

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

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Faith in the Bayou, Part II

By Chaya Chazan

When I asked my wife what type of shlichus she'd be open to, she replied, "Anything and anywhere."

We're always very excited when someone in the community has a baby, but when it's a boy, things can get complicated. It's not always easy to convince a mohel to fly down to New Orleans with just a week's notice, especially if it's a Shabbos or Yom Tov bris. Of course, there's also the cost of the ticket to be considered. It was clear a more convenient option was desperately needed.

My father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all mohalim, and I was proud and excited to join the legacy. Baruch Hashem, I've been able to give many babies brissim since, and the convenience of having someone local has helped convince people to go through with it.

I remember getting a call from a family in a tiny town in Mississippi who'd just had a baby boy. She told me she was a devout Christian, but hoped I could still perform the circumcision.

"Do you have any biological, Jewish relatives?" I asked, purely curious.

"Yes, I do!" she replied. "My maternal grandmother was Jewish, and lived in the Jewish section of France. I can even give you her exact address!"

I asked a friend in Paris to look it up, and he confirmed that the address was in the old Jewish neighborhood, and the name was a typically Jewish French name. After some more research, I was able to confirm that the entire family was Jewish. The baby was her seventh child, so it was very exciting to find so many lost neshamos!

"You must be the only Jews around for miles!" I told her.

In a way, *all* her children joined the Jewish nation that day: the baby had a bris, and her older children learned about their special place amongst Am Yisrael.

My wife and I had just had a baby boy and were planning the bris, when I got a call about another family who had a baby just a few days earlier. Our bris was on Chol Hamoed Sukkos of 2023, and theirs was a few days earlier.

I happily agreed to do the bris for *Stav and *Jenny's baby. I was a little surprised that there was a couple where *both* spouses were Jewish, and we didn't know them.

It was a small, quick bris. It took place in their home, with just myself, the parents, and a couple of grandparents in attendance.

"We have many programs for young families," I told them after the bris. "Why don't you come? I'm sure you'd enjoy it."

"Thank you, but organized religion isn't really my thing," the father waved me off. "I'm an artist, and I feel like my spiritual side is completely satisfied with that."

I didn't want to be too pushy, but I tried convincing them for a few more minutes. Finally conceding defeat, I wished them *mazal tov* and left.

A couple of days later, we heard the devastating news out of Israel. The Jewish community was reeling, and we knew

that there was nothing more healing than unity. We had a community dinner so we could strengthen one another and process as a community.

I was surprised when Stav and Jenny showed up, bringing along a few more couples we'd never met.

"Thank you for coming," I greeted Stav.

"It's been a rough few weeks," he admitted. "I remember what I told you at the bris, and wish I could take back my words. All my friends and contacts in the art world have completely turned their backs on me. I thought we were soul brothers. I see now I was wrong. Now I feel like I don't quite fit in anywhere. Judaism never meant much to me, but I think it's time to explore it and embrace it."

That was the first of many Shabbos meals and shared times with Stav and Jenny.

Randy*, one of our regulars, hosts a Jewish poker night every month. One day, I went to visit him while he was preparing for poker night. Some guys had already gathered, and I stopped to chat with one of them. Sean* was sitting on a bar stool, smoking and looking very relaxed. We spoke for a bit, and he told me he was Jewish. I took his contact information and filed it in the system.

A couple of weeks later, I was shopping in Costco when I saw a familiar face.

"Sean! How are you?" I greeted him.

"Hi, Rabbi," he answered, somewhat listlessly. "We should meet for lunch. I have a lot of stuff to talk about."

I was intrigued, and asked a few leading questions. Sean told me his wife had been diagnosed with cancer, and he was having a hard time processing the news. He had questions about G-d and his faith. We had a short, but intense, philosophical and emotional conversation over wholesale packages of cereal and pasta.

I met him in the same spot a couple weeks later, and we spoke about faith and G-d again. I invited him to join our tefillin club, a monthly meeting where we shmooze, eat, and, of course, put on tefillin.

Sean loved the Tefillin Club, and soon started coming to shul on Sundays and Shabbos as well. He also brought friends along to the Tefillin Club and introduced us to them. Sean especially loved the casual atmosphere of the kiddush, where we'd sit and shmooze, drink lechaim, and enjoy hot cholent.

Baruch Hashem, Sean's wife recovered, and he felt like life was looking up. He signed up for our JLI Israel trip and thoroughly enjoyed every minute. On one of the last bus rides, the organizer announced that a donor would sponsor a set of tefillin for anyone who'd commit to wearing them every day.

I nudged Sean in the ribs. "Nu? How about it?" I asked.



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Sean thought about it for a minute and then raised his hand. He was the first to take on the challenge, followed by many others, Baruch Hashem.

Sean had kept his commitment proudly. He often calls me on Chanukah or chol hamoad to double check whether he's supposed to put them on or not. Even when he was hospitalized for a while, he never missed a day.

