

# IllumiNations

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

*Rabbi Yitzchak and Rochel Wagner,  
Chabad of Richmond, California*

## Always Aiming Higher

By Chaya Chazan

**Small city shluchim often struggle to find Jews in their area, and each person they discover is a cause for celebration.**

Happily, it works the other way as well! Most Jews in our area were only nominally affiliated with any synagogue or temple. When the High Holidays rolled around, they'd usually go to the bigger temples in nearby San Francisco or Berkeley. When we started hosting events and minyanim, they were amazed that so many Jews lived in their own community!

Locating Jews can be a grueling and, at times, dispiriting quest. It involves a *lot* of door-to-door knocking, and even more rejections, but it's all worth it to finally meet that name who'd remained a question mark on our list for so long. From time to time, we'd bring out bochorim to assist us.

Of course, we advertise on local Facebook groups and in the paper, but I think our mere appearance is the best advertisement at our disposal. I love driving

around on Chanukah, our car menorah proud and conspicuous, closely watching passersby's reactions. Sometimes, I'll catch a certain smile or look that tells me more clearly than anything that the person is Jewish. Every time we go out in public, our large family and my hat, beard, jacket, and tzitzis attract a lot of attention. We've met quite a few members of our community in the grocery aisles on a Friday afternoon, when they'd stop to wish us "Shabbat Shalom!"

We were watching a live community event, where any audience member was welcome to introduce themselves and offer comments. Anytime someone mentioned they were from Richmond, my wife quickly looked them up on social media to see if they had any Jewish affiliation.

She struck gold with Rebecca Fishman\*, whose Facebook posts included many pictures and a detailed description of our public menorah lighting the previous year. We'd had a record turnout, and we weren't able to greet each guest personally. Neither of us had met Rebecca or exchanged contact information. But her post, which pulsed with Jewish pride, and wonder that such events were happening in her backyard, inspired us to reach out and introduce ourselves, opening a whole new world of inspiration.

There's a steep learning curve for new shluchim. Although shlichus was a goal we'd set for ourselves all our lives, when we arrived in Richmond, our newborn son just barely two weeks old, we were woefully unprepared for everything our new lives would throw at us.

It was our very first Pesach on shlichus. Despite advertising, we had no reservations for either seder. I was so excited to receive a call from Michelle\*, but my excitement quickly turned to discomfiture when she explained she wasn't Jewish. She'd always attended Passover seders at her church, but wanted to experience an authentic Jewish seder.

I was caught completely off guard, and stammered out some excuse. Although I didn't deny her outright, Michelle clearly understood my uncertainty, and didn't pursue the issue. With a few more years of shlichus experience under our belts, we've since learned how to successfully deal with a myriad of sticky scenarios.

Scraping together a minyan in an area with a minimal Jewish footprint is always a challenge, even though we know we can't aim for more than once a month. What really tested my mettle as a shliach is this year of kaddish for my father, Rabbi Akiva Wagner AH. As a son, I wanted nothing more than to honor his memory and give his neshama an aliyah by saying kaddish three times a day. As a shliach in an area with so few Jews going to minyan, I knew accomplishing that would take nothing short of a miracle.

I was comforted by the Rebbe's response to shluchim in similar circumstances. The Rebbe explained that helping Yidden do mitzvos brings such great comfort and joy to the neshama - more than can be accomplished through saying kaddish. This assurance, especially knowing I have eight brothers who daven with a minyan thrice daily, fortified my decision to remain in Richmond throughout the difficult year.

I am humbled by the outpouring of support I received, not only from our community, but from my fellow shluchim as well. During the summer months, I was able to make the hour-long drive to San Francisco for a daily minyan. Once my kids started school, it became more complicated. I held a minyan in our shul twice a week, made up half of community members and half shluchim from surrounding areas. Their dedication, whether it was waking up extra early before work, or driving two or three hours out of their way, was deeply touching and appreciated.

I knew Stan\* lived in the community and even had a connection with a nearby shliach, but I'd never met him in person. When he found out I needed a minyan to say kaddish for my father, he committed to join, every time. He's kept this promise, and is now a good friend. Recently, he brought me a pair of tefillin he wanted to get checked. He also told me he was taking on a new hachlata - to say Kriyas Shema on time every morning!



Mitchell\* was another Jew I met only recently. Although married to a non-Jew, attending a regular minyan has greatly enhanced his connection with Yiddishkeit. Mitchell teaches in the local public school, and, on days when we don't meet for minyan, he brings his tallis bag to work with him. He uses an empty classroom to don tallis and tefillin, and joyously sings the words of davening aloud.

