

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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The Power of Learning Torah

Seine and Marne is an area 50 kilometers out of Paris, and is roughly 100 times the size of the metropolis.

There are over 400 small towns and villages sprawled over the whole area, with a couple of Jewish families in each. When we first arrived, we knew no one, and there were no Jewish organizations to contact for information either.

Over the past twenty years, we've, baruch Hashem, built a strong community, complete with a shul and a gorgeous mikvah. Since our area is so spread out, we rely a lot on mailings. Our matzah mailing reaches 1,500 families. To visit each family personally would take hours of driving.

Our shlichus often brings to mind the Mishna from Pirkei Avos 2:16: "It is not your duty to complete the work, but that also does not excuse you from undertaking it." We often form a close relationship with a family who had no previous interaction with Judaism. Over time, they become frequent visitors to our Chabad House, and take on more and more commitments to their Yiddishkeit. They come to shul weekly, send their children to a Jewish school, and start to keep kashrus, Shabbos, and more. And then - they move onto greener pastures, where Yiddishkeit is more accessible and there are vibrant, frum communities. We watch them leave with bittersweet smiles, knowing that tomorrow, we'll start the process all over again

with a new family. Our community is now represented all over France, Israel, and the States, and we couldn't be prouder of our growing international family.

One of the highlights of the year is our solidarity mission to Israel, where we send a Chitas, Shabbos candles, and tefillin to Israeli soldiers. The Rebbe spoke about the protective power each of those items have for Yidden, especially for soldiers on the front lines. This year, we gave out 70 pairs of tefillin, in honor of 70 years of the Rebbe's leadership. We take a group from Seine and Marne, and we visit different army bases around Israel. We celebrate our Jewish brotherhood with a lavish barbeque, and the visits most often end with us French visitors arm in arm with our Israeli brethren, singing *Am Yisrael Chai*.

After posting pictures of our most recent trip on Facebook, I received a private message from an Israeli soldier:

I enjoyed seeing these pictures. It reminded me of when you came to visit my platoon on our army base ten years ago. I want you to know that I have continued using the tefillin you gave me

then, and I even have another set for other soldiers on base who do not have their own pair.

Dan lived a couple of villages over. His parents weren't interested in anything to do with Yiddishkeit, but he found us anyway. He asked if he could come for Shabbos, and we gladly agreed. He came the next week, and the next, and very soon, Dan was a regular, almost like another son. The walk from his house took an hour and half, so he often slept over for Shabbos and Yom Tov.

After a few months, I received a furious call from Dan's father.

"You kidnapped my son!" he thundered. "He refuses to eat with us anymore, and he's hardly ever home. He just always talks about 'the Amars!'" He even threatened me with legal action.

"Listen," I tried to calm him down. "I'm not holding him against his will. He's free to do anything and go anywhere he likes."

A year later, I received a very different call.

"I heard you're taking a trip to Israel," his father said. "Can you take Dan with you?"

"As long as you don't accuse me of kidnapping again!" I joked.

Dan accompanied us on our solidarity mission. He enjoyed the trip so much that, when he got older, he ended up making aliyah, and joined a special platoon in the army that reserves the second half of the day for Torah learning.

After completing his service, Dan got engaged to a French girl from another Chabad house and he wanted me to officiate the wedding. The chuppah was held in Yerushalayim, with a beautiful view of the Kotel.

While circulating among the guests at the wedding, I saw Dan's father crying.

"It's your son's wedding! Why are you crying?" I asked him.

"I would never have imagined this was possible," he said. "Look where Dan grew up - surrounded entirely by non-Jewish families. The chances of him meeting and marrying a Jewish girl were practically nil. And now, here we are! At a Jewish wedding, with a mechitzah, in Israel, with a view of the Kotel! Rabbi, it's all thanks to you!"

"Thanks to me?" I answered. "It's thanks to Hashem and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who sent us on shlichus. Come on, let's dance!"

I find that the most powerful way to impact people is through Torah learning. I offer many in-person and online shiurim and classes about various topics. We even recently launched an app called *eTorah*, alongside a website (etorah.fr) with over 1,300 classes to make learning even more accessible for all French speakers. There are many who decided to turn their lives around completely after attending shiurim. Jacques's story is particularly noteworthy.

Jacques first contacted me about saying kaddish for his father. There was no rabbi in his town, so I walked over and led the Shabbos davening.

Jacques was an accountant in a large firm. When I visited his office to learn together, we were the only Jews in the building. We learned together twice a week, first covering basic halachos, then continuing on to Mishna, Gemara, the Rebbe's sichos, and more.



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About ten years into our relationship, Jacques confessed something to me:

"Rabbi, my wife is really upset at you."

"I'm sorry to hear that. What did I do?"

"As you know, she isn't Jewish. She's been complaining that I'm not home all week, and then, when the weekend finally comes, I spend all Saturday with you, instead of spending time with her at home!"

"Davening only takes two or three hours," I pointed out. "There's still another 21 hours on Saturday, not to mention all of Sunday. I'm sure you can work it out peacefully."

I knew his wife was suffering from an ongoing medical condition, and I didn't feel it was my place to step into the delicate issue of their marriage.

