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

Rabbi Yair and Guile Baitz, Chabad of Limassol, Cyprus

Remodeling the Mediterranean

By Chaya Chazan

My wife and I are both originally from Israel, and we settled there after we got married. We were both excited about going on shlichus, but we wanted a large community in which to invest all our resources and talents into developing it into something more.

We were offered a position in Cyprus, and began our research. We were delighted to discover a strong, established Israeli community. This would make our transition and integration that much easier.

While we lived in Israel, my wife taught at the local school. She loved teaching, and wanted to continue in chinuch, wherever our shlichus led us. So, a couple of years after we moved, we were excited to open our very own preschool.

It took a while to find the perfect location, but we soon learned the neighbor across the street from our Chabad house was retiring. We met with her, and, with Hashem's help, managed to convince her to allow us to take over half her lease until she retired. We hired teachers, and spread the word that our school was open for registration!

Unfortunately, it seemed our passion and excitement was not contagious. It was understandable, albeit disappointing. We were opening in the middle of October, when most kids were already in school. The parents all trusted the established preschools, and were wary of our brand new institution. Meanwhile, we'd already expended significant

costs opening the school. We had a building; we had teachers. All we needed were students! A few parents expressed some interest, and we allowed our hopes to rise, but nothing came of it.

"Maybe we should just try again at the start of the school year?" I suggested.

But my wife had a plan. She gave the parents who'd shown interest at the beginning a deadline. "If we don't have enough kids registered by the end of the week, we'll have to open the school to the general public. We need the tuition to pay rent and our teacher's salaries!"

The parents didn't believe she'd go through with it, and the truth is, we probably would've tried to find an alternate plan. But Hashem intervened. A few days later, a non-Jewish woman passed by our school and decided to stop in to find out more. She must've been impressed, because soon, we were receiving dozens of calls from her friends, all inquiring about our program and availability.

Word quickly spread, and the interest soon infected the Jewish community. Desperate to get their children into the newest (and most sought-after) preschool, our email was inundated with applications. We'd soon registered more kids than we could handle, and were free to handpick which children to accept. Baruch Hashem, today we have a thriving preschool, filled with Jewish children who learn about their Judaism with joy, passion, and excitement.

I spent years trying to get David* to put on tefillin. No matter what arguments I used, he'd refuse every single time. And then, one day, David came to the Chabad house and asked me to help him put on tefillin.

I vacillated between joy and disbelief, but I quickly grabbed a pair of tefillin and helped him say the brachos.

"I'm curious," I told him afterwards. "I've asked you to put on tefillin many times. What changed your mind?"

David shrugged. "I was out of options." He sighed. "I've run a successful business for years, but lately, things have been falling apart. I've tried everything I could think of! Then I remembered all the discussions we've had. I figured putting on tefillin couldn't hurt!"

David now puts on tefillin happily, every time I ask. When his sons approached bar mitzvah age, he asked me to learn with them and teach them what this milestone really means. They, too, are happy to put on tefillin whenever I ask.

I often reflect on the importance of persistence, regardless of how pointless or futile it sometimes seems. Every fruitless conversation with David was a drop of water, slowly but surely ebbing away his indifference. While I was disappointed by refusal after refusal, my efforts eventually showed him that this was an option for drawing down Hashem's bracha.

When Liel* first moved to the community, we'd bring her challah every Friday morning, as a way of introducing ourselves and trying to form a friendship. Liel was raised on a typically secular kibbutz and left Israel at 17 years old. Her knowledge and connection to Judaism were minimal.

The weekly challah deliveries soon began to bear fruits. When we'd deliver the challah, we'd converse, and we'd always invite her to whichever shiur or program was coming up. Liel even volunteered to host a weekly Tanya shiur in her home! She began attending more functions, and soon became a beloved member of our community. We found her open and receptive to Jewish and Chassidic concepts she'd never heard before, and always ready to learn more.

Last year, Liel approached me with an interesting Halachic question: she wanted to take on a commitment in regards to her dress. Should she start covering her hair, or was dressing modestly a greater priority? I promised her I'd do some research and get back to her. I consulted with rabbanim, and found out that the mitzvah of kisuy rosh - covering her hair - would be the greater priority. Liel was happy to accept my recommendation and invested in a colorful array of beautiful head scarves.

A few weeks later, Liel returned. "My head covering makes me look religious," she explained, seriously. "As a representative of religious people, I feel like I need to make a stronger commitment to my Judaism."

Liel voluntarily undertook to dress modestly, insisting that was the only way she could properly represent the religious community. Her dedication to her Judaism impacted her entire family, inspiring them all to reconnect with Hashem in their own ways. She shed tears of nachas when her son flew to Israel, the newest enrollee of a Jewish school.

After the war broke out in Ukraine, Cyprus was flooded with refugees. Our community swelled quite suddenly, and it was a challenge to meet its influx of needs. For weeks, my wife was getting knocks at the preschool's door from Ukrainian parents asking to register their children.



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Although we advertised ourselves as a Jewish preschool, it was impossible to ignore the plea in those parents' eyes. We ended up accepting many children whose fathers were Jewish, or whose parents assured us they were in the midst of conversion.

