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

Rabbi Avrohom and Masha Rapoport, Chabad at the Shore, Atlantic City, NJ

The TikTok Rabbi, Chabad at the Shore Part I

By Chaya Chazan

The gaming halls for which Atlantic City is famed were a gamble that resulted in a terrible fallout for the community and its families, but the Chabad house my parents started in the 80s paid off in full measure.

When they first moved, there was a sizable Jewish ecosystem, complete with shuls and a day school. They questioned why Chabad was even necessary. My parents knew the Jewish infrastructure already in place was just the tip of the iceberg, and they were excited to reveal the Jersey Shore's true potential as a lighthouse of Yiddishkeit.

Careful to respect the organizations already in place, my parents looked for ways to enhance Jewish life in the area, and fill in the blanks. Their first major project was to rebuild the mikvah, which had been abandoned and left in ruins years earlier. They focused on education and shiurim, especially for youths.

My parents involved us in everything they did. I remember accompanying my father to his matza bakery demonstrations as young as 10 years old. I felt so proud and accomplished, as I helped show the kids what matza was and how it was made. One year, my father was suddenly called away, and I was left facing a room full of curious 5-year-olds. Their teacher

inclined her head, waiting for me to continue the presentation. With no other option, I picked up where my father had left off. From then on, I led the matza bakery presentations on my own.

We were always encouraged to develop our talents and interests, and, as I grew older, I became interested in directing and producing short films. I thought I'd found my forever job. Although I wouldn't have the traditional Chabad house and shlichus, I was happy to blend these two themes by producing promotional films for shluchim all over the country.

In 2015, after my wife and I got married, we moved back to Atlantic City to assist my parents. I continued telling shluchim's stories through the camera lens. There was something magical about the whole process - turning raw interviews into a dynamic, captivating video that helped shluchim reach even more Jews and teach them about Torah. As I stood behind the camera, focusing the lens on these brave couples, whose love for every Jew and incredible mesiras nefesh peeked out through every tidbit they shared, I became more and more enchanted by the Rebbe's global vision. I was also becoming more involved in my parent's community, and soon, I placed the camera on the ground and stepped in front of the screen, committing to a full-time shlichus, heart and soul.

For years, my parents partnered with the community shuls, simply enhancing their programming and volunteering their expertise. In the intervening years, the community had grown and changed. I thought it was time for an official Chabad house, with minyanim, bar mitzvahs, and Kaddish. My first project was to open a satellite Chabad house in Ventnor, NJ, a small beach town one mile from Atlantic City. We

started off small, in a tiny storefront - and, baruch Hashem, with many blessings and miracles, we now have a gorgeous, large campus.

I'd transitioned from a filmmaker to full-time rabbi, and I loved every minute. But then came 2020 and Covid quarantines. The shul I'd worked so hard to build remained shuttered and silent. But just because we couldn't gather didn't mean learning had to stop!

I pulled out my phone and began a Facebook live - the first video I ever recorded. It was a fascinating experiment! A crowd of 20 was impressive for an in-person shiur, but the engagement I was receiving for my virtual talks was much greater than that! I began doing livestreams more frequently, and set goals for myself. I was surprised to reach 500 views so quickly, and soon set my sights higher.

I logged into an Instagram account I'd forgotten I'd opened and began posting daily reels. I realized there was so much more to creating engaging content than just *talking*. With some time on my hands, I read all I could about the industry, and tailored my content to increase my following. I began posting all over social media - even Twitch, although I don't know the first thing about gaming - and watched my subscriber numbers rise. It's still somewhat surreal that I now have over 450,000 followers.

The TikTok universe is an untapped market for shlichus. Not only can I teach hundreds of thousands of *non-Jews* about important Jewish concepts, I can reach Jews who'd never dream of stepping foot in a shul. I pop up on their "For You Page" and hopefully, they're interested in what they hear.

There's a balance to creating content that will appeal to a wide, varied audience, while remaining educational and informative. Yes, there are the expected gimmicks, clickbait, and jokes, but I try to make sure every video ends off with a point to consider or some new information.

I've lost count of the number of times shluchim have told me a stranger had wandered into their Chabad house, saying *Rabbi Raps* had advised them to visit their local Chabad rabbi.

