

# IllumiNations

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

*Rabbi Alex and Chana Colin, Y"JP of Chabad of Towson, Maryland*

## An Open Heart for the Open-Minded

By Chaya Chazan

**Once upon a time, two shluchim were sent to Milan, Italy. Both families had daughters named Chana, who remained close friends their entire lives, even after moving on shlichus of their own.**

Both Chanas had daughters who *also* went on to set up Chabad houses of their own, both, incidentally, on college campuses. The Goldsteins began Chabad at Drexel University in Philadelphia, while the Rivkins started Chabad at Towson University and Goucher College in Towson. Each of these incredible shluchim had numerous spiritual children - not least of all, my husband and myself. We've now joined the Rivkins in Towson, hoping to continue the legacy for a fifth generation.

Alex:

I grew up in a small farm town near Lakewood. I had a strong Jewish identity and celebrated my bar mitzvah and confirmation at our Reform synagogue. Whenever I took aptitude tests in high school, I always scored "*clergyman*." "Of all my kids, I knew you'd be the one to turn rabbi," my mother always jokes.

Whenever we drove through Lakewood, my family would make fun of all the "overly religious" Jews with their "ridic-

ulous getup." Now, my mother treats my kids out at Lake-wood's kosher pizzeria!

When I left for college, I left much of my Jewish identity at home. There weren't many Jews in Drexel, and at the time, I didn't care one way or the other. I joined a fraternity and was happy to gain a new set of brothers.

In my sophomore year, I went on a Birthright trip that re-awakened my interest and yearning for Yiddishkeit. Nothing much came of it until the following year, when I was stuck in college for Passover.

"I've heard the Chabad here is nice. Why don't you go there?" a Jewish friend suggested. The idea wasn't a bad one, but she was headed home, and I didn't have any other Jewish friends to go with me. I certainly wasn't going alone!

When I talked it over with another, traditionally Christian friend, he was intrigued. "I've read all about Passover in the Bible," he said. "I'd love to see it in action! I'll go with you!"

That was the first time I met Rabbi Chaim and Moussia Goldstein - a meeting that changed my life forever.

The seder was the first of many meetings, chavrusas, discussions, events, Shabbos meals, and parties I attended at Chabad at Drexel.

One summer, I attended an Israel program arranged by a well-known kiruv group. They bought me my first set of tefillin, and I promptly "Chabad-ified" them by putting them on everyone else in the program!

Eventually, I was ready for yeshiva. The only question was, which one?

Rebbetzin Moussia recommended Mayanot in Yerushalayim, but it was her *reasoning* that clinched it for me. "I want you to come back as the same Alex you are now," she explained.

On the plane on my way to yeshiva, I made the decision to give yeshiva a real chance by going "*all in*," engaging fully in every rule and ritual.

In Mayanot, I realized what Rebbetzin Moussia meant. The Rebbe emphasized channeling yourself into the life-long pursuit of serving G-d. Instead of forcing myself into a cookie cutter shape, I learned to utilize *my* individuality for the good.

Chana

My childhood was a mixed bag, of sorts. For a few years, we had a strong Jewish identity. My brother and I were in NCSY - we regularly attended our Conservadox synagogue, and I was enrolled in the local community Jewish day school for five years. However, our household was non-denominational. My mother preached equality, total acceptance, and inclusivity, without exception.

The Jewish school was too rigidly religious and the sense of superiority inherent in the lessons was too overt for comfort for us. I was pulled out and enrolled in public school instead. My family then embarked on a religious journey, trying to find that elusive peace of mind amongst the churches and prayer meetings of other religions.

I was on a personal journey of my own. The notion of "peace" became something of an obsession for me. I researched religions that emphasized world peace and finding inner peace as a means of bettering the world. *Peace*, as I'd been taught from home, meant that everyone was equal. No one could be "chosen" or better than anyone else.

Goucher College in Towson seemed like a great option for college, as they offered a major in *Peace Studies*. With a last name like "Israel," the Jewish organizations soon found me, but I was very *not* interested.

The college required a semester abroad, and, as I was particularly interested in global conflict resolution, my college advisor offered me a spot in a program in Haifa to study the Israeli-Palestinian conflict up close.

I already had very strong opinions about it, and I wanted to make sure to do this Israeli semester abroad right. I contacted a Goucher alumna who'd started a BDS program. She wanted to be helpful, and gave me a long list of things to avoid so I wouldn't benefit the Israeli government or economy. I really wanted to follow her guidance, but it was too overwhelming and complicated as a solo, first-time traveler to the Middle East. Instead, I enrolled in Ulpan before the semester began.

Simply being in Israel was a powerful force that made me acknowledge my Yiddishkeit for the first time in a long time. When I told my friend about these feelings I'd thought were long-gone, she told me about Mendy and Sheiny Rivkin, the friendly Chabad couple back at Goucher College.

"I'll take you there when we get back," she promised.

When I returned from Israel, I visited the Rivkins for Shabbos. It was a visit that changed my life forever. I signed up for Sinai Scholars, and used the knowledge I gained in those five years of Jewish school to battle every point to the bitter end. I'm still amazed and grateful that they con-



tinued to welcome me back, week after week. Despite myself, I was learning and growing more and more.

