

IllumiNations

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The Rebbe's Child

By Chaya Chazan

Six generations of shluchim. That is the legacy the Rebbe empowered us to leave. We are both third generation shluchim, and have been blessed to see our children, grandchildren, and now great-grandchildren bli ayin hara, be born and raised as shluchim.

My grandparents, Rabbi Yechezkel and Heny Deren AH, were sent to Pittsburgh by the Friediker Rebbe in 1942. There, they opened the first Jewish day school of its kind in the country. While yeshivos existed in abundance, never had there been an institution where the average Jewish child could receive an entire day of instruction in a completely Jewish setting. It replaced the Sunday schools, private tutors, or after school programs Jewish children attended to supplement their public school education.

Undaunted by those who told them their project was doomed for failure because "America is different," my grandparents' mission was inspired by the Friediker Rebbe's declaration of "Amerika iz nit andersh!" What started with seven students is now a large, successful institution.

Although my husband and I are first cousins, I grew up on shlichus a little farther south. My parents, Rabbi Zalman and Risa Posner, were sent to Nashville, Tennessee, by the Friediker Rebbe. When the local Jewish community requested a Chabad rav, the Friediker Rebbe sent my father, then newly engaged, to become the rabbi of their shul.



My father founded a day school in Nashville, but there were no girls my age. I received tutoring from private tutors, and my father, when he could. I treasure the memories of those father-daughter learning sessions. A born educator, each lesson came alive, indelibly stamped on my young mind. However, it wasn't an ideal chinuch model, and when I was just 10 years old, the Rebbe advised my parents to send me to New York for schooling.

My formative years were spent with my grandparents in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. When my grandfather made the two hour walk to Crown Heights to attend the Rebbe's farbrengens, I often accompanied him. During those long walks, he'd tell me stories of chassidim that enthralled me.

My grandmother was close to Rebbetzin Chana, the Rebbe's mother, so I had the frequent and invaluable privilege of visiting the tzadekes in her home.

We didn't even need to discuss whether or not we'd be going on shlichus. It was a given; as natural to us as breathing. In fact, had we needed a discussion, we would've framed it in terms of whether we should *leave* shlichus.

Before we got married, my wife and I visited the Rebbe for a yechidus, a private audience. The Rebbe told us, "Ir vet machen lichtig un varem by anderen - You will make it bright and warm for others, un der Aibershter vet machen lichtig un varem by aich - and Hashem will make it bright and warm for you."

A year or so later, as I was nearing the end of my first year in kollel, we had another yechidus with the Rebbe.

"Where should we go?" we asked. Wherever the Rebbe told us to go, we were ready! Surprisingly, instead of giving us a direct answer, the Rebbe told us to go to Merkos, the office for all shlichus-related activities.

After leaving the Rebbe's room, we headed straight for Rabbi Chadakov in his Merkos office. He told us to

return the next day, and when we did, assigned us to Amherst, Massachusetts.

"Yes, of course!" I answered right away, remembering the story of another young man who'd been assigned a spot by Rabbi Chadakov. He'd made the mistake of saying he had to consult with his wife first, only to realize what he'd done a few moments later. He rushed right back into the office, but Rabbi Chadakov was already replacing the phone and shook his head sadly.

Rabbi Chadakov smiled and told me to first research other shlichus opportunities, and then write to the Rebbe to present all the available options.

In those burgeoning days of shlichus, the opportunities were varied and endless. We received offers in Australia, Europe, California, Israel, New York, to become a rabbi, a seminary head, a teacher, a mashgiach... It was overwhelming!

We wrote to the Rebbe, carefully listing each offer, and asking which one to choose. The Rebbe's answer confused me. *It is not now the decided mode that I choose where you should go. Choose the place that appeals to you most. I cannot differentiate between one child and another [making an exception for you and choosing your place of shlichus.]*

I showed the Rebbe's reply to my mashpia. "Look how the Rebbe refers to you as *his child!*" he pointed out with great enthusiasm. "What a singular expression of love and attention."

When I showed the letter to my wife, she expressed exactly what I'd been feeling. "Go where we want?" she asked. "We want to go wherever the Rebbe wants us to go!"

Unhindered by the qualms I felt in expressing this to the Rebbe, she immediately penned a response explaining exactly that. The Rebbe then circled three of the options we'd listed, told us to research each of them more extensively, and write back once we knew more.

In response to that final letter, the Rebbe circled *Amherst*, and the decision was made.

Sixteen years later, Rabbi Chadakov called to let me know that Stamford desperately needed a shliach. It had been made clear through other interactions that Merkos considered me wholly responsible for the entire state of Connecticut, so Stamford's problem was my problem.

