

IllumiNations

Issue 130 | Parshas Korach 5784

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 Berel and Chana Dubinsky, Chabad of S. Teresa, Costa Rica

From Paradise to Purpose

By Chaya Chazan

As a bochur, I'd helped shluchim all over Asia, so moving somewhere exotic didn't seem too crazy to me.

When I asked my now-wife whether she'd be willing to go on shlichus to Vietnam, which I'd recently heard had an opening, she was open to it! In the first couple of years of our marriage, we looked into some interesting options. We even had tickets for an initial visit to a city in Africa in early 2020. Once Covid hit, our tickets were canceled, and everything ground to a halt. We heard about a potential shlichus opportunity in Costa Rica, so I called Rabbi Spalter, the head shliach, and he invited me to visit S Teresa for myself to see the possibilities.

S. Teresa is a beautiful coastal town, half beach and half jungle. While the heat is enough to keep everyone indoors, the incredible majesty of the surrounding nature is too tempting to resist.

While we serve between 50-100 tourists every Shabbos, there is also a substantial full-time community here, made up mostly of Israelis seeking tranquility. For years, one of the men served as the "rabbi" of their homemade shul, but they knew they needed something more.



We were happy to fill that void. We have weekly Shabbos meals and minyanim, a kosher restaurant, and regular shiurim and programs.

In many ways, it feels like our shlichus runs in the "fast lane." Just a couple of weeks after we moved, we hosted a Pesach seder for over 500 people! It's only been two years, but it's all we can do to keep up with the demand for Yiddishkeit! Instead of starting our shlichus by painstakingly knocking on one door after another, slowly building up one relationship at a time, we moved to a place where people were actively searching for fulfillment. Baruch Hashem, we're kept quite busy! Serving the community is one full-time job, and caring for the mass amounts of tourists is another!

The fanny pack has made a fashion comeback in recent years, but that's not why I wear one. Whenever I go out and about, I put in a pair of tefillin and strap it around my waist. It's so handy and accessible!

One day, two brothers walked into the Chabad house and handed me an incredibly precious gift - seven pairs of tefillin! I put out the word that anyone who'd commit to putting on tefillin daily would receive a pair as a gift. The seven pairs were claimed, one after the other, and there were even more willing to make the pledge!

This offer has now become a regular event. Every month, we order two pairs of tefillin from Israel to give away to those willing to take on the mitzvah. Baruch Hashem, we never seem to have enough! We'd love to give out even more, as soon as our budget allows for it.

A shliach is never off duty. We know we may be needed at a moment's notice - even if that moment comes in the late night hours. I've made a habit of keeping my phone on every night - a habit that has proved life-saving more than once.

One night, I received a call from Israel past midnight. Through the hysterical crying on the other side of the phone, I managed to make out a mother's worry for her 18-year-old daughter, who'd just been involved in an ATV accident.

I rushed right over to the clinic and asked to see the patient. "There's nothing we can do for her," the nurses said, shrugging.

"What - what do you mean?" I asked, my heart thudding.

"The accident hurt her badly. She was screaming in pain, but the medics on site couldn't see anything obvious. They brought her here, to the only x-ray in town, to see what was causing her to wail so terribly. The drive here, which should've taken five minutes, took over two hours! Any time the car jostled even a bit - not an uncommon occurrence when most of the roads are unpaved - the girl would howl in agony. They had to drive at a snail's pace, just to keep her relatively calm."

"So what did you find on the x-ray?" I asked, breathless.

"Nothing!" the nurse said, almost apologetically. "And that's the main problem. We want to airlift her to the hospital in San Jose, but insurance refuses to cover it, since there isn't a discernible issue."

I visited the girl in her room. She was writhing in pain, and I knew I had to do my utmost to help her. Thus began a bevy of phone calls crisscrossing the globe. I spoke to the parents, doctors in Israel, doctors in S Teresa, and kept updating her worried parents. Eventually, I got hold of the insurance rep.

"So, you're the Chabad shliach in S Teresa?" he asked.

"Yes," I responded.

"So you've assessed the situation and you think her condition requires her to be airlifted?"

"Absolutely," I said.

"Fine. I trust you. I'm greenlighting the flight."

I smiled in pure exultation and ran to make the necessary arrangements.

Unfortunately, the helicopter could only land on a pad about a twenty minute's drive from the hospital. Even though she'd been given pain medications, the drive was incredibly taxing on her frayed strength. When we finally arrived, she was almost unconscious from the pain.

"Rabbi, I'm frightened," she said, her voice difficult to hear over the helicopter's engine. "What if I don't make it?"

"Let's say a special blessing for protection while traveling," I told her. "And I'll be praying for you the entire time." I shouted to be heard over the helicopter, so she could repeat each word of tefilas haderech after me.

Baruch Hashem, the hospital in San Jose was able to diagnose the problem - a small spinal injury that could've had catastrophic consequences, if not for the Rebbe's widespread net of shluchim that are trusted implicitly by Jews all over the world!