When Rabbi Mendy suggested I attend Mayanot for a month, I was intrigued. A few short days was enough to get me hooked. I'd finally found the answer I'd been searching for all these years. The message that "Judaism is not a religion. It's a connection with Hashem," resonated deeply. I didn't have to conform myself to Judaism; there was a spot made perfectly for me. Furthermore, this was the beginning of my discovery that Judaism laid out a map for achieving true world peace.

I chose Israel for grad school so I could attend Mayanot at the same time. While I continued to learn and grew to appreciate so much of our heritage, my liberal leanings hadn't subsided at all. When Israel went into Gaza for Operation Pillar of Defense, I was incensed. I wrapped a keffiyeh around my neck, and wore it as a symbol of protest in Mayanot. Instead of throwing me out or yelling angrily at me, the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Levinger, engaged me in calm, rational discussion. The rebellious, liberal freethinker was accepted as lovingly as anyone else.

## Chana

Although we mainly cater to young professionals, we live across from Goucher College, so we often interact with the students.

Recent events have made me appreciate the unconditional love and support I was shown by my rabbis and rebbetzins as a misguided young woman. I feel it is my duty to pass it on to the youth of today, who are intrepid, eager, and vocal activists. Their shouts and slogans may bother us, but they are still Jews who deserve our patience and love.

Over Pesach, there was an encampment on campus. Many of the participants were Jewish, so we handed out matzah. They accepted it graciously, and spoke with us in a friendly manner. They even made a seder with it - yes it was a week later, and with an orange on the seder plate - but they did it.

When they had an excess of food from all the donations they received, they offered us a share. We cooked for Shabbos with it, and the leader of the encampment even agreed to put on tefillin!

I see myself in these students. I was lucky enough to find mentors who looked past my bluster and accepted me for who I was. We need to figure out a way to engage with these precious Yidden creatively and find common ground. Facts and figures don't speak to people; love does.

## Chana

As a student, I got to know Joe Morton, a philosopher by training, and founder of the peace studies department at Goucher. He was a liberal Jew, so it almost goes without saying that he was an activist. We had many lively discussions about world peace and the minutiae of specific labels.

After I was introduced to the Rivkins, I knew Professor Morton would love them, too. He lived just a few houses away, so I invited him to join me there.

"I'm an atheist!" he protested. "No way!"

"You can argue with the rabbi!" I told him. "I know how much you love that. He's open to any discussion!"

Professor Morton soon capitulated, and, as I'd predicted, he loved it. Soon, he started coming on his own, without the help of my arrangements.

A few years later, I was living in Philadelphia, commuting to Baltimore to help the Rivkins with their shlichus. I found out Professor Morton was hospitalized with a serious illness. I visited him as often as I could and brought him a menorah for Chanukah, little though I knew he'd appreciate it.

When he was moved to hospice, I was in Philadelphia, so I asked Rabbi Rivkin to visit him on my behalf.

Rabbi Rivkin always offered him a chance to put on tefillin. If he was conscious, he was quick to reject it. If he was sleeping, his son was sure to do so for him.

On one visit, Rabbi Rivkin saw he didn't have much time left. He wanted to say viduy with him, but he knew Professor Morton's anti-religious son would never stand for such a thing. His son was almost always in the room, and time was running out.

Suddenly, the son excused himself for a few minutes. Rabbi Rivkin acted quickly, not knowing how long he had. He recited Viduy with the sick man, and completed it mere seconds before his son returned.

Professor Morton passed away a short time later.

## Chana

As people gathered for Simchas Torah hakafos, they shared the horrifying news. While it was heartbreaking, we knew Hashem wanted us to be b'simcha, and dance through our tears.

We decided to implement something we'd seen in another Chabad house. We formed a group of students, took the Torahs, and headed for the main street, which was lit up

by dozens of bars and restaurants, open on this busy Saturday night.

As we passed each place of business, we grabbed any Jews we saw and invited them to dance with us in the street. It was incredibly powerful and uplifting.

We made quite a scene with our singing and dancing. A passerby stopped by and chatted for a bit.

"My parents want me to marry Jewish," he told us, apparently oblivious to his non-Jewish girlfriend's gasp of indignation.

It was the pintele Yid aflame in response to the tragic provocation.

## Alex

I love going around and blowing shofar for people on Rosh Hashanah. This past year, I was looking forward to going around the college as a family, but the torrential rains changed our plans. While Chana stayed home with the little ones, I took my oldest across the street. There were only 30 minutes left before shkiyah.

As we walked, I explained to her that we probably wouldn't meet many people. It was late, and the rain would probably chase away the few who would've ventured out.

"We're here not because it's fun, or because people are expecting us. We're doing this because the Rebbe emphasized how important it is for every Jew to hear shofar," I explained.

We danced through the rain, singing Rosh Hashanah songs together.

We took refuge under the overhang outside the cafeteria. Unbelievably, we blew shofar ten times in those thirty minutes!

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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