

# 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

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## True and Eternal Teshuva

By Chaya Chazan

**The Rebbe spoke so strongly about shlichus, I was ready to skip kollel altogether and move out the day after our final sheva brachos! My mashpia advised me to wait a while and give our shana rishona my full attention.**

My association with Chabad began in 7th grade. I was attending the yeshiva of Brighton Beach, when a new group of young Lubavitch Rabbis joined the teaching staff. Rabbi Dovid Rimler was my seventh grade rebbi, and he inspired me to join Gan Yisroel that summer and visit 770 for the first time. He was my teacher the following year as well, and was extremely influential in deciding which yeshiva ketana I'd attend.

I applied to Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim, and was privileged to be the first class in their new building on Ocean Parkway.

After four years of yeshiva, my parents pushed me to apply for college, as all my siblings had done. I knew I couldn't take such a step without the Rebbe's approval, so I brought it up when I went for my yearly yechidus.

"You should not leave the atmosphere of Tomchei Temimim," the Rebbe told me.

I continued in other Lubavitcher mosdos until my marriage in 1979.



Although I couldn't move on shlichus, like Dovid Hamelech, I wanted to do everything I could to prepare for it. We began researching various options. A good friend from 770 told his brother, Rabbi Moscovitz A"H, the head shliach of Illinois, to recruit my wife and me to join him in Chicago.

That was 44 years ago. I am proud to be the longest-serving shliach in the entire state.

Shlichus - especially a second, "assistant" shlichus - was such a new concept, the role wasn't clearly defined. My job was to make sure that whatever the Rebbe asked for was taken care of. When the Rebbe wanted public school children to participate in a contest that would encourage them to do the mitzvos of Pesach, we created the "Matza Ball Contest" and visited every school in the district to explain the rules. We walked the streets for hours, signing children up for a letter in the Sefer Torah, trying to reach the Rebbe's goal. When farbrengens were announced last minute, we ran around trying to organize a local gathering as well.

Baruch Hashem, the community grew immensely, and Illinois now has over 100 shluchim!

In the first years, my schedule was extremely hectic. Everything changed when I spoke to my mashpia, Rabbi Goodman AH.

"What's your daily seder?" he asked me.

"Well, I spend the majority of each day in the office, working with Rabbi Moscovitz Ko. In the evenings, I give shiurim, visit senior centers, prisons, and community members. On Sunday nights, I give a shiur in the main shul. On Monday nights, I visit

My mashpia cut me off mid-sentence. "You can't do all that!" he said, firmly. "Delegate your classes to others - many are just as capable. Your Sunday night shiurim can be taught by Rabbi M. Your Tuesday night chavrusa can be taken over by Rabbi T."

"Then what should I be doing?" I asked.

"Consider eating dinner with your family a part of your shlichus," he responded. "If you don't spend enough time with your family, it will result in failure."

Our Chabad house is close to Chicago's O'hare Airport. Knowing how many people get stranded unexpectedly, we make sure to keep a well-stocked pantry, a hospitality suite, and minyanim and hot meals as needed.

One Friday afternoon, Mr. Bartlett\* called to ask if he could stay for Shabbos, as his flight had been canceled. He sounded annoyed, but I hoped our warm and cheerful Shabbos table would recover his good spirits.

Throughout Shabbos, Mr. Bartlett continued to bemoan his interrupted schedule. However, as we spoke, we found we had so much in common! Mr. Bartlett provided resources for prisons, and I visited prisons regularly!

Mr. Bartlett continued to repine, asking rhetorically, "Why did my flight have to be canceled?"

On Motzei Shabbos, we invited everyone to join us for our customary viewing of the weekly *Living Torah* video, a compilation of clips featuring the Rebbe. That week, the interview portion showed Mrs. Miriam Swerdlow, retelling the famous story of the massive winter storm that kept them grounded and stuck for Shabbos.

