

IllumiNations

Issue 107 | Parshas Mishpatim 5784
Rosh Chodesh Adar 1

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 Benny and Sonia Hershcovich, Chabad of Los Cabos, Cabo San Lucas, Mexico

Sunlit Shores & Sacred Spaces

By Chaya Chazan

My wife and I had very different upbringings: I grew up in Montreal's huge Jewish community, with all the conveniences of chinuch, kosher food, and Judaica just blocks away.

She grew up on shlichus in Milan, Italy, and witnessed firsthand how difficult it was for her classmates, even as young as ten years old, to live away from home for the sake of chinuch. What united us was our desire to go on shlichus and bring the light of Torah to a new part of the world.

Los Cabos was just a sleepy little Mexican fishing village until some Hollywood bigwigs realized the potential gold mine hidden in its pristine beaches and easy distance from Los Angeles. Within a very short while, Cabo exploded into a popular tourist resort and summer home for the rich and famous.

It was the last week of December, when Cabo was at its peak. The table was full of guests, many of whom stayed to farbreng late into the night. On Sunday, we took a tour of the city. They showed us a list of community members, which was impressively long. We were told there were thirty children in the community, the perfect size to start a school - a fact which particularly excited my wife, for whom chinuch was the utmost priority. Feverish construction was happening on every

corner. Cabo seemed to be on an upwards trajectory in every respect, and we'd be foolish not to grab this golden opportunity!

Three months later, one-way tickets in hand, we boarded our flight to Mexico. Reality set in very quickly. Of the large crowd around the Shabbos table, less than half were halachically Jewish. Only four of the reported thirty children were halachically Jewish, and our dreams of a school in which our own children could thrive faded away. It didn't help that we moved at the height of the recession, and all the pledges we'd been promised by wealthy Americans were hastily withdrawn. Had we known any of this in advance, or been experienced enough to ask the right questions, we'd probably never have come. Our naivete turned out to be a bracha that allowed Chabad of Cabo to begin.

Finances were extremely tight in the early years of our shlichus. We were, quite literally, counting pennies. We survived on hope, knowing the Rebbe promised to look after and take care of his shluchim.

That Chanukah sticks out in my mind. We couldn't afford gas, so we each carried as many menorahs as we could in our arms, and walked to the city square. We had a menorah set up there, and put on as good of an event as we could. Even the mayor couldn't be bothered to show up personally; he sent a representative.

"Rabbi, guess who was at your event last night?" one of my community members asked me the next morning.

I quickly ran through a mental list of everyone who'd been there. No one in particular stood out.

"Do you remember Mr. S., who came to Cabo last Yom Kippur?"

"Yes, of course!" I answered.

"He was there last night! You may not know this, but he's a famous scientist and inventor. I met him just now at the club, and he told me how impressed he's been with your organization, last Yom Kippur, as well as last night. He wants to invest in your future! He's wiring you a donation right now to show you he's serious, and he wants you to start looking for a property!"

I was speechless. I hung up the phone and burst into tears. Baruch Hashem, the Rebbe's promise had been fulfilled.

We now have a beautiful Jewish center that houses our shul, hospitality suites, mikvah, and restaurant. Sometimes, we still pinch ourselves out of disbelief that everything worked out so well!

Tishrei is the busiest time of year for Jewish people all around the world, but September is the quietest season in Cabo. The summer vacationers have all flown home, and the winter birds haven't yet arrived. For years, we barely had a minyan for the Yomim Noraim. As our kids grew older, the situation became even more dismal. I remember Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as a child vividly, and I was heartbroken that the somber, awe-inspiring atmosphere I'd grown up with would be replaced with such a poor version.

One year, when we had a young man living in Cabo temporarily, I felt it only fair to warn him. It was the first night of selichos, and, of course, no one was there besides us two. We recited selichos, and sat down to farbreng.

"Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur won't be what you're expecting," I warned him. "Honestly, they're my least enjoyable yomim tovim. Not only is it downright depressing to daven these holy tefillos without a minyan, since barely anyone is in town, it's also a tough month financially. I'd love to pay for nine guys to fly here and be my minyan, but I simply can't afford to."

My young companion was more sanguine than me. "Why not post on social media and see what happens?" he suggested.

The fact that I listened to his suggestion had more to do with the l'chaims I'd imbibed than the sense in his words, but, when I woke up the next morning, I saw that almost \$3,000 had been donated overnight! It was humbling and touching to see that many of the donations had been made by shluchim in small towns, who understood my plight only too well.

A few days later, I had enough to fly out my own minyan! All I had to do was find eight willing bochorim. That proved a bit harder than I thought it'd be, but, baruch Hashem, I found my minyan. I was ecstatic. It felt like



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I was finally receiving my reward for the years of minyan-less Rosh Hashanahs I'd endured.

A few days before Rosh Hashanah, I received word that Lena*, an eccentric old lady, was in the hospital. She was Israeli, but her walls were covered with pictures and statues from other religions, with just a small Magen David in the corner to pay homage to her heritage. I knew she wasn't invested in her Yiddishkeit, but the news that she wanted to be cremated struck me to my core.

