

IllumiNations

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.  DollarDaily.org

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

*Rabbi Mendy and Chani Posner,
Chabad of Plantation, Florida*

Judaism Takes Root in Plantation

By Chaya Chazan

The state of Florida is one of the most densely populated – shlichus-wise, at least. In our county alone, there are over 50 shluchim! When we first moved here in 1990, there were less than ten.

We were a young couple with a baby when Rabbi Leiberman asked us to join his team in Inverrary, Florida. My husband, a native sabra, worked well with the Israeli community, while I helped run the Hebrew school.

After a couple years, we were ready to strike out on our own. Shlichus was something we didn't even think twice about; it would've felt strange to build a home on anything else. My husband's father was the very first shliach sent to Eretz Yisrael. Although I grew up in Crown Heights, my parents, Rabbi Mendel and Nechama Baumgarten a"h, instilled in me the knowledge and assurance that going on shlichus was doing the Rebbe's work. In fact, my parents had asked the Rebbe more than once to move on shlichus and open a Chabad house. The Rebbe unequivocally told them they were his shluchim to Crown Heights - a position to which my parents dedicated the entirety of their lives.

We knew it would be challenging to put down roots in Plantation. The community was largely upper-middle



class, very secular, and strongly attached to their Conservative and Reform temples.

Things were very tough at first. We painstakingly build our community one family at a time. It took years to establish a weekly minyan. Baruch Hashem, that's no longer a worry!

Our shul was in its last stages of construction. I was eager to finish, so, one day, I picked up a brush and a roller and began painting the walls of the shul. Since I didn't want to dirty my white shirt, I put it on the back of a chair, and, my tzitzis dancing with my every move, hummed as I worked.

I heard someone come in, and I turned around, dripping paintbrush still in my hand. I'd never seen the man before. He looked at me in open curiosity.

"Uh - hi. I'm looking for the rabbi?"

"Just one minute," I said. I put down the paintbrush, grabbed my shirt from the chair, and turned back around with a smile and outstretched hand. "Welcome," I said. "I'm Rabbi Mendy."

Avi*, as he soon introduced himself, looked absolutely dumbfounded to see the rabbi engaging in manual labor. He was so impressed, he pledged to donate a sefer Torah to our new shul!

Avi came to shul just once more after that initial visit, and then vanished as mysteriously as he'd appeared.

I'd been informed that many stores along the Ft. Lauderdale boardwalk were owned by Jews. With my tefillin under my arm, I walked from store to store, asking each owner to put them on. One after another, they all refused - some not even bothering to be polite.

As the punishing Florida sun and humidity beat down on me, and I received rejection after rejection, I became disheartened. I'd been on the street for hours, with absolutely nothing to show for it. I found a phone booth and called home.

"Chani, I don't know if I can do this anymore," I vented. "It's been so disappointing. I'm going to try one last store. If he turns me away too, I don't think I can ever come back here again."

As my wife hung up, she murmured a heartfelt prayer. "Please Hashem, let him be successful!"

Meanwhile, I squared my shoulders and headed to my final stop. I asked for the owner and was introduced to a large, intimidating man named Ariel*, whose effusive friendliness was truly a breath of fresh air. When I asked him to put on tefillin, he graciously rolled up his sleeve with a smile.

Ariel soon became a treasured friend, who introduced us to many influential contacts, as well as all the other store owners I'd visited that fateful day. To my shock, their attitudes had undergone a complete transformation, and they were now cheery and open.

"Don't worry about them, Rabbi," Ariel told me, clapping me on the back. "I told them they better be nice to you! They know I mean business! Honestly, I'm usually not that warm or welcoming myself. I wonder what made me act so friendly to you that day...?"

"Hi, my name is Camila*," said the hesitant voice on the phone. "I'd like to use the mikvah."

I introduced myself and asked her for more details. I soon discovered that she and her family had recently moved from Cuba, where they'd converted. She couldn't give me too many details about her conversion, and, in the mess of moving, her conversion papers had gotten lost. I asked a rav if I could still let her toivel, and the rav approved.

When I met Camila in person, she shared more about her life. They lived in Miramar, which at that time had no shliach, shul, or Jewish community. She was extremely proud of her young daughter, Silvana*.

"We want to learn more about Judaism and grow in our commitment to Torah," she told me, earnestly.

Moved by her sincerity, I invited her family for Shabbos. My daughter was the same age as Silvana, and they got along really well. When we saw how serious they were about Yiddishkeit, we sat them down for a difficult conversation.

"Since we can't verify your conversion, you'll need to undergo the whole process again," we explained, gently.

"Okay," they agreed, instantly.

Nothing seemed to impede their determination. Whatever stipulation we made, they agreed immediately.

"A Jew needs to live near a minyan," we explained. "There's no shul in your area."

Within a week, they called to tell us they'd found a home in Plantation. Camila's husband made the walk for every Shacharis and Mincha - 45 minutes each way!

"You'll need to kasher your home," we told them.

Three days later, we were invited into their kitchen with a blowtorch and boiling water.

All three of them underwent conversion again, choosing the names Leah, Binyamin, and Chana*.

Binyamin nodded when we told him he'd need to re-do his bris, and gladly accompanied my husband to New York to meet with the mohel. Since he was older, the mohel prepared anesthetic. Binyamin declined.

"Are you sure? At your age, this will be a very painful procedure," the mohel warned him.

"For the privilege of becoming Jewish, such pain is worthwhile," he explained.

After they'd completed their conversion, we celebrated their Jewish marriage with a beautiful chuppah in our starlit backyard.

Their daughter, Chana, began to learn with my daughter. She was very intelligent, and they were soon far beyond the basics of reading Hebrew. Chana caught up so quickly, she was able to enroll in the same high school my own daughter attended, and kept up perfectly with every subject - Judaic or otherwise.

