

IllumiNations

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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 Dovid and Esther Aba, Chabad B'aliyah,
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Finding My Calling

By Chaya Chazan

I was born in Nikolayev, Ukraine, to a family with little to no connection to Judaism. Other than a few, specific family members who knew some Yiddish and had some knowledge about the holidays, it really didn't play much of a role in my life.

The last religious person in my family was my great-great-grandmother. Nevertheless, everyone in my family maintained a strong sentimental connection to Judaism. That connection prompted a relative to get me into a Jewish school in third grade, where I learned about my heritage for the first time. Rabbi Sholom Gottlieb, the shliach in Nikolayev, opened my eyes to a whole new world. His obvious care and dedication not only to me, but to each of his students, was transformative.

The disparity between what I was learning in school and the non-religious life I led at home bothered me. If these mitzvos were given to the Jewish people by G-d, why wasn't I doing them? I'd always felt confident in my strong Jewish identity, but this question shook my assurance.

At nine years old, after learning about bris milah for the first time, I asked my mother to have me circumcised. Soon after, I started wearing a kippa and tzitzit, then keeping kosher and Shabbos - as much as pos-



sible. By the time I was Bar Mitzvah, I was keeping as much of Torah and mitzvos as was accessible to me.

Unfortunately, living in Ukraine meant there'd be a limit to that, regardless of how much I learned. I knew that to live a Torah-true life, I'd need a community where kosher, mikvah, minyanim, schools, and shuls were easily available. I convinced my family to move to Israel, and half a year later, we made aliyah.

I began researching yeshiva options. I finally settled on Yeshivas Migdal Haemek, which, at the time, was specifically geared for Russian speakers. At 13 years old, I was the youngest student in yeshiva. I spent half the day studying in cheder, and the other half in yeshiva.

My commitment to Yiddishkeit solidified, and I soon began to aim for a higher ambition: to be a shliach.

After completing yeshiva, I served in the IDF as a combat soldier. Once I finished my service, I moved to Moscow. I soon met my wife, also a Russian baalas teshuva, and we began working with the local shliach as youth program directors. We opened the first branch of *EnerJew* in Moscow, an organization for Jewish Russian-speaking youth. As anyone who's ever worked with teenagers knows, they can be a challenging group to engage. My success with *EnerJew* gained the attention of other shluchim, who asked me to speak with them and their communities about the secret to building a successful teen club.

After seven years of shlichus in Moscow, my wife and I decided to make aliyah once more. Fifteen years after uprooting my life to move to Eretz Yisrael, I did it all over again.

My shlichus work continued in Jerusalem. I coordinated youth programs and events in my area. When Covid hit, it seemed as though everything came to a screeching halt. Zoom was useful - to a point. It was very difficult to form meaningful connections over a screen.

Feeling trapped at home, I started hosting shiurim for small groups as soon as it was allowed. I naturally

gravitated towards Russian-speakers, and soon, my efforts were officially recognized by Chabad. We were asked to join Chabad B'aliyah in Yerushalayim, an organization for Russian speaking olim.

For many immigrants, moving to Israel becomes their entire Jewish identity. Even those who were active members of their communities back home feel simply living and being in Israel satisfies their need for Jewish connection and identity. Because of this, we implement a strong sense of religion into our activities. We put a lot of emphasis on shiurim, Torah learning, and chagim, underscoring the point that being Jewish is deeper and richer than just one's environment.

"I have some extra time. Do you need any help around the Chabad house?" the speaker was a quiet-spoken young man, dressed in the ubiquitous white shirt and neat black pants of a yeshiva bochur. His eyes, eager and friendly, seemed familiar to me.

"What's your name?" I asked him, trying to figure out where I knew him from.

"Chaim*," he replied.

"Ah!" I cried out, finally placing him. "I'm so happy to see you! You look so different from the last time we met!"

I'd first met Chaim ten years before, when, as a young boy, he'd come to one of our events in Moscow. Back then, I'd spoken with him about having a bris, and he'd agreed.

I'd organized a mohel and was with him on that auspicious day, when he'd received his Jewish name. The community rallied together to throw him a beautiful celebratory Seudas Mitzvah. I'd heard he'd moved to a Jewish school, but I hadn't seen him since then.

We caught up and I learned Chaim graduated from a Lubavitcher yeshiva, and moved to Eretz Yisrael. I thanked Hashem for the gift of witnessing the fruits of my labor.

As a natural extrovert, Covid was very difficult for me, especially since it happened so soon after our move to Israel. We'd barely recovered from that, when the war in Ukraine changed everything once again.

