

IllumiNations

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

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We Have a Rebbe!

By Chaya Chazan

GIMMEL TAMMUZ EDITION

Once a week, I serve as the chaplain in Atlanta's International Airport. My job requires me to walk around the concourse, be present for the busy passengers rushing by, and see if there's anyone I can help.

One morning, I walked by the chapel and noticed something strange - a girl was curled up on one of the benches, in an uneasy sleep. The rules for the chapel - which included basic respect for the holy space - were posted on the door. I flagged down a nearby employee and asked what was going on.

The girl was just 16, and was stuck, needing a flight home to see her dying mother in Philadelphia. Her father, who was supposed to have picked her up when she arrived in Atlanta 2 weeks prior, had gone missing, and couldn't be reached. The flights those days, in the shadow of COVID, were very expensive. The next available flight that we could help her with was two days later, and she had nowhere to be in the meantime.

"We've got to do something to help her!" I exclaimed.

"We're trying," the airport employee replied, tightly. "Right now, our biggest concern is finding her a proper place to sleep tonight." He paused for a moment and then glanced at me archly. "Can you host her tonight?"



The girl looked so lost and sad, I couldn't bring myself to say no. We hosted her that night, giving her a wholesome home-cooked meal, and a comfortable bed to sleep on. The next morning, I brought her back to the airport.

"We're trying to find accommodations for her tonight," the airport employee told me. "But the family we were going to place her with just canceled, and now I'm trying to find an alternative."

The girl interrupted him. "Can I go back to the rabbi's house? Last night was so great!"

Of course, I agreed, and returned home. The only problem was that my wife wasn't home, and the laws of yichud forbid me from staying with our visitor.

"I have to run out," I told her. "Please, make yourself at home!"

I ran out to my car and started driving. I had nowhere in particular to go, but I knew I needed to kill time until my wife returned home. Our daughter had just spent some time at home recuperating from Covid, so I figured I might as well get tested. I called my doctor and asked for a test.

"Sure! Come right over," the receptionist invited me. To my dismay, it was a drive-through test that took only a couple of seconds to complete.

"It's negative," the nurse pronounced, expecting me to drive off in excitement.

"Don't you have another test I can do?" I asked.

She gave me a funny look. "You can do the PCR, but you'll need to come inside for that."

"Sure!" I said. I jumped out of my car and signed in at the front desk. The PCR test didn't take very long either. "Do you have any other tests I can take?" I asked.

"What do you need tested?" they asked.

"Whatever you got!" I answered.

They thought I was joking, but soon enough, I was hooked up to an EKG, and had my blood drawn.

"Would you like to take another test?" they asked, cautiously.

At that moment, I received a text from my wife informing me that she'd returned home.

"No thanks!" I replied, jumping off the bed. "I'm good now!"

The next day, the girl was able to fly home and spend time with her mother in her final days. As I drove her to the airport for the final time, she told me, "Every day at recess, there's always a group of people speaking badly about Jews. I'm not going to let that happen anymore! From now on, when I hear anyone speaking negatively about Jews, I'm going to tell them that out of all the millions of people in the airport, it was a Jew that finally helped me. You not only took me in, but treated me with such extraordinary kindness and warmth!"

A few days later, my doctor called with the results of the PCR. "It's positive," he told me. "Rest, and feel better!"

It was Parshas Zachor that week, and I was disappointed that I'd have to cancel the minyan on such a significant day. But by Sunday, I'd started feeling sicker than I've ever felt in my life. By the time Thursday arrived, Ta'anis Esther that year, my oxygen levels were dangerously low. I was rushed to the hospital on Thursday afternoon, in a semi coma.

When the receptionist took my information, I was told, "I can see you recently visited your doctor and took a bunch of tests. Since your doctor is in our network, we're able to access the results of the tests he took. You, sir, are incredibly sick! We'll admit you to the ICU right away!"

As a result of the COVID virus, the sections of my body that were tested were doing terribly. My body was weakened to the point that it was on the verge of shutting down.

The virus had infected my liver and my heart. They were able to see the devastating effects immediately, thanks to the tests I'd taken the week before. Instead of wasting precious time trying to find the cause of my malaise, they were able to start treatment immediately. My chessed to the poor, lost girl had saved my life.

For the next couple of days, I drifted in and out of consciousness, barely cognizant of the passing time. Despite my weakness and state of confusion, I knew I had to say my daily Rambam. I had not missed a single day since the Rebbe asked each person to say the daily shiur almost forty years before. I could barely read the words

on the page, and my lapses into unconsciousness made me lose my place and start over many times. It took hours, but I finally completed the entire portion.

Early Shabbos morning, two doctors walked briskly into the room and introduced themselves.

"Your heart is in terrible shape, and has been greatly impacted by the Covid," the brash doctor told me. "We need to perform a test to see just how badly. Can you sign these release papers?"

