

# IllumiNations

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

*Rabbi Alexander and Leah Namdar,  
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## Swede Success

By Chaya Chazan

**After a year in kollel, my wife and I were eager to oblige the Rebbe's requests for couples to move on shlichus. There were three options open to us, and we wrote to the Rebbe, describing the pros and cons of each.**

Near one of the options, by which I'd written that the local community was antagonistic towards the possibility of having a shliach, the Rebbe penciled in "not appropriate." The Rebbe gave neither his approval nor opposition to the other two options. After discussing it with my teachers, I realized the Rebbe's omission was intentional - clearly, we had to visit both places, as we had a shlichus to complete in both. No matter where we ended up, both places would benefit.

We started with Fort Worth, Texas, since it was more "local" than the other option, Gothenburg, Sweden.

For many reasons, Fort Worth didn't work out for us, so we decided to pay a visit to the community in Sweden.

When we first arrived in Sweden, we were grateful to have a rental we could call home.



Very soon, however, we realized things were BH growing quickly. We had camp counselors staying with us, mountains of boxes of seforim, and kosher tuna filling the living room - which was also being used for classes and events.

It seemed clear that it was time for a Chabad House.

I called my brother, Dani OBM, and asked him to help us out. He agreed. We immediately began looking for a place with enough room to grow with us.

We were soon shown a villa with big windows and a large outdoor area, located in a peaceful part of the city, next to the Botanical Gardens. We wrote to the Rebbe and received a bracha for this new home for our family and Chabad of Sweden.

When we learned of its history years later, we were amazed.

Although Sweden officially remained neutral during World War II, there were many shady government dealings and Nazi sympathizers. Our home was built by a man called Sven Gullin. He was a member of the Svenska Antisemitiska Föreningen (Swedish Anti Semitic Association).

This Nazi organization, with the swastika as its symbol, organized lists of the Jews of Gothenburg, arranged boycotts on Jewish businesses, and spread antisemitic propaganda.

Alongside Sven Gullin in this organization was the infamous Hermann Goering, a German who lived in Gothenburg before the war. He was a leading Nazi figure who was convicted in the Nuremberg trials and committed suicide the night before his hanging.

Peter, a survivor of the camps, told us: "When I was a boy, no Jew would step into this neighborhood, for fear of the anti-Semite who lived in this very house!"

The villa built by a Nazi now houses our Chabad house, as well as our summer and winter camps for shluchim's children.

David\* is a great friend and an integral part of our community. He served as the gabbai, and was dedicated, heart and soul, to making shul happen every week. He's also a kohen and a child Holocaust survivor.

One Shabbos afternoon, we left the shul together. Without knowing what prompted me, I suddenly turned to him and asked him to bless me with Birkas Kohanim.

"What, here in the street?" he asked.

"Why not?"

David shut his eyes in preparation for the blessing. He recited each of the age-old words with fervent sincerity. I thanked him and we wished each other Gut Shabbos.

Many years after this incident, David told me just how much it had impacted his life.

"I walked away after blessing you and sat in the driver's seat of my car. My brain urged me to turn the key in the ignition, but my hands refused to obey. *You just blessed the Rabbi*, I thought to myself. *If I can bless the Rabbi, how can I drive a car on Shabbat?* That was the last time I ever drove to shul."

The guests at our Shabbos table each week are used to our tradition of giving each person around the table a few moments to introduce themselves and share something inspirational. But no one was prepared for Josephine's\* disclosure.

"I did a sin," she began.

Awkward silence.

"It wasn't a small sin. It was a big sin."

Somehow, the room grew even quieter.

I considered changing the subject, but Josephine was determined.

"It wasn't even a sin I did by mistake," she continued. "I KNEW it was a sin, but I did it anyway."

The room was utterly silent.

Josephine took a deep breath and explained, in her Israeli-accented English.

"A few weeks ago, I had some major surgery. When I opened my eyes afterwards, I was still very weak. A nurse started asking me questions, probably to make sure I was fully aware after the anesthesia. *Where are you from?* she asked me.

"I froze. At that time Israel was at war and was under attack in the Swedish media. I really didn't have the strength for any negative comments about Israel. So, instead I said, cheerfully: *I come from France!* After all, I'd studied at the Sorbonne and I speak fluent French. The moment passed.

"I recovered at home for a couple of weeks. Last week, I was starting to feel well enough to leave home. I dressed, and looked at myself in the mirror. Suddenly I felt anger towards my own reflection. *How could you deny your land, your people? Traitor!* That was when I did the sin. I knew it was wrong. But... look."

