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

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New Beginnings in Vienna

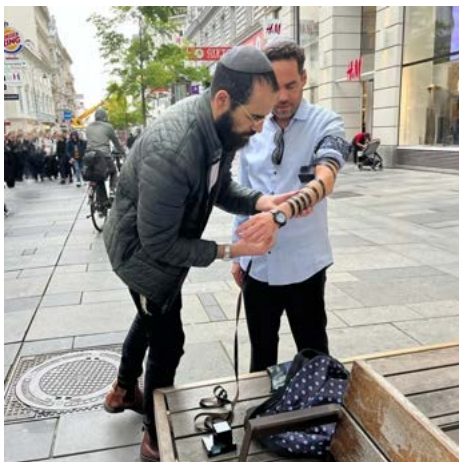
By Chaya Chazan

I grew up on shlichus in Brazil, and my wife helped her parents at their Zurich Chabad house in Switzerland, so shlichus was a foregone conclusion for us.

We got married in the chaos of 2020, so it took a while for things to settle down enough to begin our search. We researched a few options, but nothing seemed to work out. We were blessed with a son, and we continued planning our next steps. My wife and I would make time to learn together to strengthen our bitachon that we'd find what's meant for us. As we were awaiting our second child, as usual, I was constantly sending out our resume. The Rebbe often mentioned the special brachos a child brings to the world and their family. Right after we had our second baby, an opportunity came up in Vienna. All our previous efforts had led to one frustration after another, but this time, everything fell into place and we knew right away this was meant to be. Like a puzzle piece, the community's needs fit perfectly with us.

Vienna is an established community with an almost 50-year-old Chabad presence. Rabbi Biderman and the other shluchim have had an incredible impact on the community, and it continues to grow steadily. There were now enough young professionals to warrant a shliach dedicated just to them!

A few short months after we vetted Vienna, we made the move with a toddler and a small baby. We arrived in Elul,



at the end of 2023, and, since the community was already well-established, we were able to get to work right away. Our goal was to focus on shiurim, Shabbos meals, and events that would appeal to this specific demographic. Although we're still in the early stages of our shlichus, we've already seen immense potential and growth!

Riding on the successes of our first Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur minyanim, we began preparing the ultimate Simchas Torah festival. We stocked up on the essentials, and prepared for an epic celebration.

When we got to shul for hakafos, we found just a few stragglers. We didn't even have enough men to make a minyan. We heard the terrible news and realized that many people were too scared to leave their homes. Others were too intent on following the news for any scrap of information, while others were worried sick about their friends and family back home in Israel, and couldn't even contemplate dancing and rejoicing.

We were also anxious about our brethren in Israel, and it was difficult to revel in the joy of the day while battling deep-seated fears. I felt frustrated, sitting at home while my mind and hands ached to be productive. I jumped up, grabbed my tefillin, and started furiously pounding the pavement.

We live in the city's center, on a block with beautiful storefronts and dazzling displays. I went into every Israeli-owned store and asked them to put on tefillin.

I'd been to Asaf's store many times, but he always refused to put on tefillin. I thought the news from Israel might change his mind, but the idea of spiritual warfare was entirely foreign to him. He grew up in an extremely secular home in Tel Aviv, where even the vestiges of Shabbos and Yom Tov were unknown. Unsurprisingly, he'd married out.

Disappointed, I left Asaf's store and continued walking the streets. A tourist passed by, and noticing the leather pouch over my arm, doubled back.

"Hey - can you please help me put on tefillin?" he asked. "I want to do something for Israel!"

Of course, I was happy to help him wrap the leather straps around his arm and repeat each word of Shema. We were standing directly in front of Asaf's shop, and I noticed him glance in our direction a few times. When we'd finished, the tourist thanked me and went on his way. A moment later, Asaf gestured me in.

"I saw what you were doing out there," he muttered, gruffly. "I don't know why, but it looked special and important. I want to do it too."

"Of - of course!" I answered, surprised. "It would be my honor!"

It was Asaf's first time ever wearing tefillin. He blinked back tears as he repeated the age-old words after me. He shook my hand firmly before straightening and shooing me out the door so he could "get back to work."

It was an unexpected opening, and I wouldn't let it pass me by.

The next day, I visited Asaf again.

"What are you doing here?" he asked me, in mock displeasure. In answer, I held up my tefillin. Asaf refused, as usual, but his "no" rang hollow. It took only a bit of convincing before he relented.

For the next few days, every time I entered his store, Asaf pretended to be surprised. He always put up a fight, asking me to wait until he'd finished what he was doing, or telling me *not today*, but in the end, he put on tefillin, every single day.

After a few days, we no longer had to "play the game." Whenever Asaf saw me come in, he stopped what he was doing and rolled up his sleeve. It had been a few weeks of Asaf regularly agreeing to put on tefillin every day. One morning, I jokingly commented, "Nu, Asaf? How long are you going to make me come here every day? Maybe it's time for you to get your *own* pair of tefillin!"

"Okay," he answered.

My jaw dropped.

"If you get me a pair of tefillin, I'll wear them every day," he promised.

I could hardly believe my ears! What a radical change from the Asaf I'd met only a few short weeks before! I knew I'd turn over heaven and earth to get him that pair of tefillin.

I started making calls to all the local shluchim, trying to find a spare pair somewhere.

"I can't believe this!" a shliach told me. "Someone just dropped off a pair of tefillin and told me to give them to someone who would use them every day!"

"That's perfect!" I said, with rising excitement. "I'll come get them right away!"

