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A 400 Pound Lion Named “Chabad”

Rabbi Mendy & Tzippy Weiss - Miami Lakes, Florida

Mendy and I were both born and raised in Crown Heights, but our families moved during our elementary school years. Eventually, we both made it back to Crown Heights for High School and Yeshiva. In 1994, the first Chai Ehul after Gimmel Tammuz, we got married.

A year later, we decided to move to Florida. I wanted to be closer to my family - plus, we thought shlichus there would be an amazing opportunity. At the time, all the big cities had shlichim, but the small towns didn't.

We were offered a shlichus in North Miami Beach, where I spent part of my childhood, and at that time, there were maybe 15 Lubavitch families but, We knew we wanted to be involved in youth outreach. We were both passionate about finding a community like that. In the meantime, Mendy was working side jobs in catering and Hashgocha and even managing a Kosher Marketplace.

“It felt so meaningless,” Mendy said. “The money was good and my family was taken care of, but I could tell something was missing.”

In this search for purpose, Mendy began subbing at a Yeshiva - the famous Landow Yeshiva now known as LEC.

He quickly fell in love with teaching and started looking for more opportunities. It wasn't long before he was teaching Bar Mitzvah boys and the two of us were now driving from our North Miami Beach apartment to Cooper City to run Hebrew School. Slowly we began getting involved in the community, and eventually we were invited by the famed Rabbi Pinny to move there full time. This was a no-brainer for us; we took every penny we'd saved and in 1995 we bought our first home in Cooper City. This was the shlichus Mendy and I had been dreaming about!

We immediately invested our young and energetic selves into this shlichus. We spent 11 years help-

ing grow the Jewish community, teaching in Hebrew School, and running summer programs both locally and around Florida for other Shlichim. We now direct LEC Gan Israel Day Camp, one of the largest day camps in the USA.

During that time, we also opened Hebrew Schools in public schools in nearby towns. This was the start of our habit of ‘fostering’ towns.

We hopped from place to place, heading anywhere we were needed, lending a hand and teaching Judaism until finally landing in Miami Lakes, the place we knew would be our forever home. It was also a place completely void of Yiddishkeit - there wasn't even a reform or conservative synagogue, and there probably never will be.

People tried to talk us out of moving there, saying we'd never have a community or build a shul. But we value the Rebbe's outlook on individual outreach and wanted to establish this Chabad house for the individuals scattered throughout the area. For nearly 18 years, that's what it was. Building a community was an uphill battle, but every member we reached out to was a blessing.

On the day we moved into our home in Miami Lakes, I went into labor with our son Shuee. We spent about two weeks adjusting to this new reality before diving head-first into our shlichus. Our first step was a council meeting.

We introduced ourselves to the Mayor and council members and taught them about the Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach. We took our seats at the meeting and paid close attention to the action. People started sharing their concerns. Then, a man got up and started complaining - kvetching the way only a Jew could. So I turn to my husband and say: “Mark my words, that man is Jewish!”

Sure enough, someone said his name, and there was no doubt in my mind that he was Jewish. For the rest of the meeting, Mendy and I planned our attack. We exited to the parking lot and started looking for him.

“Hey, Rabbi!” a dark car from across the lot had stopped. The window was down and a man's head was sticking out of it. It was the Jewish guy from earlier!

We walked over to the car and started talking to him. He told us how he grew up secular and barely had a connection to his Jewish roots.



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“I celebrated Passover once, Rabbi,” he said. “And it was nothing but a bowl of Matzoh ball soup.”

We invited him to our home and started building a relationship with him. He told us about his Reform Bar Mitzvah. For years, this man became a staple at our home. He came for dinners and shabbos lunches. He bought my kids presents. Once, when we had a new baby, he signed us up for diapers for a year, and every two weeks, a case of diapers was delivered to our door.

In the end, when he eventually passed, we gave him a kosher kevura. And then, the biggest miracle of all, we found he'd left everything to Chabad. All of his belongings and any money he had, our Chabad House inherited. This allowed us to keep our Chabad House doors open through Covid and assist countless people with their needs.

