

IllumiNations

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

Rabbi Mendy and Mazal Sternbach, Chabad of Lagos, Nigeria

Nigerian Princes of Torah

By Chaya Chazan

I grew up in the sheltered Jewish enclave of Crown Heights. Of course, as a Lubavitcher, I constantly heard about shlichus, but it felt too monumental for someone like me, who didn't grow up with it.

I confessed these feelings of inadequacy to my mashpia in yeshiva. He showed me a sicha where the Rebbe explains that every Jew can – and should – be a shliach. *If you know Alef, teach Alef.* It opened my mind to a world of possibilities, and I began to view shlichus as a personal life goal.

As a bochur, I helped Rabbi Uzan, the shliach in Abuja, Nigeria, for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He served the Jewish needs of the entire country, so he sent me to Lagos for Tishrei. My wife also worked for Rabbi Uzan, helping him run programs. A couple years later, he served as our shadchan. So while most couples would be taken aback at the mere suggestion of going on shlichus to Africa, for us, it was familiar.

Lagos is the largest city in Africa, and is home to hundreds of Jews. Most of these are Israeli Jews, who moved here for business purposes in the early 80's. An Israeli energy company brought so many employees down to Nigeria that they even opened a school for all the workers' children! Unfortunately, it was very "every man for themselves." Those who were familiar with the traditions kept them. There was no rabbi or com-

munity leader reaching out to teach those ignorant of Yiddishkeit about its rich heritage.

Baruch Hashem, that ended a few years ago, when we opened the second Chabad house in Nigeria.

It was a very stressful time. After visiting Lagos a few times, we'd finally decided to move there permanently. My wife had just recently had a baby, and was still recovering when we packed everything we owned into the trunk and headed for the airport.

As we drove, troubling thoughts persisted in my mind. *How will we manage customs with all these suitcases? Nigeria has some seriously strict immigration and customs laws! We'll for sure be stopped - and we have a newborn on top of all of that... And even once we clear customs, we'll be operating a Chabad house from someone else's home, living out of boxes for who knows how long! Maybe this was the wrong decision... Maybe we should've waited a few months, until things were more settled.*

As these doubts gnawed at my mind, I composed a mental letter to the Rebbe, laying out all the challenges with which we'd soon be faced.

Moments before we arrived at the airport, I pulled up the Igros app on my phone, which randomly selects a letter for you. In amazement, I read the Rebbe's words: *I'm sure you know about our work for Jewish youth in Africa...*

"Everything will work out just fine," I assured my wife, a huge smile on my face.

My wife and I freely identify ourselves as major opportunists. Whenever there's a chance to introduce Yiddishkeit to the community, we jump on it immediately. Whenever there are school holidays, even if it's just for a couple of days, we organize a camp, so we can give the children a thrilling taste of Yiddishkeit tailored just for them.

During one of these camps, we took the children on a boating trip. Knowing how the speeding winds would make short work of the yarmulkes perched unfamiliarly on the boys' heads, my wife advised they all wear a snug baseball cap to keep their yarmulkes secure.

Amir* didn't have a baseball cap.

"Put your kippah in your pocket while we're on the boat," my wife recommended.

Amir looked hesitant. "Does Rabbi Mendy do that when he's on a boat?" he asked.

My wife chuckled and admitted that I didn't.

"Well, then I won't either!" Amir declared, marching proudly onto the boat, his hand holding his yarmulke securely in place.

One mitzvah always leads to another, and Amir's dedication to Yiddishkeit was mirrored by his family. They asked us to help them keep a kosher Pesach - a request which completely blew us away! While groceries here carry some kosher products, keeping kosher is a challenge on the best of days - let alone for the week of Pesach!

They were all in, and were determined to kasher their kitchen. To make it easier on them, we ordered a variety of kosher lepesach products from Israel.

The entire story underlined the importance of every positive Jewish encounter, and the power we hold as dugma chayos - living examples of a Torah-true life.

While Nigeria's largest export is petroleum oil, there often isn't enough left locally to fill the demands of its home population. Electricity is reliably unstable, and we depend on backup diesel generators to carry us through outages.

It was a Friday afternoon, just after we got married. We were expecting a number of guests for the Friday night seuda, and I was busy preparing. Every shlucha knows that the real draw for Shabbos guests is not the gefilte fish or chicken, but the fresh, homemade challah. I mixed a large batch of dough, recited the bracha, and shaped my loaves. I was just about to slide them into the oven, when the lights died, and the steady hum of electricity quietened.

There was little I could do. By the time the electricity came back on, my challah had deflated entirely, and I



had to throw it all out. I quickly kneaded together another batch, and set them to rise. They hadn't been in the oven for more than one minute, when, again, the electricity failed.

