

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Rabbi Shea and Dina Harlig, Las Vegas, Nevada Taking the Sin Out of Sin City

Las Vegas, Nevada gets a bad rap as one of the most degenerate and provocative cities in America.

People say that Lavan's name - *lamed, beis, nun* - is an acronym for Las Vegas, Nevada. We disagree. We believe that Las Vegas is actually one of the holiest and most spiritually inspiring places in the world. Millions of fervent tefillos ascend from every slot machine, poker table, and casino with which the city is so liberally scattered.

Jokes aside, Las Vegas was, for so long, so deeply rooted in tumah, that, for years, the Rebbe didn't let shluchim settle in the city. One summer, two bochorim made an unofficial visit. While they were in the city, they tried to spread Yiddishkeit to as many people as they could. They planned to return for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and wrote to the Rebbe about their successes.

The local newspaper excitedly published an article headlined, "*Lubavitch to Host High Holiday Prayer Services.*" Rabbi Kotlarsky, head of Merkos, the organization that appoints shluchim, heard about this article and brought it to the Rebbe's attention. He suggested that it was finally time to install permanent shluchim in Las Vegas.

The Rebbe told Rabbi Chadakov, his secretary, to speak to Rabbi Cunin about it. As head shliach of California, a Chabad House in Las Vegas would be under his jurisdiction. That was when Rabbi Cunin approached us and offered us the position.



We don't even call ourselves "*Chabad of Las Vegas.*" Instead, we're called, "*Chabad of Southern Nevada.*" But, as we learned pretty quickly, once you leave the glitz and glamor of the tourist attractions on the Strip, Las Vegas is much like any other city in America.

31 years ago, when we initially moved, we were the first frum couple to live full-time in that city. Since there were many frum businessmen who used Las Vegas as a frequent hub, there was an Orthodox shul. They were even in the process of building a mikvah. But that was really it, in terms of Jewish life. Mikvaos, schools, and kosher food could only be found in Los Angeles.

Now, baruch Hashem, with the brachos of the Rebbe, there are eight Chabad Houses, four mikvaos, a school with over four hundred students, and a summer day camp with four hundred campers. The community also boasts four other Orthodox shuls, a mesivta, day school, and a vibrant, rapidly growing frum community of close to three hundred families. There are eight kosher restaurants, a catering service that runs out of our Chabad house, and three local supermarkets that carry a wide selection of kosher food, under our supervision.

Las Vegas is unique not only because we're often called on to bail out those who get in trouble with the law, but also because of the variety of our demographic. Some shluchim concentrate on their locals, some cater to the businessmen that fly in and out, and some shluchim mostly service Jewish tourists in their area. Las Vegas attracts all three. Aside from the frum community, there are another sixty or seventy thousand Jews who live here. Las Vegas is also a bustling convention center, and of course, a huge tourist magnet. There's rarely a Shabbos where every person at our table is a Las Vegan.

Often, the established Jewish organizations are less than friendly when Chabad moves in. How-

ever, when the Conservative rabbi met us, he was so excited to welcome us to town. He came to the first party we hosted and recited "Shehechyanu" with Hashem's name. We formed a deep friendship that's grown in the intervening years. His grandkids all attended our school, and they're now fully frum and proud Lubavitchers. He retired and now attends services at our Chabad House as well. All of this blossomed from that first connection, when he welcomed us to town.

Along with the classic door-to-door and cold calling techniques that every new shliach employs when first building their community, they shouldn't forget to visit those who dwell behind bars.

When I first arrived, I made arrangements to visit the nearby prison. I spoke to the chaplain and set a time to visit. After driving an hour, I finally arrived. I walked confidently to the front desk, expecting to be let in right away. Something, somewhere had gone awry. The chaplain had assured me that everything was in place for my visit, but there was some missing paperwork. The guards tried to get a hold of the chaplain, but were having some difficulty.

Hearing the confusion, Lieutenant Steve Lane asked for clarity.

"There's a rabbi here to visit Jewish prisoners, but the paperwork is incomplete," he was told.

"I want to talk to him," Steve said, striding quickly to the front door. When he saw me, he smiled widely and shook my hand enthusiastically. "Shalom!" He greeted me, heartily. Recognizing my baffled expression, he quickly explained, "I'm Jewish, rabbi! American-born and raised, Marine and Vietnam vet, but I spent some time in Israel too! I hear there's a problem with your paperwork. Never fear. I'll sort everything out and let you get on with your visit."

"So nice to meet you," I responded with genuine warmth. "Do you live in the city?"

"Sure do!" he said. "I've got a wife and two kids at home."

"Beautiful! Do they currently benefit from any Jewish education?"

"Not really," he admitted.

"Well, it's never too late," I assured him. "Let's sign them up for Hebrew school!"

I was beginning to appreciate the hashgacha pratis that had led to my missing paperwork. Thanks to those missing documents, the Lane family joined our Chabad House. Steve's daughter now lives in Florida with a fine, frum family of her own, including six beautiful children.



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“Hi, Rabbi. Sorry to bother you,” said the voice on the phone. “We’re calling from the hospital. It’s a bit complicated. You see, we have a patient here...”

As a volunteer hospital chaplain, I’d previously visited a couple of times and had introduced myself to the nursing staff.

