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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 Mendel and Nechama Danow, Chabad of Pensacola, Florida*

## The Diamonds of the Emerald Coast

By Chaya Chazan

**My wife and I are both children of shluchim, and our parents taught us just how dedicated we'd need to be to get the job done.**

I grew up in Gothenburg, Sweden, and my wife was born in Rosh Pina, Israel. For various reasons, both of our parents moved to different cities and began their shlichus anew.

My parents now run one of the largest Jewish university student centers in Europe, in Leeds, England, while my wife's parents, Rabbi Sholom Ber and Dvora Hertzal, opened Chabad of the Golan Heights.

They taught us to be *ibergeben*, completely and utterly dedicated - demonstrated perfectly by our parents - and it was etched deep in our hearts and minds.

I had been to Pensacola as a bochur on Merkos shlichus. Shortly before our wedding, the head shliach of the Florida Panhandle, Rabbi Oreichman, told me that Pensacola's need for a shliach was emergent. He asked us to accept the role upon ourselves, which we were privileged to do. We became official shluchim even before we were married!

Pensacola was established in 1559, so it has a deep and rich history. It's nicknamed *the City of Five Flags* because it's been under the control of five different governments since its establishment. Jews first arrived here in early 1879. They built Florida's first synagogue and began a Jewish community. We've found a letter from the shochet of Pensacola to R' Shmuel Salanter in 1897, informing him that a



sum had been sent by the Pensacola kehilla to support a kollel in Yerushalayim. Over the years, traditional Judaism died out, and the vibrant Jewish life in Pensacola started dwindling, and young Jewish people felt that they especially had no future in town.

Although we're in Florida, we're so far west on the "panhandle," we're much closer to New Orleans than we are to Miami or even Orlando. We're not even in the same time zone as the rest of the state!

Pensacola's navy base and state college means that some of the city's population is transient and constantly changing. There's always a new face in the Chabad house, and people coming and going within the community. Despite that, we've built strong and lasting relationships.

As we were at the gate, waiting to board our flight to Pensacola, the TVs blared warnings about Hurricane Michael, set to touch down in Pensacola. We didn't know much about hurricanes, so we just shrugged it off and boarded our flight.

When we drove down the city streets to our new home, everything was shuttered behind hastily-nailed plywood boards. By that time, the storm had shifted eastwards, so we were no longer in its direct route. However, the shluchim in nearby Destin, as well as many others, now had to follow emergency evacuation orders. Despite the fact that our moving boxes hadn't even arrived yet, we welcomed them all into our bare home. We quickly got some mattresses, chairs, and tables and made do with what we had.

It was a chaotic and intense introduction to shlichus! Within the first two days, we were already set up as an emergency center, providing food, water, shelter, and generators to those in need.

Baruch Hashem, the storm passed over us, and everyone was able to return home safely.

Hurricane Sally decided to make her debut on erev Rosh Hashanah in 2020. We knew people were relying on us for davening, food, and Yom Tov packages, but we lost power for a week!

We managed to get everything ready with a dedicated staff of volunteers working around the clock. With gas, generators, and barbecue grills, we cooked up a storm! We were even able to hold an outdoor minyan in a tent, and get everyone their Rosh Hashanah packages.

Pensacola is home to the University of West Florida, a small state school. There were a number of Jewish students, and we decided to begin our shlichus with them. Coming from a campus shlichus background, I felt right at home!

We began the Chabad Jewish Student Club, and hosted weekly Friday night meals. Playing into the spontaneity so common amongst college aged, we advertised them as "open door" Friday nights. Anyone and everyone was welcome to join us for Kabbalas Shabbos, followed by kiddush - no reservations needed.

It was so popular and successful, we kept the same model for the wider Pensacola Jewish community. The "open door Friday nights" have become a Chabad of Pensacola staple. We never know how many guests will show up each week, but we often share our Shabbos table with 40-50 people.

It'd been just a few months since we moved to Pensacola, and we still felt like we were getting our bearings. As I was talking with a friend and explaining how we ran all our programs out of our small house, he asked me when we were going to buy a proper building. I laughed, saying it was way too early to think of such things.

But the seed had been planted in our mind.

We started looking around, noticing properties for sale, asking locals which was the best area to invest in, and consulting with a realtor. It didn't take long to find the perfect place. With tremendous support and assistance from Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky A"H, as well as a generous donation from Mr Morris & Lilian Tabacinic, we got into contract and were ready to approach the bank for a mortgage.

