

# IllumiNations

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

*Rabbi Yossi and Dalia Kulek, Chabad Chevra at UHart, Hartford, CT*

## Crossing the Divide

By Chaya Chazan

**Even before I was born, the Rebbe and his shluchim had a profound impact on my life.**

When my mother was in high school, she met Robert, a charismatic African American man, and they instantly hit it off. Their relationship grew quickly, and they were soon discussing marriage, even though my mother was still in school. Although she was very young, she yearned to be a mother, and when she found out she was pregnant with me, she was delighted!

Unfortunately, the rosy future my mother envisioned began to brown at the edges. Robert was frequently unfaithful and often left her alone to attend parties and meet other people. He was verbally, physically, and emotionally abusive to her, but it wasn't until he yelled at her mother for daring to hold me that she finally had the courage to leave.

My grandmother tried contacting a women's shelter to find a place for my mother, but they couldn't take her because she was underage. Other places gave similar denials. My grandmother was at a loss. Where would she find safe haven for her daughter and grandson?



At that time, my uncle was attending the local Chabad house. He'd met some bochorim on mivtzoym and was impressed with their dedication to Yiddishkeit, and how unconcerned they were with conformity. He followed them to the shliach and built up a relationship with them.

My grandmother didn't fully understand what the "Jewish center" was all about, but she'd heard how much they cared for every Jew. Desperate, she called Rabbi Leibel and Devorah Alevsky. Without hesitation, they agreed to take us in - a single, teenaged mother and her newborn son.

We stayed at their Chabad House for a few weeks. My mother was immediately struck by the atmosphere, noticing how Yiddishkeit leant meaning to every moment of the day. *This is what I want for my son*, she thought.

When Mrs. Alevsky asked if she'd be interested in studying in Machon Chana to learn more, my mother didn't hesitate. At the tender age of 18, with an infant to boot, she packed up her whole life and set off on a bus to a community, culture, and life wholly unfamiliar to her. She credits her courage to her drive to give me a better life; I can only admire and appreciate her strength.

She arrived in Crown Heights just before Shavuot. Every year, we commemorate Shavuot as the anniversary of the day we as a nation received the Torah, but for my mother, it is also the day she began our journey to Hashem.

She found a basement apartment in Crown Heights, got a part-time job, and spent the rest of her time in Machon Chana, drinking in all the classes.

After a few years, she met my father, and they got engaged. It was customary for chassanim and kallos to meet with the Rebbe in *yechidus* before getting married, and my parents were granted the same opportunity. They took me along with them. Although I was just four years old, I remember that *yechidus* with perfect clarity. I can still see the Rebbe leaning down over his desk, a warm smile on his face, to talk with me.

The Rebbe asked me if I was wearing *tzitzis*, and I proudly answered that I was. He asked me how many strings I had on my *tzitzis*, but in awe, I didn't answer.

"Do you have one string?" the Rebbe asked, and I nodded. "Do you have two?" the Rebbe continued, and I nodded again. The Rebbe continued asking until we got up to eight strings, at which point he gave me a smile and continued speaking with my parents.

My parents acknowledge that, although the *yechidus* was in honor of their upcoming wedding, the focus was mainly on me. The recollections of that *yechidus* still uplift me in times of struggle or doubt. I picture the Rebbe's beaming smile, and know that I'm in the right place - and that everything will work out fine.

After their marriage, my parents moved to Chicago. The Chabad community there was small; I think we were among the first ten Lubavitch families in the city. We were different; I knew that. Although it was a Chabad school, most of the students were not from Lubavitch homes. My classmates didn't keep *Cholov Yisroel* or eat only Lubavitch *shechita*. I couldn't eat in my friends' houses, but my parents instilled a pride in our differences - and it's something I carry with me to this day.

My parents never had a "Chabad House." They never attended the *Kinus Hashluchim*. But *shlichus* was built into their psyche. In a way, the Rebbe sent them to Chicago on *shlichus*, without them even knowing it!

When my parents were engaged, they wrote a letter to the Rebbe and received a standard reply. At the top of the page, there were a few letters typed in the corner, but my father couldn't make out what it said. He even showed it to a *mashpia*, who also couldn't understand what it was. So my parents shrugged it off and forgot about it.

Years later, my father was reviewing the letters he'd received from the Rebbe and reexamined the mysterious word once again. He realized the Rebbe had spelled out "Chicago" in Hebrew. My parents didn't even consider moving to Chicago until years after that letter was sent - but clearly, the Rebbe saw they had much to accomplish there.

My parents influenced people just by virtue of being who they were. As my father rode the Chicago "L" train every day, hunched over his pocket-sized *sefer*, he drew the attention of his fellow commuters. Many of them stopped to talk with him, and he often came home with brand new friends on his arm.

My mother almost single-handedly ran the *mivtzoym* scene in the city, and continues to orches-

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trate and organize it, even though she no longer lives there.

