

IllumiNations

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

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On the Cutting Edge of Shlichus

By Chaya Chazan

Although both my wife and I grew up in large Jewish communities, shlichus was a recurring theme and a strong influence throughout our childhoods.

I remember, as a first grader, when my principal asked our class what we wanted to be when we grew up. Rather than the expected answers of "policeman" or "fireman," I, along with many of my classmates, proudly answered, "A shlich!"

Our lives were filled with mitzvot, and learning the Rebbe's si-chos where he spoke so fervently about the importance of being a light unto others.

So, from the get go, we agreed our dream would be to build a Chabad house.

Baruch Hashem, most cities with sizable Jewish populations already have a shlich. When we heard about Morgan Hill, it came with the caveat that other couples had looked into it, and decided there weren't enough Jews to make it sustainable. After careful consideration, we decided to move to Morgan Hill, just outside of San Jose, despite the risk.

Morgan Hill, and its neighboring town, Gilroy, are "bedroom towns." Many of the people who live here work in large tech companies in nearby Silicon Valley, returning home just to eat dinner and rest. It's hard to meet them at their places of work, since these large tech companies are heavily secured and don't easily allow visitors. We're happy to remain at the cutting "edge" of technology, helping them and their families connect to their Judaism in our "bedroom" town.



Living in a small community has its challenges, but we've also found that people *want* to be more involved. It's a quiet, sleepy town, so people are excited to join a community, make friends, and have something to do on the weekends. While our numbers may always remain small, we can engage a large percentage of Jews in our area.

We had a couple of Merkos bochurim visit us before Pesach to help us deliver matzah door to door and see if they could discover any more Jews we hadn't yet met. They returned, excited to tell us about Jennifer*, a young Jewish mom of two kids, who they'd met while knocking on doors.

My wife and I went to visit Jennifer a couple of weeks later, bringing along freshly baked challah as a gift. We were thrilled to meet another three Jews, and expected to find the same reaction from her, as we'd experienced with almost every other person we'd met in the past. We'd found the people of Morgan Hill to fit the stereotype of small-town friendliness and exuberance, only too happy to connect with a community.

We expected Jennifer to invite us inside, have a chat, introduce us to her children, and form a friendship. Instead, she stood in the doorway, her hands folded across her chest. When we offered her the challah, she thanked us perfunctorily and moved to close the door. We asked her for her contact information, but she declined to give it to us.

"No offense, Rabbi," she finally said, "But I'm not interested in Judaism. Yes, I'm Jewish, but my husband is Catholic, and we've decided to raise our children non-denominational. I see no reason to expose them to religion of any kind right now. When they're older, they can decide for themselves. I know something about Judaism from my childhood, so believe me when I tell you that I've left all that behind, and I'm simply not interested."

Disappointed, we said our goodbyes and left. We continued to visit her every so often, bringing her a menorah on Chanukah, mishloach manos on Purim, and matzah for Pesach. Every time, she thanked us politely, but succinctly took the package and closed the door.

This year, I visited her once again before Rosh Hashanah to bring her a small honey cake and a cheerful Shana Tova card. I received the same aloof reception she'd given for the past two years.

A few days later, after Rosh Hashanah, I received a call from an unknown number.

"Hello, Chabad of Morgan Hill," I said as I answered.

"Hi!" the caller gushed. "I have to tell you, I was so excited to see the Chabad house! I just drove past, but there wasn't anyone in. It's such a beautiful building! Do you think we can meet sometime?"

"Uh... sure," I answered. "May I ask who's calling?"

"It's Jennifer!" she chirped. "Remember, the lady you gave the honey cake to a few days ago?"

My mind whirled. Almost everyone to whom I'd given a honey cake had come to shul on Rosh Hashanah. Who was Jennifer? It couldn't be the woman who'd been so indifferent about Yiddishkeit these past few years. This woman was positively enthusiastic about it!

"It's great to hear from you!" I answered, trying to match her energy despite my confusion. "How was your holiday?"

"I have the craziest story to tell you, Rabbi," she said. "My husband and I both work in the public safety sector. Recently, my husband was given an assignment to sweep the San Jose airport and make sure it was safe before the arrival of a V.I.P. Prime Minister Netanyahu was coming to meet with Elon Musk. We knew he'd be joined by a large delegation, so we decided to throw a nice reception for them, to welcome them to San Jose.

