

# IllumiNations

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 Menachem and Chana Yidgar,  
Chabad Youth, Netivot, Israel*

## The Power of the Youth

By Chaya Chazan

**Shlichus was never a question of *if*, but simply *where*. I grew up in a Chabad family, where shlichus as a “career” was a matter of course.**

My wife's family are descendents of the Baba Sali, and her parents had been on shlichus in Netivot for years already. With some of her siblings assisting her parents in and around Netivot, it was a no-brainer for us to do the same once we were married.

When we joined the community, we noticed how many traditional families lived in the area. These people demonstrated strong connections to their Jewish faith and roots, but nothing concrete tied them to the religion. Knowing an ounce of *prevention* is worth a pound of *cure*, my wife and I decided to dedicate our shlichus to the youth of Netivot. Our mission starts with these children - but it doesn't end there. More often than not, the relationships we build with these children are a step towards connection with the whole family.

The niche we chose presented some challenges. We had a group of teens excited to join our programming, but whenever we tried to book a venue, interest quickly petered out after we explained who our demographic was. It seemed no one wanted to host a group of rowdy teenagers... For many years, we held events in our own tiny apartment. Teens piled on the couch, and set chairs out on every available surface in the living room, dining room, kitchen, and porch. Although it was quite cramped,

it made everyone feel completely at home. We were so happy to see them treat our home as their own.

Obviously, this wasn't an ideal situation. It took a few years, but we finally rented a larger space, where we continue to serve the community and their children. Although we now have enough space, I miss the days where we had to climb over legs just to reach the other side of the room. We work very hard to ensure our teens still feel comfortably at home.

One way I reach the community's youth is by serving as the rabbi for the local boys' high school. I give shiurim to the students and staff, and act as advisor and counselor.

It took a lot of time and trust to earn that position. In the beginning, I would stand outside the school building, tefillin in hand, offering students an opportunity to put them on. The administration was unhappy and asked me to stop, quoting some vague reports of complaints they'd received. I politely persisted. It was weeks of back and forth negotiations, but eventually, everyone grew used to the sight of me outside with my tefillin, and local furor died down.

My position at the school gives me the opportunity to connect with students over the course of a few years, and watch them grow in their Yiddishkeit. I met Dan\* in 7th grade, as I taught a Bar Mitzvah class. When I approached Dan individually and tried to engage with him, he cut me off brusquely. “I'm Muslim,” he said. “Not interested.”

Something compelled me to dig deeper, instead of taking his answer at face value. The story I uncovered was heart-breaking.

Dan's Muslim father had converted to marry his Jewish mother, only to abandon them both after Dan was born and return to Islam. His mother then cut herself off from any religion completely.

“Dan, I know how confused you must be,” I told him. “You think you're Muslim, because Islam follows the father's tradition. But in Judaism, it follows the maternal line. Your mother is Jewish, and that means *you* are, too!”

The revelation didn't have the life-changing effects I'd hoped they'd have, but Dan and I stayed close. His trust was an honor; I was grateful he viewed me as reliable.

Dan's ambivalence ended abruptly on October 7th. Three of his friends were killed in the massacre, and it forced Dan to finally choose sides. He started attending shul three times a day. He asked for a pair of tzitzis (he knew we were making them for the soldiers), and even agreed to put on tefillin.

“Do you want a pair of your own?” I asked him.

Dan shrugged. “It doesn't matter. My parents wouldn't want them for me, even if I did.”

“I'll take care of it,” I told him.

That night, I made a few calls and had a pair of tefillin delivered straight to him. Since then, I've received a daily morning selfie from Dan, proudly wearing his tefillin.

Liam, a young boy with a Turkish father and Jewish mother, has also recently gotten a pair of tefillin and celebrated his bar Mitzvah at 17.

We, thankfully, weren't hit on October 7th, but we've had many rockets fall in our area. My father-in-law's Chabad house was actually hit directly. It's a true miracle no one was hurt. The entire congregation had run downstairs to the bomb shelter, where they all survived the attack safely! Located as close as we are to the Gaza border, the war has been our primary focus these past few months.

With the surge of requests for army-issue tzitzis, we've spent hours tying knots into camouflage green tzitzis. We've tied over 1,000 pairs, and given out more than 30 pairs of tefillin, as well. Of course, we look after our soldiers' physical needs too. Along with the tzitzis and tefillin, we've delivered over 2,000 pizzas to our chayalim.

So many of these brave soldiers are from our community of youths. Although some have kept closer touch than others, a strong bond connects us, no matter how long it's been.



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I met Azi\* at a Purim party a few years ago, and we've stayed in sporadic contact. He sent me a selfie the other day, green tzitzis and strings waving proudly in the wind against Gaza's backdrop. He'd made another addition as well - a kippa on his head.

