

IllumiNations

Issue 176 | Parshas
Behar-Bechukosai 5785

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.  DollarDaily.org

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

Rabbi Shmuel and Riki Faigen, Chabad of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary

Hungering for Yiddishkeit

By Chaya Chazan

My friends and I had just finished Kvutza, and after our year of learning in New York, we were ready for Merkos shlichus. Rabbi Shmuel Raskin of Chabad of Hungary asked us to help bring Yiddishkeit to Israelis in Budapest and its surrounding cities.

Of course, Hungary has a prolific Jewish history, with dozens of Chassidic sects tracing their roots to its towns and villages. Tragically, the shtetl streets that once bustled with Jewish life are still, and only a few lucky exceptions are reawakened with yearly pilgrimages to a holy Rebbe's gravesite.

That doesn't mean Jewish life in Budapest is entirely underground. Although very few, if any, of the 7,000 locals listed on the memorial in the center of town returned after the Holocaust, there are many Israeli business people and tourists scattered throughout the country.

Chabad in Budapest was already well-established, but Rabbi Raskin knew of a growing community in faraway Debrecen that had no leadership. Before our flights were booked, he asked one of us to take responsibility for Debrecen, in addition to the work we'd be doing in

Budapest. I was happy to volunteer. So, every Shabbos throughout our stay in Hungary, I'd shlep a friend along the three-hour drive to Debrecen. We hosted Shabbos meals, minyanim, and weekly shiurim. I got to know the community and grew to love them.

Our time in Hungary flew by, and soon it was time to return to Israel for the next chapter of our lives.

"Come back with your wife!" Rabbi Raskin told me when we parted.

I smiled politely in response, but I couldn't help thinking how very unlikely it would be for that to come true.

A few months later, I met my wife, and we settled in a small apartment in Israel. When we were ready to entertain shlichus options, Debrecen was at the forefront of my mind. We visited a couple of times so my wife could decide if she could envision a future there. Baruch Hashem, everything fell into place. A few months later, we were packing up our Israeli apartment and loading it on a shipping palette, set for Debrecen.

It seemed that no one had told Hungary that the Holocaust and Communism were over. The pallor of the past hung heavily over the city and its citizens. Passersby glanced furtively over their shoulders as they darted to and fro. No one in their right mind would dare to wear a yarmulka and tzitzis openly. "Proud" and "Jew" were antitheses of each other.

All that changed, due to a few influential leaders. Rabbi Oberlander, the head shliach of Hungary, infused Hungarian Yiddishkeit with a fresh vitality. He taught Torah to native-born Shlomo Koves, who now works alongside him, leading Hungarian Yiddishkeit to reclaim its former glory. Rabbi Koves has close connections with many government officials, lending prominence and reverence to Chabad.

A new era has dawned on the country. Heads once bowed in shame are now lifted with pride, yarmulkahs unabashedly on display. Passersby are friendly and

purport their solidarity with Israel. I have close friendships with many local government officials, and they've helped us many times. Baruch Hashem, the change over the last 20 years is incredible, and, imh, the next 20 years will bring about just as much growth and transformation.

Debrecen hosted a small Jewish community, complete with its own shul and rabbi. They were proud to call themselves Orthodox, maintaining high standards of halacha, whatever their personal level.

My wife and I originally came to service the Jewish students at the University of Debrecen. Before we moved, we made a firm resolution - we would work in complete harmony and unity with the community. Our job was simply to *add* - not to change or rebuild.

With this in mind, we focused on our students, offering the community our help when we could, and politely stepping back when we were asked to. College kept us quite busy as it was! We were still operating out of a small house, hosting dozens of students each week for Shabbos, shiurim, and programs.

We had ideas for how to grow. We had ambition. But reality threw cold water over our aspirations, time and time again. Our financial situation was beyond dire; we barely had enough money for the basics. When we tried to launch new initiatives, they failed dismally. Even the demographics in our community were unpromising - there were mostly older couples, or young, transient students, with no roots or futures in Debrecen. Without young families and their children to lead the generation of tomorrow, what future did Chabad of Debrecen have?

Maybe we'd made a mistake, my wife and I mused. Maybe it was time to move on to greener pastures.

Of course, we wouldn't do anything without informing our boss - the Rebbe. When I flew to New York for the kinnus that year, I visited the Ohel and composed a heartfelt, if somewhat audacious, letter.

If Hashem wants us to remain in Debrecen, we need a clear sign, I wrote. If we meet two new families with children in the next year, we'll know that we're supposed to remain there. If not, we'll understand that the challenges and hardships we are facing are signalling us to move on.

I knew it was wrong to *demand* signs, but we were desperate for answers.

A week or two later, I got a call from a Hungarian student named Zoé*.

"I'm moving to Debrecen soon, and I wanted to see how my family could get involved with the community. I have a three-year-old daughter..."



A few weeks later, Liat*, one of our students, called to tell me she was returning home to Israel, and couldn't bring her treadmill with her. She offered it to me, since it would go to waste otherwise. I told her I'd come pick it up, and drove over shortly thereafter.

"Are you a rabbi?" Liat's landlady asked. "I'm Jewish too!"

"Really?" I asked in surprise. "I can't believe we haven't met!"

"And I have children, too!" she continued, completely unprompted.