"As it was the day after Rosh Hashanah, and most of the delegation were important Israeli officials, we wanted to honor the holiday and their faith. Of course, we had coffee, cakes, and drinks, but we wanted something reminiscent of Rosh Hashanah. That's when I remembered your honey cake! It was the centerpiece of the refreshment table, alongside a card reading *Shana Tova!*

"The delegation absolutely loved it. They kept praising us for our thoughtfulness and inclusivity. It was such a great experience!"

"When I got home, I started thinking about the whole thing. I'd been so excited to hear a large Israeli group was coming, and thrilled to have even a little part in welcoming them to town. But why? Why was I so excited about a group of strangers? I realized I felt connected to them simply because of our shared Jewish heritage. That's all I needed. Judaism had meant so little to me for so many years, but the arrival of the Israelis woke up an affection I never dreamt I still possessed!

"But what about my kids? If I kept them away from Judaism, I'd quash any chance of them developing this innate joy! I was robbing them of the chance to be connected to their people; their family. I realized I'd made a terrible mistake.

"That's why I'd like to meet with you, Rabbi. I have pictures of the reception I'd love to show you, and I'd like to talk about exploring my connection with Judaism."

His mother had some negative experiences as a girl, and became virulently anti-religion, so Danny* grew up without a shred of Yiddishkeit, although he didn't inherit his mother's apathy.

He moved to Utah as a young man, and met Chabad there. He felt drawn to Yiddishkeit, and enjoyed celebrating Pesach sederim, Rosh Hashanah tefillos, and Shabbos meals. A few years later, he moved to another state, and lost contact with the shluchim. Unfortunately, his Judaism fell by the wayside as well.

Over twenty seder-less, megillah-less, Shabbos-less years had passed before Danny met us, and reignited his interest in Judaism. It was amazing to witness him fall right back into Jewish practices with ease and familiarity, as if twenty years hadn't passed. He visited often, and joined every shiur, event, and program.

On Rosh Hashanah, Danny decided to make a long-lasting commitment to wear tefillin every day. He bought himself a pair, and



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put them on each morning before work, before giving them a kiss and carefully wrapping them up and laying them to rest in their velvet pouch. He kept his commitment faithfully, day after day, never missing even one.

One day, Danny decided to take a personal day off of work to visit family a few hours away. An avid nature lover, Danny decided to take a sunrise beach drive. He set off quite early in the morning, reveling in the silence and serenity. He cruised along the empty highways, wrapped up in own thoughts. Suddenly, a thought darted through his mind. *Tefillin!* It had been so early when he'd left his home that morning, he hadn't even thought about them. He was already over an hour into his drive, so turning around would mean an added delay of at least two hours... He'd planned every moment of his drive, choosing the perfect beach to witness sunrise. He couldn't turn back. It was too late.

So Danny continued driving, but he couldn't stop thinking about the tefillin and the commitment he'd made on Rosh Hashanah. When he finally pulled up to the deserted beach, he couldn't even enjoy the majestic sunrise because of the gnawing guilt.

Danny was sure he'd have the entire beach to himself because of the early hour, so he was surprised to see the distant silhouette of another sunrise visitor. When he looked more closely, he couldn't believe his eyes. It looked eerily similar to a man - wearing tallis and tefillin!

Overjoyed, Danny rushed towards him and waited until he'd completed his davening. He tapped him on the shoulder, and the man jumped. He turned towards Danny and paled.

"Hey, how are you? Can I possibly borrow your tefillin?" Danny asked.

The man instantly calmed down, and agreed to loan Danny his tefillin. Danny sent me a smiling selfie of himself and his tefillin-on-the-beach buddy. They shook hands and parted ways. Danny marveled at the heaven-sent angel that had enabled him to keep his hachlata.

In the first couple of months after we moved, we only knew of a couple of Jews. One of them, Mr. Goldstein*, a sweet, elderly man, had fallen and needed to spend time in a rehabilitation center. Of course, we went to visit him there. As we were leaving, I couldn't help but ask the nurses at the front desk if there were any Jewish patients. Morgan Hill is not the type of place where you meet Jews on every corner, so I didn't really expect a positive response. I was amazed to hear her reply, "Do we ever! Mrs. Epstein* is not only Jewish, she's extremely proud and vocal about it too!"

