

# IllumiNations

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*Rabbi Eliezer and Devorah Lea Klain, Chabad on Campus Hanamal, Haifa, Israel*

## Our Students on the Front Lines

By Chaya Chazan

**Chabad on Campus came to Israel just before our marriage in 2013, and Chabad student centers were popping up at universities throughout the country.**

The organization had their eye on a college in Haifa, and was looking for the right couple to begin. Fifteen other couples had already applied and visited before we were offered the position. Although it has its challenges - its deep downtown, so everything is industrialized and there's no kid-friendly spaces, and it's far from the religious parts of town, where the shuls and schools are - we decided to accept.

One thing that many people don't realize about Israeli colleges is that while the average university student starts at 18 and graduates at around 22, Israeli teens go straight from high school into the army. After their

mandatory 3-year service, many take a year or two to tour Europe and Asia. Only afterwards, when they're already 23 years old, do they return home and begin settling into "real life" by attending college.

On the one hand, it makes our job a little more challenging, since they're older and busier. They're in college for a very specific reason, not just to party, have fun, and hopefully learn something meanwhile. On the other hand, since so many of them are fresh off the heels of their own journeys of "self discovery," hoping to find the answers to their spiritual emptiness, when they meet us, they recognize the value of what we offer.

Over the last year, our shlichus has completely changed. Almost every student we have is in miluim and was called up in the wake of October 7. College was canceled for months, and campus was utterly deserted. Even now, we spend more time meeting our students in uniform on their army bases than we do on campus. Our hometown of Haifa and the university in particular are under regular rocket attacks.

Many students who avoided us on campus or previously felt uncomfortable are now happy to reach out and invite us for a visit and a chat - and some excellent food, of course. In that way, the war has brought us closer together.

While we offer many shiurim and classes, I've found that today's youth are looking for something else. Of course, the importance of learning Torah can never be overstated. Recent events have shown us, more than ever, how important human connection is.

The war forced us to look away from our phones, computers, and screens, and develop the emotional con-

nection with others we so desperately need. My students want to sit and *talk*. They come to the Chabad house for companionship.

Knowing how important it is, I make sure I'm just as available for a good shmooze as I am to give a lecture.

Like every good shliach, I spend Rosh Hashanah afternoons on the street, blowing shofar for passersby.

One year, I was doing my usual rounds. I was blowing a round of shofar blasts for a couple in the street when I suddenly felt cold water drench me from head to toe. Astonished, I looked up and saw a woman leaning out of her window with the pail she'd just emptied on my head.

"Go away!" she screamed at me. "No one wants to hear your loud, annoying horn! We don't need you! Get out of here!"

I knew there was little point engaging, so I shook off my dripping hat, wished her a *Shana tova*, and moved on to another area.

A week later, as I sat in shul on Yom Kippur, I was shocked to see the same lady slip in and find an unobtrusive seat in the back row.

"Chag sameach!" I greeted her. "I'm so happy you could join us today!"

"I've never been in a synagogue before," she said, somewhat redundantly. "But I had to come today. You might not remember, but last week, I -"

"I remember," I said, quietly.

"Right. Well," she continued, embarrassed. "A few nights ago, my grandfather appeared to me in a dream. *What's wrong with you?* He scolded me. *Your grandmother and I grew up in Communist Russia, and we still heard the shofar on Rosh Hashanah! Who do you think you are to stop that rabbi from blowing the shofar?*

"I came today to apologize," she concluded.

"Today is the day of forgiveness, so how could I possibly withhold mine?" I replied. "We're honored to have you here."

"Excuse me, do you want to put on tefillin today?" I asked a young man passing by my tefillin booth.

"@#!+ no!" he responded, before walking away.

I was accustomed to refusals... albeit not quite as rude as that one, but I took it in stride.

A few months later, he was back at my table.



“Do you want to put on tefillin today?” I asked him.

“A few months ago, you asked me the same question, and I responded very rudely,” he answered. “But today - yes. Yes, I want to put on tefillin.”

I helped him bind his arm with the leather straps. I could see that he was very emotional as he covered his eyes and said Shema.

His eyes were wet when he handed me back the velvet pouch.

“I had a friend when I was in Gaza,” he said, quietly. “He wasn’t religious, but he made sure to put on tefillin every single day, no matter what. He was killed in battle, and I just wanted to feel close to him again - to do something I know he’d be doing if he were alive today. This is for him.”

As we prepare for the Yamim Noarim this year, I keep getting requests from students who’ve never celebrated these holidays in their lives.

“I really want to come to Rosh Hashanah this year. Please tell me Chabad is hosting tefillot,” one student texted.

“I’m coming for every tefillah!” another student told me. “I’d like to learn more about the tefillot, what they mean, and how to pray. Is there a special siddur I can buy?”

These requests are coming from young men and women that are so far removed from Yiddishkeit, Yom Kippur meant absolutely nothing to them. At the most, their parents may have “commemorated” the holy day by staying home and watching movies.

Now, for the first time in their lives, post October 7th, they want to connect and learn more. We’re only too happy to help.

“You owe property taxes for the year!” the school president told me, in a threatening voice. “You better pay up!”

