Baruch Hashem, they are thriving and have many friends in the community. They also have a tremendous impact on the community. When they speak at the Shabbos table and share what they've been learning about the parsha, people love hearing them.

In December, we have only five hours of daylight. In the summer, we experience two months of "white nights," when the sun only dips below the horizon, but it doesn't get dark. This situation presents many halachic challenges. We now feature a Halachic FAQ page on our website. In June, Shabbos ends at 1:30am!

When we traveled to Iceland for the first time, it was on Chanukah, and we headed out to JFK airport before menorah lighting time. Because it was winter, with sunrise at 11:00am, we were able to light the menorah when we arrived at our Airbnb in Iceland in the morning!

Briet* was willing to join us for some events, but she remained wary. She told us she wouldn't bring her kids to any Jewish programs.

We didn't push her at all, and slowly developed a friendship with her.

Six months later, we started a weekly Hebrew school. The first registrants were Briet's children.

We've found that once the channel to the neshama is opened, there's no limit to how far it will take the person.

Nowadays, public menorah lightings are almost ubiquitous, with 15,000 menorahs lit in public squares throughout the world every year. But in Reykjavik, such a thing was unheard of.

We sent a letter to the city asking permission to put up a public menorah, and waited eagerly for a response. Bureaucracy is usually very efficient in Iceland, since it's a small country, so we were concerned when we didn't receive any response. We feared it might be ignored altogether, but baruch Hashem, a few weeks later, we received approval. They granted us a space right on the main street of Reykjavik! We couldn't have asked for a better location.

We had a meeting with city officials to plan the logistics, and they were all very courteous and helpful.

"I'm sure you were wondering about the delay in responding to your letter," the city clerk told us. "Honestly, when we received your letter, we were stumped. We'd never heard of such a thing, and had no idea what to do with it. We passed it to another office, but they didn't know what to say either! Your letter passed from department to department, until it finally made its way to the mayor's desk. He approved it immediately!"

That Chanukah, we hosted the first ever public menorah lighting in Iceland. It was heartwarming to see how well it was received by everyone, Jews and non-Jews alike.

The next year, the mayor attended the lighting himself. In his speech, he pledged there would always be a public menorah in Iceland.

The Jewish community took great pride in the mayor's words, and were very proud and amazed to see Chanukah celebrated openly on the streets!

Just before Covid, we celebrated another Icelandic milestone with the very first Siyum Sefer Torah in the country, donated by the Krauzs family of Zurich. The community had a chance to write letters in the Torah, a once in a lifetime experience for most people. We then paraded the chuppah and the Torah through the streets. There was so much joy and Jewish pride - even the non-Jewish Icelanders were cheering us on!

Iceland boasts a thriving fishing industry. I once visited a fish factory for kosher certification purposes. I was given a tour, and met the factory owner, Gunnar*. While chatting, I discovered he was Jewish. I immediately invited him to join us for the Friday night meal.

Gunnar agreed, and enjoyed the experience immensely.

"I only found out recently that I'm Jewish," he told us. "Brexit caused some issues for me, since I only have UK citizenship, but live half the year in Iceland."

"My sister started to research our family ancestry, hoping to find some European connections so we could claim citizenship. She found more than she bargained for. It turns out we're descended from Hungarian Jews. I've only had a few weeks to process this information. I have no idea what it means to be Jewish, but I think this Shabbos table is a great start!"

"I couldn't agree more," I said, smiling.

We recently received a mysterious letter in the mail. It was addressed simply to "Leader of the Jewish Community, Reykjavik, Iceland." Despite the lack of name and postal info, the post office knew exactly where to send it.

I found the story cute, so I posted it on our social media page. The outpouring of love, support, and appreciation in the comments told a story all their own.

Locals and tourists consider us ambassadors of Judaism, and our Chabad house is the embassy to which they can turn with anything they need. It's a privilege to be here and do whatever we can to assist the local Jews.

A flight from Poland to New York had to make an emergency landing in Reykjavik. The flight included a large group of Chassidim.

