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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

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Prayer and Camaraderie on the Kibbutz

I grew up in a verdant wasteland. The kibbutz where I was born was full of greenery and growth. Spiritually, however, it was dry and barren.

Not a single member of any of the thirty-odd kibbutzim in central Israel ever stepped foot in a shul. My first exposure to Judaism as a religion, rather than a culture, was in the army. From there, my curiosity grew, and in my search for more, I wound up at Chabad.

My wife had a similar upbringing and journey to Yiddishkeit. She, too, was born on one of these kibbutzim, but eventually made her way to Torah.

We became baalei teshuva together, one step at a time. After we married, we moved to Tzfat so I could continue learning in yeshiva. We both wanted to share our newfound knowledge with our kibbutz friends and family, and introduce them to the beauty of Torah. So, one year later, we moved to Beit She'an, where we built relationships with the communities and kibbutzim in the area.

Our Chabad house in Emek HaMaayanot is in one of Israel's most beautiful and scenic locations. There are national parks, waterfalls, and breathtaking sceneries that attract thousands of tourists every year.

After our requisite three years in the army, my wife and I traveled to India, where we met up with my childhood friend Ohr. He brought his girlfriend, Shira, and Itzik, another friend. My wife and I had only just started exploring our Judaism, but we were, by far, the most religious of the group.

We lost touch with them after that, especially since my wife and I were committing more seriously to Judaism. We had long gotten married, living in Tzfat, and deep into community life. One Friday night, as I entered the shul, greeting familiar faces and smiling at visiting ones, I suddenly heard my name being called from the second-floor balcony. A smiling Ohr was waving down at me. He raced down the stairs, and as we hugged, I couldn't help but notice his ponytail and knitted kippa.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, in amazement

"I'm here to experience Shabbat!" he told me.

We sat to catch up, and Ohr told me he was looking for ways

to integrate religion into his kibbutz life. I offered to come learn with him once a week.

Over the next few months, we started delving into the Tanya. We continued the weekly learning sessions during my move to Beit She'an and the opening of our Chabad house. Ohr attended many of our events and was becoming seriously attached to Yiddishkeit. His girlfriend, Shira, was more reluctant.

"I know it's wrong to live together," Ohr admitted. "I have to marry her."

But even after the wedding, Shira was still adamantly against becoming religious. She threw all her energy into planning their honeymoon in India.

"I feel guilty," Ohr confided. "I feel like I should be doing more than just vacationing in India."

I smiled. "And you will!"

Ohr looked confused.

"There are Chabad houses scattered throughout the country," I explained. "Shira is going on vacation, but you are going on shlichus!"

Ohr and Shira ended up visiting two Chabad houses during their trip, staying at each for a few weeks. Ohr integrated seamlessly, becoming "one of the gang." Pretty soon, Shira, too, lowered her guard and felt at home.

Ohr and Shira decided to conclude their honeymoon with a visit to 770 in New York, before returning to Eretz Yisrael as a completely religious and observant couple!

At the beginning of our shlichus, I got a call from one of the kibbutz families - they needed help gathering a minyan for a shiva house.

I arrived at the shiva house, bochurim in tow. I immediately spotted an old friend, Natan, standing in the back.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Old family friend," he responded.

I nodded. "I'm sorry for your loss."

We spent a few minutes catching up. Natan was now married, and he, his wife, and their two children lived on a nearby kibbutz in a small, one-bedroom house.

"I recently started learning more," he told me. "I think I might believe in G-d."

I was thrilled to hear that! I offered to learn with him weekly, and Natan smilingly accepted.

We began to learn together every week, and we both enjoyed not only the Torah learning, but the re-establishment of our friendship as well. As Yom Kippur approached, Natan became increasingly worried about the lack of shul on the kibbutz.

"Where am I going to daven?" he asked. "I can't leave my family, but I also don't want to daven without a minyan."

"What if the minyan came to you?" I asked.

"But there's no shul here; barely even anyone here believes in G-d at all!"



I smiled. "All you need to do is find a room," I said. "I'll take care of the rest."

Natan found a small room, and I recruited ten bochorim from my old yeshiva in Tzfat. We found a chazan and a Torah and prepared the kibbutz's first ever Yom Kippur davening.

Although we spread the word about the minyan, we didn't expect to see anyone other than Natan. Helping him daven on Yom Kippur would've been well worth the effort. To our utter astonishment, the room was packed with kibbutznikim. For Kol Nidrei and Neila, the crowd spilled through the door. It was truly one of the most moving and memorable tefillos I've ever experienced.