Another one of Randy's friends that I met before that poker night was Steve*. Randy told me that Steve was very sick and needed urgent prayers.

Steve had been told he only had a short time to live, but he refused to let death take up any more of his life than it had to. He was funny and full of love and laughter. I visited him a few times, but for a while, he wasn't picking up his phone, and we lost touch.

One day, a few months later, Randy asked if I'd officiate Steve's ceremony.

"Why...? What happened to Steve?" I asked.

"He's dying," Randy answered, quietly. "He's donating his body to science, and then he'll be cremated. We'll have a ceremony to honor him a few days later, and I want you to lead it."

"Why are we talking as though he's already dead when he's still alive?" I asked. "I'm going to visit him in the hospital!"

When I visited Steve, he was clearly deteriorated, but his mind was as sharp as ever. We spoke for a while, and I gently brought up his end of life plans.

"Why the donation to science?" I asked him. "Why not a proper Jewish burial?"

Steve sighed. "I can't afford it," he admitted. "I don't want to burden my kids with it either."

"Steve, if I could take care of all the arrangements and finances, would you want a Jewish burial?"

Steve's eyes filled with tears. "Yes!" he cried. "More than anything! I've always wanted a Jewish burial, but I just couldn't pressure my kids with it."

"Don't worry about a thing. Consider it done," I assured him.

Randy helped me fundraise for Steve's funeral. His friend was a caretaker for a Jewish cemetery and was happy to donate a plot. JFS was extremely supportive and helpful. Steve's sister in California reached out to thank us for arranging the funeral, and offered her financial support as well. All in all, we managed to raise the necessary amount in a short time.

When Steve passed away a couple of weeks later, he was buried k'halacha, surrounded by his loving friends and family.

We'd gone away for Pesach and were returning home with tired children and overflowing suitcases. We breathed a sigh of relief as the Uber pulled up and Francisco*, the driver, starting packing our bags in the trunk.

He eyed my tallis bag curiously and asked, "Is that Hebrew?"

"Yes, it is," I answered, with some surprise. "How did you know?"

"Oh, my wife is Jewish," he said, getting into the driver's seat.

Of course, I had to know more. He told me his wife, Isabella*, had been born to a Jewish woman, but was raised Christian. Although she wore a cross and practiced the religion with which she'd been raised, she always knew her biological mother was Jewish.

"Maybe I can meet your wife for coffee," my wife suggested. "What's her phone number?"

Francisco shared their contact information, but when I texted him a few days later to schedule a meeting, he replied, *I think my wife already knows you.*

I was intrigued and asked more questions until I figured out that she'd actually worked with Rabbi Schechter, another shliach. Isabella worked in a funeral home, and had assisted Rabbi Schechter with a few Jewish burials. He had even directed them to my in-laws seder! My in-laws had immediately noticed the Spanish-speaking family, but had no way of contacting them to follow up.

I was happy to connect the dots. Isabella was able to provide kesubos of her biological parents and even grandparents. Isabella began visiting more often, and became very involved with the Chabad house. Her children attended CTeen, and the entire family learned more about their heritage.

Just a few weeks after meeting Isabella and her family, a good friend of ours passed away. Gary* had been diagnosed with a terminal illness years earlier, and, sadly, had succumbed at last.

Gary's daughter was a baalas teshuva and lived in Israel. He passed away on a Friday morning, and she asked if we could make every effort to bury her father before Shabbos, understanding how painful it is for the neshama when a burial is delayed.

Since Gary had been terminally ill for so long, I figured they would've bought a plot and made arrangements, but, to my surprise, his daughter told me they had nothing in place yet.

"I will definitely do my best," I told her. "But there's so much to arrange, and I'm not sure we'll make it before Shabbos! We need to get the death certificate, arrange with the funeral home, buy a plot, hire diggers... I'll do my best, but we may have to wait until Sunday morning."

"I know," she replied. "I'm just asking you to do your best to get it done today. It's almost Shabbos here in Israel, so we won't be able to stay in touch. Thank you for everything."

I quickly called a funeral director who'd been very helpful many times, but he shook his head.

"I'd love to help you out with this," he said. "I just don't think it's possible to get it all done."

I hung up the phone, at a loss, until I remembered Isabella. We'd only known her for a few weeks, and her connection with Judaism was still new, but I had to try whatever I could. I called and explained the situation.

"No problem, Rabbi," she said, confidently. "I'm happy to help."

I don't even know how, but Isabella was a whirlwind of activity and somehow managed to arrange everything. She even drove the hearse herself, so it wouldn't take extra time to find a driver! Baruch Hashem, we were able to bury Gary that same day, and even arrived home with time to spare before Shabbos.

Isabella's only connection to Judaism was the knowledge that her biological mother was Jewish. Through the power of a mitzvah, she not only discovered the wealth of her own heritage, but helped other Jews fulfill fundamental mitzvos as well.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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