

# 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 Pesach and Chanie Scheiner, Chabad of Boulder, Colorado*

## Radiating the Rebbe's Mission in the Rockies

By Chaya Chazan

**By the time we moved on shlichus in 1991, most major metropolitan cities in the U.S. and Europe already had a designated shliach. We were looking to open our *own* Chabad house, so when a friend passed on a suggestion that didn't work for him, we were delighted.**

We wrote to the Rebbe, and were given a bracha for "hatzlacha, in a way of adding and increasing."

While Boulder is known for its breathtaking beauty and halcyon hipster vibes, it has a relatively small population of just 100,000 people. We were one of the first groups of shluchim to begin the "trend" of starting Chabad in smaller cities, and were among the first to discover the particular challenges that come along with it.

Baruch Hashem, one of the major obstacles a small-town shliach faces, that of fundraising with a limited donor group, was made easier by a generous grant that covered most of our expenses for the first year.

We quickly found that size wasn't the only obstacle Boulder's population placed before us. In smaller cities, it's harder to attract large crowds, especially in a city like Boulder, where residents have settled expecting to spend their time out-



doors. If we wanted to make an impact, we'd have to find *them*. And we did - one by one. Some of our strongest and longest-lasting supporters were those I met while giving out Chanukah candles in the grocery store parking lot, or by visiting their offices every week. Slowly but surely, we were getting to know more people. As shluchim of the Rebbe to all the Yidden in our city, we've worked to strengthen Yiddishkeit in the general community by building strong connections with local Jewish organizations.

With the beautiful Rockies majestically surveying the ski slopes and sleepy towns around Boulder, Colorado, it's not unusual for pedestrians to stop mid-walk and stare in fascination at the incredible wonder around them.

During our first week in Boulder, while exploring the town, gazing at the breathtaking scenery, we soon realized that we were being stared at ourselves! Apparently, the sublime summits of the Rockies are nothing compared to a real, live rabbi, complete with beard, jacket, and black hat. The Rockies could be seen from every grocery store around; a religious rabbi was a rare sighting!

Baruch Hashem, much of that has changed in the 33 years since we first moved. Every Sukkos, we order over 100 sets of Arba Minim to satisfy the community's demand. Before Pesach, we have a hard time keeping up with the requests for the "Rolls Royce" of matzah, and people are willing to *pay* for the privilege of eating authentic shmurah matzah. On Chanukah, each of our public menorah lightings draws in crowds of hundreds, or even thousands! We know it's all thanks to Hashem's bracha, and the Rebbe's continuous kochos.

I'd been invited to a backyard concert, featuring two musically talented brothers, both in the University of Colorado at the time. After the concert, I introduced myself to the pianist, Ted\*. He was interested and curious, so I invited him to join us for a Torah class that week.

After the class, Ted approached me with an abashed smile. "I don't want to be disingenuous, so I think it's best if I told you my background. I was raised in a very traditional home in Denver. My grandfather was one of the founders of the Jewish community, and my family is very well-known. We went to shul regularly, and kept many of the mitzvot and traditions of Judaism.

"It all felt very... forced to me. It felt like a show - something we had to do to keep up appearances, rather than something truly meaningful and sincere. I was going through the motions, but it didn't feel right.

"When I got to college, I met a group of friends who were all devout Christians. They had such strong faith! They truly felt the Divine Hand in everything, and had a genuine connection. It was the exact piece I'd been missing all along! I felt myself drawn to them and their sincerity. A few months later, I converted, and have been a practicing Christian ever since.

"The real reason I came tonight is because I know Christianity is founded on Judaism. I thought understanding Judaism better would help me become a better Christian."

He was so gentle, honest, and earnest, but it felt like a terrible blow, especially so early on in my shlichus.

"How do you know?" I blurted out. "You yourself said you're not an expert in either religion. So how can you be sure rejecting Judaism in favor of Christianity is the right move?"

Ted was taken aback by my attack, but he thought for a moment before responding. He answered, I argued, he countered, and I disputed. We were at it for hours. Finally, deep into the early hours of the morning, Ted sighed exhaustedly.

"We can argue for another 100 hours, but I won't change my mind. I was so unhappy before, and ever since my conversion, I've been more at peace than I've ever been."

"I get it," I answered. "As long as you're aware that your tenacious grip on Christianity stems from an *emotional* need rather than a solid logical foundation..."

It seemed we'd get no further. Ted left, and I hurried to catch a ride to the airport. That Shabbos was Gimmel Tammuz, the first Yom Hilulah of the Rebbe, and I wanted to be in 770 with my brother chassidim to commemorate the significant and difficult day.

When I returned to Boulder, Ted called me.

"I was thinking a lot about our conversation," he said. "In fact, I couldn't *stop* thinking about it. You're right! I need to give Judaism a fair chance."

I knew that the power of the special day had created this significant change.

I connected him to the larger Jewish community in Denver, and watched with joy and satisfaction as he turned his life around again and committed to a Torah-true life. His metamorphosis impacted his brother as well, and he, too, committed to a Torah lifestyle.

Alex\* and Katie\* were the first to initiate contact. Alex was going through some personal issues and wanted to speak with a rabbi. Although he wasn't raised in a religious home, he'd picked up enough to know that Chabad would be the perfect address for his call.



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I had a deep heart-to-heart with Alex, in which he shared how his crisis revealed a yearning for spirituality. He was eager to take on anything I could suggest! His fiancé, out of love and support for him, was willing to go along with it as well.

