

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Dedicated in Meomory of Harav Moshe Kotlarsky - Pioneering A Generation of The Rebbe's Shluchim

Rabbi Raffy and Chana Filler, Chabad at Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York

Igniting Inspiration in Ithaca

By Chaya Chazan

I had a traditional Chabad upbringing in the large Lubavitch community in Montreal. As a bochur, I was privileged to help shluchim in various parts of the world and gained firsthand familiarity of the mesiras nefesh shlichus demands.

My wife was born on shlichus, growing up in Stony Brook, helping her parents teach university students about Judaism.

We both added to our experience by, after our marriage, working with the Johnsons, at Chabad of the University of Texas. It was an invaluable experience under expert tutelage that empowered us, when we were offered a post of our own at Ithaca College, to accept it with confidence.

We're still in the beginning stages, having moved out just under two years ago. Our first order of business was getting recognized by the college as an official student club - not an easy feat in most US colleges.

We began by gauging student interest, offering programs or services they requested. We're continuing to grow our current programs, as well as adding more. A year ago, we had six or seven students as guests at our Shabbos table; now, we're fully maxed out at 20 guests each week. We offer Shabbos and holiday programs, Sinai scholars, lunch

and learns, and other one-on-one opportunities to deepen the student's understanding of their heritage.

Grady* was heavily influenced by his brother's close and growing connection to Judaism. Although he didn't know of any Chabad rabbis on campus at Ithaca College, where he was returning for a second year, he knew the Torah-true lifestyle was the path for him. He made up his mind to keep Shabbos. He knew it would be difficult. Although Ithaca has a kosher dining hall, Grady doubted there'd be anyone else keeping Shabbos. He knew it was the right decision, and firmly put all doubts and questions out of his mind.

Of course, Grady was delighted to find that Ithaca College had just welcomed its own shluchim! He was our guest that first Shabbos - and every Shabbos since.

He'd been keeping kosher for a while, and he was quickly soaking up everything we could teach him about Shabbos. He was open and receptive to learning about anything and everything in Yiddishkeit - with one notable exception. Shomer negiah was one thing he had not yet accepted. He considered *hugs* a core part of his friendships. How could he suddenly and so drastically alter half the friendships and relationships he'd built, especially since his female friends might not understand why he was doing it in the first place? He simply wasn't prepared for the slew of uncomfortable interactions he'd have to survive multiple times a day.

Grady had applied to Maayanot Yeshiva in Yerushalayim for the following year, and he focused on that as his starting point.

"Once I'm in Jerusalem, in a male-only yeshiva, without having to talk with those friends and family who've known me forever, it'll be much easier to take on," he explained. "Then, when I return from yeshiva, this will be one of the practices I adopted while there. Hopefully, that'll make more sense to my friends."

A few weeks later, I attended a farbrengen in New York, where Rabbi Eli Silberstein from Chabad of Ithaca shared a story about a student from his college, Clark*. Rabbi Silberstein had been talking to Clark about starting to keep kosher. Clark was on board, but he wanted to defer for a few months. He told Rabbi Silberstein that he'd start as soon as he graduated. Now, he was in a frat home, and it would be too uncomfortable and difficult to explain such a radical change to all his friends.

"Keeping kosher in New York City is pretty easy," Rabbi Silberstein told him. "The real test is *now*, in college, when there are many more obstacles in your way. *That* is a true commitment to Hashem."

Clark was still hesitant about how differently he'd be treated by his friends. Rabbi Silberstein assured him everything would work out.

So, a couple of nights later, Clark banged on the communal table and announced to all his frat brothers, "Guys, as much as I love you all, I'm going to keep kosher now, and I won't be able to eat with you anymore."

Clark wasn't sure what reaction - if any - he'd receive. He certainly wasn't expecting all his brothers to rise to their feet and give him a standing ovation!

I returned from the kinus in a thoughtful frame of mind. I had a standing weekly chavrusa with Grady, and the next time we met, I casually shared the story I'd just heard.

"I don't need to point out the obvious," I concluded.

Grady thought for a few moments before nodding his head decisively.

"You're right, Rabbi. Being shomer negiah in Israel isn't proof of commitment. The true test of my faith is if I can do it here, in college. Can we schedule another weekly class so I can learn the laws of shomer negiah?"

Grady posted about his new resolution on social media, and was shocked to receive a wellspring of support when he'd expected scorn and hostility.



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Like many college campuses across the country, we haven't been immune to loud, anti-Israel demonstrations. With an overwhelmingly large Jewish population, it's been much less dramatic than those staged at Columbia and Harvard, and the administration has taken a peaceable, neutral stance.

In the wake of the horrific attack on October 7th, we saw a surge of Jewish pride and yearning to connect. People who never wanted to put on tefillin before were suddenly volunteering their arms, and we got many calls of support.

We had an idea to take our students on a Shabbaton and give them a true Shabbos experience. However, many students were wary of going away for the weekend and giving up their phones and devices for a whole 25 hours. Only a few brave souls signed up.

