

# IllumiNations

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*Rabbi Dov and Racheli Muchnik, Chabad of Oxnard, California*

## Waxing Philosophical in the Grocery Store

By Chaya Chazan

**Many people are familiar with my father, the famous Chabad artist, Michael Muchnik. While I didn't inherit his talent, the legacy of his passion for Yiddishkeit and Chassidus still shape my life to this day.**

Growing up in Crown Heights, I was zoche to see the Rebbe often. I sat on the floor by the Rebbe's table at many farbrengens, and davened with the Rebbe's minyan. The Hayom Yom describes the great impact seeing or hearing a tzaddik has on a person, and each of those encounters were indelibly impressed upon my young mind.

My wife's family learned about Chabad through Rabbi Amitai Yemini, a shliach in Los Angeles, when she was a young girl. They made a point to visit the Rebbe at least once a year, for Yud Shevat, the anniversary of the Rebbe's leadership, so she, too, was strongly influenced by the Rebbe.

Since she already had Californian connections, when we were ready to move on shlichus, we met with Rabbi Shlomo Cunin, the head shliach of California, and began searching for a shlichus spot. Hashem soon led us to

beautiful, oceanside Oxnard, where we've been igniting Yiddishkeit for the last twenty years.

Before officially accepting the position, we went to the Ohel to get the Rebbe's bracha. Rabbi Cunin encouraged us to stay and watch the screen in the visitors' center, which plays non-stop videos of the Rebbe. When we sat down to watch it, the Rebbe was speaking about the importance of consulting with a mashpia, so, of course, we consulted with our mashpia to make sure moving to Oxnard was the right step for us. We also wrote a letter and placed it in the *Igros*, a collection of the Rebbe's letters. The Rebbe's letter spoke about bringing light to the farthest, darkest places. It was the perfect assurance that we were on Hashem's intended path.

We were very excited for our first Purim on shlichus. Using our carefully compiled lists of Jewish families, we sent out fliers about our party, and planned every detail. It was also the Chanukas Habayis for our home/Chabad house, so our expectations were high.

Three people came.

My wife and I were bitterly disappointed. There were many times since we'd first moved that our house was filled with minyan goers, but they were mainly frum visitors on vacation. We wanted our home filled with people who wouldn't be attending a minyan otherwise; people who we could teach about the beauty of Yiddishkeit.

Disillusioned, we turned to Rabbi Avraham Levitansky A"H, renowned shliach in S. Monica, and my personal mentor. We told him about our frustrations, and how we weren't reaching the crowd we were meant to affect.

"Three people means three precious neshamos learned about Purim and did the mitzvos. These are incalculable treasures! Shlichus is about affecting individuals, not about large crowds," Rabbi Levitansky counseled us. "Re-

member, kol hascholos kashos - all beginnings are difficult. Don't measure success in terms of numbers!

"Secondly, why do you feel that catering for the already-frum crowd is a distraction from your mission? Shlichus means to care for every Jew - no matter what labels they have slapped on them. You'll see how, in the end, it enhances your shlichus!"

Rabbi Levitansky's wise words were a paradigm shift for us. Time has only proven how right he was. We made an effort to accommodate frum visitors to Oxnard, and eventually, many shomer Shabbos families bought homes in the area. They are now our strongest supporters, enabling us to do our work.

Iris's\* three children were attending public school. When they started to become more interested in Yiddishkeit, I encouraged them to give their children the gift of a Jewish education. It was very difficult, but I finally managed to convince her to enroll her children in a Jewish school. It was 45 minutes away, and the tuition was steep, but we impressed the importance of Jewish education on her, and she was willing to make the commitment.

A few years later, the school closed. The impact it had made on Iris's family, and many more like them, was too important to forgo. The same day the school announced their closing, we immediately let everyone know we were happy to meet the demand by opening our own school. Thus, Lamplighters Jewish Academy was born.

We had 18 students in the first year of our one-room, multi-aged schoolhouse, including Iris's children.

Now, in our tenth year, we have 60 students from grades 1-12. We recently bought and renovated a new building overlooking the Channel Islands Harbor, whose beauty enhances our students' robust Judaic and secular education.

I was on my way home when my wife called and asked me to pick up some diapers. It was a part of the city I wasn't fully familiar with, but, spotting a Ralphs nearby, I maneuvered into the parking lot.

I found the diapers and joined the checkout line. The woman behind me caught my attention when she asked, "Are there Jews in Oxnard?"

"You're looking at one!" I answered, laughing. "Hi, my name is Rabbi Dov Muchnik. Are you Jewish?"

"I used to be," she admitted. "My mother and father were both Jewish, but I converted to Christianity a while ago."

"A Jew is a Jew," I insisted. "You were born a Jew, and nothing you do can change that fact. You will always be welcome at Chabad of Oxnard!"

"Thanks, but I'm happy at my church," she declined.

It was strange to wax philosophical on a grocery checkout line, but I couldn't let an opportunity to reach this precious neshama slip away.



"We both believe in G-d, and that He created the world in seven days," I said. "What unites us is stronger than what divides us. If you change your mind, we'd be happy to welcome you for any program, event, Shabbat dinner, or just for a visit."

I reached out to her afterwards, but she politely declined all invitations. "You have your beliefs, and I have mine," she maintained.