When I assessed the situation, I realized a couple visits wouldn't do the trick. It needed a permanent solution. But Stamford was so much more expensive than Amherst! And finding solutions would require a delicate hand. How could I possibly ask anyone to knowingly put themselves in such a difficult situation? Perhaps I could do it, but how could I leave Amherst - the place the Rebbe sent me?

At a loss, I called Rabbi Chadakov and asked what to do. He asked me to call back a few days later. He told me what the Rebbe had said: "Without a doubt, a shliach should be established in Stamford. Whether it's you or another shliach is up to you."

I inferred from his tone of voice that it was preferable for us to move to Stamford, finding a suitable replacement to leave in our stead in Amherst.

It wasn't easy to begin again from scratch in a new city, after establishing ourselves in Amherst for so many years. But we don't sign up for shlichus because of its ease and comfort - we do it despite the inevitable contrary!

Amherst is a college town, and the "community" was primarily college professors.

I remember meeting the president of the Amherst Jewish community on our first Shabbos there.

"Any advice for me?" I asked, mostly jokingly.

"Yeah. Go back to Brooklyn," he replied. "You don't belong here."

Obviously, I didn't take his advice, kindly enough as he meant it.

Educational standards were a bit more lax in those days, and, after assuring the head of the Jewish studies department that semicha qualified me to teach every bit as much as a tenured professor, I was able to give classes on campus.

In one of those early years, the Hebrew studies professor scheduled a mid-term for Shemini Atzeres. When I heard, I went straight to her office.

"You're the Hebrew studies professor! You're an Israeli! You can't schedule a test on a yom tov!" I insisted.

"This isn't a religious institution, and the students don't observe - or even know about - the holidays. I can do what I want," she insisted.

Hearing the faint shouting of Vietnam war protests gave me an idea.

"You can schedule your tests however you'd like," I agreed. "But, if you insist on keeping this date, I guarantee you there will be a protest right outside your classroom."

She quickly agreed to switch the test date.

To prepare for our first Chanukah in Stamford, I contacted the parks commissioner for permission to set up a menorah. He flat out refused, even threatening to arrest me if I tried to put it up without permission.

Backed by the assurance of my community's wholehearted support, I informed the public there would be a menorah lighting at 7:00 PM. I invited the local TV and radio station to attend as well.

That night, at 6:55, the park was packed. Dozens of police officers stood by at the ready, and the parks commissioner stood at the head, his arms folded smugly across his chest.

At precisely 7:00, I drove up in a flatbed truck, with the menorah securely attached. The parks commissioner stood by helplessly as we proceeded to have a beautiful menorah lighting, witnessed by all the local news anchors.

Seeing the battle was all but lost, the parks commissioner reluctantly agreed to let us put our menorah up each year from then on.

When we first moved to Stamford, we wanted to announce our presence and advertise ourselves. We decided to hold a dinner. We gathered a committee and meticulously planned every detail. I asked the Rebbe for a bracha for "a successful dinner, beyond the scope of mere goodness."

I kept track of every reservation on my computer, and was pleased to see about 275 guests. The caterers were pushing for a final number, so I told them to prepare for 300, just so we'd have some extra in case something went wrong.

The next hurdle was figuring out seating plans. The committee and I sat for hours with little cards inscribed with each attendee's name, placing them each in their own perfect spot. It was the early hours of the morning, and everyone else had already left. Just my wife and myself were left by the table, next to a stubborn pile of cards.

"Something isn't right," I said. "These numbers aren't matching up." I quickly counted up each card. There were 333. I checked back on the computer, but it still said 275. The names were all the same, but for some reason, the screen displayed the wrong number.

"How can this be happening?" I cried. "The caterers said we can't make any more changes! Thirty-three people won't have plates!"

Frantically, we called the caterer and left desperate messages, explaining the miscalculation. He finally assured us that, with some configuration, he'd make sure everyone had something to eat.

Baruch Hashem, the dinner was a great success.

With the Rebbe's bracha, the impossible becomes possible - even if the computer can't figure it out!

We'd just completed a brand new Chabad house building in Stamford. A rabbi of another local institution came by, so I offered him the "grand tour." He marveled at the size, the decor, and the furnishings. He knew exactly how difficult it was to manage the finances of an institution in Stamford.

"How did you do it?" he asked in awe, when we completed our tour.

"Purely through Hashem's kochos and the brachos of the Rebbe," I replied.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I was able to see Hashem's hand so clearly," I explained. "I had to put in effort - otherwise nothing would be accomplished. But Baruch Hashem, whenever I put in the work, I see results. Interestingly, the results are never a direct outcome of whatever I'd worked for. Hatzlacha is always found in an unexpected way. It's a clear message that our success isn't because of our talents or hard work, but purely a bracha from Hashem."

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