

IllumiNations

Issue 131 | Parshas Chukas 5784

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.  DollarDaily.org

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

Rabbi Dov and Chani Bialo, Chabad at Reed College, Portland, OR

The MitzvahThon That Changed Everything

By Chaya Chazan

The taste I got of shlichus in my bochurhood only whet my appetite for more. After a personal turning point while on bachur shlichus, I then decided to include shlichus in my future.

However, in my imagination, *college* didn't figure in at all. But when the opportunity for a community/campus shlichus in Southeast Portland came up, my mashpia advised me to at least check it out. So we boarded a plane and flew across the country.

We were so enthusiastic and raring to go, we didn't stop to consider that the very *worst* time to get a pulse on campus life is in the summer... There was barely a soul to be seen anywhere, but the neighborhood surrounding it looked beautiful and inviting. It had a welcoming *vibe* that just felt *right*. When we met a 90-year old man who agreed to put on tefillin for the first time in his life, it boosted our confidence that this was the right move.

This belief was cemented when we met Aubrey*. The campus is set in the community, rather than in its own separate campus. As we were walking onto campus, an old punch buggy came bumping right past us, and two students popped out. When we asked if they were Jewish, they said *no, but our buddy is, and he'll be here any moment*. They introduced us to their Jewish friend, Aubrey, a student. He agreed to put on tefillin, and I helped him

wrap the straps around his arm as we began chatting. Aubrey's description of the lack of Jewish student resources touched us. We felt we could make a difference. Without even needing to see school in session, we knew we'd found our place.

Once we'd made our decision, things moved quickly. We wanted to be on campus when school restarted, so the preceding summer was a whirlwind of packing and moving.

Once we were somewhat settled in, I invited Aubrey for a hot drink. He accepted my invitation, but when I handed him a Styrofoam cup, he declined. It was a quick and effective lesson on Portland's dedication to conservation. That was the last time we used Styrofoam.

A slogan commonly seen on school swag is "*Communism, atheism, and free love*," but that doesn't contradict our mission at all. We focus on Ahavas Yisroel - if one mitzvah doesn't appeal to a student, well, there are 612 others.

We knew we wanted to be especially mindful in our interactions with the students, and we wanted to avoid being misunderstood or being put into a position where students could see us in the lenses of possible misconceptions. To accomplish that, we knew we'd have to get creative! We started making "Kabbalah lollies," little sweets to which we'd attach a short Chassidic or Kabbalistic thought. It makes every interaction we have, whether with a Jew or non-Jew, meaningful and uplifting.

For a few years, we served the students at Portland State University, as well as Reed College. PSU was notorious for impossibly scarce parking. There were a couple of streets known as "the parking blocks" which had the only available spots for the entire campus. It took many "hakafos" before we'd finally manage to snag one.

On Sukkos, this issue was compounded. We'd need an even bigger spot to accommodate our sukkah mobile - and it couldn't be under a tree. Portland revels in its verdancy, so there were only *two spots* without an overhanging tree.

For each of the two years we brought our sukkah mobile to campus, somehow, someone was *just* pulling out of one of those two coveted spots! It was a small miracle that underlined how Hashem helps us along every step of our shlichus.

In memory of my brother, who passed away shortly before we moved on shlichus, my wife and I started an annual "MitzvahThon." Generous friends and family would donate for every student that put on tefillin that day.

In an atmosphere where religion is taboo, this was a non-threatening way of introducing mitzvah tefillin. We also had a pushka so passersby could give tzedakah - an accessible mitzvah for anyone and everyone.

The first year, between the library and the cafeteria, 19 students put on tefillin! The second year, the numbers grew. By the third year, we realized most of the student body was aware of MitzvahThon and felt comfortable celebrating it.

So while we continue to host a "tefillin-a-thon" on my brother's *yahrzeit* every year, it's in his honor that we've had this breakthrough, and have since begun offering tefillin in public campus areas on a regular basis.

Over time, the MitzvahThon has expanded to include other mitzvos, and we involve the community as well.

Both my personality and the campus environment have impacted my approach to our shlichus. I prefer to make opportunities attractive and readily available to engage the students to come on their own terms, while I try to make each individual interaction meaningful.

But at one particular MitzvahThon, I noticed a muscular student on the other side of the crowded room. In my teens, I was heavily into weight-lifting, so, almost before I could stop myself, I found myself calling in an uncharacteristically loud voice: *Hey! How much can you bench?*

The student smiled and came over, and we spent the next few minutes discussing weight lifting, to our mutual satisfaction. He agreed to put on tefillin, and I found out we'd caught him just in the nick of time! He was graduating just a few days later, yet somehow, we'd never met before!

When we attended the graduation ceremony a few days later, I introduced myself to the woman standing beside us. She gasped audibly, and we looked at her, surprised.

"You must be the rabbi that put tefillin on my Brett* last week!" she said.



I smiled, remembering how Brett and I had connected over my almost forgotten hobby.