I was nervous to apply for a commercial loan with a brand-new enterprise, but with Hashem's help, the entire process went smoothly. They accepted our spartan fundraising records as proof of viability, and started the underwriting process.

It was just 10 days before we were supposed to close on our Chabad house property. As many times as I reviewed the documents, I just couldn't see how it would all come together. If we had more time, we could work out the various issues that kept coming up. But the closing date was fast approaching, and I was worried the whole thing would fall through.

It was Chof Av, the *yahrzeit* of the Rebbe's father, so I decided to seize the opportune moment to travel to New York and ask for the Rebbe's brachos at his Ohel.

I left the Ohel feeling inspired and unburdened. A few days later, the bank informed us that the closing date would be pushed off. We had the time we needed to iron out all the details. In the end, we signed on Chai Elul, the birthday of the Baal Shem Tov and Alter Rebbe.

Less than a year after we first moved, we closed on our Chabad house. Baruch Hashem, it was an absolute game changer and has really helped us widen our reach and host more programs.

Baruch Hashem, our community continued to grow after we bought our miracle building. While we lived on the second floor, Chabad activities took place in the main part of the building.

After being on Shlichus for a few years, and the closest mikvah being a 3-hour drive round trip, we realized it was really time to build a mikvah as well.

The architect, my wife, and I spread the blueprints of our property over the kitchen table and tried to find a spot for the mikvah. We looked at it from every angle, but were eventually forced to concede: our property would not be able to fit a mikvah.

At the same time, we started realizing that, even though we had only bought our building three years prior, our shlichus had expanded way beyond our initial expectations and the Chabad house started feeling too crowded. A larger space started to become the new priority.

"What about that mansion for sale, two blocks over?" my wife suggested. "It would be perfect!"



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"It would," I agreed. "But it's going for 1.2 million dollars! How would we even begin to raise such a sum?"

It felt too overwhelming and impossible, so we regretfully shelved the idea.

It was then that I got a call from Yosef\*, a good friend who we got to know in Pensacola.

"Hey, Rabbi Mendel! How are you doing?" he asked, jovially. "I'm sure you remember when we spoke last year, and I pledged \$30,000!"

"Of course," I answered, honestly.

"Well, at the time, I'd just signed a lucrative contract and was sure I'd be able to honor my pledge. Unfortunately, I didn't read the contract carefully enough. What I'd signed had a much lower commission rate than what I'd expected.

"When I realized my mistake, I was going to call you and tell you I couldn't honor my pledge, and that maybe I'd try again in the future. But then I thought to myself, *Yosef, if Hashem wants you to give tzedakah to Chabad of Pensacola, He'll make it happen.*

"Well, just a short while ago, the contract was sold to another company, so we had to draw up a new agreement. This time, I made sure the commission rate was correct. The company even agreed to back pay me for the missing amount! They just sent me a check for \$30,000. As soon as I got it, I knew Hashem was telling me I should send it to you. I'm going to wire you the money right now!"

A few minutes after we hung up, my phone dinged with a notification that the wire had come through. I turned to my wife with a wry smile. "I guess Hashem wants us to build that mikvah and expand the Chabad House!"

With that generous donation already giving us a massive boost, finding funding for the rest of the down payment felt more attainable. We put in an offer.

On Chai Elul, exactly three years after we closed on our previous Chabad house, we went under contract for the new, larger space. We recently broke ground on our mikvah, and look forward to incredible growth in our beautiful new center!

I often tell my community that if they ever meet another Jew, they have the onus to connect them with Judaism, either by bringing them along to shul, taking down their contact information, or putting them in touch with me.

That's how we got to meet Jared\*. The first time he came, he was accompanying a friend of his who'd been to our Chabad house many times before. Jared enjoyed the experience, and joined us again a few weeks later. Soon, he began coming without his friend, and he quickly became a "regular." He bought his own tefillin, and started wearing them every day!

Jared joined us at a Shabbaton for young Jewish professionals in Crown Heights. He loved the intense, up-close look at a Torah-true Jewish community. He even asked me where he could buy a kapoteh!

When we visited the Rebbe's Ohel, I pulled Jared aside.

