

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

Rabbi Yisroel and Leah Engel, Beis Menachem, Denver, CO

Just One Candle, Just One Shabbos

By Chaya Chazan

My wife and I both knew we wanted to dedicate our lives to shlichus. When we got married in 1981, we were perfectly poised to fulfill our dream.

Many states and countries already had established shluchim, but with the Rebbe's recent push to grow his army of shluchim exponentially, it felt like the sky was the limit. We could strike out on our own in unchartered territory and open the first Chabad house in miles! Or we could join another shliach and help expand his reach.

Even as a bochur, I was heavily involved in mitzva mezuzah throughout the city of New York. I visited homes, office buildings, hospitals, schools, and apartments and helped the owners see what a great mitzvah they could do by allowing me to affix a mezuzah on their doorposts. At one point, I was able to report to the Rebbe that we'd hung up *two thousand* mezuzos in New York City!

When we saw it wouldn't be feasible as a full-time shliach position, we started searching outside the city. After writing to the Rebbe and getting his bracha, we soon

landed in Denver, Colorado, working with Rabbi Yisroel Meir Popack AH, and Rabbi Aharon Sirota.

Denver has a rich history of established Jewish communities. Years before, there'd been a flourishing yeshiva community, complete with a slaughterhouse that supplied kosher meat to the entire country. There were many old shuls and yeshivas. Unfortunately, the community had mostly moved on, leaving just brick and mortar memories of a once-thriving Jewish center.

Baruch Hashem, Denver has come a long way. Judaism once again dances in its streets and fills its homes.

Mr. Harris* is a well-known member of our community. He's fully Torah-observant, attends shul regularly, and comes to all our shiurim and programs.

Once, at a farbrengen, someone asked him, "Mr. Harris, what got you started on your journey to Judaism? What's kept you so *dedicated* to it for so long? I know it's not always easy."

Mr. Harris had a quick answer ready.

"When I was a kid in public school, Rabbi Engel came to my class with a model matzah bakery. That one experience changed my life. It showed me Judaism isn't a dry set of rules and regulations. It's living and breathing. It's passionate. It's *fun!*"

I was amazed to hear something so simple had been such a powerful catalyst. I can only imagine how many more "Mr. Harris" there are, whose stories I haven't yet heard.

I was reading *The Jewish Press* when an interesting headline caught my eye: *New York City School Completes Six Million Penny Project*. The article described how students had amassed six million pennies as a visual representation of the magnitude of the Holocaust's toll. The article concluded that the \$60,000 collected would be used to enhance the Holocaust museum exhibits.

That's nice, I thought to myself, but they're missing the main point. A museum is a tribute to someone long gone - something from the past that needs to be remembered. How much more meaningful could this project be if the funds were used for something current, living, and vibrant? What if we used the money to write a sefer Torah in memory of the victims?

That's what inspired me to launch another Six Million Penny Project in Denver. The impact was incredible! People from all over the city participated, donating pennies or checks. We even had a check sent from a prisoner in the state penitentiary! He'd heard about our project and wanted to contribute. His \$12.16 check brought tears to my eyes, knowing how much of a sacrifice it was for him to write it.

Brad* and Susan*, a set of twins celebrating their 12th birthday, asked all their guests to donate to the Six Million Penny Project in lieu of gifts.

Henry* donated a bucket of pennies that took two people to drag it over. He'd been throwing pennies in for over 30 years, and wanted the entire thing to join our massive collection. I still have that bucket in my office as a constant reminder of how important each individual's participation is.

When we finished collecting everything, we used the money to write a Sefer Torah - *The Living Sefer Torah*. The \$60,000 bought 600,000 letters, representing the six million kedoshim that perished in the Holocaust.

In the early years, before Colorado had all the shluchim it has today, I used to travel to nearby cities to give shiurim.

There was a family in Colorado Springs whose oldest son, Baruch*, was about to become bar mitzvah. They wanted to hold the celebration in Colorado Springs, but the only shul in the whole city was a Reform temple, and they wanted a genuine experience. Instead, they held the bar mitzvah in a hotel. They invited our whole family for Shabbos and ordered pre-packaged, double wrapped kosher meals.

I was given a corner of the hotel kitchen to call my own. On Friday afternoon, I was busy in the kitchen, supervising the delivery of the meals and making sure everything was as it should be. The hotel's executive chef was working across from me, and I struck up a conversation with her.

She told me her name was Sophie*, and when I asked her if she was Jewish, she told me she actually was!

"Wonderful!" I responded. "There's an amazing mitzvah you can do that will help bring light into the whole world. Do you have a candlestick and matches at home?"

"Yes," she replied, warily.

"Great! All you have to do is light the candle at this exact time, cover your eyes, and recite this blessing. This will bring peace into your home, and, by extension, the whole world."



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Sophie told me she'd do it when she got home, and we both went back to work.

Baruch had a wonderful bar mitzvah, and we all returned to our regular lives.