"Last week was my mother's *yahrzeit*," Brett's mother explained, dabbing the corners of her eyes with a tissue. "I went to her gravestone to pray. As I was standing there, Brett sent me a photo of himself wearing *tefillin*! I couldn't believe it! It was one of the most powerful, emotional moments of my life! Thank you!"

I reflected on the incredible *hashgacha pratis* that led me to do something so completely atypical thanks to a teen-aged hobby, allowing me to connect with Brett, who we'd never met in the four years of his schooling, and offer one last opportunity to put on *tefillin* with us... on the day of his grandmother's *yahrzeit*.

We were visiting one of our students' mothers at her home. While exchanging pleasantries, we found out she was a Reed alumna as well!

"I can't thank you enough for what you're doing for my daughter," she told us. "When I was in college, I asked one of my professors to be excused for absences over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He gave me such a nasty look and made such a show of denying me, it was the last action I ever took in connection with Judaism.

"Now, my daughter proudly attends your Chabad house a couple of times a week! It's a dramatic change - for the better!"

When I first met Ben* at the daily minyan on the other side of Portland, I felt an immediate sense of friendship and attachment to him. He and I hit it off, so, although he wasn't a student at Reed, we established a weekly *chavrusa*.

I loved those *chavrusa* sessions. Ben was so eager and had such a genuine excitement and passion for learning. He was so *sincere*! It felt like I was speaking directly to his *neshama*. That's why I was devastated to learn he was engaged to his non-Jewish girlfriend. I couldn't reconcile his earnestness and growing warmth for *Yiddishkeit* with intermarriage.

It bothered me so much, I knew I had to speak with him about it. It was a very difficult conversation, but Ben saw how sincere I was, and listened carefully. Eventually, Ben decided to break off his engagement.

I remember sitting with him at that wooden folding table, feeling euphoric, guilty, noble, humble, helpless, and cruel all at once, as Ben sobbed his heart away. He was giving up such an important piece of his life, purely in service to Hashem, and I just sat by in awe. It was a humbling reminder that we are here as mere representatives of the Rebbe. If not for the strength and authority he vested in us, how could I dare to tell someone who they should or shouldn't marry? So I sat there, feeling all kinds of ways, as Ben mourned the future he'd envisioned, trying my best to help him.

I can't even imagine what strength of character and courage it took for him to follow through. I encouraged him to attend *Mayanot Yeshiva* in Jerusalem. Baruch Hashem, Ben is now married with a bunch of little *kinderlach*, and is the president of his shul!

My wife and I were out of town, attending a family wedding. We stopped to get some gas, and I had to pay for the pump inside. The walk from my car to the store was only about 20 feet or so, but I made sure to grab my *tefillin* and take them with me.

I hadn't made it more than a couple steps before I was stopped.

"Are those *tefillin*?" a man asked, eyeing the little velvet bag.

"They sure are!" I answered. "Would you like to put them on?"

"Yes, please!" the man answered. "I can't believe this! I made a commitment to wear *tefillin* every day. I'm here on vacation, so I looked up the closest Chabad house. No one was around, so I just left, not knowing how else I'd find a pair of *tefillin* today!"

Many Jews, even the very secular, know that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are sacrosanct. Though they may never step foot in shul the rest of the year, they dutifully attend services on the High Holidays.

Not in Portland. No one follows *any* sort of tradition here - especially not the religious kind.

In an effort to make sure we'd have a minyan for Rosh Hashanah, I told two brothers we'd celebrate their belated bar mitzvahs on Rosh Hashanah. But when it was time to read the Torah, we only had nine.

We waited for a while, hoping someone would walk in. As the time ticked by, one of the nine, Mitch*, started getting antsy.

"I told my boss I'd be back soon," he said. "I'll have to leave in a couple of minutes."

"Please, Mitch. Stay. We're so close!"

Mitch went back to his chair, but he was grumbling and checking his watch every few minutes. In desperation, I went outside, hoping to find a Jewish passerby. I knew it wasn't likely, but I had to try something!

"Excuse me, are you Jewish?" I asked an elderly man down the block. When he nodded, I excitedly explained the emergency and begged him to follow me back to shul. He finally agreed, and I quickly returned to shul. Just as I was leading my new friend, George*, in, Mitch walked out.

"Mitch, where are you going? I found a tenth!" I called.

"I'm sorry, Rabbi! My boss will fire me! He's not a forgiving man!"

I led George into the shul and settled him with a *tallis* and *siddur*, but now we were back where we'd started: one short of a minyan. I couldn't come up with a solution. Suddenly, Mitch walked back in.

"Eh, I can always find another job," he said, picking up his *siddur*. "You ready, Rabbi?"

Not only were we able to give both brothers their first aliyos, George and his wife soon became good friends and frequent visitors.

A few years later, George returned his *neshama* to Hashem - on Rosh Hashanah.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

DollarDaily.org

a Project of

**YadLShiach.org
and COLive.com**

COLIVE

THIS GIMMEL TAMMUZ, BRING THE WORLD OF SHLICHUS TO THOSE AROUND YOU WITH THE **Illuminations Book.**

It's the perfect way to share the Rebbe's vision with your loved ones.

Bulk discounts available.

718.781.6405 for details.

