

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

Rabbi Yisroel Moshe and Aura Ort, Chabad at Auraria Campus, Denver, CO

Judaism, Rebooted

By Chaya Chazan

My entire life was changed by a single sentence: *Why don't you join us for Shabbos?*

I was a college student from Jacksonville, Florida, who thought he knew everything there was to know about Judaism. I'd grown up attending my parents' Conservative synagogue on High Holidays, and even on Shabbos most weeks - until my bar mitzvah, at least. I thought I knew all about the Jewish holidays. We were religious about giving gifts on Hanukkah, and our seders lasted forever - sometimes even a half hour! I'd even celebrated my bar mitzvah in Israel, putting on tefillin for the first time in the shade of the Kotel.

Clearly, I knew it all.

When I started attending university at UCF in Orlando, I was disappointed there was no Jewish group on campus, like there'd been at UF in Gainesville, where I'd attended before. A friend of mine shared this disappointment, and we decided to team up and create a Jewish club ourselves. He took me to two synagogues in town - a Conservative synagogue and a Chabad house. While the conservative synagogue felt more familiar, it was my first time ever visiting a Chabad house.

The shliach, Rabbi Sholom Dubov, was very nice, and I really liked the vibes, but I wasn't interested in getting in any deeper than that.

A few months later, I was speaking with my mother about a dilemma. "Is there a rabbi you can speak with?" she asked.

"Rabbis give very good advice." "Yeah, I kind of know one," I told her. "He seems very knowledgeable. That's a good idea."

Rabbi Dubov gave me excellent advice, and when I offered a donation, he waved it off, and asked me to come for Shabbos instead. Delicious, free food for a college student? Deal!

That Shabbos was the start of everything. I soon became a regular and began keeping Shabbos as their guest. After graduating, I moved to the neighborhood and started keeping kashrus too. After a while, I wanted to learn Jewish texts in the original Hebrew and meet other guys like myself, so I enrolled in Yeshivas Hadar Hatorah.

After my wife and I got married, I got a job as a software engineer. My company relocated us to Texas for a few years, but after a while, we were ready to look for a new opportunity. There was an excellent job prospect in Colorado, so we moved to Denver.

I couldn't believe it when, one Purim a couple of years later, Rabbi Popack, the head shliach of Colorado, casually asked if I'd like to be a shliach to the Auraria Campus in downtown Denver. It was remarkable hashgacha pratit to come full-circle, when I, the guy who'd discovered authentic and meaningful Judaism in college, would introduce it to others in college.

It started small, with tabling shofar blowing, matza delivery before Pesach, and small events. We tabled on campus, handed out Shabbos candles, wrapped tefillin, and hosted students in our home for Shabbos and holiday meals.

I still laugh when I think of the former college version of me who'd never imagine he'd become a chassid, nevermind studying in yeshiva, let alone becoming a college campus shliach himself!

I once asked Rabbi Popack what prompted him to ask a full-time software engineer to take on an equally full-time shlichus. I wasn't even a rabbi at that point - I studied and became ordained a few years later.

"You have the ability to influence people for the good," he said, matter of factly.

The simplicity and clarity of his statement was unanswerable, but there were times when it was a struggle to balance these two heavy responsibilities. I could clock out of the office at 5, but how could I turn away a student calling for help and guidance at 2 AM?

I was especially bothered that I no longer had the time to keep up with my own rigorous Torah study schedule. When I confided in Rabbi Popack, he told me about a chassid of the Friediker Rebbe, who'd come bearing a similar complaint. *I'm honored to complete the Rebbe's missions*, the chassid had cried. *But I no longer have time to learn!* The Friediker Rebbe cried with him, then dried his tears and said, *And now I have another mission for you.*

Shlichus means self-sacrifice - of your sleep, of your privacy, and of your personal ambitions.

The college owns Golda Meir's restored Denver home. In recent years, management of the historical house was transferred, and the new manager was eager to breathe life back into the building. She asked if we wanted to use it for programs, and we were only too happy to accept. We held classes there during the week, but we thought we could do more.

Our home is in a different neighborhood - too long of a walk to be easily accessible to students. The building was an opportunity to host Shabbos meals right on campus.

While it made it very convenient for the students, it's less so for us. We have to stay in a hotel over Shabbos. In addition to the expense (2 days of stay), it can be very tricky to avoid muktzah in a place that relies on electricity so heavily. Baruch Hashem, the staff is very accommodating, and, after many weeks of patient explanations, we managed to work everything out.

We make all the food at home, transfer it in large plastic bins, set up warming trays on pre-set timers to go off on Shabbos, and make sure all the food is refrigerated. Everything has to be immediately locked up, including the fridge - because leaving it unattended in a public building would call the kashrus of our dishes into question.

Day meals get a little easier on Yom Tov, but we cannot cook since there are no facilities on campus, and it's still a huge



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endeavor every week. Nothing will beat the first week we hosted Shabbos there, when we were nearly snowed in on Friday night!

Mr. Gregortov* was very upset with us. He'd frown whenever he saw us, and mumble some unpleasant things under his breath. In a way, we understood. After all, we'd taken his normal, promising son, Modi*, filled his head with ideas about G-d, Torah, and Judaism, and then sent him to learn in yeshiva. Mr. Gregortov took his son's drastic change very hard and placed all the blame squarely on our shoulders.