Almost in tears, I called my husband. "What should I do? We need challah for Shabbos, but I can't keep throwing out batch after batch!"

My husband assured me that everything would be okay. He quickly called a friend who had a gas oven, confirmed it hadn't been used in a while, and asked his permission to kasher it. Then he took the *third* batch of dough of the day, and brought it to the newly kashered oven. Unfortunately, the oven malfunctioned, and instead of golden, fluffy challoos, we ended up with a strange cross between matzah and challah.

Our guests enjoyed it anyhow, and we bonded over stories just like those - life's little bumps in the road, to which we can all relate.

In Israel, where most of our community is from, the lines between political demographics feel immutable. However, far from home and all that's familiar, they naturally gravitate towards each other and soon come to realize that despite their differences of opinion, they have more in common than they supposed.

Roni* made it no secret that when we first came to town, he went out of his way to avoid me.

"If I saw Rabbi Mendy coming, I'd run the other way!" he told everyone.

But soon, Roni saw that the black hat and jacket weren't quite as scary as he imagined, and he formed a tentative relationship with us. As time went on, that friendship grew stronger.

After we officially moved to Nigeria on a permanent basis, we had some trouble finding proper housing. For a while, we moved from place to place, under the constant threat of sudden homelessness.

Roni approached me one day, a serious look on his face. "Rabbi, I know you're having a hard time finding a house. I myself have a small two-bedroom apartment for my family. If you ever need it, consider it yours! My kids will join me and my wife in one bedroom, and your family can take the other. Just know you're my brother, and I'll never let you end up on the street!"

Roni's offer moved me to tears. The man who'd once run in the other direction when he saw me was now ready to share the little he had to offer - because we were brothers.

Sukkos is a week-long opportunity for continual mitzvos. How could we be satisfied with just inviting guests to our sukkah? Sure, they'd do the mitzvah for the night or two they were with us, and maybe, if we were lucky, I'd run into them again with my sukkah mobile, and they'd get one more chance. But if we could somehow figure out a way to bring the sukkah to *them*, so they could do the mitzvah all week long - that would be perfect!

We decided to build ten sukkahs, and place them in strategic spots around the city. We got to work early, knowing it would take time to prepare such complicated arrangements. We found 10 hosts who each agreed to keep a sukkah in their backyard, and began negotiations for the materials we'd need. Communication was very slow. Between the language barrier, unreliable power and phone lines, and the strangeness of our request, the summer passed quickly without any progress being made.

It was just days before Sukkos, and I had no materials on hand to build *any* of the ten sukkahs. I decided it was time for a heart-to-heart talk with the Boss.

"Hashem," I said, "I'm doing this for *You* and for *Your* children. I've done everything in my power to make this happen. If *You* want it to happen, I leave it in *Your* hands."

Sukkos was Sunday night. On Friday morning, a dedicated community member managed to get bamboo mats from another supplier in another country. It was extremely complicated to find them, communicate with them, and get the mats back on time, but clearly, Hashem was showing us that He was running the show. In a miraculous turn of events, all our materials were ready for assembly just before Sukkos.

I spent the entire erev Yom Tov running from one location to another, setting up each of the ten sukkahs. I was exhausted, but it was all worth it when I received the reports. *We invited our neighbors for a holiday meal!* One text read. A selfie of a group of friends gathered around a sukkah table, all smiling, followed. Each of the ten sukkahs helped dozens more Jews gain the

inspiration of Sukkos to carry through the rest of the year.

I started a weekly Torah shiur, but it was very sparsely attended. Every week, I made dozens of phone calls, trying to convince or cajole people to come. After a while, I realized it was time to change tactics.

On Simchas Torah, after everyone's inhibitions had been lowered by the freely flowing lechaims, I jumped on a chair and called for attention.

"All of you are here in Lagos for parnassah reasons," I said. "I'm the only one here for something other than business. You want to know how to increase your wealth? I guarantee that whoever commits to learning Torah for 20 minutes a month will see an increase during that month!"

One man after another approached the bima, committing to learning Torah for 20 minutes, an hour, or more a month.

From then on, it wasn't hard to fill my shiurim at all! I'd set up in a conference room at one of the Israeli companies, and even those who demurred at first soon joined.

Some refused to wear a yarmulke at first. But when we started learning, and I told them the stories of Reish Lakish, Rabbi Akiva, and other Tana'im, they started to identify with these great Torah sages. It showed them that even those who get a late start can become some of the greatest of Torah scholars. Slowly, those yarmulkes started to appear. Who knows? Maybe one of the 40-year olds attending those classes is the next Rabbi Akiva.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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