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Rabbi Moshe and Chani Gourarie, Chabad of Toms River, New Jersey

A Didan Notzach for Toms River

By Chaya Chazan

Despite its extremely close proximity to Lakewood, when we first moved to Toms River - a suburban town in Ocean County, New Jersey - most people in Lakewood had probably never heard of it. Other shluchim had decided there were too few Jews in the area to make it a sustainable shlichus. Of course, everything is completely different now.

We visited the Ohel with Rabbi Herson, the head shliach of New Jersey, and asked the Rebbe for a bracha for our new shlichus. We remained in Crown Heights, traveling periodically to New Jersey to look for available houses. For some reason, every property we looked at had one issue or another. Sometimes the price was the problem, sometimes the location, and sometimes, it was just a lack of availability. It was frustrating to be held back just because we couldn't find a place to live.

I checked the classifieds regularly, and signed up for email updates so I'd hear of anything as soon as it became available.

On the night of Yud Alef Nissan, the Rebbe's birthday, I went to the Ohel. I wrote a pa"n detailing our plans and difficulties.

Early the next morning, I opened my email and found an advertisement for "new, spacious, centrally-located houses in Toms River!" I looked over the details and thought it sounded

perfect! I quickly called the number at the bottom of the ad and asked to see the house. I explained we'd be going out of town for a holiday for the next two weeks, but we were extremely interested!

"Oh, I'll hold it for you! No problem!" the property manager assured me.

After Pesach, we signed the lease for the house that became the headquarters of Chabad of Toms River for the next seven years!

On shlichus, we often see the incredible effects of mitzvah gorreres mitzvah - one mitzvah beginning a chain reaction of positivity and many more mitzvos.

We knew that the community included many elderly people, so one of our top priorities was arranging programs for them. I started a monthly Kabbalah shiur for seniors in a nearby community. As Rosh Hashanah approached, some of the members asked if and where we'd be holding services.

"Excellent question," I responded. "To be honest, we only recently moved, and we don't know too many Jews yet. We don't have a weekly minyan, or anyone we can count on to show up. But you're right! We need davening for Rosh Hashanah. If you can all commit to being the minyan, I'll take care

of the rest!"

One of the couples that attended, Brian and Lisa*, became close friends of ours after that. They joined us for Shabbos meals, shiurim, and minyanim often, and learned about Judaism first-hand.

Brian also began listening to taped shiurim on his commute to and from work. Utilizing these otherwise lost moments in such a valuable way was utterly life changing. It turned him into a Jew whose life was permeated with halachah and Torah through and through. The changes were subtle at first, but became increasingly obvious.

Brian and Lisa accompanied us on a trip to the Ohel. I encouraged them to write down their requests for whatever they needed.

"What about our son, Michael? He really needs a job," Lisa asked.

"You can definitely include that in your letter!" I answered. "When asking G-d for a bracha, it helps to accept a mitzvah upon yourself, to make yourself into a vessel fit for G-d's blessings."

"We'll start keeping Shabbos," Lisa replied, her face serious.

My jaw dropped open in shock. Brian and Lisa lived over four miles away from our Chabad house! This would not be an easy resolution to keep! But Lisa was determined. She included the details of her hachlata in the letter, and brought it to the Ohel.

A couple of weeks later, their son, Michael, received a job offer.

Brian and Lisa honored their commitment. Every Shabbos, Brian would wake up at 6 AM to begin the four-mile trek to our house. It took him hours, but he never missed a week. Lisa often came too, making the long trip on foot. Seeing Brian stretched out in exhaustion, resting his weary feet after a long walk, was a source of endless inspiration to me and everyone else in the community.

Brian, now retired, lives in Eretz Yisrael, where he devotes his days to learning Torah.

Valerie* grew up with little Yiddishkeit in her home, so it wasn't shocking when she started dating Luke*, a non-Jew. They had a tacit agreement that he would convert if and when marriage came into the picture, but for the moment, they were just enjoying getting to know one another.

When their relationship got a little more serious, Valerie brought Luke along with her for Rosh Hashanah davening. Luke stood in the men's section, absolutely spellbound. The somber atmosphere and the shofar's piercing cry impressed him so deeply that he decided to convert.

He began taking classes and learning all about Jewish life. By the time he was ready to dip in the mikvah and emerge as Chaim, he and Valerie were no longer on the same page. He broke up with her - because she wasn't religious enough for him!

He moved to an established Jewish community, and I lost



touch with him. But one day, when I was walking down the street, a bearded, black-hatted father pushing a loaded double stroller with two more little kids hanging off each side stopped to greet me.

“Rabbi Gourarie? It’s me! Chaim!”

We caught up, and he thanked me for being the catalyst that changed his life forever.

We were coming off a major high after Tishrei. Baruch Hashem, every yom tov had been full of people davening, learning, and celebrating. It all came to a crashing halt when we received six summons to appear before the zoning committee. They claimed we’d breached some ordinances by having a shul in our residential home.

