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

Rabbi Chaim and Chani Hanoka, Chabad of Pasadena, California

Braving the Blaze

By Chaya Chazan

After marrying the youngest daughter of Rabbi Shmuel Dovid and Leah Raichik, the Rebbe's first shluchim to conquer the spiritual wilderness that was California in the late 1940's, my family moved to L.A. in 1991 to begin our own shlichus journey.

I worked with Rabbi Naftali Estulin at the Chabad Russian Center as the youth director. I confided in him my earnest wish to open a Chabad house of my own, but knew it wasn't likely to happen for quite some time.

But suddenly, everything seemed to line up, and striking out on our own became a very real possibility. We wrote to the Rebbe for a bracha, and I made an appointment with Rabbi Boruch Shlomo Cunin, the head shliach of California, to make it all official.

It seems fantastic now, when California is heavily saturated with Chabad houses in every neighborhood, but back then, there were large swathes of undiscovered areas. We spent quite some time analyzing all the possibilities, and which would be most practical for our needs. Rabbi Cunin's famous telethon came in handy, as we used the list of callers to determine which area had a large enough Jewish population. In the end, we decided on Pasadena and its surrounding areas. Located about 40 minutes from Los Angeles (on those rare occasions when there's no traffic), it promised lots of potential.

Rabbi Cunin disappeared into the back room adjoining his office, and returned dressed in the Rebbe's kapoteh, a solemn expression on his face.

"When the Levitanskys joined our shlichus, the first couple to do so, the Rebbe inquired specifically about three things: who his parents were, who *her* parents were, and whether or not he attended *Mitvoch Sha'ah*, the one hour Released Time program on Wednesday afternoons. I will pose the same three questions to you.



"Of course, I know your in-laws very well and admire and respect them highly. I know your father as well, since we spent time together in yeshiva. Only one question remains."

He raised his brows, awaiting my response.

"Yes, I attended Released Time," I answered his unasked question.

"Excellent!" Rabbi Cunin smiled. He pulled a stack of twenties from his desk and handed me one. "These were given to me by the Rebbe. I wish you much hatzlacha in your new shlichus! Now you'd better get out there and get started! I expect you'll be up and running by Rosh Hashanah, in just two months time!"

Although it wasn't far from our home in Los Angeles, I'd never been to Pasadena and didn't even know how to get there. As GPS technology wasn't available yet, I purchased a paper map and traced the route with my finger. I knew very little about the city, except that it was home to Caltech and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

We started in our living room, but that very quickly became too small. We rented a storefront, which lasted a few years before we outgrew that, too. Baruch Hashem, we were able to purchase a large building, which we completely gutted and rebuilt. Over the last 25 years, we've renovated and built on to keep up with our growing community. We recently added on-site mens' and womens' mikvaos, as well as a preschool.

There are now *seven* shluchim serving the same area we began exploring 30 years ago!

Baruch Hashem, Chabad of Pasadena is thriving and growing. We'll soon outgrow this building as well!

And that was all *before* the fires...

When appointing us to Pasadena, Rabbi Cunin had given us an ambitious goal - to host Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, even though they were only a month and half away!

I equipped myself with a Yellow Pages and dialed a hotel in the area.

"I think I need a conference room? Maybe a multi-purpose room...?" I asked, hesitantly.

The receptionist was inordinately patient. "Sure! Approximately how many people will you need to accommodate?" she asked.

I knew she was trying to be helpful, but I had no idea how to answer that question. I knew there *were* Jews in Pasadena, but how many would I find before Rosh Hashanah? And how many of *those* would actually show up?

"Fifty...?" I said, hoping it would suffice.

I didn't want the room I'd just booked to be empty, so I had my work cut out for me. I bought a mailing list and put an ad in the paper. I reached out to everyone and hoped for the best.

Over the three days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we met 150 Pasadena residents. Almost everyone said the same thing: "*I didn't know so many Jews lived here! I thought it was just me!*"

At the beginning of our shlichus, Rabbi Cunin called me often for status updates. I told him, "I drive to Los Angeles almost every day for minyanim and kosher grocery runs. Every morning, when I meet my father-in-law, he asks, *Nu, Chaim? How many tefillin did you put on today? Did you host Shabbos meals? How many Yidden have you influenced?* Believe me, I'm giving very detailed reports on a constant basis!"

After years of reflection, I've come to appreciate what my father-in-law's pressure did for me and my shlichus. It constantly reminded me that I wasn't the main character in my shlichus. This wasn't about proving myself, running my own show, or becoming independent. I was a cog in a larger machine. I had a "boss" to answer to. I was the Rebbe's shliach, and it was *he* who set the parameters of my shlichus, not my own inclinations or desires.