The nurse filled me in on the details: A man had passed away with no known next of kin. Standard procedure dictated the body be turned over to the state and cremated. While she was prepping the body, the nurse noticed a star of David chain around the patient’s neck. It reminded her of me - hence the phone call.

I asked them to halt the cremation while I quickly did some detective work. Eventually, we uncovered a brother in another state. The brothers hadn’t spoken in years. I explained the delicate situation to him.

“Do whatever you want, Rabbi,” he told me. “Send me the papers, and I’ll sign them.”

And that’s how a Magen David necklace earned a precious Jew a kevruras Yisroel.

Howard drove trucks for a living, but his compulsive gambling drove *him*. The long nights on the road and the emptiness of the slot machines drove the joy from his life. Finally, he decided he had enough.

He parked by a truck stop, tossed the keys in the cab, and walked away.

“If you want your truck, you can pick it up from the truck stop on Route 15,” he told his bosses. “I quit.”

He drove to Las Vegas, planning to gamble away every last cent he owned. When that was done... he didn’t see the point in going on. After five or six weeks of a shuffling existence between his car and the casino, Howard’s supply of money was running out. It was time to implement the next - and final - stage of his plans.

He was exiting a pharmacy the next day, when he noticed the car parked beside his. The license plate read, “Chabad1.” He was studying it when the owner of the car, Yitzi, walked out.

“Hey - are you Jewish?” Yitzi asked him. Howard nodded. “Have you put on tefillin today?” Yitzi asked.

“I haven’t put on tefillin in years,” Howard responded.

“We can take care of that right now,” Yitzi said as he traded the plastic pharmacy bag for the velvet

tefillin one. Yitzi then invited Howard to share some more about his life. When he heard Howard’s plan, he was shocked. “You can’t do that!” he said firmly. It was clear that Howard had some fight left in him; otherwise, he wouldn’t have told this stranger what he was ready to do. At least part of him still wanted to keep going. “Your life is too precious. The fact that I parked next to you today is clearly a sign from G-d. Come to Chabad with me. It’s not too far from here, and I know the rabbi well. He’ll help you out.”

When I met Howard, I could see the depression weighing on him. “Take heart, Howard,” I encouraged him. “This is a clear sign from Hashem. We’ll get you a place to stay and help you out with whatever you need.”

After a few weeks of rest, recuperation, and spiritual rebirth, Howard signed on with another trucking company, thanking Hashem for his new lease on life.

Yaakov would periodically stumble, drunkenly, into our Chabad House and stay for a few days until he felt ready to go out on his own again. He didn’t share much about his life, but he told us that he’d suffered through a bitter divorce. His ex-wife had turned his children against him. He left them in Israel and he hadn’t seen or spoken to them in years.

We hadn’t seen Yaakov in a while when, one night, I got an urgent call from the Clark County Jail.

A woman was crying hysterically on the phone. “Please, rabbi! Please! Help me!”

When she calmed down enough to share her story, she told me that her name was Shulamis. She and her husband were Israelis who’d recently moved to Las Vegas. They’d gotten caught up in a rental agreement dispute.

“They arrested me and my husband,” Shulamis sobbed. “And they took our three children to protective services! Please, rabbi! You must help me!”

“I’ll do everything I can,” I told her, inwardly counting the miles of red tape we’d need to cut. We hurried into action, contacted our lawyer, and prepared for the arrival of the three children that would be added to our own crew of five.

It took a lot of legal maneuvering and convincing before CPS agreed to release the children to us. We settled them in as best as we could, meanwhile working feverishly to raise \$10,000 for Shulamis’ release.

It was worth all the effort when Shulamis was finally released ten days later and reunited with her

children. They continued to visit us regularly, and Shulamis revealed more of her story.

“You know,” she commented one day, “I heard that my father actually moved here, to Las Vegas. He and my mother went through an awful divorce years ago, and I haven’t spoken to him since! I doubt I’ll ever find him... there must be millions of Yaakov’s in this city!”

“Yaakov, did you say?” I asked her, with a certain gleam in my eye.

It was like a novel come to life. We all wiped tears from our eyes as Shulamis was reunited with her father, our friend Yaakov.

“Hey, what’s up? I’m your Uber driver,” said the man at the door. His hair hung to his shoulders, and he surveyed the assembled guests in candid appraisal. “You doing the Seder thing tonight?” he asked.

“Oh, are you Jewish?” asked my son, who was hosting a crowd of at-risk teens for a chol hamoed meal. “Have you ever had matzah?”

“Sure did. Name’s Mordechai,” he answered. “Haven’t had it in a while, though.”

“Here, you can have some now,” my son invited him. “You should come by the Chabad house one of these days.”

“Sounds good!” Mordechai casually agreed.

A few days later, Mordechai visited our Chabad House and rediscovered his long-forgotten roots. He committed to wearing tefillin, a promise he has faithfully kept every day since then. He taught himself to read Hebrew and continues to grow in his Yiddishkeit, day by day.

We’re always cognizant of the Rebbe’s guidance that leads us and of Hashem’s brachos that help us find success in our shlichus. It’s our privilege and zechus to be the Rebbe’s soldiers on the front lines.

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