“My taxes have never been that high before!” I protested. “We’ve always been able to get an exemption.”

Nothing I said seemed to make any difference at all. The school threatened to close us down and ban us from campus if we didn’t make a complete payment right away.

There was absolutely no way I could afford it. I didn’t know what to do, so I poured out my heart in a letter to the Rebbe. I sent it off to the ohel. Time passed.

Somehow, (I’m too scared to ask too many questions) everything seemed to resolve peacefully, and they never bothered me again.

Since our students are older, and many of them are settling down, getting married, and starting families, showing them what a Torah-observant family looks like is very important. We make sure our children share a Dvar Torah by every Shabbos meal, and encourage them to take part in our shlichus.

One Shabbos, everyone was chatting around the table. My seven-year old daughter saw one of the girls pull out her phone.

“Shabbos is so beautiful!” my daughter said. “You don’t even need your phone! If you put your phone away, you can enjoy the Shabbos table, and the yummy Shabbos food, and all our friends!”

We held our breath, but the girl smiled and said, “You’re right!” She put her phone away and chatted comfortably with the group.

In fact, for the next few weeks, she kept her phone off the entire Shabbos!

“*Mipi olilim viyonkim yisadita oz,*” - “From the mouths of babes You established strength.”

My wife learned with Rina\* for a long time prepping her for marriage, but she was still ambivalent about using the mikvah. After discussing it with a rav, my wife figured out a way to make Rina a little more comfortable. Instead of using a traditional mikvah, she’d immerse in the ocean. Rina agreed, and began preparing.

That night, my wife accompanied Rina to the beach. On the way, Rina suddenly turned to her and said, “Devorie, I changed my mind. Let’s go to a real mikvah. For thousands of years, our mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers have been immersing in a mikvah. I don’t want to be the one to break the chain.”



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Meirav\* grew up in a typically secular Israeli family, with anti-religious leanings. In the weeks post October 7th, to restore the feeling of security, soldiers were positioned all over checkpoints in the south. So when she received her orders post-October 7th, she was extremely annoyed.

“I have to stand guard outside the women’s mikvah in Netivot?” she fumed. “I don’t even believe in all that stuff? Couldn’t they send someone else?”

Grumbling still, she took her first shift outside the mikvah. She scoffed as she watched the women enter one at a time, each of them rushing into the safe embrace of the building as fast as they could. But as the night wore on, she felt a grudging respect beginning to grow. As she repeated her duty night after night, the respect and admiration won, and soon grew to curiosity.

*We’re so close to Gaza, and things are still so dangerous and unsettled. What gives these women the courage to leave their homes and families and come here at night alone? She began to wonder. I must learn more about it!*

When things returned to some semblance of normalcy and Meirav returned to college in Haifa, she immediately enrolled in our JLI course.

“Those women inspired me with their courage and strength,” she explained. “I need to understand what it was all for. Please teach me.”

Meirav has now started lighting Shabbos candles and turns her phone off for the entirety of the holy day. She is adamant that when she marries, she, too, will keep the mitzvah of Taharas Hamishpacha, inspired by the women of Netivot she stood guardian.

My seven-year-old daughter loved setting out a table with Shabbos candles every Friday afternoon. She’d stop women walking by and urge them to take one and light it.

The dean of the university passed by, but of course, my daughter didn’t know who she was.

“Ma’am, light these Shabbos candles!” she commanded in her high-pitched voice.

The dean was so touched. This seven-year-old girl just wanted her to light Shabbos candles. She took a box and lit them that night.

She later told me that my daughter’s simple, one sentence imperative had inspired her to start lighting candles every week.

Reim\* was never overly enthusiastic about Judaism, but he sometimes agreed to put on tefillin, and enrolled in the JLI course I gave each week.

Reim is part of the Magdan Combat Unit, an elite troop in the IDF. For four months, he was fighting deep in Gaza and never had a moment to breathe, let alone make a phone call! When his unit finally received temporary reprieve, Reim called me.

“Reim! Mah nishmah! I haven’t heard from you in months!” I answered, cheerfully.

“Everything’s changed,” he told me, seriously. “Let me tell you what happened on October 7th.

*I was in Tel Aviv, just hanging out and enjoying myself, when disturbing reports started coming in. I felt so angry and helpless, so I just got in my car and drove to my army base. I had nothing on me - no guns, no protective armor, no weapons - but I just felt like I had to be doing something.*

*We sat there for hours, begging the commander to send us on a mission. But information was still coming in and being processed, and we had no idea whether terrorists were still freely roaming the streets.*

*Eventually, we had enough. We just had to be doing something. We were right near Kibbutz Beiri, so we drove there to see what we could do. It was awful. I’ve seen things in war, but walking through those streets was a special kind of nightmare.*

*We were told there was one house where a mother was hiding out with her two little children. We knocked on her door, telling her that we were from the IDF and were coming to help her. The poor woman was petrified. She was sure we were just another wave of terrorists, as many had dressed up as Israeli soldiers to gain even more victims.*



*We tried proving our identity and showing who we were, but she refused to open the door. The situation was so sad and heartbreaking - a sister, too afraid to open the door to her own brother. I needed to do something that would convince her I was for real. I thought deep and realized I know a Jewish line that no terrorist could say. From the depth of my heart I cried out with emotion, “Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad!”*

*A few moments later, the door crack opened and we could finally see her face, still white with fear.*

*“You’re really Jewish!” she exclaimed happily, and finally let us in.*

“That’s when everything changed for me, Rabbi,” Reim continued. “This woman was a secular kibbutznik – they don’t let anything Jewish in that place, through and through. I don’t think she’s ever said Shema Yisrael once in her life. At best, she’s heard of it. Even for me, it’s not something I’m used to saying every day. I am not religious by any means. But that was all it took to forge a connection between us and to allow her to trust who I was.