I could see the wonder in Mr. Bartlett's eyes as he turned to me, as if questioning if I'd set this up in advance. I smiled and shrugged. *It wasn't me! That's 100% hashgacha pratit!*

We all knew Chabad of Illinois was being run on a major deficit. Things came to a head when Rabbi Moscovitz called us into his office and informed us, with a strained voice, that he had to let us go, as he could no longer afford our salaries.

I knew shlichus was more than that. I told him I'd be staying; I'd figure out another way to pay my bills. My shul gave me a small salary, and I found hashgacha positions and other odd jobs that allowed me to make ends meet - for the most part. The rest had to be fundraised. I was still working with Rabbi Moscovitz on the various programs I'd started in Chicago, as well as running my own shul in Niles, and visiting prisons regularly. It was quite a hectic time!

Meanwhile, my kids were growing up. My first wife, Hinda OBM, was fighting cancer. She was worried about our children's futures, and urged me to consider training them in fields that had a slightly more secure paycheck than shlichus.

"What do you mean?" I asked, shocked. "Of course they'll be shluchim!"

"Well then, we'd better find a way to fundraise for their salaries, so they can come work for you," she advised.

She was absolutely right. It took a lot of time, training, and hard work, but I acclimated myself to my new role - instead of being the man in the field, I had to be the man on the phone, ensuring our little organization had enough to keep it afloat.

She passed away after a valiant battle with the dreaded disease, and I named our organization for her, doubling my efforts to expand our operations.

I remarried a few years later, and my wife, Avigayil, has helped the organization grow in ways I could never imagine. Not only do our rabbis regularly visit a long list of jails, her hard work has added social workers and caseworkers who help former detainees re-enter society after being released, providing them with counseling, training, housing, and employment. Half of the casework supports their family members and children, the innocent collateral damage of crime.



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My wife's vision has infected me to see how much our organization can grow and continue to help many others.

When I first started visiting prisons, I was a young man of 25. One of the first inmates I grew close with was Shimon\*, a teenager who'd been convicted of first degree murder against a classmate. Shimon was in a bad state when I first found him. He was looking at a 14-year sentence, where he'd spend the best years of his life behind bars. He was despondent, not seeing the use of doing anything with his wasted life.

When I spoke with him, I sensed something underneath the hardened criminal - a Jewish neshama, crying to be set free. I visited him a few times a week, bringing him kosher food and books of Jewish philosophy to read.

By the time Shimon turned 18 and was transferred out of juvie, he was already wearing a yarmulka and tzitzis. The prison guard stared in disbelief; in all their years, they'd never seen a prisoner dress like that.

I continued visiting him and saw that Shimon was undergoing a deep, genuine teshuva. He worked on himself to root out his darkest traits, and was extremely remorseful about his past actions.

When Shimon's case was put under review, the court unanimously agreed to release him early for good behavior. Shimon was duly appreciative and grateful to begin a new life while still relatively young. He immediately enrolled in a baal teshuva yeshiva, and completely turned his life around.

Shimon's first marriage ended in disaster a few short months after the wedding. His wife was abusive, and the violence began during sheva brachos week!

Shimon would call me, in tears. "What do I do, Rabbi? Why is this happening to me?"

I couldn't know for sure, but I tried to comfort him with this thought: "The Rambam says that the greatest sign of a complete teshuva is when you're presented with the same opportunity, but manage to overcome your yetzer. The fact that you've never raised a finger to your wife, no matter what she's done to you, is a sign that your rehabilitation is complete."

My wife's side of the organization can be the hardest, most heartbreaking part of it all. She'll often talk to mothers, sisters, brothers, and friends of the accused, whose only crime is being related. Yet they often cry about the isolation they feel, as everyone in the community turns their backs on them and glares at them as if it was *their* hands that committed the deed.