It was a busy Friday afternoon, and I had to make a quick dash into Office Depot to grab an item. As I perused the selection in the aisle, I heard someone ask, "What are *you* doing here?"

I turned to see a young couple, both of whom were staring at me in open astonishment.

"I live here!" I answered, cheerfully. "My Chabad house is just a couple of blocks away!"

They were so excited to discover there was a Chabad house so close by, and promised to visit. They kept their promise, and Michael and Aliza* soon became regulars. They were newlyweds, and by the time they were ready to welcome their first child, they already had a solid understanding of Yiddishkeit and the power of a rebbe.

Michael was a doctor, so when he called me, his voice shaking, to tell me there were complications during Aliza's delivery, I knew the situation was drastic.

"Please call the Ohel on our behalf, Rabbi," he begged, barely restraining his tears. "Aliza needs a miracle!"

Of course, I immediately called and asked for someone to start saying Tehillim by the Rebbe's kever. I too, took out a Tehillim and fervently prayed for good news.

A short, but interminable while later, Michael called. "It's a miracle!" he cried. "All her symptoms completely disappeared, as if they'd never existed in the first place! Also, it's a boy!"

As their family continued to grow, so did their commitment to Yiddishkeit. Their eldest, Shlomo*, now a fine bochur, studies in a Chabad yeshiva. They have a large extended family, some of whom we've been privileged to meet, and Shlomo serves as a great dugma chaya to them all, introducing them to tefillin, Shabbos, kashrus, and leading by example.

The Eaton fire, which, at the time of writing, has yet to be contained, has decimated whole blocks of our city. Our Chabad house was a mere four blocks from the mandatory evacuation zone. Already, we know of 50 families in our community who have lost their homes and everything they owned, and, unfortunately, that number keeps growing.

As we drove through the streets, trying to help people evacuate, the scenes around us looked apocalyptic. Our voices are hoarse from the smoke. Clouds of billowing ash and smoke obscure the familiar lines of the mountains always visible from our Chabad house window.

In times like these, we answer whatever need we are called to fill. The Chabad house has been turned into an emergency center, where we offer fresh food and water around the clock, outlets to charge devices



for those who have lost power, toiletries, clothes, medical supplies, and other necessities. Of course, we also have minyanim every day, and tefillin and Tehillim are always available for those who wish.

While we have a preschool running year-round, we opened attendance to *any* children that want to join. Even for those whose homes have remained intact, they can't play outside because of the terrible air quality. Their parents are under a lot of stress, and have ten million things to arrange. Having a safe place to leave their children to enjoy a few hours of relaxation and fun is a huge burden off their backs, and one we're happy to provide. When we heard another Jewish preschool in the community fell victim to the fire, we immediately reached out to let them know we'd be happy to incorporate their students in our classes. In addition, we opened a camp/day care for public school children whose schools are closed or burned down.

The road to recovery will be long, but we're trying to address the most immediate needs first. People who evacuated with nowhere to go need a place to lay their heads, and those who ran out in their pajamas need clothes. We have a stack of gift cards that we're able to distribute when we hear of someone in need, and the generosity of OBKLA, Holy Smokes, and Tomchei Shabbos have allowed us to provide food and drink constantly.

In those first nightmarish days, we made sure to visit Mrs. Neiman*, a widow who lived alone. When we got there, we saw her garage had been burnt to cinders. Her house had been miraculously spared, but was in ever-present danger, as the wind could easily carry embers from the still-smouldering garage and set it ablaze. Firefighters were scarce, and, in any case, were too busy battling actual flames to worry about embers. All water power had been shut off, so we had no choice but to fill ceramic pots with mud and dirt and smother the glowing embers.

Baruch Hashem, although the vast majority of the houses on her block succumbed to the flames, we were able to save her home.

Although we wish we could help *everyone* find new homes and give them back everything they lost, sometimes, just allowing them to be heard is the best we can do.

Dr. Fitz* is a renowned motivational speaker and psychologist. He has lots of experience speaking with victims of devastation and helping them come to terms with their loss. When *he* lost everything in the fire, I was unsure what I could say to *him*. What words of wisdom could I offer an experienced trauma counselor?

We spoke for a while, and Dr. Fitz thanked me over and over for it.

"You have no idea how much it helped!" he told me, emotionally. "Sitting here, talking to you, and soaking up your positive attitude has done wonders for me."

