

IllumiNations

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

Rabbi Levi and Hindy Wilansky, Chabad of Portland, Maine

The Lighthouses of Maine

By Chaya Chazan

In 1987, the shlichus “business” was booming. Every kollel yungerman was eager to find their place and get to work. My parents were no different. Their choice was clear when Rabbi Kotlarsky announced they’d be sending shluchim to five new states and offered my parents Maine.

They were eager to accept, and wrote to the Rebbe. The Rebbe wished them that it should be “at a good and successful time with everything,” and that he would “mention it at the grave of [the Friediker Rebbe],” and they were off.

It was my privilege to be born into shlichus, and I couldn’t be prouder that my wife and I are carrying on my parents’ legacy, assisting them to help Chabad of Maine continue to grow.

In the 50’s and 60’s, Portland’s strong Jewish infrastructure earned it the moniker “Little Yerushalayim of New England.” There were many shuls, a kosher butcher, and more. Unfortunately, Portland lacked a strong educational system. With no ground in which to plant new seeds, this flourishing Jewish community would inevitably die out. By the time my parents moved there, only remnants of “Little Yerushalayim” remained. All the youth had either moved to greener pastures, or assimilated. The older generation remained staunchly committed to their Yid-

dishkeit, but the shuls were falling into disuse, and there was no vibrancy or growth.

Although Merkos, the umbrella shlichus organization, had been sending bochorim to Maine for years, the community treated my parents with suspicion and hostility. They’d only barely heard of Chabad before, and couldn’t imagine what anyone could add to their well-established community. It took a long time to earn their trust, and prove Chabad could inject an infusion of enthusiasm and vitality.

Proper chinuch is a challenge many shluchim face, and my family was no different. My siblings and I attended the Jewish day school until first grade, and from then on, were homeschooled. At just eleven years old, I left home to attend school in New York.

Baruch Hashem, our large family meant there was always someone to play with, even though Jewish friends were few and far between.

Our lives were completely intertwined with shlichus. Our home also functioned as our shul and Chabad house. When we woke up on Sunday mornings and padded to the breakfast table, we found ourselves sharing our eggs and pancakes with the early minyan shul goers.

For us, it was a matter of course to accompany my father on his mivtzoyim route, visiting friends and strangers all over the city. In retrospect, I can see how including us in this aspect of shlichus enriched both our passion and commitment for the Rebbe’s mission, but also brought excitement and joy to the people we met.

In our home, shlichus was a family project. We were all equally invested in the success of every shiur, program, and event, and threw ourselves into preparations however we could.

Mainers live life at a different pace. The people here are mostly simple, hardworking folk, and years of frigid temperatures and difficult conditions have taught them to adopt a hard exterior. They’re friendly enough, but like to keep to themselves, especially as winter weather drives everyone indoors.

I knew what I was signing up for when I joined my parents’ shlichus. One distinct advantage I possessed was the title of “Mainer.” As one born and bred in the state, I automatically earned a higher level of trust and respect from my fellow statesmen, who look upon outlanders with some disdain.

So far, in addition to my parents and ourselves, two more of my siblings have established Chabad houses 5l throughout Maine. With 13 of us, kn”h, you never know when another Wilansky will show up on your doorstep to open another Maine Chabad house!

Being a second-generation shliach in the same city in which I grew up adds extra dimension to our mission.

Since Maine is one of America’s least densely populated states, everyone lives miles apart. Instead of one central Hebrew school hub, we offer a *traveling* Hebrew school. If there are a certain number of children in an area, we’ll travel there and teach in one of their houses.

My mother taught Flora* as a child in Hebrew school. Now, Flora’s son, Ray*, is my student, in one of our Hebrew school pods. This year, Ray was Maine’s representative at JewQ, an international Jewish trivia bee for Hebrew school students. His face shone with pride, and he answered every question with ease. Ray won gold, and brought home multi-generational nachas for us all.

Eddie’s* connection began with the famous, “Excuse me; are you Jewish?” on the streets of Manhattan. Although he was running late to catch a bus back to Maine, he turned to the two bochorim outside their mitzvah tank and answered, “Half-Jewish. My mother was.”

“Well, that’s the right half!” the bochorim answered. “Would you like to put on tefillin?”

Eddie agreed, and allowed the boys to wrap the black leather straps around his arm for the first time in his life. He didn’t expect such a strange ritual to affect him so deeply, but he couldn’t help but admit how moved he felt. The minutes-long interaction had changed something monumental in him.

When he got home, he began researching. He faithfully put into practice everything he’d read about, but somehow, the Shabbos he’d tried to create in his dining room felt different than the Shabbos described in the article.

Eddie is a shy and reticent man by nature. It took him a few years to work up the courage, but he finally called for the guidance he so desperately needed. The office immediately contacted me. Looking up his contact infor-



mation, I learned he lived no more than ten minutes from my house!

I met with Eddie, helped him put on tefillin, and answered his questions.

"I feel like I already know you," Eddie shared, shyly. "I've been coming to your public menorah lightings for years. I never miss it! I've always been too shy to introduce myself, though."

Eddie and I soon built a deep connection and friendship.