This was truly a bittersweet moment. But perhaps the wildest discovery of all was learning about the lion he'd donated to a local reservation. After growing from a small cub to a 400 pound adult, this man had taken his lion - named Chabad - and sent him to live in a controlled wilderness.

Moving to Miami Lakes didn't mean we forgot about our foster communities. For years, we kept in touch with the children we taught and the families we worked with. I remember multiple students who came back to us when they were getting married. Whether for chosson and kallah classes or to ask us to marry them, these kids wanted us to be a part of their lives - they still call us from time to time. Some couples still come to us for Shabbat Dinner.

I also used to keep in touch with all my Bar Mitzvah boys after their leining and Aliyahs, “I would call them before Shabbos, tell them about the Parsha, and encourage them to go to shul and put on Tefillin”. For one boy, this caused a rift with his parents.

They ended up calling us to ask us to back off. I was hesitant, but ultimately chose to respect the parents' wishes. But this changed very little! The boy continued to call and ask me questions.

Today, the boy is completely frum and raising frum children. His parents even apologized to us and admitted they were wrong.

“We have so much nachas from our son,” they said. “Who cares if he's more frum than we are? Thank you for being there for him.”

Over time, our community started to grow, and a couple of years in, Mendy and I decided to host Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur in a local hotel. My brother Avrom joined us. However, it came time for Neilah, and we only had 9 men. Mendy didn't know what to do. How could we conclude the holiest day of the year without a minyan?

My brother Avrom had an idea! Instead of waiting and hoping, he decided to go downstairs to a steak restaurant. He walked inside and very loudly asked if anyone was Jewish. Much to his surprise, a man raised his hand. Avrom grabbed him by the arm and led him up to the shul and we had our minyan.

Jason was a student at the local university and had no intention of ever coming to Chabad. But after Yom Kippur, something changed. Suddenly, he was coming once a week. For years, Jason took his place at our table. Then, when he graduated, Jason continued to stay in touch - today, he's still an active part of our community. Just last week, I was speaking to him and I asked, “What was it about us that made you stay?” Jason laughed. “It was actually Nechama.”

When Jason first arrived, my daughter - who was just a toddler at the time - used to always welcome him with a hug.

“Having her sit on my lap felt like family,” Jason said. “I didn't want to lose that!”

18 years later, we're still in touch, and we just visited his new apartment in Manhattan to put Mezuzahs up for him.

One of my favorite stories comes from the early days. When we first moved to Miami Lakes, a man named Marco started joining us for Shabbos. He was an intellectual man and very curious about discovering Yiddishkeit. He was in security at the time and working towards becoming an air marshal. It took some time, but eventually, he got there. He left for duty, and sadly, we lost touch.

A few years went by, and our son Eli went to South Africa for a simcha. On his way back, he boards his flight, and the air marshall walks over to him.

“You're a Weiss, aren't you?”

Eli is confused, but the man assured him that he knows him. “You're from From Miami Lakes,” he continued. “The last time I saw you, you were a kid singing Parsha Songs at your shabbos table.”

When the flight lands, we get a call from Marco. He tells us he met Eli on the plane and can't wait to catch up with us. We speak for a little while and he tells us about the past couple of years. While working towards becoming an air marshall, he started to grow in his Yiddishkeit. Eventually, he met a frum girl, got engaged, and married her. He sends us a picture of his chuppa. We couldn't believe our eyes. Marco is wearing a black hat, has a beard and is marrying a frum girl from overseas. Marco laughs from the other end of the phone. “It all started at your Shabbos table.”

Our community is slowly growing. A few years ago, we didn't have a steady minyan, and now, we have Jews actively moving to Miami Lakes and buying homes here. The shlichus is changing. Mendy is still a permanent structure in LEC; teaching is part of him and his shlichus.

We also give classes and have meetings with students at St. Thomas University. It's a Catholic University, but there are Jewish and Israeli students attending law school and business school. We are in touch with many of the graduates who have married Jewish and are raising families. We've walked several of them down to their Chuppahs.

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