"I've got to meet her!" I said. They showed me to her room and introduced me to the sweetest, happiest old lady I've ever met. After just a few minutes of conversation, I saw what the nurse meant. Mrs. Epstein was very proud to be Jewish, but it was not a pride born of knowledge and education. Just then, her son, Isaiah*, walked in for a visit. His eyes widened when he saw me, but he shook my hand heartily and introduced himself, apologizing for being "a heathen." Mrs. Epstein's condition didn't allow her to leave the rehab, but Isaiah happily accepted my invitation to join us for Shabbos.

As Isaiah joined us more often, I realized that he knew next to nothing about Yiddishkeit, but he was open and excited to learn more. He told me that he was going through a crisis of sorts, and had asked G-d to send him a sign. A few minutes later, he'd walked into his mother's room and saw a bonafide rabbi sitting at her bedside. He felt that my arrival was G-d's answer to him.

The first real "event" I invited Isaiah to was Shavuot davening.

"We need you for the minyan," I told him. "I'm counting on you!"

Isaiah agreed, not exactly sure *what* he was agreeing to, but happy to do the rabbi a favor nonetheless. He was the tenth man for our minyan, and we were able to read the Aseres Hadibros from the Torah.

"That's a nice Torah," Isaiah commented. "Whose is it?"

I explained that I'd borrowed it from another shliach, and Isaiah nodded thoughtfully.

A few days later, Isaiah called. "Rabbi, it's just not right that you have to borrow a Torah. I want to buy you one!"

"I'm extremely touched," I answered. "That's a very generous offer."

"Yeah... about that," Isaiah inserted, with a chuckle. "I went on Amazon to order one, expecting it to cost a couple hundred dollars, but I can't seem to find the exact product. About how much are we talking, exactly...?"

"Torahs cost tens of thousands of dollars," I answered, gently.

"I - I can't... that's..." Isaiah sounded crestfallen.

"Don't worry about it," I assured him. "We only use a Torah when we have a minyan, and that really doesn't happen often enough for it to be an issue. We can borrow a Torah for the few times a year we need it."

When I repeated the story to a fellow shliach, he was quick to point out another angle.

"You have a Jew who's found a way to connect to Hashem and Torah that he's passionate about!" he explained. "You must grab this amazing opportunity!"

Acknowledging the justice of his words, I called Isaiah back.

"Let's figure out a way to make this Torah happen," I told him.

Over the next few weeks, we researched and discussed various ways to fundraise for and acquire a Torah. In the end, Isaiah decided to purchase a brand-new Torah and to pay for the entire thing personally in installments.

Isaiah and his Torah have become pillars of our community. Isaiah joins us often, making strides in his journey to Hashem and *His* Torah.

We'd heard of a Jewish woman in a nearby nursing home, so, one sunny March day, we went to visit her.

To our dismay - and embarrassment - the woman suffered from dementia and began yelling abuse at us the second she saw us.

We extricated ourselves from the situation as quickly as we could and headed out.

As we turned down one hallway, I heard someone say, "Shalom, Rabbi!"

"Shalom to you, too!" I answered the elderly man. "Are you Jewish?"

"Yes!" he answered.

I searched for something in Judaism that could be relatable and spark a connection. "Do you know it's almost Purim?" I asked. "What's your favorite hamantash flavor?"

I could tell I'd hit gold. His eyes lit up, and a wide smile took over his face. "I love poppy hamantashen!" he answered. "I remember eating them as a kid and I couldn't get enough. What I would do for another poppy hamantash...!"

"I'm going to get you your hamantash!" I promised.

True to my word, I brought a tray of the delicious pastries a couple of weeks later. As I was about to head in, a woman stopped me.

"Excuse me, Rabbi - did you meet my husband, Aaron*, a couple of weeks ago?"

"Yes! I'm actually on my way to deliver these poppy hamantashen to him right now!" I answered, lifting the tray.

"Excellent! I've been looking for a rabbi for a long time! Aaron and I have been married for many years, but religion was never part of our life. However, Aaron's often told me that he wants to be buried as a Jew. I'd like to honor his wishes, but I have no idea what that even means! Does a rabbi sprinkle water over the coffin and bless it? What's involved?"

I was happy to explain the entire process to her, and to offer my assistance. They'd already purchased a plot in a cemetery, but sold it to purchase one in the Jewish section.

I was with Aaron in his final moments, and was able to say Shema and Viduy with him.

Thanks to a dementia patient and tray of hamantashen, a Yiddishe neshama received a kevruras Yisroel.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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