When war broke out in Ukraine, everybody wanted to pitch in. Our community (and several others) held a Zoom conference with Rabbi Yechiel Shlomo Levitansky of Sumy, Ukraine, who was then trying to escape the war zone. He shared some very powerful stories and insights. He concluded with a heartfelt plea: "If anyone is wondering how they can help, there's nothing better you can do than to take on a mitzvah. In its zechus, we will be protected."

The next day, Eddie called. "Rabbi, I'm ready to buy my own pair of tefillin."

Eddie uses his tefillin regularly, and continues to deepen his connection to Hashem.

Greg* was intrigued when he saw the Sukkah mobile driving by. He initially called for some general information, which quickly developed into a genuine interest. At first, he stopped by a couple of times a month for a Shabbos meal. That soon graduated to spending every Shabbos with us, camped out on the living room couch. I believe he learned a lot about halachah and Jewish life from watching our family interact with one another. Eventually, he became fully shomer Shabbos, and my parents sent him off to yeshiva. I remember marveling at Greg's transformations each time he returned home. First, it was the sproutings of a beard, then a hat, jacket, and white shirt.

He was a successful, middle-aged doctor, but had never gotten married. After becoming shomer Shabbos, he married a baalas teshuva from Canada, and together, they built a beautiful Jewish home. We were so excited to attend his wedding, piling into the van for the drive north. Greg was family. My parents escorted him to his chuppah.

For the first few years of their marriage, they lived in Portland, but, as is the bittersweet reality for so many shluchim, once their son grew old enough to require a more rigorous education than Maine could provide, we advised them to join a proper Jewish community. They soon set-

tled into a community they loved, and live a wonderful Jewish life there.

We were left floundering when the only mikvah in town closed. The next nearest mikvah was over four hours away. In bad weather, it meant an all-day affair, or sometimes even longer! Although we didn't have the funds to build a mikvah, we knew it was of critical importance.

With many miracles from Hashem, the money came together slowly, and we started construction.

It was Sukkos, and my father was in the sukkah, farbrenging with Leiby*. We'd known Leiby for a while. He was one of the many tourists who, during the yeshiva break, flocked to Maine for the breathtaking scenery and national parks. My father noticed that Leiby was taking more than his fair share of lechaims, and was downing them more with *desperation* than *celebration*. After most of the crowd had cleared, he sat beside Leiby and asked him what was wrong.

Leiby hung his head and tears dripped down his face. He told my father how his life was falling apart. Although he was a young man, he'd already suffered through two divorces.

My father tried to console him. "We're in the middle of building our mikvah now," he told Leiby. "The zechus of partaking in such a special mitzvah will surely bring bracha into your life! Even if you can't help financially, maybe you can help us find contractors or supplies."

Leiby eagerly agreed. A few weeks later, he managed to get some crucial materials donated to the cause, and even drove up to install them himself!

Since this was during Covid, other materials we'd ordered took a while to come, and Leiby promised to return when they arrived to install them as well. He was still struggling to find a shidduch, and my father encouraged him to have emunah and bitachon.

Over the next few months, he kept in touch with my father. A faint tinge of hope filled his voice as he shared that he'd met someone, and their shidduch was progressing nicely. Unfortunately, since she came from a different Chassidus, Leiby's mother was adamantly against the match.

After a few months, the light fixtures arrived, and Leiby fulfilled his promise to install them personally. As he tightened the final screws, his mother called to tell him she'd changed her mind, and finally gave approval for the shidduch.

Almost everything for the mikvah was ready. All we needed was rainfall to fill the tank. We watched the skies hopefully, but it was a while before rain fell. The day the mikvah gathered the proper amount of water was the day Leiby got engaged.

There were still a couple of fixtures that hadn't arrived, and again, Leiby promised to take care of them personally. He held an afruz in our Chabad house, inviting his friends to join. While he was here, he took the opportunity to finish the mikvah's final touches. As he was wrapping up, he received a call from a childhood friend's father. The father told him his son still held a grudge against Leiby for the way he'd treated him back in elementary school. "I know you've had trouble with shidduchim," the father said. "Perhaps my son's resentment was the reason why. I know you're getting married soon, and I thought I'd call so you can ask my son forgiveness, and march to your chuppah with a clean conscience."

With every step of the mikvah completion, Leiby's load was lightened.

Meilich* couldn't donate much, but he wanted to participate in the mikvah anyhow. He gave us his credit card information, but, for one reason or another, we never charged his card.

"Charge it!" he begged us.

We meant to; but it kept slipping our minds.

Finally, while placing a purchase, we remembered his card and put the charge through. An hour later, he called with good news.

"Mazal tov! My wife just had a baby boy!" He shared that, although she usually had difficult labors, this one went smoothly and easily. "I have no doubt it's thanks to my participation in the mikvah's construction!" he said.

*Names changed to protect privacy

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HOW MANY CHABAD RABBIS DOES IT TAKE TO CHANGE A LIGHT BULB? JUST ONE, BUT HE WON'T ACTUALLY CHANGE IT. INSTEAD, HE'LL INSPIRE THE LIGHT BULB TO FIND ITS OWN INNER ILLUMINATION AND SHINE BRIGHT!

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