

IllumiNations

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

Rabbi Avremi and Chaya Raskin, Chabad of Southern Vermont, Brattleboro, VT

Maple Syrup Meets Mitzvah Mania

By Chaya Chazan

Shlichus is in my blood. My grandparents were some of the first shlichim sent out by the Rebbe. My father grew up on shlichus in Morocco, and after he married, my parents moved to Burlington, Vermont to begin their own shlichus.

I was born and raised on shlichus. Even after leaving home for yeshiva, I was constantly surrounded by talk of shlichus, and felt inspired to continue my family's legacy. My wife, although Brooklyn born-and-raised, felt the same.

My parents have been on shlichus in Burlington for over 40 years. More recently, they were joined by my sister and brother-in-law, who took on the local college campus, but there was no one to serve Jews in the less populated regions of Southern Vermont. Now, another sister and brother-in-law have joined the crew, and there are many more shlichim throughout the state.

I spent two summers traveling between all these rural areas as a bochur on Merkos shlichus, meeting many precious neshamos without access to any Jewish resources. At that time, there weren't any Chabad houses at all in the lower half of the state. We had the opportunity to start from scratch, and build up a community of individuals with little to no Jewish connection.

Brattleboro is tucked into the southeast corner of Vermont, so we're very close to both New Hampshire and Massachu-

setts. We regularly host guests from all three states at our events.

The Jews we met were excited to hear we'd be opening a Chabad house. Baruch Hashem, in the last twelve years, we've built a flourishing community, despite the widespread population.

It took years to build stability and get to a place where weekly minyanim happened more often than not, and shiurim were filled with inquisitive minds.

On Purim of 2020, rumors about Covid were swirling wildly, but no mandates had been imposed yet. We had the largest party we've ever had, with record attendance.

In a place like Brattleboro, which is isolated at the best of times, lockdown was absolute. Of course, we did our best to continue all our programs virtually, but it felt as though we'd lost all the impetus we'd gained.

It took many months for people to feel safe enough to gather once again, and even then, our numbers were nothing like they'd been pre-pandemic. Used to the convenience and comfort of doing everything from home, people no longer felt the pressure to show up in person.

However, Covid also helped us reach people in a whole new way. Most of our community is scattered throughout a wide radius. Attending a shiur means driving 45 minutes each way! With the soaring popularity of Zoom and online shiurim, they were able to attend many more Torah classes than before.

Claudia* accused me of watering down Torah.

"Why doesn't Chabad take a more active political stance against modern breaches of morals?" she challenged. "If it's against the Torah, declare it!"

"Chabad's path is to draw people closer with love and warmth," I explained. "We can teach more with love than we can with criticism."

Claudia wasn't satisfied. "That's a cop-out answer!" she retorted. "You're giving us a watered-down version of Torah!"

"Why don't you join our Torah class this week?" I suggested. "The topic is on living ethically and morally, and how the Torah defines those terms. We don't shy away from anything the Torah asks of us - we just choose to do it in a kind, welcoming way."

Claudia joined our class, and admitted that it led to many thought-provoking discussions on the ethos and pathos of life.

Jake's* transformation happened so gradually, I don't think either of us realized it was happening. He was a young teen when he started attending weekly shiurim. Torah resonated deeply within him, and his life began to change, in night-imperceptible but steady increments.

After a couple of years, he asked me to help him transfer to a yeshiva.

Yanky, as he is now called, adapted wonderfully to his new environment. He's now learning in Ohr Sameach, and is planning to apply to Mir yeshiva. Our last discussion was about how to maintain consistent learning times, even after getting married and starting a family.

Ariel* was Israeli, but his interest in Yiddishkeit was minimal. He married a non-Jewish woman, and visited only seldomly.

We completely lost touch after Ariel's wife asked about converting, and I told her it would require a major lifestyle change - moving to a larger Jewish community, committing fully to Torah and mitzvos, etc. She was miffed by my denial, and our relationship significantly cooled after that. After I asked Ariel to shake lulav and esrog one Sukkos, he reacted angrily and broke off contact altogether.

A few months ago, I signed my kids up for skiing lessons at a nearby resort. To my surprise, I found out Ariel was the owner of the resort! Now, we see each other every week. Ariel will often comment things like, "Remember that Shabbat dinner we had at your house?"



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We've restarted a cordial relationship, where we exchange pleasantries every week. I hope these little meetings will give Ariel more positive memories about Yiddishkeit - the most important foundation of all.

Vermont, the home of Bernie Sanders and Ben and Jerry's, is "true blue." Many of our community members are proud of their liberal leanings, and consider themselves social justice warriors. The overwhelming majority included heavy criticism of Israel as part of their narrative.

October 7th cut such a deep, gaping chasm into the essence of our people, it "woke up" the neshamos of our "woke" community.

A few weeks ago, a delegation from our community visited Israel to offer their support and assistance. When they returned, we hosted a Shabbos dinner, where they each spoke about their experiences. It was incredible to see how moved everyone was, and how the warm Yiddishe neshama overcame prejudices years old.