"Sometimes, after removing my tallis and tefillin, I forget to take my kippah off!" he confessed. "Some of my students ask me about it, and I'm always so happy I've made that 'mistake.'"

One time, Mitchell asked his mother to join, so she could help him watch his children during davening. His mother grew up on an anti-religious kibbutz, where Judaism wasn't practiced at all. His mother began coming more often, learning about and celebrating various yomim tovim and special occasions.

She visited on Sukkos for the express purpose of shaking the lulav and esrog, something she'd never done before.

"I don't fully understand what's happening," she marveled. "Just a short while ago, I knew next to nothing about Judaism. Now I'm shaking this palm branch!"

I smiled, in awe of the power of "mitzvah goreres mitzvah," one mitzvah leads to another.

Even more brachos from this miraculous minyan are already apparent. The four or five community members who made the effort to attend every minyan worked for various companies in San Francisco or other larger cities. With inflation rising and the economy deteriorating, their jobs were in peril. Some of them were laid off, while others continued working with the threat of joblessness hanging over their heads. They grumbled about it each morning they assembled in our little shul.

In the past few months, each and every one of them has received another job offer, and are doing much better. Jeff\*, who'd been working in limbo for months, was offered a transfer to a closer office with better pay and hours.

"Rabbi, with my new job, I have Saturdays off!" he told me, his face shining. "Now I don't have to work on Shabbos!"

Although we don't often have minyanim, I was excited as I made my way to shul on Simchas Torah. A bunch of people had promised me they'd come, and I was looking forward to celebrating this special yom tov.

I was surprised when the shul remained relatively empty, without many of the people who'd committed to joining us. An Israeli man who came in just then shared the devastating news with us, and I understood why so many had chosen to stay away. We were all heartbroken. The mood in shul was somber and anxious - but it was also Simchas Torah.

"Friends," I called, "let me tell you a Chassidic story. Two righteous brothers, Reb Zushe of Anipoli and Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk, were once imprisoned in a Russian cell. They desperately wanted to daven, but there was a foul-smelling chamber pot in the corner of the cell. They couldn't daven with it in the room.

"My brother," said one tzaddik to the other, 'Hashem is the one who wants us to daven, and Hashem is also the one who put this chamber pot here. This too, is the Will of Hashem! It's not deterring us from doing His Will, but rather, another opportunity to serve Him!' This thought made them both so happy, they began dancing around the chamber pot, singing joyously. A prison guard, hearing the incongruous singing, rushed in to find out what was going on. He was bewildered to find a chamber pot the centerpiece of the rejoicing, but he maliciously removed it, determined to deny his prisoners anything that brought them joy.

"And now, my brother," the tzaddik said, 'We can daven.'

"The lesson we can take from this story is self-evident. Although this news is as disturbing as a foul-smelling chamber pot, it's still Simchas Torah. Although our hearts are breaking, and tears fall from our eyes, our feet must dance around the chamber pot."

The story, and its poignant lesson, struck a chord, and, our hearts in pieces, our eyes streaming, we danced.

My father, Rabbi Akiva Wagner A"H, was a respected Rosh Yeshiva and mashpia. Whenever he farbrenged for his bochurim or for the community, his message was always one of self-improvement. *Spend an extra hour davening; learn an extra shiur; take on another hachlata*, he often said. His directive for shluchim was no different. Living far from a Jewish community makes certain parts of Yiddishkeit more challenging - whether it be the availability of kosher food, minyanim, shiurim, etc. Living like that on a constant basis gets the shliach used to the status quo.

My father demanded the opposite - whenever a shliach is in a Jewish community, they must hold themselves to a higher standard. Yes, at home, they may daven alone, but when a minyan is available, they must make every effort to take part. Yes, they may rely on certain leniencies in kashrus when they have nothing else available, but when there's a kosher grocery nearby, only the most stringent hechsherim can pass muster. Of course, a shliach can never do *anything* against halacha, but the mesiras nefesh shlichus requires can never become a shliach's norm.

My father's life in chinuch was his shlichus, but he kvelled with nachas when we opened our own Chabad house. He loved visiting, his eyes lighting up with pleasure when he spoke with our community members. He guided me to always follow halacha to the letter, gently pointing out where I could improve. It's a legacy I do my best to emulate, and will, for the rest of my life.

\*Names changed to protect privacy

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