We debated whether it was worthwhile to arrange such a massive event for just a couple of students, but we drew inspiration from everyone around us. If they could step outside their comfort zones to do something positive for the sake of Israel's safety, how could we not do the same?

The Shabbaton was a massive success. The students experienced a real Shabbos for the first time in their lives, and it impressed them tremendously. It was so successful, we've decided to make it a recurring event every semester!

After the Shabbaton, we gave out Sinai Scholar T-shirts, emblazoned with the message *I ♥ being Jewish!* We had a long, emotional talk about what it meant to have Jewish pride, and how to combat the fear of anti-Semitism and not let it hold us back. Many of the students resolved to wear their T-shirts on campus the next day.

Sharon* was extremely reluctant. She'd seen so many hateful messages and heard too many stories to become a walking target. Cornell, just a stone's throw away, had its fair share of anti-Semitism against Jewish students. Her mother advised her to remove her Magen David necklace. But when she thought more about our discussion, she overcame her fear and joined the other students, wearing her t-shirt to class. She even snapped a selfie and sent it to her mother.

Sharon's mother, Mattie*, was set to run the New York City Marathon a few days later. She'd been suffering the same cycle of fear and anxiety as her daughter. Seeing her daughter overcome her fear and wearing her *I ♥ being Jewish* shirt inspired Mattie too. When she ran the marathon, she ran with the names of every hostage displayed on her back, and the name of a fallen soldier pinned over her heart. She ran, unafraid, through crowds waving the Palestinian flag and shouting hateful chants. She crossed

the finish line with tears running down her face, and a heart beating fiercely with pride and love for her people.

Since we're still in the beginning years of our shlichus, we don't yet have a big, beautiful building. Instead, we cram as many students as we can fit into our small home. For a regular Shabbos, we make it work. But Purim was coming up, and we wanted ample space for a much larger crowd.

After some creative thinking, we decided to rent a party bus. Not only would we have more space, we could also drive around from dormitory to dormitory, bringing the party to the students! As Purim fell out on Motzei Shabbos, we arranged for the bus to come right after Havdalah.

While we enjoyed a calm, serene Shabbos at home, we had no idea what was taking place on campus. A pro-Palestinian organization had arranged a "die-in," where dozens of students lay on the floor, as if dead. It cast a pall over the entire campus, and a feeling of unease amongst the Jewish students.

Without knowing any of this, we came driving down the street, blasting festive Jewish music, pulling students in to dance, and giving them mishloach manos packages to give their friends the next day. In moments, the mood switched from anxious and tense to happy, cheerful, and confident. *And the city of Ithaca rejoiced and was glad.*

A new van was in order. It would help with schlepping students to and from Shabbatons, packing up our large meat orders from New York City, and so many other important errands. We chose a used van that was still in good condition, and even brought it to the mechanic to make sure it was a worthwhile investment. As I was driving home from the garage, I was rear ended. The driver sped off before I could take his info. I inspected the damage and saw the taillight had been shattered.

A short while later, I was talking to someone in the community, and mentioned what had just happened.

"Don't worry about it, Rabbi," he told me. "I'm sending you \$500 right now. That should cover it."

"Amplly!" I replied. "I don't think it'll even be that much!"

"It's fine," he said. "I'm sure it'll be put to good use."

We had to drive to New York for Shabbos, so we all piled in our new-to-us van. Just as we crossed the bridge, the brakes failed. With careful driving and maneuvering, we managed to reach our destination safely before Shabbos.

I placed the car and its problems aside for Shabbos. Right after Shabbos, my phone lit up with a text from another

friend in Ithaca. *I just sent you a donation. I'm sure you'll find a use for it.*

When I brought the van to the mechanic the next day, he viewed the damage and gave me a quote - the exact amount I'd received from my two "random" benefactors.

Charlie's* whole family came to celebrate his graduation. Charlie had become quite a regular in our Chabad house, and he was excited to introduce us.

"Do you want to mark this special occasion by putting on tefillin?" I asked Charlie.

"Sure!" Charlie said, rolling up his sleeve.

I offered Charlie's father and brothers in turn. Although they were a bit hesitant, Charlie's example encouraged them to follow. It was their first time wearing tefillin. I explained I'd received that pair from my cousin, who asked me to use them to help people put on tefillin in honor of his father, my uncle, who'd recently passed.

I then turned to Charlie's grandfather, and offered him a chance to put on tefillin.

"No thanks," he grunted.

"Come on!" I pressed lightly. "When was the last time you put on tefillin?"

"It was with a rabbi named Velvy Finkelstein," he answered.

My jaw dropped. "That's the uncle I was just talking about!"

Charlie's grandfather clearly didn't believe me, but was shocked enough that he agreed to put them on.

"Your uncle was a very special man who helped me a lot," he shared, emotionally. "I'm so happy I got to do something for him in return."

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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