

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 Dovid and Chanie Greene, Chabad of Rochester, MN

The Lost and Found Neshama

By Chaya Chazan

I'm a born-and-raised Minnesotan. When Rabbi Moshe and Mindy Feller AH first moved to the twin cities in 1962, my parents became very close with them and learned about Chabad and the Rebbe through them.

Rabbi Feller's remarkable charisma and sincerity impacted me, even as a child. I attended the Torah Umesorah day school in Minneapolis, and I vividly remember Rabbi Feller addressing the student body every Friday before dismissal. I can *hear* his distinct voice telling us stories about Shabbos, tzaddikim, and mesiras nefesh.

Most of my classmates "graduated" after their bar mitzvah. They considered their Jewish education complete, and moved on to public schools. My father received an offer for a full scholarship for me in a Chicago Jewish boys' high school. He was excited about the offer, and mentioned it to Rabbi Feller.

Apparently, Rabbi Feller communicated this to the Rebbe, because we received a reply that Lubavitch would match the offer and provide me with a full scholarship at any Chabad yeshiva ketana. My parents, with their academic background, insisted on a school that offered a full secular curriculum, so I attended the Lubavitcher Yeshiva of Montreal.



It was a transformative experience that made me realize I wanted more. I saw how much the Rebbe's leadership encouraged everyone to realize their potential, and I was inspired to join the ranks of the Rebbe's shluchim.

Rabbi and Mrs. Feller visited my wife and myself in our Crown Heights apartment and offered an exciting opportunity - to open a Chabad house in Rochester, the largest city in Southeastern Minnesota.

Rochester's claim to fame is the world renowned *Mayo Clinic*, one of the top centers in the world for cancer, cardiology, and endocrinology. Millions come to Rochester every year for treatment, of which around 20,000 are Jewish. We don't stop to think about how impossible the numbers are. We just *do*. We try to make sure every Jew we meet or hear about is reached and brought closer to Yiddishkeit.

In the early years of our shlichus, we went past the Rebbe for Sunday dollars. As our turn approached, Rabbi Groner AH explained to the Rebbe that we were on shlichus to Rochester.

The Rebbe pointed to the baby in my wife's arms, and the toddler in mine, and asked, "Are they also going to Rochester?"

The Rebbe's rhetorical question has shaped the way we approach our shlichus. The Rebbe zeroed in on the very real issue of empowering our children to be shluchim in their own right. They weren't coming along just because we were their parents - each of our children had an incredible influence on our community.

We received the ultimate nachas when our son and daughter-in-law joined us on our shlichus a few years ago, proving the answer to the Rebbe's question all those years ago. *They, too, are moving on shlichus to Rochester.*

Rabbi Chadakov, the Rebbe's head secretary, had been on Rabbi Feller's case for some time to find a shliach for Rochester. Rabbi Feller had tried, but every time a prospective couple wrote in to the Rebbe for a bracha, they got no answer. When we finally received a response for the Rebbe with "Bracha v'hatzlacha. Azkir al hatziyon," Rabbi Feller was overjoyed.

On our next trip to New York, he repeatedly asked us to visit Rabbi Chadakov, almost as living proof that the request had, at long-last, been fulfilled.

I asked Rabbi Chadakov, "I know I'll spend much of my time visiting Jewish patients in the hospital. What is my unique role as a Chabad shliach in performing the mitzvah of bikur cholim?"

Rabbi Chadakov, no doubt echoing the advice of the Rebbe, told me to ask each patient about their thoughts on the Jewish education system in their hometown. This accomplished a few important goals: 1) It gave them a positive, proactive question to consider, rather than wallowing in pain and despondency, 2) it forced them to consider their involvement in Jewish life, and 3) it hopefully inspired them to increase their Yiddishkeit and the Yiddishkeit of their hometown when they returned.

He also told me, "Hashem is omnipotent. He could send a person a cure wherever they are in the world. They'll only be in Rochester so they can meet *you* and become a partner in your work there."

These messages inspired me and gave me great encouragement. To this day, they still empower me to carry out my shlichus.

When Mr. Smythe's* 8th grade class learns about Middle Eastern history, he invites an imam, a priest, and a rabbi to discuss their respective cultures with his students. He's asked me to speak with his class every year for almost 30 years. Each of us three religious leaders try to find a way to help the children relate to our culture personally. The imam shows each child how their name would be written in Arabic, and the priest gives them a memento. I developed my own "shtick."

Armed with a class roster, I tell the class that many of them have names from Hebrew Scriptures. It always leads to that uniquely pre-teen self-conscious embarrassed look around the classroom, but I tell them to focus on themselves, not on their friends.

"Your parents gave you a life-long gift when they named you," I tell them. "Do you know why they chose your name?"

Most of them have no idea, and I challenge them to find out. I remember one year, Mr. Smythe had a student named Jedidiah. Even for Biblical names, that one is pushing it!

"Jedidiah, do you know how special your name is?" I asked him, in front of the whole class. "In Hebrew, it's Yediyah, and it means 'G-d's friend.' It was actually the name of King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived!"