"I'm not in any state of mind to make such a decision," I answered, mustering up all my strength. "And I can't call anyone because it's Shabbos and they won't answer."

The doctor simply lifted an eyebrow superciliously and waited for me to authorize the procedure.

"If you reach for my phone, I'll tell you which number to call," I finally suggested. "I have a good friend - a non-Jew - who is a brain surgeon. I'll consult with him, and follow his advice."

But my friend didn't pick up.

"I think it's a sign that I shouldn't agree to this procedure right now. Is it really urgent?" I asked.

"Extremely!" the doctor almost shouted, his brows constricting aggressively. "If you wait around to make a decision, you may not survive long enough to approve! If you won't give me your approval now, the hospital won't take responsibility for your life!"

His words frightened me, but I have a personal rule: if someone behaves aggressively towards me while demanding I do something, I tread very carefully, because it's usually the aggression doing the talking. In this case, I was resolute in refusing. He stormed out in a huff, leaving me to sink back on my pillows in exhaustion. I'd spent many hours in hospital rooms with direly ill patients, but it felt different when I was the one on the bed. I was terrified. Were these my final hours on earth? Had I made the right decision? Should I prepare myself for death by saying Shema and the other prayers? I was in a state of confusion and despair, but I remembered the famous story of Reb Mendel Futerfas, who composed a mental letter to the Friediker Rebbe while imprisoned in Soviet labor camps. The Friediker Rebbe replied with a letter sent to his family in England. Although I didn't dare compare myself to the great chassid, I know the

shliach, Rabbi Yisroel Deren, had taken inspiration from that story and also hoped to communicate with the Rebbe in his mind. He, too, received a response from the Rebbe. I knew there was no reason to be confused because *we have a Rebbe!*

I felt that it would be best if I actually would write a letter to the Rebbe, and so I waited until Shabbos was over, because I didn't want to write it on Shabbos even in my mind. When I was ready, I envisioned myself immersing in the mikvah, walking to 770, sitting by the scratched wooden table under the clock, and writing to the Rebbe, explaining my plight. Although my letter was not more than a few lines, it took a very long time to write. I kept drifting in and out of consciousness, and every time I woke up, I had to visualize myself starting the entire process of immersing, walking, and writing all over again. Finally, the letter was complete.

In my mind, I stepped out of the room and stood in the hallway, facing the Rebbe's room. *I should go in and see if the Rebbe is there*, I thought to myself. Again, it took me many tries until I stayed conscious long enough to actually enter the room. I saw the Rebbe sitting behind his desk. The Rebbe read the letter, looked up, and told me four words. These four words basically contained my entire life and personality. It would take me year to encapsulate all that the Rebbe expressed in a mere four words. At that moment, I knew without a doubt that this had to be something real and not a fantasy of the mind. In those words I also received the Rebbe's bracha for a refuah shleima gratefully and with conviction.

The next morning, a different doctor came in. He recommended the same procedure - but told me there was no rush. He scheduled it for 6 months later! In fact, he later informed me that had I consented to the procedure at that time, I probably would've died since my body was too weak to handle the stress of the invasive procedure.

The four words the Rebbe told me gave me no rest. They had pierced into my very being, exposing me for who I was. I knew that I had to do a serious cheshbon hanefesh and take advantage of my miraculous new lease on life. I examined every aspect of myself, and took on resolutions to improve myself as a father, as a son, as a shliach, as a rabbi, as a chassid, and every other area of my life. It was a sincere, exhaustive self-reflection, and took me days to complete.

The day after I'd concluded my self-examination, I was told I was well enough to be transferred out of the ICU, and, a day later, I was released entirely.

Recuperation was still a long process, but I knew I had the Rebbe's bracha as a guarantee.

I was back in the hospital five days later, as the medicine they sent home with me was incorrect. I was in an extremely grave condition. But I knew that I had the Rebbe's brachah. Baruch Hashem, I was home for Pesach.

A month later, I was feeling well enough to contemplate a visit to the Ohel. My doctor refused to grant me clearance at first, but when I pointed out that my recovery had been miraculous up until that point, he reluctantly agreed, with many limitations and restrictions.

I sat in the tent writing for over two hours. I filled pages and pages with every detail of my illness and recovery, and asked for the Rebbe's guidance and bracha. When I walked up to the Rebbe's matzeivah, I began crying like a baby - which is very unusual for me in the presence of the Rebbe. I raised my arm to cover my eyes, and, at that moment, in my mind's eye, I saw the exact scene I'd envisioned in my hospital bed. The Rebbe sat in the exact same place, but this time, the Rebbe remarked with amazement, "*Two and half hours? You've been here before and I already gave you a bracha! When I give a bracha, it's not a simple wish - it's the empowerment you need to fulfill it! In these two and a half hours, you could've changed the entire world!*"

In an instant, the vision was gone, but it left a lasting impression on me. My job was to focus on what I could do, not what I couldn't, or complain about previous issues.

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