My parents' dedication to spreading Yiddishkeit and helping people was the foundation of my own desire to become a *shliach* myself.

My first experience as a *shliach* was shaped by my unique perspective on being biracial in an overwhelmingly Ashkenazi society.

I met a boy in the park with a skin tone similar to mine. I immediately befriended him and invited him back to my house. My mother was a little surprised to see me bring a complete stranger into our home, but she greeted him warmly and offered him a snack. She soon learned that his family was Yemeni and was struggling to find their place in the community. Because of my friendship with the boy, our families met, and his mother decided to enroll all her children in Jewish schools. Today, those children are grown, raising Torah-true families of their own.

Still, people's reactions to my skin color sometimes made me feel alienated. Although I questioned my place in the *frum* world, my love, appreciation, and belief in the Rebbe kept me tethered to Chabad. I loved learning *Chassidus* and was deeply drawn to the Rebbe's teachings.

My years in *yeshiva* offered even more persuasions for a life of *shlichus*.

My *mashpia* in *yeshiva* in Seattle gave me a much-needed dose of reality when I told him about my friendship with the *yeshiva* handyman, Larry.

When Larry wasn't busy, he liked to sit on the stoop, smoking and people-watching. I often joined him on the steps, leading our conversations into Torah and Yiddishkeit. Larry appreciated the company, but he told me he was an atheist and didn't believe anything I was saying.

I told my *mashpia* what Larry had said and cried out, "I don't get it! Why don't people want to keep Shabbos or *kashrus*? It's so easy and so beautiful!"

My *mashpia* smiled gently at my naiveté, put a hand on my shoulder and told me, "Yossi, it's *not* easy. What the Rebbe asks of us is to be *crazy*. It's not normal to approach a stranger on the street and ask if you can wrap some black leather straps

on their arm. We do it anyway - but it's important to remember what you're asking of the people you approach."

It was easier to blend in while learning in Israel, where the population is darker-skinned. But after a few years in Israeli *yeshivos*, I started to miss home. The Israelis considered me American, and the Americans heard my perfect Hebrew and saw my Israeli friends, and figured I was Israeli. I felt I didn't belong in either group, and I wanted to continue my *semicha* program in America, closer to my family.

When I'd first faced the decision of which *yeshiva* to attend, the Rebbe had indicated I should go to Kiryat Gat. Now that I was considering a switch, I knew I had to ask the Rebbe once again. Unfortunately, the *histalkus* of the Rebbe on Gimmel Tammuz the year before had made everything more challenging. My *mashpia* advised me that the Rebbe wanted us to first turn to friends and mentors for advice - but if we found ourselves in a situation where *all* options felt right, then it was okay to write a letter and place it in a random volume of the *Igros Kodesh* and let *hashgacha pratis* do its work.

To my disappointment, the letter I opened addressed a *bochur* and advised him to go to *yeshiva* in Israel. I'd hoped for a different answer, and closed the *sefer* with a sigh. That's when I noticed the *Igros* I'd selected was a volume of the *Friedliker Rebbe's* letters.

*Well that doesn't count!* I thought. *Let me give it another go.*

When I opened a second volume, it was a letter written in English to a Jewish newspaper in New York. The Rebbe explained that the letter was specifically written in English to make the message absolutely clear. *My father-in-law, the Friedliker Rebbe, already gave you an answer about this, the letter read. You must follow the directives of the Rebbe.*

Needless to say, I continued learning in Eretz Yisroel.

I spent a summer with the *shluchim* in the *yeshiva* in Tzefas, and ended up spending a lot of time leading groups at Ascent of Tzefas. It was my first

time being fully immersed in *shlichus*, and I loved it. I met many interesting people, including David, a schoolteacher from Brooklyn.

One evening, we sat on the rooftop, talking throughout the night. Our conversation ranged from religion, to philosophy, to life reflections, G-d, and more.

We talked for hours, until we saw the sun rising over Meron, its rays spreading pink tendrils through the sky. We sat in companionable silence, admiring G-d's incredible handiwork.

"My twin brother would never believe this," David said suddenly, breaking the silence. "When I first got here, I was a staunch atheist. If he knew I'd sat up all night, talking G-d and religion - let alone believing any of it - he'd be incredulous. *I'm* incredulous! But somehow, talking with you, it all seems real!"

I thought about a conversation I'd had with a friend, Rabbi Yossi Refson, *shliach* in Charleston, South Carolina, where I told him I wanted to go into business - to be the Zevulun partner in the relationship. He challenged me to name famous business tycoons from the previous century, or even further back.

"Despite their wealth, their legacy died with them," he argued. "As a *shliach*, you make a lasting difference in people's lives. Generations after them will be impacted by the influence you have. How could you replace one with the other?"

Sitting with former-atheist-David on that rooftop in Tzefas, I understood my friend's point. I knew I wanted to meet many more "Davids," and help them discover G-d and His Torah.

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