Svetlana* wasn't Jewish, nor was her husband, and she had no plans of conversion. But she was insistent on enrolling her son in our school.

"Jews are smart," she said. "I want my son surrounded by them!"

Knowing how much Svetlana and her family had suffered to make it here, my wife eventually accepted her child.

A few months later, in a conversation with Svetlana, my wife asked her what had pushed her to insist on Jewish schooling for her son.

"I know we're not Jewish, but I've always felt connected to the Jewish people," she explained. "My mother was born Jewish, although she wasn't a practicing Jew."

"Now I understand what gave you this push!" my wife cried. "It's called the *pintele Yid*, the spark inside every Jew that can never be extinguished, no matter how buried."

No one is sure what the future holds for these refugees, but while Svetlana makes her home in Cyprus, we're delighted to welcome her and her family to our programs and events, and teach them about our shared heritage.

It was the final hours of Purim, and as the busy day faded into night, I sat with Eitan* and Ariel*, partaking in a final few lechaims. I'd known both for some time, as they were active members of our community.

Wine has the power to lower our inhibitions, and make difficult things easy to say. We farbrenge about a variety of topics, the alcohol making me feel mellow enough to bang my fist on the table and declare, "You both need to break up with your non-Jewish girlfriends, and find Jewish wives!"

I spoke earnestly on the importance of Jewish continuance, and while they listened complacently, I wasn't sure if the glassiness in their eyes was a film of drunkenness, or disinterest.

"Lechaim!" I toasted them, raising my glass. "May you both get married to Jewish women this year!"

They laughed and shot back their drinks.

"And may you have children this year, too!" I added.

Eitan and Ariel left, without intentions of making any changes. Somehow, within a few months, for unrelated reasons, their relationships fell apart. We introduced Ariel to a nice Jewish girl, and Eitan found himself a Jewish girl, too! A couple of months later, they were both engaged!

Today, both men are happily married and building Jewish families. Thanks to a Purim lechaim, Eitan and Ariel have fathered three beautiful Jewish children!

The preschool had been operating successfully for a few months. We'd already enrolled 25 children, and everything was going smoothly.

Opening the school was a huge undertaking. If we thought it would get easier as time went on, events soon showed us that our challenges only grew as our school did! The financial pressure to pay our teachers, buy supplies, and keep the building lit, heated, and cleaned was immense. As Pesach approached, with its additional expenses of wine, matzah, meat, and fish, the situation became unbearable. I could hardly concentrate on anything besides the tremendous amount of debt about to cripple us.

We wrote a detailed and heartfelt letter to the Rebbe, describing the issue. We concluded with a request for a bracha "*I'maalah miderech hateva*," one that confounded the laws of nature.

A few weeks before Pesach, I was inspired to speak to my congregation about the mitzvah of maaser.

"We aren't usually allowed to test G-d," I explained. "But with this mitzvah, the Torah gives us a promise. *Asor*, give tithes, so that *taasor*, you will become rich. G-d literally guarantees that you will be repaid - tenfold!"

I shared stories from the Sages, describing how Hashem showered His brachos upon those who gave maaser.

Preparations for Pesach continued, and so did the financial worries. It was on my mind as I shopped, cleaned, shlepped, and peeled. As I sat on the couch after completing bedikas chometz with a furrowed brow, my wife took a break from the kitchen and sat beside me.

"I hate seeing you go into Yom Tov like this," she said. "Since I was a little girl, I learned that one must *give* in order to *receive*. You spoke so passionately about giving maaser a few weeks ago - why not lead by example?"

The next morning, I sent a sum of money to a relative in Israel, and told him to use it for the chag. I felt a huge burden lift from my shoulders, and I was able to begin Yom Tov with a clear, worry-free mind, assured of Hashem's brachos.

That night, we hosted over 200 people for the seder. I circulated around the tables, greeting friends and familiar faces and telling short stories or insights into the Haggada.

"Chag sameach!" I greeted the Lasker family*. Their son was one of the first enrolled in our school. The festive atmosphere, and, no doubt, the wine, made Mr. Lasker in an expansive mood.

"This is all very impressive!" he told me, gesturing broadly around the room. "For some of us, the Pesach seder is the only time we sit down and *talk religion*. You guys do it the real way! Your school fulfills the mitzvah of *'tell it to your children'* every day, not just on Pesach night! I want to be part of something so important!"

"Sure, sure," I answered, patting him on the back good humoredly. We were good friends, so I didn't take his offer too seriously.

A few weeks later, we flew the entire family to New York, in honor of the Hakhel year. We were settling into our seats, when I received a message from Mr. Lasker. *What's the best way to send a donation?*

A short while later, my phone chirped, informing me a deposit had been made. My jaw fell open in amazement. Mr. Lasker's donation was *exactly ten times the amount I'd sent my relative on erev Pesach*.

Once again, Hashem's promise to repay His debts generously was fulfilled!

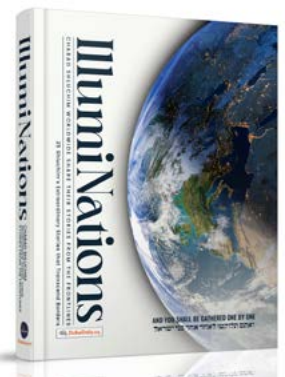
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