When trying to rehabilitate former detainees into society, we hit roadblock after roadblock. No one can look past the "convict" description to see the reformed and eager human underneath. Their families won't accept them back, and finding a job is next to impossible. It's heart-rending to hear story after sto-

ry, knowing there's only so much we can do to tear down such strongly built prejudices.

My wife went with one recently released man to get some basic pieces of clothing. Still unused to the ways of the world, he mentioned - rather loudly - that he'd just spent 20 years in prison. She tried shushing him, especially when the man in front of him turned around and looked him up and down.

"I did 10 years, myself!" he said. "Here; take these pants. You need them more than I do."

The simple gesture brought tears to my wife's eyes. It was clear that the man needed them too, but he didn't hesitate to give them away.

Another time, my wife was trying to get an agency to help Sonia\*, a woman who'd spent 17 years in prison for murder.

"We're too scared to accept her as a client," they refused. "She's dangerous, and a liability to our staff and other clients."

"Just meet her once, please," my wife begged. They finally agreed, and were shocked when my wife led in a frail, elderly woman, ambulating with difficulty even while clinging to her walker.

"Look at my bobble earrings!" Sonia excitedly showed the staff. "Aren't they adorable?"

Needless to say, sweet Sonia has become one of their favorite clients.

Michelle\* was a Fulbright scholar with an MA - and also a bipolar diagnosis. One of her episodes led to her sending someone numerous texts. They complained to the police, and she was arrested for harassment. She awaited sentencing for 18 months, living in inhumane conditions that only worsened her illness. When her case finally reached the docket, it was immediately dismissed and she was released. But the damage had already been done.

There are so many stereotypes working against these people. We wish more people would learn from the Rebbe's example on how to treat people who are learning how to adjust to a whole new world.

My wife went to visit Lynn\* in a halfway house, whose conditions were only slightly better than the prison she'd just left.

Lynn was overwhelmed with gratitude upon receiving the food and clothes my wife brought her, and they chatted for a little while. My wife couldn't help but notice the cross dangling from Lynn's neck. Lynn herself had told my wife she'd grown up in a traditional Jewish home.

"How sad," my wife thought to herself. "This poor neshama is so distant from her faith and heritage, she feels like her only symbol of hope and protection is a cross. Maybe I can do something to rekindle her faith."

Aloud, she said, "Can I teach you a special prayer called Shema? It's about -"

Lynn interrupted her with a flawless recitation of Shema, as she'd learned it as a little girl in Hebrew School.

Tears filled my wife's eyes. "Who am I to lecture *her* on faith and suffering?" she thought. "She's been through so much turmoil, and yet Shema is still on the tip of her tongue after all these years."

I remember receiving a call, asking me to visit a family still reeling from a traumatic event. Sarit's\* husband, while in the throes of a mental health collapse, tried to "exorcize the demons" from their baby. While the police took him into custody, Sarit and her remaining four children had nowhere to go. They didn't want to stay in their home, the scene of so much trauma, but they didn't know what other options they had.

I immediately drove to their home and packed the family in my car. We treated them to kosher pizza - the first of their lives - and brought them to our home. My wife, Hinda A"H, a born teacher, engaged the children and tried to distract them from their trauma. They spent that whole Shabbos with us, and we did our best to stay upbeat, positive, and cheerful. It was the children's first time seeing an Aron Kodesh and Torah, hearing kiddush, and making havdalah.

They moved to Eretz Yisroel a short while later, and I lost touch with the family. I continued visiting the father in jail, but his mental health hadn't improved, and it was nearly impossible to hold a coherent conversation with him. When he passed away a few years later, we were able to arrange a Jewish burial for him.

25 years later, I got a call from the wife of Sarit's youngest son. They'd recently moved back to America, and her husband was interested in learning more about what happened to his father. Through them, I found out Sarit's children had all integrated into Torah-observant schools, and were all leading Torah lives.

Our interference over one Shabbos derailed a path of destruction in its tracks, and instead turned it into a force for good. We can never know how great an impact our little actions can have.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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