## A Sweet New Year

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"It showed me that Yehadut is something that defies any labels or limitations. It's something intangible that is connected to our innermost core as Jews. It's something that comes alive, even when we've been brought up our whole lives to abhor it. It's our blood; it's our soul; it's our life.

"I decided to start wearing tefillin every day from that point on. I had to say those words daily. So far, I haven't missed a day, despite the craziness of the war."

My eyes and heart were too overwhelmed with tears to answer.

Lioz\* was stationed in a cleared area in Gaza. He was standing on the rooftop of a building, peering into the darkness for any signs of approaching danger. Everything looked clear, so Lioz allowed himself to relax, and to start thinking about other things.

*It's Chanukah tonight!* Lioz suddenly realized. *I must light a chanukiyah! I'm sure I can find something to light. Let me go look.*

Lioz headed for the stairwell leading off the roof, and had just made it to the next landing, when the entire building shook, and loud thuds sounded from the roof above him.

"Rabbi, had I been standing there even one minute later, I would not be talking to you right now," Lioz told me in a phone call a short while later. "It was my Chanukah miracle!"

We host a chavrusa learning program where students from the nearby yeshiva study Gemara, Halachah, and Mishnayos with our college students. Recently, Avi\* joined the weekly learning sessions.

He told me he wanted to dedicate his learning to the memory of his friends who had died in Gaza, including a Bedouin soldier he was friendly with. It was his first time ever opening a Gemara, and he did so with tears in his eyes in honor of his friend.

Ayelet\* and Nina\* served as paramedics in the IDF. For months, they were stationed in the field hospital

near Gaza, treated the most lightly wounded as best as they could and triaging the rest.

"It was horrible," Ayelet told us. "We saw so much pain and suffering. And despite our medical training, there's only so much we can do."

"There was one particular soldier," Nina recalled, her eyes darkening as she spoke, "who was wounded really badly. I didn't think he'd make it, even if we called for a helicopter evacuation. But he *begged* me to keep trying; to save him. I knew there was nothing I or medical science could do for him. I took out this picture of the Rebbe," she pulled out a pocket sized photo and showed it to us. "I spoke to the Rebbe. I told him this man needed a miracle, straight from Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

"I evacuated the soldier to the hospital and they were able to save his life. I know for a fact it was 100% due to the Rebbe's bracha."

"There were so many situations like that," Ayelet agreed. "I asked the Rebbe for strength and for brachot for all the soldiers. I felt the Rebbe with me, giving me the strength to continue."

Every year, Chabad on Campus in Israel arranges a trip to New York. This year, Ayelet and Nina requested to join, specifically so they could go to the Rebbe's Ohel and thank him in person for the miracles they saw in Gaza.

I met Menashe\* as we were walking down the street in opposite directions. I greeted him, and found out he was attending our college.

"You must join us for Shabbos!" I said. "We have a Chabad house just down the street!"

Menashe gave me a strange look I didn't fully understand. "Chabad?" he repeated, with raised eyebrows. Later, when I got to know more about him, he explained.

"I grew up in Meah Shearim," he told me. "I heard a lot about Chabad growing up - maybe too much. Almost none of it was good.

"Eventually, I decided to leave. I was angry at my family, at G-d, and at Judaism, and I decided to drop

everything and everyone. I dropped contact with my family, cut off my peyot, and moved up north. In fact, you were the first dati person I'd seen since leaving. You looked so *normal*, which is why I was so surprised to hear you say you were Chabad. From everything I'd heard, I expected something very different!

"You completely unnerved me when you invited me for Shabbos, just like that. You didn't care about my background, my leanings, or my history. You accepted me, just because I was a Jew. *That* is special."

It was the beginning of a long, warm, healing friendship between us. Menashe eventually learned to overcome all his prejudices against Chabad and started putting on tefillin again every day.

Every Shabbos, I would tell him to reconnect with his family.

"I'm sure they miss you and wish you would call," I told him.

"No," he'd always respond. "I'm sure they wrote me off a long time ago. They'd be upset if I dared to call."

"Let's try it!" I dared him. "On Motzei Shabbos, call your mother."

Menashe finally agreed and I watched him dial the familiar number with trembling fingers. When I heard his mother's joyful voice on the other end of the phone, I closed the door to give him some privacy, a huge smile on my face. Helping Menashe reconnect with his family is one of the greatest privileges of my life.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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