In almost no time at all, Alex and Katie had started keeping almost every mitzvah to the best of their abilities. When they got married a few months later, I was privileged to be the mesader kedushin.

Alex and Katie became great friends of ours. Alex had vision and liked to get things done. When we first met, we were operating out of a tiny condo. Alex was the one that pushed us to move to a bigger space, even finding us a property, and connecting us with a real estate friend.

When they moved to another community, they revolutionized Judaism in that city - bringing down a shliach, and helping to open a proper mikvah and school. Although they've now moved a couple of times, one thing remained constant - they always had an open home, and many guests around their Shabbos table.

This past year, while my daughter was in seminary in Eretz Yisrael, she was graciously and warmly invited to Alex and Katie's home for Shabbos.

It is a phenomenal and humbling nachas to witness how their lives and ours came full circle.

"Can you drop everything for an emergency?" the caller asked. He was a Chabad lawyer from Florida. Someone he knew had just passed away, and while he'd wanted a Jewish burial, his next-of-kin, a sister who lived in Boulder, was very antagonistic towards religion. Deliberately defying her brother's wishes, she organized a cremation.

The only way to stop her would be to get an injunction from a local judge, but nothing could be done until she was officially served. Time was of the essence, not only because of the scheduled cremation, but also because it was the day before Thanksgiving. Within hours, all judicial offices would close for the long weekend, and it would be too late.

I drove to her house with the papers, but she refused to answer the door. *Why would she?* I thought wryly, to myself. *She knows exactly who I am and what I'm here for. It would take a miracle for me to serve these papers to her.*

With time running out, I left the envelope just outside her door. As I drove away, I instinctively turned my head to take one more look at the house, and to my surprise, I saw that the woman had opened the door out of curiosity to see what I'd left.

I reported all this back to the lawyer.

"We got her!" the lawyer cried triumphantly. "As long as we have a witness to confirm that she did in fact see the papers, we can definitely get the injunction!"

Baruch Hashem, we were able to get the injunction on time, enabling the meis to have a kevaras yisroel, as he wished.

In a small city, it's very challenging to make a minyan. Most Jews today unfortunately don't know how to daven since they weren't raised going to shul. Richard\* was a good friend with a strong Jewish identity, and I occasionally asked him to do me a favor by completing a minyan. He usually came when I asked, but spent the time doing yoga meditations.

One time, a fellow congregant who was a rabbi of a different denomination, watched him quietly for a few moments and then remarked, "Do you know that what you're doing is a non-Jewish practice?" Richard was taken aback, but remained silent and didn't reply.

Although Richard moved to Denver a while later, we still kept in touch. About 20 years later, he called to ask how to get a pair of tefillin.

"I'd be happy to help!" I told him. "I'm just curious - why the sudden change of heart?"

"I've been going through some really hard times at my company," Richard sighed. "The other board members made a coup and were trying to remove me, citing some mistakes I've made. It was extremely nerve-wracking, and I couldn't sleep at night! Feeling restless, I started scrolling on my phone. One thing led to another, and I soon discovered much worse behavior amongst the other board members! I was able to use that information to solve our internal crisis.

"The whole story made me feel indebted to G-d, and I wanted to take on a mitzvah to show my gratitude. I remembered what that person told me about yoga, and decided to drop it in favor of tefillin."

This showed me, once again, how the seeds we plant eventually bear fruit. It might take a very long time, but we can never give up on another Yid.

The difficulty Covid restrictions imposed on everyone can never be understated. The biggest impact was felt by seniors, who often lived alone, and went for days on end without seeing or talking to another soul.

This was especially true for Henry, who was very anxious about catching Covid. He came to many other events and always enjoyed himself, but it was difficult to convince him to join us, even for outdoor, socially distanced minyanim. We knew he lived alone, and worried about him.

Every week, I'd come up with a few people I knew who could use a boost, and deliver them a home-cooked Shabbos meal. One winter Friday, I prepared a package and thought of Henry, who I hadn't seen or heard from in a while. I asked one of my volunteers to deliver it to his home.

"No one is answering the door," she told me, after unsuccessfully ringing his bell multiple times.

"Just leave it outside his door," I told her.

I tried calling, but his mailbox was full. Worried, I asked my husband to call the police. Maybe they could check on him? But when my husband spoke to them, they said that there wasn't evidence that he was in trouble. It would've been illegal for them to break down the door. He argued with them, but they didn't relent.

We knew Henry only seldomly left home, and the worry kept niggling in the back of my mind.

"Please go check on him," I asked my husband after candle-lighting.

Although it was a snowy night, my husband and a friend went to Henry's apartment. They knocked; no answer. So, they asked a neighbor if they'd seen Henry lately. Fortunately, the neighbor had a key to Henry's house. When they entered the home, they found Henry on the couch, unconscious.

They immediately called an ambulance, and the doctors were able to stabilize him.

As the Sages say, *"one mitzvah leads to another."*

To raise awareness of the importance of a Jewish burial, we include a memorial page to people who've recently passed in our community calendar. We also include a short, but powerful article, explaining why one should choose kevaras yisroel.

One day, I got a call from Janice\*, a member of our community.

"My mother-in-law just passed away," she told me. "I remember reading about a Jewish burial in the calendar, so I suggested it to my husband's family. They asked for a copy of their own to look over. Do you have an extra one?"

Baruch Hashem, the family was convinced, and gave their mother a Jewish burial.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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