When I'm out of town, or otherwise unavailable, I know I can always count on Leah to be the mikvah attendant in my stead.

It was nearly impossible to convince Avital* to use the mikvah. In vain, I explained how the laws of taharas hamishpacha enhanced the marriage, and invited G-d into their relationship.

"My marriage is fine, thank you very much," she'd respond.

I'm not sure what changed, but one day, years later, Avital told me she'd spoken with her husband and they'd agreed to try it out. I excitedly arranged a crash course on the laws of mikvah, and finally, she was ready.

She came regularly for a year or two, until one day, she called me in tears.

"It's just not working," she cried. "I have to keep restarting my count, over and over!"

As she explained her symptoms, something sounded wrong to me.

"Avital, please see a doctor immediately," I advised her.

Unfortunately, Avital had developed major medical issues that required surgery. We stayed by her side through it all, trying to comfort and help her.

"Now what?" she asked me one day, as I sat by her hospital bed. "Is that the end of mikvah for me? I'd really love to go at least one more time."

"Of course," I assured her. "After you fully recover, you'll be able to go one more time."

As Avital emerged from the mikvah waters for the last time, tears poured down her face. As I held back tears of my own, I asked her, "Avital, why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying because this is my last time," she explained through her tears. "I'm crying for all the years I didn't go. I can't believe how long I missed out on this incredible mitzvah."

Every time Lisa* had to go to the mikvah, it took tremendous courage and effort from both me and her. She was extremely aquaphobic, and all my lifeguarding training did little to calm her fear. The rav told her she only had to immerse once, instead of the usual three, but Lisa refused to do anything by half measures. She insisted on dipping thrice, each time shaking with paroxysms of fear. I was inspired and impressed by her fortitude.

"Chani, I really want a baby," she told me, after a while.

"Let's daven together," I suggested. "We can add a kapitel of Tehillim, or -"

"No," she interrupted me. "I know what I have to do. I'm going to immerse in the mikvah four times!"

We both knew what a tremendous sacrifice this demanded from her. Shaking and trembling throughout, Lisa completed her fourth immersion and emerged, exhausted.

I didn't see Lisa for a while after that. I sincerely hope that her incredible courage and sacrifices were rewarded with a child.

We organized a challah bake as a zechus for Eretz Yisrael. I received an RSVP from Janelle*, whom we'd reached out to many times before, but she'd never responded.

"I know I've been more or less ignoring you," she admitted. "This war in Israel inspired me to respond. I'd not only like to attend the challah bake, I'd also like to arrange a time to learn about mikvah."

About fifteen years ago, we were invited to a distant cousin's wedding in New York, on Rosh Chodesh Nissan. We were packed and ready to go when we received a call from Lana*, who was sobbing hysterically.

"They arrested Ehud*! They arrested him!" she cried.

Her husband, Ehud, was a successful businessman. Eventually, she calmed down enough to tell us he'd been accused of laundering billions of dollars.

"What do I do?" she wailed.

"Chani, you go to the wedding, and I'll go to the Ohel," I decided.

While in the Ohel, I explained all the circumstances in a letter, and asked the Rebbe to beseech Hashem for mercy on Ehud's behalf. Fretting about Ehud's difficult situation and his wife's despair, I sighed deeply, and hardly noticed my surroundings.

"Is everything okay?" a man asked, tapping me on the back. I turned to see Rabbi Moshe Feller, a good friend of my in-laws. I explained what had happened.

"You know," he began, almost conversationally, "I really wasn't planning on coming to the Ohel today. It was an impulsive decision. Now I see the hashgacha pratit! Back in the 70's, one of my community members went through something very similar. The Rebbe sent me a letter about it - here, I'll read it for you!"

The Rebbe's letter to Rabbi Feller reminded him that Nissan is the month of redemption, and by thinking positively, he'd see good results.

I called Lana. "Everything will work out!" I told her. "Think positive thoughts!"

Within a few weeks, all charges were dropped. Ehud, realizing how his partner's shady business practices had dragged him into this mess, started a new business, which became more successful than his previous one.

I know I can never go to the Ohel without informing Ehud. Whenever possible, he accompanies me in person. If he can't make it, he insists I dial his number as I enter the Ohel, regardless of what important meetings he has to interrupt, so he can whisper his prayers over the telephone.

*Names changed to protect privacy

DollarDaily.org

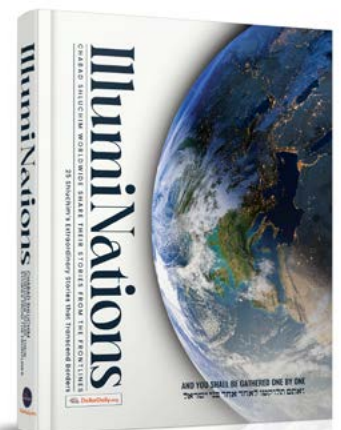
a Project of

**YadLShiach.org
and COLlive.com**

COL LIVE

IllumiNations is now a book.

Inside, you'll discover a unique collection of stories, some of which have graced the pages of the weekly newsletter 'IllumiNations,' captivating readers far and wide. Alongside these are dozens of previously unreleased tales and details, making each page a new discovery. With intriguing facts, a stylish magazine-style layout, and vibrant, full-color illustrations, IllumiNations takes you on a journey through over 250 narratives, spanning the globe from Alaska to Australia, California to Johannesburg, and beyond. In every story, you'll feel the deep theme of a Jewish soul finding its way home, one at a time, guided by the extraordinary individuals we call shluchim.



Now Available Wherever Great Jewish Books Are Sold Or on DollarDaily.org