

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Rabbi Yisroel and Chaya Sara Hahn, Chabad of Spokane, WA

One Cup of Coffee and Cheesecake at a Time

Both of us grew up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in the Rebbe's neighborhood, where we could see the Rebbe often and easily attend farbrengens.

But, on the downside, neither of us had any contacts in the shlichus world, so choosing a location to set up wasn't so easy.

We looked around, but Spokane County, Washington caught our eye. Though it was a very small community, we knew we had our work cut out for us. Washington is one of the larger states, but at the time, there weren't many shluchim. I spoke to the rabbi of the local Conservative shul. He told me there weren't many Jews in the area, apart from the three hundred and fifty families in his congregation. Statistically speaking, I figured there must actually be double that amount who were unaffiliated, each with at least two or three kids, and eagerly set off to build our community of what we *thought* were three thousand Yidden. In the intervening 16 years, I've discovered that the rabbi was right.

Spokane is an isolated city, with no other urban development for miles. We're a very small community, as I've said, but that only makes our impact and con-



nection stronger. In the last year, Spokane has become one of the most sought-after real estate markets in the country, and we've welcomed so many new people to our community. We've had more minyanim and first-time tefillins than we've had over the course of our entire shlichus.

The first years were challenging. Attendance was very low, with little local support and financial resources. We lived the ma'amer chazal: "If someone says they tried and did not succeed, do not believe them." As challenging as it was at times, we persevered, reaching one Jew at a time. Each Jew we met introduced us to a friend or two, and our community slowly grew.

Just a few months after we arrived, I got a call from the hospital, asking me to come perform a patient's last rites. He was actually a doctor. He'd caught a terrible bug, and it was draining his life away. His heart rate was low; too low to be hopeful. The doctors gave him a thirty percent chance of survival; when I arrived, his wife was quite emotional, thinking that it was all over. I calmed her down, telling her that only Hashem gets to decide what will happen with her husband.

I wrapped the tefillin around his arm and began to say shema, word by word. His wife sobbed each word after me. Suddenly, the numbers on his monitor jumped as his heart rate surged and accelerated.

The neshama greatly affects the body - a connection that becomes even clearer when the body is weak and frail.

During a convention for shluchim, I was grouped with Rabbi Eliezri, author and shliach in Yorba Linda, California for a workshop. He encouraged us to focus on adult education and to build our mikvah. The Conservative rabbi's mixed messages pushed me to start my own JLI chapter. Over twenty-five people came to the

first course, a rousing success for Spokane. That number has only grown since we first started. For years, JLI used our success as an example, telling other shluchim, "If it can work in Spokane, it can work anywhere."

I once met a senior shliach on a fundraising trip. During our meeting, he asked what I was planning for the upcoming yom tov of Pesach.

"How many matzos are you giving out?" he wanted to know.

"One hundred," I said, overestimating by about half.

"How many Jews are on your list?" he questioned.

"About two-fifty," I admitted.

"So you should be giving out two hundred and fifty matzos!"

"I don't have the funds to cover that many matzos," I answered.

"I'll cover the bill," he offered.

That year, I visited every Jewish home - some personally and some by proxy, through volunteers or bochurim. During this time, I got to witness the power of visiting people in their own homes, in their own spaces, and on their own time. You can properly connect with them. It completely changed my shlichus. I try to visit every home four or five times throughout the year.

For Shavuot, we deliver one hundred and fifty homemade cheesecakes to Jews in Spokane.

Of all the homes I visited, there was one man I never managed to meet personally. When I brought the cheesecake before Shavuot, he was finally at home.

"I can't take this," he said, pushing it back towards me. "I belong to the Conservative Temple."

"Oh, I see," I replied. "So you signed a contract that prohibits you from accepting free cheesecakes from me?"

"No, but I don't want to mislead you. I won't attend your services and programs, so I don't want to take your cheesecake."

"I've been visiting your home for years," I replied. "If my goal was to sign you up as a card carrying member, I would've stopped coming a while ago. My mentor, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, encouraged us to have ahavas Yisroel. This world needs more love and acts of kindness. Take the cheesecake. If it inspires you to attend Temple for Shavuot, I'll be happy about that - and if it inspires you to pass the kindness to the next person, that's wonderful!"

I gave a JLI course about anti-Semitism for attorneys. Baruch Hashem, a nice crowd came, although many



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of them were not Jewish. Most of our JLI students *are* Jewish, with this as an exception. Max, a lawyer and first-time attendee of Chabad events, was very interested and kept asking questions.

“Max, I’m so happy to see your interest in this class,” I told him. “If I may, why are you so curious?”

“This topic really speaks to me,” he answered. “My grandparents were Ukrainian Jews, who were forced to flee their home due to anti-Semitic pogroms.”

“Really?” I asked, thoughtfully. “Which grandparents...? Paternal, or maternal?”