But that was just the tip of the iceberg.

“Rabbi, have you seen what’s going on on Facebook?” a community member asked.

Just a quick search was enough to give me a headache and make me wish I could snap my fingers and make it all disappear. Every Toms River Facebook group was ranting about us. On another occasion, I may have found it funny that we apparently were opening a school, planning to shut down the nearby liquor store, and had already put motions in place to buy up every available piece of real estate in the area. But I was in no laughing mood. Our future was at stake!

The hearing would be public, as they all are, and anyone from Toms River was invited to join. While usual sessions are held in city hall, so many people wanted to listen in, they had to postpone it to rent a larger hall! The hall held over 1,200 seats, and there was still a long line of people hoping and waiting to get in!

Our lawyer presented our counter argument - there was no law forbidding a man to ask his friends over to his house so he could pray with them. Why all the furor?

I was called to the stand so the committee could ask me all their questions. My lawyer counseled me to say no more than was absolutely necessary - not the easiest advice for a rabbi to heed! After answering the committee’s exhaustive questions, they moved on to the next part - opening the floor to the public.

For the next 4 hours, I stood there fielding questions as numerous as they were ridiculous. I had to bite my tongue so many times as quotes from various websites were quoted out of context, and wild theories were presented as absolute facts.

As it neared midnight, the council finally called the meeting to a close and voted. Of course, they denied our proposal.

While we were disappointed, our lawyers weren’t ready to give up the fight. They advised us to sue the township and escalate the issue to federal courts. Together we argued that it was against RLUIPA (the Religious Land Use and Incapacitated Persons Act, which forbids any municipality from creating ordinances that prohibit places of worship) and my constitutional right to freedom of religion. We also argued that the council was giving in to antisemitic pressure, rather than judging the issue in an unbiased manner. Unfortunately, there was a lot of evidence to prove the last allegation. The comments section on almost every Facebook group was filled with virulent antisemitism, much based on the growth of the nearby Jewish community, threatening me, my family, and the entire Jewish community with violence, referencing gas chambers, guns, and bullets.

When the news ran the story, they conflated the complaint against me using my house as a shul with the town’s general complaint that frum Jews from nearby Lakewood were buying all the available real estate and “taking over” the quiet suburb.

“Rabbi, why don’t you issue a statement that you aren’t from that community, and shouldn’t be held accountable for their actions?” a concerned community member asked.

“I don’t want to separate myself from my fellow Jews and ‘other’ them,” I explained. “We can’t build ourselves up by standing on someone else’s ruins. We’re Jews. We are all in this together, like one family, for better or for worse. Regardless if I agree or not.”

At one point, the president of a local synagogue - who’d previously refrained from offering us his vocal support - asked to meet at the kosher bagel shop.

“An influential member of our synagogue is close friends with many on the town council,” he explained. “So when we heard you were suing the township, we wanted to find a creative solution that would make everyone happy. We were going to offer you one portion of our property for you to build a home and shul. When we approached the town council with the proposition, they told us that the zoning laws causing you such problems technically applied to us as well. Since our synagogue has been around for so long, it’s grandfathered in, but if we wanted to build a new shul on the property - well, there’d be the same issues.

“It’s easy to think of our two synagogues as separate, and to label ourselves very differently than one another. Seeing how the township was ready to cause us problems - even though we were trying to help them dismiss the suit against them - we realized that they hate us as much as they hate you. I never imagined how deep this antisemitism runs. In their eyes, we’re all Jewish, and we’re all the same. In the spirit of unity,

I hope we can work together from now on.”

We waited months for the township to respond, only to hear that they remained determined on their denial. We offered a settlement - to reimburse our legal fees, allow us to keep davening in the house, and we’d drop the suit. They refused. Finally we went before a federal judge, who told them to settle. They refused. The judge sent us to mediation, and we finally came to an agreement. The judge didn’t accept the town’s argument about why we needed a variance, since our house was still being used primarily as a residence, and that we could continue to use it for davening. The end of the story Toms River settled.

The entire process had taken over a year to come to a successful conclusion. In the meantime, the demography of Toms River shifted and many from Jews started to move in. Of course, as blocks became more and more Jewish, shtetl-belach started popping up all over.

In 2019, during his final week in office, Thomas F. Kelaher, the mayor of Toms River, whose town had once led the fight against us under his leadership, made a remarkable gesture. He allowed the first public menorah lighting on the grounds of Toms River Town Hall. That evening, he spoke with genuine warmth, expressing his hope that this tradition would continue for many years. It wasn’t just a farewell gesture—it was a moment of true understanding and respect. A beautiful conclusion to what had been a dark chapter.

The court battle we fought so hard to win—a true Didan Notzach—was a victory that ensured all shuls could exist without fear of legal reprisal. Chabad, united with the entire Jewish community, led the charge. Today, finding a minyan in Toms River is simple, with Jewish homes across the town hosting gatherings that once seemed unimaginable.

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