Some time later, we sent out a flier to everyone on our list, advertising a new series of ten classes, each on one of the Rebbe's ten mitzvoyim. The flier clearly laid out all ten, and urged everyone to join the weekly class.

The final class was on the Rebbe's strongest push - mitvza Moshiach. To my surprise, Harriet\* joined - the woman from Ralphs. She listened attentively to the lecture, and took avid notes.

During the class, I emphasized how our belief in techiyas hameisim, the revival of the dead that will take place when Moshiach comes, affects the laws of Jewish burial. Harriet sat quietly, her face betraying nothing of her inner feelings.

I expected to see Harriet again, but I didn't hear from her for a long time. Months later, I found out she was gravely ill. I went to visit her, but she'd already deteriorated past being able to talk.

A short while later, her husband called to inform me of her passing. I offered him my sincerest condolences, but he had another reason for the call.

"Before she passed," he told me, "Harriet told me that she was born a Jew, and would die as a Jew. She asked me to call a rabbi and arrange a Jewish burial for her."

I was able to fulfill Harriet's last request. The women of the chevra kadisha in Los Angeles who performed her taharah were unaware of her background, but they shared how deeply they felt the purity of this neshama's final journey to her Father.

There was an eating disorder rehabilitation center in Oxnard, and whenever they had a Jewish patient, they'd ask me to assist with kosher food, and, sometimes, counseling.

One time, I was asked to assist Joey\*, who'd recently checked in. I helped him with tefillin, kosher food, and visited him often to chat.

One day, Joey called me. "It's my father's yahrzeit in two days. Can you help me arrange a minyan for kaddish?" he asked.

"Regretfully, we don't hold daily minyanim in Oxnard," I answered. "But Agoura Hills is close by, and they'll have a minyan."

"I'm not allowed to leave the rehab center," Joey said, in a low voice. "I can't go to shul in Agoura."

I tried suggesting that he apply for special permission, or, failing that, to give me his father's name so I could recite kaddish on his behalf.

"No," Joey insisted. "I've never missed a year, and I'm not about to now. Can you bring a minyan here?"

"I'm afraid it's just not possible. To be honest, we have a hard enough time getting a minyan on Shabbos - and that's with all the weekend visitors in town! I won't be able to find another eight men on a weekday morning. I'm so sorry. Let's try to find another way."

I felt bad, but there was little I could do. Figuring he'd either apply for permission, or find someone to say kaddish on his behalf, I put it out of my mind.

The next evening, I was at home with my family, when I got a call.

"Hi, Rabbi Muchnik? I'm here in Oxnard with a group of bochurim, and we were wondering if you had a minyan for Maariv."

I was dumbfounded. "How many are in your group?" I asked.

"Eight."

Tears welled up in my eyes. "Yes - yes, we can have a minyan tonight, but the location may be a little strange."

I got permission for Joey to join us just outside the rehab center, and listened with great emotion as Joey recited kaddish with his miracle minyan. It was a clear night in the middle of the month, so we were also able to recite kiddush levana - and Joey got to say an extra kaddish at the end of the tefillah.

"Joey," I said in awe, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. "Do you realize what a miracle this is?"

"I really wanted a minyan," Joey said, shrugging. "I knew Hashem would make it happen."

I have a treasured pair of tefillin, written with extra care, that are small enough to fit in a shoulder satchel. Even when I'm traveling no further than from my home to the Chabad house, I make sure to take the tefillin with me. I've learned that you never know when you'll meet a Jew.

It was just moments before sunset, and I was running late. I decided to cut through a different route to get home more quickly. It took me past a non-kosher restaurant owned by a Jew. I saw the owner standing outside, and offered him a chance to put on tefillin in the last few moments of sunlight.

"I'm not even meant to be here right now," he told me. "I'm actually running late."

"Me too!" I answered. "This is what we call hashgacha pratit. I'm not meant to be here either, and I'm also running late. Hashem clearly wanted us to meet so you could put on tefillin today."

In addition to my role as rabbi and shliach, I serve as chaplain for two local police forces, as well as the nearby Navy base. I also often visit prisons, hospitals, and rehabilitation homes.

Because of the friendships I've built with the police over the years, our Chabad house is always amply protected by police presence.

One morning, I saw a squad car parked outside, so I went over to say hi. It was an officer I'd never met before named Sheylan Flannery. His name, red hair, and genial face proclaimed him to be of Irish-Catholic descent, which he admitted to with a grin.

"My father is Irish alright, but my mother is Jewish," he told me.

"That means you're Jewish, too!" I told him. "Come inside and let me show you around our Jewish center!"

Officer Flannery followed me into the Chabad house, and I explained its basic functions. I offered him a chance to put on tefillin, and we celebrated his bar mitzvah right there in the shul - minus donuts, unfortunately.

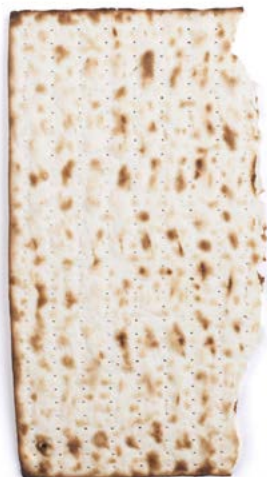
*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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