I'm usually the only yarmulka-wearing man in the country, so it was quite a sight to see five or six minyanim worth of such crowds descending upon Iceland. Baruch Hashem, we were able to provide them all with kosher food, and we spent some time farbrenging together during their unexpected 24-hour stay. It was a real treat for us to have a surprise minyan for Rosh Chodesh! Many people in the group kept telling me, "I love Chabad," "I can't believe you managed to get this kind of kosher food in Iceland," and "Mi K'amcha Yisroel!"

Pesach preparations were underway, and we were assembling a guest list from the reservations that came in.

"Look at this one!" my wife exclaimed. "Michael and Rebecca Roth* are coming all the way from northwest Iceland! That's an 8-hour drive, at least!"

We marveled at the strength of the pintelev Yid, that pushes souls to reconnect with their Yiddishkeit, no matter the distance - physical or spiritual.

After Michael and Rebecca attended the seder, we maintained contact. Michael even bought himself a pair of tefillin and puts them on every day!

Anders*, a valued member of our community, was accompanied by his wife and son on a visit to Israel. On the morning of Shabbos, October 7th, they'd planned to be in the southern region, in one of the towns that, unfortunately, had been targeted.

Not knowing why he felt that would be the better option, his son recommended, "Dad, why don't we spend a few days in the north before heading back to Iceland?"

Recognizing the hand of Hashem at play, Anders concurred. This fortuitous decision ultimately spared his life. Had it not been for that last-minute change of plans, he was slated to stay at the precise location where the terrorists carried out their horrific attacks.

When we first moved and started meeting members of the community, we asked for their input: *how do you envision the future of the Jewish community? What would you like to see happen?*

One repeated answer was a wish that Judaism would be recognized as an official religion. Seeing how important this recognition was, we made a concerted effort to bring it to fruition. It took two years, but the Chabad house was finally recognized as the official Jewish community of Iceland.

This governmental approval granted us the right to a Jewish cemetery, recognition of a chuppah as a valid marriage, and the ability to receive religious tax funds. Most importantly, it instilled a sense of pride and belonging in our community.

It took a long time to convince Anna* to go to mikvah. When she finally agreed, my wife was ecstatic. They made the hour-and-half-long drive to the hot spring, and hiked their way up there. To their chagrin, they found the hot spring occupied by a group of young people, partying in the pool.

My wife knew Anna was still hesitant about the whole thing, and was afraid this setback would send her flying back to the car. She approached the group and informed them she'd be conducting a religious ritual and needed complete privacy.

The group, astonished, took one look at her determined face and understood. They immediately clambered out, running straight for their own cars! That is life when your mikvah is off the beaten track.

It was the final moments of Yom Kippur, the most powerful time of the year. Before we chanted Shema Yisroel, I addressed the congregation.

"Shema is an expression of our ultimate faith in Hashem. It's the verse a Jew recites before giving up his life for Hashem. But being a Jew is about *living* with the Torah. So now, as we recite the Shema together, think about a way you could enhance your *life* as a Jew. Think of a mitzvah you can do that will strengthen your bond with Hashem!"

After we completed Neilah and broke our fasts, Erik*, one of our community members, told me he'd committed to celebrating Shabbos each week by lighting candles, making kiddush, and enjoying a seuda.

We're very proud of our summer day camp, which we started a few years ago. The impact a camp-like atmosphere has on children is so much more potent than a couple hours of Hebrew school once a week.

Eva's* mother sent us a picture of a Kriyas Shema poster hanging in a prominent spot above Eva's bed. But the moment that showed us just how impactful the summer experience could be was on the last day of camp.

"We really don't want camp to be over!" the older girls begged my wife. "Is there any way we can extend it?"

My wife promised to arrange a Shabbaton - not an easy feat for Icelandic summer, when Shabbos is a three day event! We'd host the girls from Friday until Sunday morning, when we could conclude the Shabbaton with havdalah.

Baruch Hashem, the Shabbaton was extremely successful, and the girls enjoyed it immensely.

The next week, we got a call from one of the girls' mothers.

"My daughter wants to keep Shabbos again this week," she said. "She just doesn't remember - what were all the 39 things she's not supposed to do?"

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