We never pressure anyone to commit to mitzvos they're not ready for. Instead, we lead by example and try to inspire others to follow. Modi joined us for a few Shabbosim, and was inspired by the elevated atmosphere. After a few weeks, it felt weird to leave the Shabbos table, get in his car, and drive home. He tried limiting his use of blinkers and lights, but it felt wrong. He decided not to use any electricity when he got home, and he was astounded by the difference it made.

"It makes *me* feel different," he told me.

He started increasing his observance of Shabbos, and one thing led to the next. Eventually, he attended yeshiva, and married an amazing Jewish girl.

After a few years, Modi settled back in Denver, accompanied by his wife and adorable children. Mr. Gregortov loves being around them, and his adoration for his grandchildren has turned all his former animosity to gratitude. He now smiles happily when he sees us, acknowledging our small part in his present happiness.

One Sukkos, we received a couple of visitors in our sukkah, Ben* and Remy*. It was our first time meeting them since the beginning of the new semester, but the acquaintance was off to a good start when they excitedly told us how much they "loved Chabad."

I asked if they had mezuzos for their dorm rooms, and promised to bring some when they told me they didn't.

I really hit it off with Remy, and when I came to his apartment to hang up the mezuzah, he asked if we could meet for coffee one day, as he had some things he wanted to discuss. I happily agreed and we settled on a time and place.

On the appointed day, I headed to the coffee shop, waving cheerily at Remy, who was holding a table for us on the veranda. He smiled warmly and we had a great talk but his facial expression quickly changed when I pulled out a tefillin bag I brought with me.

"So *that's* why you agreed to get coffee?" he asked, coldly, eying my tefillin bag pointedly.

"Of course not!" I assured him. "But I'm a rabbi, and this is what I do. The tefillin are standard equipment for rabbis!" I hoped a joke would lighten the suddenly tense atmosphere, but it didn't seem to do the trick. Remy and I spoke for a little while, but the conversation was awkward and stilted, and Remy ended it as soon as he could.

I continued texting him to invite him to classes, programs, Shabbos meals, and events, but he ignored all my messages and didn't show up for any of them. I was very sad that a small misunderstanding had so massively uprooted a promising friendship.

When I saw Remy at our Chanukah party a couple of months later, I was so excited, I plowed through the crowd and enveloped him in a big bear hug.

"I'm so happy to see you!" I greeted him.

Remy looked surprised, and tried to cover his confusion with an awkward grin. He later told me that his friend had dragged him along to the party, and he hadn't known it was Chabad until he walked into the room and saw me. He was nervous about meeting me again after our last encounter, but was completely disarmed by the overwhelming welcome. It made him realize that I really *did* have good intentions, and that the tefillin were not the ambush his prejudice had convinced him they were.

With an open mind from the warmth he received, we were able to strengthen our connection, and Remy started to really explore his Judaism and identity. At that time, he was dating a non-Jew, and he asked me to speak with her.

"Listen," I told her. "You're a great girl; he's a great guy, but that doesn't mean you're great for *each other*. What will December 25th look like in your home? What will Rosh Hoshana or Yom Kippur look like in your home? How will your family figure into those days? What will your children's identities be? What holidays will they identify with? You tell me you're willing to *convert*, but that means a lot more than you think. It's a lifelong, deep, and intense commitment. It's a question of one or both of you stifling your identity."

It was the first of many conversations. Ultimately, as Remy became more observant, the only possible outcome was to break up with her; a brave and exacting decision that brought initial pain and heartbreak, but was ultimately good for both of them.

A few months later, Remy was deciding whether or not to take the plunge and attend yeshiva. He was ready for it; it sounded interesting, but it was a commitment he wasn't sure he could honor. In order to help him outsmart his yetzer hara that was

making it seem like a giant commitment, I told him, "Just try it out for a few days. You can leave if you don't like it."

Remy tried it out for a few days, and, as expected, he *loved* it. He ended up staying there for quite a while, and it has literally changed his life and outlook, immersing him in Torah and G-dliness.

Jerry* wasn't fully religious, but he covered his head with a Bucharian-style kippah.

When anti-Israel sentiment tore through college and protests were staged across the campus, Jerry became nervous.

"Should I take off my kippah?" he asked me. "It feels like a matter of safety."

"Absolutely not!" I answered. "Now, more than ever, we must display our Judaism with pride, and show them that Am Yisrael will always prevail!"

I knew I was asking a lot of him, so I was moved to tears when I saw him a few days later, wrapping tefillin on the quad, while protestors nearby chanted hateful threats against Israel and Jews.

Gil* was despondent. He hated his job, felt stuck in his personal life, and was frustrated that he couldn't see a clear way out. He confided in me and asked for advice.

"That's amazing!" I told him.

"Rabbi, did you *hear* me?" he asked, confused. "What exactly about what I just told you is amazing?"

"If you were completely happy and satisfied with life, you'd never feel any need or desire to improve and become better. The fact that you are feeling this way is not a tragedy; it's an incredible opportunity to change your life into something you can be proud of."

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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