Josephine slowly raised her sleeve. On her arm was a tattoo, printed in large, clear, blue Hebrew letters: *"Am Yisrael Chai."*

*"Even the sinners amongst Your people are as full of mitzvos as a pomegranate is full of seeds,"* says the Midrash. If these are the sins of Your people, dear G-d... please bring Moshiach now!

When we first moved to Sweden, around the first birthday of our eldest child Berel, he wrote a birthday "letter" to the Rebbe. At the same time, we wrote to the Rebbe about the public menorah we wanted to put up in the center of town.

We merited a beautiful response from the Rebbe:

1. The birthday customs of their son, may he live.
2. Regarding the menorah: *"And there will be from this wondrous fruit, increasing and growing."*

We were struck by the order. Number one was reminding us of the importance of the birthday customs of a one-year-old child. In fact, we'd taken care to make him a birthday farbrengen, gave extra tzedakah, and most of the other customs. But there were two birthday customs we'd omitted: he/we had not read the whole of Tehillim and he/we had not learned a Chassidic discourse by heart!

The Rebbe didn't miss a thing - even the details of how a one-year-old Chassidic child celebrated his birthday. This was a powerful message in education!

Number two was regarding the menorah. This would be the first public menorah in Scandinavia, which was followed by more over the years, BH, impacting many thousands.

Over the years, the lighting of the menorah has become an incredible source of inspiration for the Jews of Gothenburg as hundreds gather on the first night of Chanukah, in the presence of dignitaries, with music, fireworks, Jewish pride, and the eternal flame of Chanukah.

This year, despite the events of October 7, over 600 Jews showed up.

"I couldn't stay away," said one teen. "We need the light this year more than ever before!"

The menorah stood proudly, towering over no less than four demonstrations that took place during Chanukah, a silent symbol of the truth; the eternal connection of the Jewish people with the land of Israel, Torah, and Hashem.

It was one of the first weeks on our shlichus. A local woman had arranged a class in her home and had brought out a member of the Kollel in nearby Denmark to speak some words of Torah.

She invited me to attend.

He spoke about the Holocaust, and he, like some other well-meaning but misguided rabbis, spoke of the six million who were killed as if their deaths were somehow a punishment for not following the path of Torah.

I was shaken to hear these words.

Just a few weeks before, I'd stood in the women's balcony of 770, listening to the Rebbe's sicha on this very topic. The Rebbe - with great emotion - described the six million as holy kedoshim, who died at kiddush Hashem, and whose honor was above reproach. When the Rebbe mentioned those of the opinion that these holy martyrs "deserved" their punishment for a lack of one mitzvah or another, the Rebbe hotly protested this preposterous idea and spoke with great passion.

The Rebbe's words rang in my ears.

I couldn't remain silent.

Apologizing for disagreeing with him, I explained the Rebbe's take on the issue, emphasizing how beloved each of those six million neshamos were to Hashem.

To his credit, the visiting lecturer listened respectfully to the Rebbe's view.

When the conversation ended, Anna\* approached me with tears in her eyes.

"I'm a Holocaust survivor," she told me. "When the visiting rabbi began speaking about the innocent people - including children - that perished in the Holocaust, saying they'd earned this horrifying suffering by their own sins, I decided that if Judaism couldn't value those innocent children, men, and women who died for nothing other than their Jewishness, I couldn't be part of that religion

anymore. I thought - maybe I should just convert to Christianity! When you shared the Rebbe's words, it comforted me. I've decided to remain a Jew."

Many of the members of Gothenburg's small shul were Holocaust survivors. Yankel\* couldn't escape the horrific memories, which seemed to replay themselves before his eyes constantly, giving him no rest. His memories tormented him.

It was post hakafos on Simchas Torah. I'd had my fair share of lechaims and I asked Yankel if he could accompany me home. He probably figured I was asking for my own safety, and he quickly agreed. I was so happy that he'd finally agreed to come!

When we finally made it home and opened the door, we were greeted with the typical Yom Tov meal. As we made kiddush, one of the kids accidentally spilled some wine on the tablecloth. Since the laws of Shabbos preclude dabbling at the stain, my wife simply laid a napkin over the mess, allowing it to soak up on its own.

At the innocuous sight, Yankel paled, and his eyes filled with tears. He pointed a shaking finger at the napkin, slowly changing color as it soaked up the wine.

"Never in my life did I think I'd see this Shabbosdike sight again," he said. "It brings back too many memories! My home, my parents, my family! I'm sorry; I don't think I can stay any longer."

Although we were distressed by Yankel's obvious pain, we couldn't help but marvel at the timelessness of halacha, and the power of its every minutiae.

\*Names changed to protect privacy

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