My strengths are in public speaking and education. But Israel received a flood of Russian-speaking immigrants who needed help of other kinds. At first, I tried to find a compromise by teaching the new olim about Yiddishkeit. However, I soon saw firsthand how true the mishna in Pirkei Avos we read recently is: *If there is no bread, there is no Torah*. Before they could be open to hearing about Torah and mitzvos, they needed houses, clothes, and food.



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The community stepped forward in a very real way. These refugees had escaped the ruins of their city without so as much as a suitcase to call their own. Our usual donor base is very thin. We mostly survive on small donations of 20 or 50 shekel. Raising the vast sums needed to provide all these refugees with their needs seemed an insurmountable challenge. However, with the partnership of many other Chabad houses in the city and Hashem's help, we gathered funds beyond my wildest expectations. We even hosted a beautiful Purim seuda for over 100 refugee families!

I'd been learning with Avi* for a while, and was ecstatic when he told me he'd met a nice girl - also an immigrant - with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life. Avi and Jacqueline* were excitedly planning every detail of their dream wedding.

October 7th changed everything. The wedding hall they'd booked down south could no longer accommodate them. With the uncertainty of when exactly Avi would be called up to serve, picking a day was tricky.

Avi approached me for help.

"We just want to get married as soon as possible," he told me. "That's all we care about. It can be a small and simple affair. All we need is a chuppah - preferably close to the Kotel."

"Of course," I answered. "Don't worry about a thing!"

But as I started making arrangements for Avi's wedding, it didn't feel right.

This couple is sacrificing their lives for Am Yisrael! I thought to myself. They're already missing out on their dream wedding. Why should they have to settle for a hurried chuppah with ten strangers?

I was determined to throw them the best wedding I could in the short amount of time we had. We managed to find a venue overlooking the Kotel, and arranged for flowers, music, and catering.

Avi and Jacqueline had the beautiful wedding they deserved. When Avi is given leave over Shabbos, he joins us at our minyan. May Hashem watch over and protect them.

Years ago, I was on a train from Ukraine to Moscow. Although it isn't my preferred method of transportation

- it involves traveling for days with airless cabins and malodorous odors - I had no choice.

I shared a sleeper cabin with three others. On the first night, when I went to the bunker, two large men were already sleeping there, and another lay on a third bed. Feeling claustrophobic, I went to the common room for some air.

I was joined a few moments later by one of my roommates. I was annoyed at first, but kept up my side of a polite conversation as he asked me where I was from and where I was going.

"Tell me," he said. "Is it true Jews aren't allowed to sew on Shabbos?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that's true."

He smiled. "I knew it. My grandmother never sewed anything on Shabbos."

"Oh, are you Jewish?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

The man shook his head. "Absolutely not, I'm Russian. But it sounds likely that my grandmother was Jewish."

"Which grandmother?" I asked him.

The man shook his head. "I'm not Jewish, it's my mother's mother."

I nodded, not wanting to say anything that may push him away. I continued the conversation, making small talk about our hometowns and journeys. Soon, the conversation veered to his family.

"My wife is Christian," he told me. "I've tried going to church with her a couple of times. But every time I walk into the church, it's like my body rejects being there. My head starts to hurt and I get dizzy. I need to walk out before I feel better."

I couldn't ask for a better opening or indication that he craved the truth. "Judaism passes through the mother," I explained. "So if your maternal grandmother was Jewish, you're Jewish, too!"

He seemed excited to hear, and was eager to stay in touch. We exchanged contact info, and I gave him the address for a shulim in Moscow. Unfortunately, as I was disembarking from the train, my phone fell into the gap and shattered.

I still don't know what happened to him, but I do know it was Hashgacha Pratis that we met. I'm confident Hashem placed me in his path for a reason.

One of the Chabad houses in Moscow hosts a huge seder every year. They need all the help they can get, so, like many other shluchim in the city, I pitched in.

On the last day of Pesach, by the Seudas Moshiach, I plopped down beside a group of people. "Tell me about a miracle that has to do with your Yiddishkeit," I told them. "Let's hear these stories while we wait for Moshiach!"

Simon*, one of the men there, volunteered to share his story.

"In the 90's, I left the Soviet Union for America," he began. "I hate to say it, but I wasn't the most honest man during that time. I had an idea to make some easy money. All I had to do was approach some Jewish leaders in New York, make up some stories about how I was helping Jews in Russia, and ask for money.

"It got easier and easier each time. The lies grew more elaborate with each visit, and the stories tripped off my tongue with practiced ease. That is, until I met with the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

"I stood before the Rebbe, made eye contact with this holy man's blue eyes, and my words were gone. All my lies and my tales were stuck. The only thing I could say was my name. It didn't matter how much I tried to speak, or what I wanted to say, nothing else would come out - only my name!

"That meeting is the reason I put on tefillin," he concluded.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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