I was loading up my car with water bottles and food kits, ready to deliver them to firefighters hard at work up in the hills, as well as to those sitting, catatonic, outside the ruined wreckage of their homes.

Danny*, who was staying in the Chabad house temporarily, asked to accompany me. He remained silent for a while as we drove through streets at once so familiar and so strange.

"Can we drive past my house...?" he asked. "The fire was pretty close when we evacuated, but I want to see what happened with it."

We both had a sinking feeling as we drove up his street. Blackened remnants lined both sides of the block. Unfortunately, Danny's home had fared no better. The cops accompanied him into the ruins of his once beautiful house, but there was absolutely nothing left to salvage. All he had were his wife's pajama pants, which he'd thrown on before rushing out.

When he returned to the car, his face was as ashen as the haze around us. He broke down in tears, crying bitterly for everything he'd worked so hard for, so suddenly gone up in flame. After five minutes, he took a few shuddering breaths to calm himself.

"Let's help some more people," he said.

I was amazed at his resilience and altruism. By the time we'd finished our mission of mercy, Danny was in a thoughtful frame of mind.

"Seeing all this terrible devastation has made me appreciate what I have," he said. "I'm so thankful that I, my wife, and my daughter are all alive and well. I thank G-d for our lives and our health."

When Danny and his wife, Nikki*, first came to the Chabad house, Nikki pulled my son-in-law, Rabbi Zushi Rivkin, aside.

"Look what my husband is wearing!" she said. "He doesn't have anything of his own, so he's actually wearing my pants! Do you think you can help him...?"

"We have gift cards he could use to go shopping -" Zushi started to explain.

Nikki shook her head. "He's not ready for that yet. He won't have the brain power to go shopping and pick out new clothes. You're about the same size. Do you have anything you could lend him for now?"

My son-in-law thought of his closet, with the suits and shirts that no longer fit him gathering dust in the back. Though he could no longer use them, they'd fit Danny perfectly. He ran home and emptied his closet.

It was a little jarring to see him the next day, walking around in Zushi's clothes. Of course, at some point, Danny will be able to go shopping and replace his wardrobe. But Zushi's gift was perfectly timed.

My son-in-law, Zushi, and my son, Leibel, visited Mitch*, only to find him struggling against the flames licking his home with a single hose. They each grabbed another hose and helped, keeping the fire at bay. One of them ran around the corner where a firefighting squad was hard at work. He convinced them to follow him back to Mitch's home, where they were able to vanquish it completely and save the home - although they still had to evacuate.

OBKLA and Holy Smokes, amongst other Los Angeles kosher eateries, have been providing fresh, hot food for all those in need. One night, Holy Smokes delivered trays of pastrami sandwiches. Zushi, knowing that Mitch, a native Brooklynite, loved his deli, sent him a quick text message: *Hey! Are you coming to Chabad tonight?*

I'm too emotionally exhausted, Mitch replied. *I won't make it tonight.*

Zushi decided to hand-deliver the meal, knowing how much Mitch would appreciate it. Indeed, Mitch and his wife, Gloria*, were very appreciative.

"Rabbi, what do you think of my outfit?" Gloria asked Zushi.

"Your outfit?" Zushi repeated, confused. "It - it looks very nice! Is there something special about it?"

"There must be!" she replied, with dry cynicism. "I've been wearing it for four days straight!"

I quickly ran back to the Chabad house and grabbed some gift cards. "I know there's a lot on your mind," I told Gloria. "But I have a job for you tomorrow! You need to go shopping!"

One of Zushi's latest brainchilds is a Chabad matchmaking service unlike any other. His family friend, Rabbi Mendel Wolvovsky, is now a shliach in S Rosa, California. In 2017, the Tubbs Fire swept through Northern California, decimating the area. Many of Rabbi Wolvovsky's community members lost their homes in the fire and had to rebuild everything anew.

Zushi realized that the mental load of worrying about all the details - a P.O. Box to open, insurance claims to file, clothing to replace, FEMA to contact, and a myriad of other errands - was too much to handle. He spoke with his friend and suggested making "shidduchim" between members of our community, and survivors of the fire from Rabbi Wolvovsky's community. Having recent, first-hand experience, they would be the perfect guides into everything that needed to be done, and how to best arrange everything. They could also relate to this devastating loss perfectly, and share their own coping mechanisms and strategies.

Baruch Hashem, it's been a massive success. Everyone who heard about the idea immediately asked to be paired up. The S Rosa community is only too happy to lend a hand and help others through the same challenges they just overcame. *We fight fire with fire.*

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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