Seven years later, I got a phone call.

"Hi, my name is Sophie," said the woman on the phone. "I'm sure you don't remember me. I met you in a hotel kitchen seven years ago? You asked me to light Shabbat candles."

"Of course I remember you!" I replied. "Did you light the candles in the end?"

"I sure did!" she answered, cheerfully. "It changed my life! That one little candle inspired me to learn more about Judaism. I started becoming more observant, and I met my fiance, Mike*. He learned about Judaism with his Chabad rabbi, and he's now a baal teshuva. We want to get married in Pueblo, Colorado. It would mean so much to me if you could officiate at our chuppah."

Of course, I was honored to accept. Sophia and Mike now live in a major Jewish community, where they and their children keep a completely Torah-observant home.

I recently visited them and received inordinate chassidische nachas as I listened to their oldest son repeat what he'd learned about the weekly parshah.

That one little candle had, indeed, brought much light into the world.

Jenny* was stationed at the air force base near Colorado Springs, but she came to every class she could. After a while, she told me she was moving to New York. I wished her luck and strongly encouraged her to keep up with her learning, especially since New York, with its many shulcham and Torah centers, had so many opportunities.

We lost touch over the next few years, until Jenny moved back to Colorado Springs. She resumed her regular attendance at my classes and seemed to be gaining a lot from them.

One night, after class, Jenny approached me and said, "Rabbi Engel, I'm ready for the next step! What could I do?"

I was stymied. There was no Jewish community in Colorado Springs for her to build a deeper connection to, nor any other Torah-classes or rabbis around. Suddenly, an idea popped into my head, and though I was still developing its details, I told her about it.

"Jenny, I think you're ready to take on the Six Week Challenge!" I said.

Her eyes opened wide. "That sounds great! What is it?"

A few more ideas sprang to mind. "We're going to choose a few specific, realistic goals in regards to Shabbos observance. You're going to challenge yourself to honor them for the next six weeks."

"I can do that," she agreed.

"And," I added, hastily, as another idea came to mind, "for one of those weeks, you'll have to drive to Denver before Shabbos starts, and spend the entire Shabbos with us."

"Absolutely!" she said, her eyes shining. "I can't wait to start!"

I explained some of the dos and don'ts of Shabbos, and together, we picked out a few that suited Jenny's lifestyle.

A few weeks later, Jenny called. "This is the week, Rabbi! I've kept my Shabbos resolutions for five weeks now, so this is my final week of the challenge. I still have to do the second part, so I guess I'll be spending this Shabbos in Denver!"

That was the first, but definitely not the last, Shabbos Jenny observed. She continued growing in her commitment to Yiddishkeit. She even spent a Shabbos in Crown Heights, hosted by my in-laws, of blessed memory.

Jenny knew exactly what she wanted. When she started considering shidduchim offers, she only accepted offers that matched her vision of where she wanted to end up. Baruch Hashem, Jenny found her perfect match, and they are now raising a family that treasures their relationship with Hashem. Of course, Shabbos is the highlight of their week!

When Mr. Pelled* needed a liver transplant, his whole family moved to Denver, so he could receive the best care possible. They didn't speak English well, and leaned on us heavily for support.

Mr. Pelled was at the top of the transplant list, but the hospital demanded an advance sum of \$110,000 to keep him there. His Israeli insurance would cover up to \$107,000, but the hospital insisted they make up the \$3,000 difference. If they didn't deliver the money in full by Monday night at 8:00, he'd be bumped to the bottom of the list.

Raising a large sum of money in a short time is never an easy task, but back in the 80's, this seemed almost herculean! Slowly, dollar by dollar, we gathered donations. Unfortunately, we were still short.

It was already 7:00 Monday evening, and we still didn't have enough. The anxiety gnawed relentlessly. This was literally a matter of life and death! There was no other choice but to get the money! I mentally calculated how long it would take me to pick up the check and deliver it to the hospital. It would need to happen in the next few minutes, or I would be too late.

Reminding myself that Hashem is in charge, not hospital administrators, I sat down at my desk and recited a kapitel of Tehillim fervently. Just as I kissed the sefer and put it back in place, I received a call that the final sum had been collected! I was able to deliver it to the hospital just in time, ensuring Mr. Pelled received the next available liver.

Michal confided in me that she was having some sholom bayis troubles and didn't know what to do. I tried counseling her as best as I could, but I knew I was way out of my depths.

"Why don't you write to the Rebbe and ask for advice?" I suggested.

"That's a great idea!" Michal replied. "I'll write to the Rebbe."

Some time later, I discreetly inquired how Michal was doing. She beamed. "Thank G-d, everything is so much better! You know," she paused for a moment, thoughtfully, "you told me to write to the Rebbe about my problems. I really wanted to, and even verbalized what I'd write, but I noticed that from that moment, everything seemed to be changing for the better. I realized the Rebbe had already given me my answer, before I even sent the letter, so I never ended up writing it!"

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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