Jacques' birthday was coming up, and I planned a nice farbrengen for him. There are no kosher bakeries near us, so my wife baked him a beautiful cake, and I prepared a bottle of mashke with which to say l'chaim.

A day or two before his birthday, Jacques called me, crying.

"My wife just passed," he told me. "Do you think you could come to her funeral?"

After ascertaining that there would be no crosses or any other signs of avoda zara, I agreed to come, to show my support and care for him. It was the morning of his birthday.

That afternoon, I showed up as scheduled for our learning session, bringing the cake and l'chaim with me.

"You know something, Rabbi? I think it's your fault my wife died," Jacques said, nursing his whiskey.

"Jacques!" I was shocked. "How could you think such a thing? Don't you think that Hashem planned this all 56 years ago, the day your wife was born? Hashem decided that today was the day her mission in this world would be completed."

We learned a sicha where the Rebbe addresses the concept of "chassidei umos haolam," and explains that righteous non-Jews earn a special place in Olam Haba, the world to come.

"I'm sure your wife is in a special place in heaven," I consoled him. "She was definitely in the category of *chassidei umos haolam*."

Our bi-weekly learning sessions continued, until Jacques eventually remarried a wonderful Jewish woman and they made aliyah with their daughter. Jacques still calls me frequently to ask various halachic questions that come up as he lives his life as a fully frum Jew.

There are three prisons in my area, and I visit each of them every two weeks, to bring tefillin, books, and kosher food to the Jewish prisoners.

I received a call from the mother of one religious bochur, who was serving a six-month sentence in a French prison.

"I was raised to hate Chabad," she told me. "I've never had a reason to; that's just how it was in my neighborhood. You're the first Chabadnik I've ever dealt with, and I can't believe how wrong I was. You don't know me; you don't know my family; you hardly even know my son. But you still visit him, bringing him tefillin, sefarim, and kosher meals. I can never thank you enough. Now, whenever I hear someone disparaging Chabad, I immediately come to their defense, explaining how they love and care for every single Jew, regardless of background, affiliation, or nationality."

A couple of times a year, we take a group to New York, to visit the Rebbe's Ohel. It's an intense 72-hour experience, during which they're immersed in farbrengens and preparations for entering the Rebbe's room in 770, and the Ohel.

One of the women in the group, who ended up joining last-minute, was suffering from *yeneh machalah*. After pouring out her heart in the Rebbe's Ohel, she returned to France and has since been in remission, completely cancer-free.

"My husband has been visiting the Ohel for years," she told me. "I never really understood what drew him until I went myself. It was truly a life-changing experience."

Twelve years ago, we built a mikvah. We poured hours of planning and thought into every tile, and, baruch Hashem, it's known as one of the nicest in the country. I often encourage couples to tour the mikvah, hoping that when they see how beautiful and luxurious it is, it will inspire them to use it.

Gervase and Emily never responded to my invitations, until one day, when Gervase asked me about available mikvah appointments. I told him to contact my wife, and invited him to join me in my house for a learning session while our wives continued on to the mikvah.

When Emily finished, she asked to speak with me.

"In all five years of our marriage, this is the first time I've been to a mikvah since our wedding," she told me. "I have a phobia of putting my head underwater. When I told my mikvah attendant that, she pressured me into doing it anyhow, and I found the whole thing too traumatizing to do ever again."

"Over the past five years, we've had three miscarriages. You kept inviting us to see the mikvah, so we eventually figured that I'd give it one more try. As soon as I came in, I told your wife about my phobia. She was so gentle and reassuring, helping me overcome my fears and offering to hold my hand throughout. I can't thank her enough. This was such a beautiful experience."

After such a glowing review, I was surprised to hear from my wife that Emily didn't make any follow up appointment. When I bumped into Gervase a few months later, he told me straight out, "Emily won't be coming to mikvah anymore."

"Why not? Is it something we did? Can you tell me so we can correct it?"

"No, no, of course not. Emily is expecting," he said, a soft smile lighting his face. "Twins!"

I'd scheduled a night of mezuza hanging, book delivering, and house visiting, when I got a call from Louis.

"My father isn't doing well," he told me. "Can you come visit him?"

His father was in Paris, just a half hour's drive away, so I decided to make the detour.

When I entered his hospital room, I was shocked. Louis and his two brothers stood morosely on the side, just... waiting. The atmosphere was tense and heavy. Louis' father was sitting up in bed, eyes open and alert. I called the sons out of the room and spoke to them in a low whisper.

"I don't understand this," I said. "I'm not G-d. I don't know what will be with your father tomorrow, or even a few hours from now. But right now, he's awake and alert! He's alive! Why all the mournful faces? Every minute of life is a precious gift. Let's put on tefillin and celebrate his life!"

We re-entered the room, and I put tefillin on Louis' father. We sang and danced in that hospital room, transforming the tension to joy. When I left one hour later, the environment had completely changed.

Louis called me a day later. "My father passed away," he told me.

"Baruch Dayan haemes," I intoned. "Thank you for calling, Louis. Because of you, your father passed away surrounded by joy, energy, and love. He was able to put on tefillin, and his soul departed in peace."

Never underestimate any mitzvah. You never know where one small action can lead! Stay focused on your shlichus, making sure to strengthen your hiskashrus daily to the meshaleiach, and you're guaranteed to see unlimited brachos!

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