“My mother’s parents,” he answered, not realizing the significance of his revelation.

“Max, that makes you 100% Jewish!” I excitedly told him. “Have you ever put on tefillin?”

We put on tefillin together, Max carefully reciting every word.

Our small community has taught us the importance of every individual neshama. We know it’s worthwhile to spend all our effort and energy to benefit even one Jew.

I contacted Stacy about sending her son to our summer camp. She was agreeable, but hesitated to register him because her ex-husband was very difficult to deal with. She was scared to even ask him about carpool arrangements, let alone covering the camp tuition.

So I called her ex and negotiated with him. I even offered to drive their son to and from camp every day.

Every neshama is precious. Our small numbers help us appreciate that.

Gershon, an elderly Russian Jew, asked me to meet with him. His wife had recently passed away and he wanted to remarry - but he wanted to meet a Jewish woman.

Intermarriage in Spokane is close to 96%. His firm dedication to marrying Jewish is touching and incredibly special.

“My friends keep trying to set me up,” he told me. “But I know it’s wrong, rabbi. I only want to marry a Jewish woman.”

I networked with other shluchim who work with Russian communities. Im yirtzeh Hashem soon, he will find his shidduch.

When we met, I also helped Gershon put on tefillin for the first time in his life. Until he finds a new person

with which to share his life, I invited him to our Chabad House for Friday night tefillos and meals. I also invited a few other Russian Jews, and they got quite a farbrengen going!

In today’s day and age, it’s incredible to find someone who’d never before put on tefillin, yet is still so committed to marrying Jewish.

Gershon and his estranged daughter, Alexandra, hadn’t spoken in over five years. Before his wife passed away, he contacted her and they reunited. She was able to say goodbye to her mother.

Alexandra had three beautiful children. Our community is mostly older, so it’s very exciting to have a young family. I reached out and told her about the youth education options we offer.

“I spoke to Alexandra,” Gershon informed me on Shabbos. “She said she’ll be giving her son a bar mitzvah and sending her children to camp.”

Special speakers usually attract a larger crowd, since it’s in a neutral space with a non-threatening topic. A few years ago, we booked a Holocaust survivor to speak about his experiences and share his life story. I reserved a hotel conference room, ensuring it could support a one hundred-person capacity. Knowing how many people *usually* come to events, I figured that would be enough.

Hoping to attract a couple more people, I invested in a Facebook ad. By the time I woke up the next morning, all one hundred seats were sold out. I booked the adjacent room, and by the next night, all those were sold out too. We hosted a “Standing Room Only” crowd of over fourteen hundred people!

Three months later, despite advice to the contrary, we had another Holocaust survivor come speak. That event was attended by another nine hundred people. Each of them was asked to fill out a survey. The first question was, “*Would you come to another Holocaust survivor speech?*” 100% marked, “Yes.” I was amazed! When have hundreds of people all agreed on the same thing, let alone the famous conundrum of, “*Two Jews, three opinions?*”

I also asked if they’d be interested in Jewish programs, which was a discreet way of finding out how many of the attendees were actually Jewish.

From all the feedback I received, I realized it doesn’t matter whether or not the person was a good speaker. People weren’t as interested in the speech as they were in the person. They felt humbled watching these

brave heroes, describing horrors the human mind can hardly comprehend, while still smiling, laughing, and affirming their faith in G-d. How simple their lives and problems seem in comparison! As many of them have told me, it changed their lives.

Avista is the power company that services the greater Washington area. In 2015, there was a huge windstorm that downed Spokane’s famous 200-ft-tall Ponderosa pines. These pine trees are called “*widow makers.*” While other trees cushion their blow with their wife branches, pine trees fall like a beam. After the hurricane-like winds struck, Spokane looked like a war zone. Houses, cars, and streets lay broken, their pieces scattered.

My first priority was ensuring the elderly were all safe. I then evacuated my family to the Hebers in Tacoma, who warmly welcomed them, and then returned to Spokane alone to support my community. The only other woman left in Spokane who kept kosher made a big pot of soup. I went around, handing bowls of soup to those who were left without heating or homes.

I also visited a local cafe to buy coffee for linesmen, who were working overtime on this cold, winter day. They asked me where I lived, and, somehow, my area was one of the first to regain electricity. The local TV station covered the rabbi handing out coffee to the workers. When they interviewed me, I challenged Spokane to show their gratitude by spreading kindness that Thanksgiving morning.

The next morning, when I brought coffee to the linesmen again, they pointed to an amassed heap of coffee, sandwiches, and snacks, brought to them by the Spokane community. Everywhere I went, I was “out of business.” The CEO of Avista was very grateful, and gave us a generous donation to help us continue our work. Avista continues to be one of our sponsors, and we have an excellent relationship - all for the price of a cup of coffee.

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