"I know you recently became unemployed," I told him. "This is your chance to ask the Rebbe to intercede on your behalf before Hash-

em. You can ask for anything you need - even physical or financial needs. At the same time, you have to make yourself a vessel that can catch G-d's blessing. The best way to do this is to take a hachlata upon yourself."

Jared listened intently to my words, and sat down to write his letter. In it, he explained his situation, and asked for a bracha for a good livelihood. He wrote that he wanted to help us build a mikvah, and would donate a large, specific sum of his ma'aser money to our Chabad house.

Out of the blue, a few weeks later, Jared's friend asked him to join him as a partner in his new business. The business took off, and Jared's financial worries were a thing of the past.

This year, Jared joined the young Jewish professionals Shabbaton again. This time, when we went to the Ohel, it was to thank the Rebbe for the incredible bracha.

A couple years ago, some teenage hoodlums threw a rock through our Chabad house windows, covered in antisemitic epithets. The hate crime made the local news, and I was interviewed by all the newspapers and TV stations. Our message was clear: we fight darkness with light. We will use this stone as the foundation of our new Chabad house. We will not allow hate and ignorance to silence us!

A few days later, I received a call. A shy, hesitant, youthful voice answered me in faltering accents.

"Is... is this Chabad?" she asked.

"Yes; how can I help you?" I asked.

"My name is Gina\*," she said. "I heard about what happened at the Chabad house, and I just wanted to say, I support you, 100%!"

"I really appreciate that, Gina!" I responded, warmly. "That means a lot! Are you Jewish?"

Gina tried to worm her way out of answering the question, but ultimately admitted that, while her dad wasn't Jewish, her mother was.

"It's not really something I share," she said, hesitantly. "No one at my school knows I'm Jewish. Who knows what would happen if they knew?"

"Well, we'd love for you to join us for Shabbat dinner," I invited her.

A few weeks later, Gina took us up on the invitation. She loved it, and came many more times. We'd just opened our CTeen chapter, so I invited Gina to join us to meet with other Jewish teens and learn about her Judaism.

Gina made tremendous strides. She now serves as the president of our CTeen club, and is a proud Jew - both on and off of school campus!

For the Rebbe's birthday on Yud Alef Nissan, I traveled to New York to spend the special day by the Rebbe.\* A group of friends, all of us relatively new shluchim, gathered to farbreng and inspire one another.

One of my friends spoke passionately about the importance of focusing on the individual. "Sometimes, we get so caught up in the programs, and the crowds, and the numbers. We must always

remember to look out for the 'little' Jew, and not lose sight of our goal."

This insight flashed into my mind a few days later, just an hour before Pesach began, when I read a text from Sergeant Cohen\* from the nearby Navy base. *I know I made a reservation for the seder tonight, his text read, but I can't get off duty. I'm sorry to miss it.*

For a moment, I put myself in the sergeant's shoes - the lone Jew on the base, trying to celebrate under such challenging circumstances. We wouldn't forget the "little" Jew.

We quickly packed up some matzah and Pesach foods, and drove to the base. I called him and told him to meet me at the front gate so he could get his package.

Sgt Cohen hugged me tightly, with tears running down his face.

"You have no idea what this means to me," he repeated, over and over. "I was dreading the seder night all by myself. Now, I can celebrate properly. Thank you!"

When I first began learning with Michael\*, I had to give him a refresher on the Alef-Beis he'd learned in Hebrew School, but had since forgotten. We quickly progressed and began a weekly study on Shaar Hayichud Vehaemunah, the second section of Tanya.

One day, as we were learning, Michael sat back in his chair. "You know, Rabbi," he commented, "This is kind of depressing. The world as we know it doesn't really exist. It's all just a false front. It makes you really re-examine everything you once took for granted!"

That year, right after Neilah on Yom Kippur, Michael approached me, still fired up from the intense day of fasting and prayer.

"I know exactly what I want to do with my life," he announced. "I want to go to Israel and learn in a yeshiva!"

Michael quickly finished his degree and flew off to Israel, where he enrolled in a yeshiva, and then also served in the Israeli army.

It was the ultimate nachas to meet Michael on the streets of Yerushalayim a few years later, looking indistinguishable from everyone else passing us by. He introduced me to his wife, and proudly pointed out the shul where he davens, and places where he learned each day.

\*Names changed to protect privacy

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