We hosted a Friday night meal just a couple of days before we were slated to travel to the States for my sister's wedding. We had the usual suspects - some community mem-



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bers, and many tourists. Among them was a loud, fun group of Israelis. Everyone enjoyed the meal, and after Shabbos, we prepared for our trip.

It was a beautiful, sunny day, and we reveled in the sunshine while awaiting my sister, the kallah, to walk down the aisle to the chuppah. As the haunting melody of *Arba Bavos* floated on the breeze, a different melody sounded from my pocket.

Who could be calling me now? I thought.

"Chabad; how can I help you?" I answered.

"Rabbi! Help!" the voice on the phone shouted. Behind him, I could hear torrential downpour, and crashes of thunder. "It's Shai! I ate at your Chabad house on Friday night! We need help!"

"What's the matter?" I asked, ignoring the frowns aimed at me.

"We went for a ride through the jungle, and it started storming! The road has turned into a river, and it's floating our car directly into the ocean!"

"Send me your coordinates! Let me see what I can do!"

Their coordinates were just an hour from my home. I quickly messaged the community WhatsApp group, explaining the emergency, and asking for help.

I'll go right now! Came a quick reply.

Help is on the way, I texted Shai. *Hold tight!*

As my sister circled the chosson seven times, I did some circular pacing of my own. *Where was he? Had he found them yet? Why wasn't he updating me?* I called emergency services in S Teresa, trying to figure out how to get to them as quickly as possible.

Finally, the volunteer called. "I found them, but I can't get to them. They're stuck in some sort of a ditch!"

"I'll bring my tractor!" Another community member volunteered.

"I'm being called up to recite a bracha under the chuppah," I interrupted. "I'll have to mute you for a few minutes. Wait for me!"

It was a disquieting dichotomy - the ultimate joy of celebrating my sister's marriage, while simultaneously orchestrating a life-or-death search and rescue op.

Baruch Hashem, the group was eventually found and saved, and they all returned home safely. The celebration and dancing was doubled that night!

Shiri* manages a few Airbnb rentals in S Teresa. We're always happy to send business her way whenever we get inquiries about accommodations. A very large, chassidishe family asked about the possibility of spending Sukkos in S Teresa. I told them to speak with Shiri to see if she had enough rooms for them.

Because it was such a large group, Shiri canceled her plans to return to Israel for Sukkos. She was annoyed, because she'd really been looking forward to attending the Nova festival with all her friends, but there were so many arrangements to make, she knew she had to be on site. I helped her coordinate with the family and make sure they had everything they needed for Yom Tov.

We were also there for Shiri when she learned all her friends had been killed or taken captive at the festival they'd planned to attend together.

We were all in shul one Shabbos, when I saw a curious face peering through the frosted window. Always happy to urge a shyter on, I went outside and greeted the young man heartily.

"Shabbat Shalom!" I smiled.

"Gut Shabbos," he responded.

My eyes widened. *What is a "Gut Shabbos" Jew doing in S Teresa, Costa Rica on Shabbos?*

"Please come in!" I invited him. He hesitated, and looked back at the group waiting for him just down the street.

"I'm not ready to come in yet," he said, heavily. "But one day, I will be, and I'll return."

"Mendy, come on already!" an impatient friend called to him.

Hearing the telltale name, my eyebrows rose. Mendy blushed and quickly made his escape.

Many months later, Mendy returned. "I'm ready now," he said. I knew his family, and knew he grew up with a similar background as me, so we delved right into a ma'amer.

Mendy slowly rediscovered the beautiful traditions he'd left behind. As we learned more together, Shabbos and tefillin made their way back into his life.

On Yud Tes Kislev, Mendy called. "It's Yud Tes Kislev! We need to farbreng!" he said.

"Come on over!" I invited him.

Mendy and I sat together for a farbrengen I'll never forget.

To cover our absence over a couple of weeks, we hired a few bochorim to keep the shul running. The bochorim did far more than that! They decided to open a yeshiva, keeping the same sederim as they did back home. They invited community members to join shiurim in "Tomchei Temimim of S Teresa." Those classes have made an indelible impact on each of those members' lives, making Yiddishkeit a real part of it.

Some members of our community prefer to keep their Judaism private. But after the events of Simchas Torah, we knew it was time to make a stand and show our pride! For Chanukah, we organized a "mitzvah car parade." Knowing how the community felt about such loud and public displays, we thought we'd be the only ones there. We were pleasantly surprised to be joined by a number of others!

When we reached our destination, complete with Jewish music, dancing, and Chanukah foods, a man rushed up to me.

"Are you Chabad? Is there really Chabad here?" he asked, breathlessly.

"There sure is! Come join us!" I answered.

"I can't believe this!" he shouted. "Wait one minute; I'll be back."

He returned a few minutes later with his family in tow. He told me they were waiting to board a flight to Israel on October 7th to celebrate their son's bar mitzvah. When the news broke, their flight was immediately canceled. In the chaos and anxiety that followed, they'd never gotten a chance to celebrate the bar mitzvah.

"Let's do it right now!" I said, as soon as I heard that. "I've got tefillin right here!"

It was an emotional moment as the boy put on tefillin for the first time, followed by his father.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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