I immediately rushed to the hospital to talk with her. She was under a lot of medication, and even opening her eyes seemed to be a laborious ordeal. I pleaded my case as best as I could, but she fought to open her eyes, stared at me, and stated, "I am a Buddhist, and I'm going to be cremated." Each time she said it, it felt like a stab to my heart. I tried talking to her husband, but he just said he wanted to honor her wishes.

Knowing I'd done my absolute best, I left the hospital and continued preparing for yom tov. Lena asked to be returned home for her final hours, so I visited her at home the next day, and blew shofar with more kavanah than I'd ever had before. I received news of her passing on motzei Shabbos.

"I decided to bury her, by the way," her husband told me. "The funeral is tomorrow at 10:00."

Better, but still not quite there. Lena would need to be buried in a Jewish section of cemetery, and her body had to be prepared according to halacha. Lena's non-Jewish, Mexican husband wasn't too interested in the specifics. I quickly called my mother, a member of the chevrah kadisha in Montreal.

"Ma, I know it's erev Rosh Hashanah, but how crazy would it be for you to take a 6 AM flight tomorrow morning to Cabo for a meis mitzvah?" It was crazy. My mother was 70 years old at the time, and had her set place in shul during Tishrei for over 30 years!

Twenty minutes later, my mother called back. "Book the flight," she said.

I called Lena's husband again. "I know you wanted the funeral at 10 tomorrow morning, but I have a special burial specialist flying in from Montreal. She'll be here at 12. Can you possibly push the funeral off for a few hours?"

I took some convincing, but he finally agreed.

My mother rushed to the airport a few hours later, only to have her flight delayed. The bochurim I'd flown down got "Tehillim duty," taking turns watching Lena's body.

The weather was at once humid and rainy, it was erev Rosh Hashanah, and everyone was losing patience. The second my mother's plane landed, I rushed her to the funeral home. I'm not sure if my car tires touched the ground! She performed the taharah, and we were finally able to bury Lena. We got back home twenty minutes before Rosh Hashanah, filthy, muddy, and drenched in sweat and rain. My kapoteh was ripped from the nails and wood I'd brushed against, and none of us had time to shower or change!

That night at our yom tov seuda, as I farbrenge with the bochurim, it hit me. "You aren't here because I *deserved* a minyan for my years of mesiras nefesh!" I told them. "The Rebbe sent you here because a Jewish woman who thought she was a Buddhist needed a kevaras Yisroel! I'm not the center of the universe - I'm just a cog in Hashem's master plan!"

I was walking down the street one day, when a French-accented voice hailed me.

"Pardon moi. You are a rabbi, yes?" The question came from a young man, Rodney*. He was tall and slender, with an earnest look on his face, and an intense gaze.

"Yes, how can I help you?" I answered politely.

"Why can't Jews marry non-Jews?" he asked.

We stood on the side of the road, talking together for the next hour and a half. Of course, Rodney's innocent question hid a wealth of confusion and introspection. I invited him to join us in shul, and Rodney took me up on the offer. As I suspected, he had a non-Jewish girlfriend with whom he was loath to break up.

We began learning together regularly, and I was impressed with Rodney's sincerity and drive. He thought deeply about everything, and came back to the next class with a long list of questions.

He was a sweet guy, so although he understood *why* he had to break up with his girlfriend, he couldn't bring himself to actually do it. After a couple of years, he was ready to move to Eretz Yisroel, and begin a Torah-true life there - with his non-Jewish girlfriend accompanying him. At one point, she ran into visa issues and had to return to Mexico. He finally worked up the courage to tell her to stay there. He now leads a Torah-true life in Eretz Yisrael with his wife and beautiful family.

Like the famous story of Hillel and Shammai, so much positivity came from a conversation we had "while standing on one foot."

Meidad* was a firebrand! A Canadian youth who temporarily made his home in Cabo, we became quick friends, sharing our experiences growing up in Montreal. He was extremely passionate, and threw himself, heart and soul, into every project he was involved in. This not only applied to business, but to his relationships as well. He met another young Israeli who was suffering from a drug addiction. Meidad took him under his wing, and cared for him like a brother. He was very protective and hardly let him out of his sight!

One day, he came into the Chabad house, looking very upset. He told me his friend had just suffered a relapse, and Meidad was taking it very hard. I'd just received an order of two pairs of tefillin - a rare occurrence for us - and I immediately offered one to Meidad.

He stretched out his hands, shaking with emotion.

"Rabbi, you got these for me?"

"Of course, Meidad! These tefillin are yours!"

Meidad clutched the tefillin close to his chest and burst into loud sobs. He wrapped them around his arms, thanking me over and over, and promising he'd take good care of them.

Meidad was one of the unfortunate victims in the horrific October 7th attack. When terrorists stormed the music festival, Meidad stood in the doorway, fighting them off one by one. Although suffering from multiple gunshot wounds, when the terrorists lobbed a grenade into the room, Meidad didn't hesitate to jump on top of it. He gave his life to protect his brothers and sisters. May his memory be a blessing.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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