Kobi\* accompanied me to New York last year, on a visit to the Rebbe. That trip inspired him to start wearing tefillin. He also shared that it gave him the emunah to face the battle. Although he was injured in a recent skirmish, his emunah remains strong and encourages him to push through!

A couple of weeks ago, I was approached by a sad and broken-looking man, just outside Netivot. He looked disheveled, and his eyes held more pain than any human should ever bear.

"Can I put on tefillin?" he asked me, his voice breaking.

"Of course," I responded. "What's your name?"

"Yitzchak Field," he told me. At my double take, he nodded. "Yes, as in those Fields."

I immediately knew who he was talking about. His family was well-known and well-connected.

"I'm not in touch with them though," he told me. "We stopped speaking years ago, when I abandoned religion."

The words poured from Yitzchak's mouth, almost as if by their own accord. He told me all about his life, describing his kibbutz in great detail.

"So many people were killed," he cried. "I don't know why I survived; why my wife survived. But we're sure there must be a reason. We're determined to make our survival mean something. My wife is currently shopping for tznius clothes. And I want to put on tefillin."

I gently guided Yitzchak to a chair and poured him a glass of water. With little prompting, I walked him through the bracha of shehakol. I don't know how much of his passion and intensity were remnants from his past, or culled from recent experience, but he was genuine and sincere.

It reminded me of the Rebbe's explanation regarding Noah's teiva. Life presents floods, threatening to drown the person and swallow their world whole. At times like these, they're given the opportunity to hop into the safety of the teiva, following the words of Hashem and His Torah. In the wake of October 7th, when the floods threaten to overthrow our nation completely, Yitzchak, and so many others like him, willingly choose the teiva, clinging to their newfound faith in Hashem.

During the pandemic, we were the only youth group still running. Many schools and after-school programs were shut down, but we never stopped. We turned our activities into volunteer opportunities, and our teenagers helped deliver food to the elderly.

Ilan\* and Avi\* only joined because they were bored and there was, literally, nothing else to do. Despite that, their dedication became very real and genuine. Both live Torah-true lives today, and try to inspire those around them to deepen their connection to Hashem as well.

Ilan texted me recently, asking for tzitzis for his entire unit. Avi called to request a few copies of Chitas, which include the Chumash, Tehillim, and Tanya, for his air force crew.

As the chachamim taught, "mitoch shelo lishma, ba lishma - what starts as insincere becomes sincere."

Once a year, we organize a special camp for the teens who have served our community exceptionally well. We use this as an opportunity to guide these teens closer to Hashem.

Five years ago, we took our group to Thailand. While lounging around the pool one day, Barak\* and I began talking. Barak was distinctive; his many piercings immediately set him apart. Suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, he asked for my opinion on his style.

"Do you like my piercings, Rabbi?" he asked me.

I considered my answer carefully, knowing this was a delicate topic. "I think they're important to you, but they don't need to be. They're certainly not a necessity. I'm sure they affect the way people see you, and that's going to influence the way you act!"

I held my breath, nervous for his reaction. Barak nodded thoughtfully. After a few moments of silence, he started to pull the jewelry from his face. A dozen earrings, nose rings, and eyebrow rings were gathered in his palm. Then, to my surprise, he pulled his arm back and threw the jewelry as far over the fence as he could.

"You're right," he said. "I don't need them in my life!"

I commended him on his clarity and determination to follow through. That moment marked a significant change in Barak's life. He'd learned the quintessential goal of a chassid - to strive for constant self-improvement, and demand truthful introspection from oneself.

That trip was memorable, not only for Barak, but for his friends too. From the seven boys we took to Thailand, six have already committed to a life of Torah and mitzvos.

Whenever I bumped into Erez\*, I made sure to make time to speak with him. I'd known him for years, and was disappointed to learn he'd recently begun dating a non-Jewish girl. I knew maintaining a connection was pivotal.

About a month ago, I ran into Erez on the street. We greeted each other warmly, and caught up on our lives. I noticed he seemed hesitant about something, and I encouraged him to speak his mind.

"I think - I wonder - I'd like to go to the mikvah!" he finally blurted out.

"No problem!" I assured him. "I'll be in touch very soon!"

Later, Erez told me he wanted to put on tefillin. I helped him wrap the leather straps and taught him the brachos. It was powerfully moving, and I was sure Erez was profoundly affected, too. My suspicions were confirmed later that month, when I received a distraught call from him.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

Erez breathed deeply. "I've made a tough decision," he told me. "I've decided to break up with my girlfriend. I don't understand why, but I suddenly felt like I couldn't be with her anymore. I now know I need to marry a Jewish girl!"

We hope to continue growing and serving our community. We're currently fundraising for our own building. Rav Moshe Shilat, director of Chabad youth throughout Israel, has been a huge help in our shlichus! We're dedicated to shaping Netivot's future through its youth, and through them, their families and futures as well.

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