

# IllumiNations

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Rosh Hashanah Edition

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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*Rabbi Michoel and Zisel Goldman, Chabad of Kauai, Hawaii*

## The Westernmost Chabad House in the World

*Although Shlichus did not motivate my initial visit to Hawaii, while there, I stumbled across the beginnings of a structured Jewish community.*

It was summertime; I'd met a local Jew, Jim Rosen, who happened to be close to Chabad in Anchorage, Alaska, and later, Honolulu. I asked him about their plans for the High Holidays, and he said the local community would meet up every so often to hold services, using a church as their venue. Running a minyan for the Yomim Nora'im was the furthest thing from my mind, but Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were approaching, and I couldn't believe this was their only option - gathering in a church for the holiest days of the year!

I called Rabbi Krasnjansky, the head shliach in Honolulu, and explained the situation. For many years, he and his wife had been periodically sending Merkos shluchim (Yeshiva bochorim, who intern with a shliach during the summer) to Kauai. They'd stay a few days and visit the twenty-odd Jews they had on their list. I suggested sending a full-time shliach to Kauai, but, at the time, Rabbi Krasnjansky didn't see it as sustainable: there were only a few dozen Jews, little to no financial support, and not enough "business" to keep a shliach busy.

"I've been here for a few months," I argued, "and I've met dozens of Jews. There must be hundreds more - more than enough foundation for Chabad."

"Very well," Rabbi Krasnjansky replied. "As Moshe Rabbeinu told Pinchas, if you're the one to see the problem, you can be the one to fix it. Why don't you become the shliach to Kauai?"

I grappled with the offer for a while. On one hand, shlichus is in my blood. (My parents began their shlichus in Johannesburg, South Africa forty years ago, and that was how my siblings and I were raised.) On the other hand, I wasn't sure I wanted to take this on. Ultimately, I realized I was being faced with a challenge from Hashem - and I decided to embrace it. I began to invite a few people over for a little class or a Shabbos meal, here and there.

I'd accepted responsibility for this community, but eventually, I had to head back to New York. For many years, I commuted as often as I could to Kauai, while building a family and personal life in

New York. Eventually, our family moved to Hawaii full-time.

Of the eight islands that make up Hawaii, Kauai is the westernmost island open to tourists. We're the last community in the world to take in Shabbos, recite Neila, and daven Ma'ariv every night. We consider ourselves the "shevet Dan" of the world, who used their unique position as the last tribe in the traveling order to restore the forgotten belongings of the Jews who walked before them. Similarly, we're the ones who catch the last remaining opportunities as the day fades.

There are hundreds of local Jews on our island - that we know of. Just last week, two of our community members introduced us to a few of their Jewish friends. We've lived here for years, and we're still meeting more and more Jews!

We met Dennis and Cici Sassoon-Kaduri when they were already well-advanced in years. Both of their last names are respected lineages in the Sefardi world, but Dennis' first time putting on tefillin was with the Merkos shlichus bochorim who "discovered" him.

Dennis was born in Burma (now Myanmar), and from what he told the bochorim, we gathered that his mother was a local Burmese girl. Despite doubts about her Jewish heritage, we accepted him into our community and gradually grew closer.

Dennis wanted to be cremated. It took much effort and convincing, but he finally agreed to be buried according to halacha. He was inspired to live the last few years of his life in Israel, where he decided he'd like to be buried. With his medical conditions, making aliyah was no simple task. As part of his preparations, he needed a letter from me, authenticating his Jewishness.

Those doubts I'd relegated to the back of my mind came into sudden, sharp focus. How could I sign an affidavit without determining the truth? I questioned him about his mother, and he told me she'd converted.

A Chabad shliach must wear many hats, and it was at this point that I dusted off my deerstalker and did some detective work. Our research turned up a record book detailing the births, marriages, and deaths of the Jewish Burmese community. Luckily, the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan had photocopies. I stopped by on my next trip to New York and paid for copies of the relevant pages. I eagerly thumbed through these pages, but, unfortunately, it was written entirely in Farsi.

I asked a Farsi-speaking friend to read them for me, but he shook his head regretfully.



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"This dialect is unique to Burma. I can't read it."

I remembered a bank owner from my hometown who shared the name Sassoon, who directed me to an elderly Jew in Eretz Yisrael. Finally, we'd be able to translate.

Dennis' birth had, indeed, been inscribed, eighty years earlier. The date of his bris was noted, as was his mother's name, along with the tag "giyores." Progress! The Burmese community had clearly accepted him and his mother as bonafide Jews - but did they follow the halacha? Could we trust their authority?

A few months later, I was spending Shabbos in Honolulu. One of the hotels was hosting an Asian Studies conference. It included, for the first time, a discussion panel of experts on Jewish Asian communities. One of them had dedicated her life to studying the Jewish community of... Burma!

I contacted her as soon as I could and asked her my burning questions about the legitimacy of conversions done by the Burmese community. Without skipping a beat, she named the rabbi, chazzan, and mohel from eighty years before. She assured me, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the rabbi was a devout Jew, and the conversion was more than reliable.