Kyle*, a lifelong Democrat, told me how betrayed he felt by people he'd considered his closest allies.

It was Shabbos morning, and Kyle was the tenth man for our minyan. We were just about to start kriyas haTorah, when Kyle folded up his tallis, and prepared to leave.

"Kyle, where are you going? We're about to read the Torah!" I asked him.

"Sorry, Rabbi! I gotta run," he apologized. "There's a pro-Palestinian protest downtown, and I need to be there to counter protest!"

"I wouldn't attend such events," I warned him.

"You and I do things differently," Kyle said, laughing off my warning.

I begged him to stay a couple more minutes, until someone else came, so we could still have a minyan for kriyah. As soon as he could, Kyle took off.

He returned a few hours later, shaken and ashen-faced.

"It's the first time in my life I've ever been aware of what it means to be Jewish," he said, emotionally. "I've never experienced such hatred and vitriol! But they can't scare me off! I've never been prouder to be Jewish!"

I was in the post office a few days before Pesach, mailing a package of matzah to someone who lived too far to drive. I saw a man in line behind me eyeing me suspiciously, and he soon approached me.

"Have you ever seen the series *Unorthodox*?" he asked, a malicious glint in his eye.

I hadn't seen it personally, but the scandalous tell-all film of a woman who rejected her Satmar upbringing was being widely discussed in many circles.

"I'm familiar with it," I admitted.

"I love that show," he said. "It highlights all the reasons I hate Orthodox Jews!"

Instead of taking offense, or descending into a fruitless argument, I asked him his name.

"Larry*," he answered, still suspicious.

"Larry, it's almost Passover. Do you have matzah? If not, please follow me to our synagogue, and I'll gladly give you a package."

Larry agreed, and took a box of matzah home. Since then, he's become one of our most active members and good friends! You don't need to chase away darkness. You just need to add some light.

I was asked to officiate at the funeral of Ethel*, an elderly woman who'd passed away. She was survived by her Holocaust-survivor husband, Misha*, and her children.

When I went to be menachem avel the family later that week, I asked Misha if he wanted to put on tefillin in honor of his wife. Misha agreed, and I helped him wrap the shiny leather straps around his wizened arm.

As he repeated the age-old words of Shema after me, Misha broke down in tears.

"You want to know why I'm crying?" he asked, once he'd calmed down a bit. "I was a young boy in Chernovitz, eagerly awaiting my bar mitzvah. Just a month before I turned 13, all the Jews of our town were herded into the Ghetto. They rounded up a large group of men, my father included. That was the last time I ever saw him. Obviously, my bar mitzvah never took place. This is my first time wearing tefillin."

An orphan from Ukraine celebrated his bar mitzvah 75 years later, in rural Vermont.

Now, as a spry 95-years-young gentleman, he comes to shul often. He shares warm memories from his childhood, and infects everyone with his joie de vivre.

I was awakened by the phone's ring in the middle of the night.

"My husband is dying," the woman on the phone tearfully explained. "Can you please come now?"

I rushed to the hospital and sat at his bedside, reciting Tehilim. He passed away a short time later, his neshama accompanied on its homeward journey by my whispered prayers.

His wife wanted to bury him locally, but I tried to convince her to hold the funeral in a Jewish cemetery. Somehow, the meis had a connection with Rabbi Yanky Meyer AH, the founder of

Misaskim, and I soon found myself on a three-way conference with the venerated leader and another rabbi, trying desperately to arrange a kevarah.

"You know this man wasn't frum," the other caller commented. "Rabbi Meyer, will you really let him be buried in your cemetery?"

"He was born a Yid, and died a Yid," Rabbi Meyer declared. "I don't care what happened in between! Of course he's welcome - in any Jewish cemetery!"

Our house was entirely too small for us, but we had nowhere to go. During Covid, a friend mentioned they were selling their three-acre property since the lockdown had severely affected the Airbnb for which it was used.

"Maybe we'll buy it," I jokingly said.

Then I thought, *Well, why not?*

Although we knew Covid had hit everyone hard in the pockets, we held a fundraiser for the down payment. It was an absolute miracle that we accomplished our goal. Everyone gave, and everyone gave more than they could afford. We were humbled by the wide support so freely given.

We now have a big, beautiful property that more than amply fills our needs. The highlight is the barn, and the goats, sheep, and chickens that fill it. It's a great icebreaker, and we've had people get more comfortable in shul simply because they loved visiting the goats so much.

One day, we hope to renovate the barn into a functional shul, but for now, we enjoy the benefits of our animal neighbors.

Technically, the animals belong to Mitch*, who lives on the adjoining property. Mitch admitted that he knew nothing about Judaism. He'd been kicked out of Hebrew school as a kid, and never extended his education beyond that. However, now that he's our neighbor, he's gaining lots of hands-on experience! Anytime we're short for a minyan, we run right over and ask him to join. He helps me build sukkahs, menorahs, and anything else I need. He even agrees to put on tefillin every now and then! Not bad for a Hebrew school dropout!

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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