While social media has its pitfalls (I don't let my kids have their own accounts), it's also an incredible tool with unprecedented power. I can bring my following along through my daily life as a rabbi. If I'm going to



a wedding, I record a short clip, interview the bride, and share some insights into Jewish ritual and celebrations. My subscribers follow me to the cemetery, where I respectfully share insights into Jewish mourning. One of my most powerful videos was only seven seconds long. It was a clip of me blowing the shofar with the caption *How does the sound of the shofar make you feel?* The comment section was an enthralling treasure trove of soulful connections and meaningful reflections.

For many shluchim, it takes months, or even years to build relationships. Every time they interact with a community member, they nurture that relationship, until, hopefully, it's grown enough to bloom on its own. But for the average unaffiliated Jew, how often are they speaking to their rabbi? Once a year, when they come to shul on Yom Kippur? Perhaps for a few more minutes when the rabbi drops off matzah for Pesach?

When I started doing social media, I noticed something amazing. When I visited people I'd only met a couple of times before, they behaved like we were best friends! *Oh, we watched your video on Judaism and Thanksgiving, and we were discussing it at dinner, they'd say.* I realized that, while I had only met with them a handful of times, *they were meeting me every day!* I'm not the rabbi they meet twice a year; I'm the rabbi they watch while they're waiting in the doctor's office. They're so much more open to strengthening their connection with Hashem because of some lighthearted - but meaningful - TikTok videos.

"Thank you!" Rabbi Arele Loschak of Chabad at Rowan University enthused. "There's a kid in our college, Tommy*. He actually grew up in Lakewood, but his family was completely secular. They felt alienated from all the *black hat people*, and even though they were entirely surrounded by Torah and Yiddishkeit, they felt nothing positive towards it.

"Whenever Tommy walked by my table on campus, he deliberately turned away, and sometimes even glared at me. He was distant, cold; totally uninterested.

"At the start of the new school year, I was shocked when Tommy headed straight for my table, rolled up his sleeve, and said, *Let's wrap this up!* Of course, I asked him what had caused such a considerable shift - and he told me he'd started following *you* on TikTok. He explained he'd never understood what tefillin were, but after watching your videos, he became inspired to try it for himself."

A few months later, we hosted a Shabbaton for college students across the tri-state area.

"Hey, Rabbi Raps, I have someone I'd like to introduce you to," Rabbi Loschak called, leading a student towards me. "This is Tommy!"

Tommy was a little star-struck, but I told him how proud I was that he not only put on tefillin, but was also attending a Shabbaton!

Emilia* found my account on Instagram and sent me a message. *I live in Switzerland, she told me. I'm an elderly woman, and I live all alone. I was recently diagnosed with cancer, and I'm so scared. Can you please pray for me?*

When I asked her to tell me more about herself, she explained that she was half-Jewish. Her grandmother was a Holocaust survivor who'd married a Swiss after the war.

I have a long list of people I daven for every day, most of whom I've never met in person, so I added Emilia to the list.

"I'm about to have a big operation," Emilia shared one day, a few weeks later. "Do you know how I might pray for a speedy recovery?"

"Jewish tradition advises adding a name when someone is very sick," I told her. "We can add the name *Chaya*. It means *life*."

Emilia was thrilled with the suggestion!

That Shabbos, I turned to my congregation and said, "I want to introduce you to someone I've never met. Her name is Emilia. She's bedridden, but she's doing her best to learn more about Yiddishkeit. She's light-

ing Shabbos candles, davening from her bed, and listening to online shiurim. She doesn't have a shul; she doesn't have a community. Let's be her family. Let's all daven for her, and add Chaya to her name."

"I love that we can help another Jew halfway across the world!" one of my congregants remarked. "Thank you for this opportunity!"

Sadly, Emilia passed away a short while later. We arranged for her to have a kosher kevarah, and for someone to say Kaddish for her.

Every week, my mother bakes batches and batches of challah and sells them to the community. Like Sara Immeinu's dough, there must be a bracha in her challah, because people line up around the block to buy a loaf!

It's turned into an open-air festival of sorts. There's always music, and people chat about Israel and Judaism while they wait in line. We also sell other kosher foods, and there are stands with Israel T-shirts and other merchandise. We set up a tefillin booth as well, and it's been heartening and uplifting to see how many people come up to the table, especially after October 7th. It may have felt bizarre to allow a stranger to wrap black boxes on their arm and head, but it was clear their neshamos were crying out to be heard, awoken from their sleep by the tragic fates of their brothers and sisters.

**Names changed to protect identity*

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