The next morning, I walked into Asaf's store with a big smile on my face. I handed him the tefillin, and Asaf reached out for them with trembling hands. He hugged them tightly and thanked me, over and over.

"I don't know how you did it," he said, shaking his head. "You're far from the first rabbi to walk in here and ask me to



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put on tefillin. I always said no. I don't know how you managed to get to me!"

I hardly ever visit Asaf's store now, since he's proudly putting on tefillin every day. He proves that "a Jew will not and cannot be disconnected from G-dliness."

Just before Sukkos, I texted Asaf a reminder that we don't wear tefillin on chol hamoed.

"Are you sure?" he replied. "Is there any way I can keep putting them on? I've really connected to the mitzvah, and I'll feel off if I don't!"

After Sukkos, I texted Asaf again. "Did you put on tefillin today?"

"First thing in the morning!" he replied. "I can already feel the difference. Today will be a good day!"

I recently took Asaf and his mother to the Rebbe's Ohel in New York. It was an extremely emotional and meaningful experience for all of us.

The Shabbos after October 7th, we hosted a "Unity for Israel" seudah. We knew everyone there very well, except for one man, who sat in the back, looking very uncomfortable. When I had a moment, I went to talk with him and find out who he was.

His name was Aharon*. As a child, his family had been part of an extreme Jewish cult. Understandably, he had a difficult childhood, and had decided as an adult to live isolated, and to never have anything to do with Judaism ever again.

"I'm an atheist. I live three hours away, in the Austrian mountains. I don't even know why I'm here," he kept repeating.

I tried to make him feel welcome, and was rewarded by seeing his body language soften, and his demeanor open up.

Aharon had so strongly insisted on his detachment and his strong atheist views that I thought I'd never see him again. Amazingly, he returned many times afterwards, making the long 3-hour-drive each time.

Every time he joined us for Shabbos, he'd repeat, "I never do this. I don't know why I'm here! I promised myself I was done with Judaism! For some reason, I just feel a need to be connected with other Jews."

Last year, Aharon contacted me a few days before Chanukah.

"I'm going to join you for Shabbos Chanukah," he told me. "Can you set a menorah aside for me? I'll pick it up when I come, and take it home with me."

"But Shabbos is the third night!" I protested. "What about lighting on nights one and two? I'm going to mail you a menorah so you can have it right away!"

Aharon was touched that I cared so much and promised to light it. He sent me cheerful selfies each night - the self-proclaimed atheist lighting his menorah in his window so everyone could see.

Aharon continued to visit us often, explaining that he'd made peace with his past and felt comforted by the presence of other Jews. He eventually informed us that he wanted to move to Israel.

We waved Aharon off on his flight to Israel, where he'll be permanently surrounded by his fellow Jews. His physical self found its way home, and his mental and spiritual self are sure to follow.

Yevgeny and Katya* had emigrated from Russia. Their parents grew up under the Soviet regime, and even though Communism fell, it had already robbed them of their heritage. They knew nothing about Yiddishkeit, and had nothing to pass on to their children.

When Katya had a baby boy, Yevgeny told me they would give him a bris milah.

"It's because of you, Rabbi," he told me. "I don't know anything about bris. For the past ten generations, no one in my family has ever had one!"

We'd never talked about a bris specifically, but just being there for them and accepting them with unconditional love had inspired Yevgeny and Katya to make a stronger commitment to Yiddishkeit. I told them about mezuzos, and explained how it would ensure their baby came home to a house protected by kedusha.

"Of course!" they agreed.

We can impact another person very deeply without having to discuss anything at all. It's just a matter of being ourselves and accepting everyone with open hearts.

I was excited to have my tefillin stand ready for display. On Friday morning, I set it up on a busy street and began looking for "customers." While I was busy helping one person wrap tefillin, I saw an older man hovering nearby, staring at us with undisguised interest. He soon continued on his way, only to return a few moments later.

"Can I take a picture of your booth...?" he asked.

"Sure," I agreed. "Are you Jewish?"

"No. Well, yes. And no. It's a bit complicated," he stammered.

Franz*, as he introduced himself, told me that his family had decided to cut all ties with their Judaism after suffering the horrors of the Holocaust.

"We all converted and swore to uphold Christianity forevermore," he explained. "I remember, as a kid, I once asked my mother if we were Jewish, and she told me, *not anymore!* But I've always had a fascination with Judaism. Just a couple of days ago, I came across some Hebrew writing. It felt significant and exciting, and made me want to find out more. When I saw your booth, I couldn't help myself!"

"Did you know," I asked, "that according to Judaism, one can never convert and renounce their faith? No matter how many baptisms you undergo, according to Judaism, you're still as Jewish as Moses!"

"That makes sense," Franz agreed.

"Would you like to put on tefillin?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so," he answered.

Franz was visibly moved as I helped him put on tefillin and say Shema. It was incredible to see his neshama waking up after laying dormant for so many years.

Upon finishing, Franz told me he had a confession to make, he said "from his mothers side they were Jewish, but his father's side were Nazi-descendant." He told me, "The world may seem so divided and dark, but there will be better times, and times of peace."

We recently moved to a more central location. We hadn't noticed it at first, but after the dust had settled on our move, we noticed a plaque on the side of our building, describing how forty Jews had been rounded up from that very building and led straight to the concentration camps.

Having our Chabad house, where Yiddishkeit comes alive, in the very place where the Nazis tried to stomp out the flame of our nation is the best revenge. Am Yisrael Chai!

*Names changed to protect privacy

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