The hashgacha pratis of all these puzzle pieces is astounding. Baruch Hashem, with the expert's verification, I was able to sign the affidavit. Unfortunately, Dennis passed before realizing his dream of making aliyah, but, thanks to our research, we were honored to offer him a proper Jewish burial in Kauai.

In the 80's, the Rebbe campaigned to print copies of the Tanya in every city in the world that boasted even just one Jewish citizen. It infuses the atmosphere with holiness, ignites the dormant neshama of the local Yidden, and spreads the light of Torah to every corner of the world. In fact, the Rebbe personally commissioned the printing of Hawaii's Tanya, specifically asking the Merkos shlichus bochurim to see to it. The Rebbe also funded the printing in full, beyond the Rebbe's usual practice.

Learning this inspired me to print a Tanya for every Hawaiian island. Just this week, we completed the printing of a Tanya in Bora Bora, a small island south of Hawaii. The story of this Tanya is an incredible series of hashgacha pratis, involving two visitors to Kauai who have never met each other.

During one of our first weeks on the island, I got a call from Bora Bora. It was a man who introduced himself as Elie and asked to join us for Shabbos.

To say I was curious would be an understatement. He ran a bed and breakfast called *Blue Heaven Is-*

*land* on a smaller isle not far from Bora Bora. When he showed up, dressed in white, hair flowing behind him and feet comfortably barefoot, I had no idea what to expect. I certainly never predicted he'd pull a dollar from his wallet and give it to us, stating it was from the Rebbe.

"I'm giving you a bracha to have a son - and a Chabad House," he announced, mystically.

An Eliyahu from Blue Heaven Island, dressed in white, that showed up unexpectedly with a bracha for a son? I was almost sure I was experiencing gilyu Eliyahu!

"Where'd you get this dollar?" I asked him, incredulously.

He showed us a picture of himself receiving a dollar from the Rebbe. "I lived in Crown Heights for a few months," he explained. "I carry this Rebbe dollar with me wherever I go. Last night, I dreamed that the Rebbe told me to give this dollar to you."

Elie had written the date he'd received the dollar, and, glancing down, I noted it was Daled Nissan.

"Watch," I murmured to my wife. "Next year, Daled Nissan, we'll have a boy."

(Our son, Menachem Mendel, was born on Beis Nissan, and on Daled Nissan, we brought him home.)

We kept in touch and became very close. A few years later, he visited again to meet our son. We spent another Shabbos together, and by now, we were good friends. At this point, I broached the topic of printing a Tanya. Elie lived on a tiny little island, Motu Paahi Faanui. Population? Two. We had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to print a Tanya there, and we knew we'd never have a chance like this again.

Elie agreed, but we both were distracted by other things, and years passed without a Tanya being printed.

Part two of this story involves Eliyahu, a tourist from Teaneck, NJ, and his family. They'd prepared a meal in advance, but some of it spoiled, and their hotel room kitchen was unusable. He called us and asked if we could help him with this crisis. We were happy to do so, and my wife immediately set about preparing a feast of comforting food. I delivered it to their hotel room, and the family was so thankful.

Some time later, Eliyahu invited me to "farbreng" with him and tell him about our shlichus.

"Maybe we can even learn Tanya?" he suggested.

Tanya covers a wide variety of topics, so I decided to focus on one particularly meaningful perek. I Googled his name and discovered that he runs a non-profit daily charity website by the name of

*goodtoday.org*. Subscribers can choose an institution and a donation amount on a daily basis.

One of the letters in Igeres Hakodesh, the fourth section of the Tanya, discusses the Rambam's ruling that it's better to give small amounts over a long period of time than just one lump sum, one time. The Rambam explains that consistently giving tzedakah helps break the natural will to be stingy, and replaces it with a habit of generosity. The Alter Rebbe explains the deeper implications of the Rambam's ruling, and how it affects the neshama.

Eliyahu loved it. This was the exact goal of his website, so it meant a lot to him. I gifted him with a Tanya that had been printed in Kauai, explaining the Rebbe's directive.

"Maybe one day, I can print a Tanya somewhere," Eliyahu commented. "If you ever hear about a place that needs a Tanya printed, let me know."

I told him Elie's story, and my plan to print two Tanyas - one in Bora Bora, and another on Motu Paahi Faanui.

"I'm in!" Eliyahu agreed.

We were so excited to begin! ...then COVID hit, and all our plans had to be put on hold. Last month, when Elie finally returned to Blue Heaven Island, I connected Elie of Bora Bora with Eliyahu of Teaneck, NJ, and the Tanya was printed.

Part of the Rebbe's vision for the Tanya printing campaign was that people learn from the newly printed Tanyas. I told Elie that, as soon as the first Tanya is printed, he should pick a page at random to learn. On a three-way call between me, Elie, and Eliyahu, we studied it together. The page Elie picked opening the Tanya at random was the *exact same page I'd learned with Eliyahu, years before in Kauai*.

On Chai Elul, the birthday of the Alter Rebbe, we bound the newly printed Bora Bora Tanya. Our next goal? Print a Tanya for every zip code on Kauai!

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