My mouth dropped open. "That's... great to hear," I replied, my voice suddenly thick. "You should know that, because of you, we'll be staying in Debrecen!"

I gave you a year, Hashem, I whispered. You answered us so quickly, our mission here must be truly urgent!

From that day on, we were able to face any challenge with equanimity. We knew Hashem was on our side and that somehow, everything would work out.

We do our best to meet the demands of every demographic in our community. Every Shabbos and Yom Tov is split into two: at night, we celebrate in Hebrew with the young, Israeli crowd, and in the mornings, we rejoice in Hungarian with the more staid locals.

Learning Hungarian was essential, and I became fluent enough to offer classes and programs completely in Hungarian. I do sometimes have to stop and ask how to say a word or two, but everyone is very understanding.

This is especially important for our Sunday school students, who only learn rudimentary English in school. We offer classes full of joy, excitement, and passion for Judaism - all in Hungarian. It gives them the knowledge and inspiration they need to wear their Judaism with pride at their public schools.

I teach an electives class on Jewish Ethics through the university every week. Back in the 2010's, when smartphones were just starting to gain popularity, it was jarring to see people sitting and ostensibly listening, while their eyes and fingers never strayed from the screen in front of them. At one point, I started to question whether it was worth giving the class at all.

The students weren't paying attention; they were only there for the college credits - maybe the snacks. But were they *gaining* anything? Was it worth the hours of preparation I put in?

Just a few days later, I got a call from Andris*, one of my Jewish Ethics students. "Rabbi, you're the only one who can help me now."

"What's going on?" I asked, concerned.

"I'm very, very lonely," he explained. "I'm going out of my mind, staring at the walls, day in and day out. I have no one in my life, and it all became too much. I wanted to take my life. Do you know why I didn't? Last week, you taught us the Torah principle of *v'nishmartem meod al nafshoseichem* and the sanctity of life. I remembered the discussions we had on assisted suicide and the Torah perspective, and it stopped me from going through with it. But... now what do I do?"

I assured him I was coming *right* over as I jumped into my car. The entire way there, I prayed for Hashem to put the right words in my mouth. We talked for hours, and, baruch Hashem, I was able to bring him back from the edge.

A while later, Andris, starved for companionship, fell hard for the first woman to give him attention. He was a bit embarrassed to tell me she wasn't Jewish, but he explained how he couldn't help himself. Just seeing the lights reflected on the walls of her apartment had been too powerful a symbol of home and belonging.

We kept in touch, and the years brought about significant change for Andris. I officiated his wedding to Chana in a beautiful courtyard in Jerusalem.

"I can't believe I'm dancing at my own wedding," he told me as we locked arms in joyous embrace.

And I can't believe I ever doubted the power of Torah learning! I replied to myself.

In recent years, we began a tradition of hosting an upscale farewell dinner at the restaurant for our graduating students. We become very close with them over the course of their university years, and we're always sorry to see them go. The dinner is an opportunity to reminisce, gift them each a leather-bound Chitas with their names engraved, and share inspiration.

We ask each student to share their thoughts on how they grew over the last few years, how their connection with G-d changed, and what their dreams are.

One students, Nava*, turned it back on me. "What is your dream, Rabbi?" she asked.

I knew Nava and her husband, Kobi*, well. It had been an emotional night, and that led me to say, "My dream is to marry you and Kobi with a proper, halachic, Jewish marriage."

Nava smiled, but didn't answer. I knew she and Kobi had specifically chosen a civil ceremony because they didn't *value* a religious one, but I hoped my heartfelt words would make an impression.

A couple of months later, the world was rocked with the news of Hamas' massacre.

Nava called me a few weeks later. "Rabbi, Kobi and I talked about it... and we came to a decision." She took a deep breath. "We want to do something to show our commitment to Judaism and our connection to our people. Can you... marry us Jewishly...?"

"Of course!" I beamed. "I actually have a couple of weddings scheduled in Israel in a couple of months. Maybe we can -"

"No," she interrupted. "We need to do it now. Before I change my mind."

A few days later, Nava and Kobi stood under a tallis on their veranda overlooking the magnificent Judean hills. In the face of Hamas's willful destruction of Jewish life, Nava and Kobi established a beautiful, new Jewish home.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

DollarDaily.org

a Project of

**YadLShliach.org
and COLlive.com**

COL LIVE

**MAKE CENTS OF YOUR NEW YEAR
\$1 a day keeps the mitzvahs on the way!**

ILLUMINATIONS, A PROJECT OF DOLLARDAILY.ORG, SUPPORTS CHABAD HOUSES WORLDWIDE:

- Provide Tefillin for Yitzhak, connecting him to his Jewish roots.
- Empower Miriam through Mikvah visits, fostering spiritual growth.
- Help the Rabbi's family with new clothes, supporting their selfless service.
- Sponsor Shabbas experiences on college campuses, creating vibrant Jewish communities.

\$731+

DONATING PER DAY

\$779645+

ALREADY DONATED TO ORGANIZATIONS

\$265720+

TO BE GIVEN OVER THE NEXT 365 DAYS

Join 700+ people giving just \$1 a day at DollarDaily.org and make a lasting impact!



DollarDaily.org

HELP JEWS.

ALL JEWS.

IN ALL PLACES.