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Jedidiah sat up straighter in his seat and looked around the room with a proud smile.

After dismissing the class, Mr. Smythe pulled me aside.

"You have no idea what you've done for Jedidiah today," he said. "He's been bullied for years on account of his name. You've made him king of the class!"

Twenty five years later, I was back in Mr. Smythe's classroom, doing the same shtick. As the rest of the class filed out, one kid stayed back.

"My uncle used to be in this class, years ago," he said. "As soon as he heard I'd be having Mr. Smythe, he said, 'Wonder if that rabbi still comes to his class. He was really cool!'"

"Well, you can tell him that I'm still here!" I joked. "What's his name?"

"Jedidiah," the kid responded.

It taught me the impact of every interaction, no matter how fleeting and small it may seem to us. We don't know what a difference we can make in a person's life, so we have to make each meeting meaningful and uplifting, whether Jewish or not.

Howard* was very proud of his car. He'd just put a ton of work into it, and every time he saw the chrome gleam, he smiled with pride.

It was his first time joining us for a Shabbos meal. He came early, and rifled through some books while my wife and I got things ready.

Our then 2-year-old was playing with some toys on the carpet. She toddled to the window and noticed his shiny car parked right out front.

"Is that yours?" she asked Howard.

"Yes it is!" Howard answered with pride. "Isn't it pretty?"

"You're not 'upposed to drive on Shabbos," she said, with all the seriousness and sincerity a toddler can muster.

Howard was dumbfounded. There were no adults in her immediate vicinity that could've whispered in her ear and prompted her to say those words. It came from a pure, clear-minded neshama.

To Howard's credit, he didn't laugh it off as the prattle of a two-year-old. He took her words to heart. Shortly thereafter, he moved so he'd be within walking distance of shul. Words from a sincere heart entered one just as sincere.

Good afternoon, Rabbi, the email began. I work in a home for disabled adults. We have a Jewish resident, and we wanted to learn more about Jewish after-life care. Could we meet?

We set up an appointment, and they soon told me the shocking and heartbreaking story of Rachel, their Jewish resident.

Rachel's parents were from Israel. Her father was a doctor, completing his residency at the Mayo Clinic. Rachel was born with a rare disease that caused her to have a shrunken skull, and no ability to see, hear, or speak. The doctors predicted years of struggle with minimal quality of life. Rachel's parents didn't know what to do. They were in a strange country, without any family or friends around. They already had a rambunctious toddler, and an extremely busy schedule. How could they manage with an infant who needed 24-hour intensive care? They ultimately decided they couldn't, and left Rachel as a ward of the state.

After completing residency, Rachel's family moved to Sacramento for his fellowship, leaving little Rachel behind in Minnesota. A short while later, Rachel's father was killed in a car accident. Her mother and older brother returned to Israel, trying to leave every remnant of their painful past behind them.

Rachel was the first resident of the home for disabled adults. Although she eventually learned some basic functions, she still needed round-the-clock care.

I was aghast as the director told me Rachel's story, but she just shook her head sadly.

"Now that Rachel is getting older, we wanted to be prepared for every eventuality," she explained. "The state is financially responsible for her, so it makes sense to go with the cheapest option - cremation. Is that a possibility?"

I was still reeling from the terrible story I'd just heard, but I tried to pull myself together. "I'm honored and proud to be from Minnesota, and to share a community with such amazing people as yourselves, who go above and beyond to respect religious cultures they're unfamiliar with," I began. I watched their faces light up, "...but I'm afraid cremation is out of the picture."

We discussed other options, and how to implement them practically.

I also contacted Rabbi Heller for advice, since he's an expert in these matters.

"You keep telling me everything she *can't* do," he said. "What about the things she *can* do? When's the last time they checked for cognitive function?"

It was stunning in its simplicity. Considering her as a promising case instead of one already doomed changed everything. The staff never gave her anything less than the best care, but now they treated her as the "girl who was found," instead of "the abandoned orphan."

When I told Rachel's story to a friend, he immediately signed over his family plot in Minneapolis's Jewish cemetery to her.

Baruch Hashem, Rachel is still alive and well, and we hope she has many more years to live. Now that the pressing issue of kevaras yisroel has been addressed, we can focus on visiting her and connecting her to Yiddishkeit as much as possible.

The Skverer Rebbe came to Mayo for a procedure, and I tried to help him out as much as possible. He came with a dedicated group of ten chassidim, who watched over him, ensured he always had a minyan, and took care of him.

When the Rebbe was released from the hospital, he and his whole entourage visited the Chabad house. Seeing ten bona fide chassidim, dressed in their distinct levush all piling out of a van is no everyday sight in Rochester, Minnesota! It attracted the attention of a passerby, who stopped and gaped in wonder.

"What is going on here?" he whispered to me. "I mean, I'm Jewish, but *this*."

"You're Jewish?" I asked, seizing what I thought was the most pertinent of his remarks. "Would you like to put on tefillin?"

He agreed to come in, and I was able to report to the Rebbe that a Jew had put on tefillin – because of him. The Rebbe smiled.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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