After that, minyanim became a permanent fixture on the kibbutz. Although they were denied permission to build a shul, the people of the kibbutz found a way to daven together. They held a small minyan in a driveway. Soon enough, the minyan acquired their own Sefer Torah. They met regularly every Shabbos and Chag. It was a small-but-intrepid minyan, started by one man's desire to daven with a minyan on Yom Kippur.

Unfortunately, Natan was taken from us way too early. In his tragically short life, he made a lasting impact on his entire kibbutz.

Since many kibbutz schools avoid teaching about Jewish traditions and holidays, we make it a priority to visit and teach the children about their religion.

One year, just a few days before Rosh Hashana, I visited a kibbutz preschool to blow shofar for the students.

"Can we wait?" one teacher asked me. "I have a friend who's on her way and she really wants to be here when you start."

I agreed and waited for her friend. A few minutes later, a middle-aged woman came and sat in the back of the class. I began my presentation, playing games with the kids and teaching them all about the upcoming holidays. Of course, I also blew the shofar. Before I left, I approached the woman and asked her name.

"I'm Nitzan," she told me.

"Are you a parent here?" I asked.

Nitzan shook her head. "I've just never heard the shofar before. I knew I should hear it at least once in my life, and I figured this was my chance!"

A few months ago, I attended a funeral at a kibbutz. I came, expecting the body to be in a coffin, but was pleasantly surprised to find the meis wrapped in a talis. Her family stood before her, sharing memories and last goodbyes.

"I want to tell a story about Ruth," Shoshi, her best friend of 50 years, said. "It happened ten years ago, when we and our husbands traveled to the States."

The room went silent as Shoshi gathered her thoughts.

"We went on an absolutely beautiful hike. It was long and difficult, but the view from the top was worth every drop of sweat. And while we sat there, staring out at the world, I started to get hungry.

"*You have to stay hungry today*, Ruth told me. *It's Yom Kippur*. She began to sing Kol Nidrei in a hauntingly beautiful voice, enhanced by the silent beauty surrounding us. Her father used to take her as a child - that's how she knew the words. And sitting there on that mountain top, listening to Ruth sing Kol Nidrei, I felt attached to every Jew in the world."

I'd only known Ruth for a few years, but her family was completely unaffiliated with Judaism. None of her children mentioned G-d, or even planned to say Kaddish for her soul. Shoshi's connection to Yiddishkeit was tenuous as well. She and Ruth had shared fifty years of friendship and companionship. Of the hundreds of stories she could've chosen to share, something moved her to share a moment when Ruth revealed their innate connection to Am Yisrael.

Eitan, a kibbutznik, asked me to take a look at his mezuzahs. When I got there, he took one look at me and asked if I was Chabad.

"The Rebbe saved my life," he told me.

He reached into his pocket and showed me a picture of the Rebbe. Then, he showed me another picture of him standing next to an army tank, a Chabadnik wrapping tefillin around his arm.

"It was during the second Lebanon war," he explained. "We were heading into enemy territory, and a Chabadnik offered to help me put on tefillin. I figured if there was ever a time to put on tefillin, it was *that* morning. Hours later, deep into battle, our tank took a direct hit and burst into flames. My team got out, but I was in the driver's seat. The angle made escape impossible. I knew I was going to die. But then a hand reached in and yanked me out. My commanding officer pulled me out seconds before the entire tank exploded."

"Wow," I answered. "That really is a nes!"

The man shook his head. "You don't understand, Rabbi. I was a big kid; it shouldn't have worked. I was trapped, and no amount of pulling could have saved me. I should have died."

The man gathered his breath and looked up at me. "It was the tefillin," he said. "They saved my life!"

A few years ago, we had the opportunity to substitute the shlichim in India for a few months. As we organized Shab-

bos meals, Chagim, shiurim, and events, we got to know a young girl named Adi Chyrek. She popped into the Chabad house every so often. We felt an instant connection to her because she was from Beit She'an! She was touring India with some friends. Her friends never came, but Adi visited enough for us to form a friendship.

After our stint was up, we returned to Beit She'an and our regular Chabad house. We wanted to reach out to Adi, knowing she lived close by, but we didn't know how to get in touch with her.

Recently, a baal teshuva named Idan Chyrek joined our community. He started coming to minyanim and celebrating Chagim with us. His last name reminded us of our long-lost friend.

"I used to know a girl with the same last name as you," I told him one Friday night. "Any relation to Adi Chyrek?"

Idan smiled. "That's my wife!"

"No," I said. "Adi wasn't married when we met her. She was Chyrek before marriage."

Idan started laughing. "That's my wife!" he said again. "We're cousins. Where did you meet her?"

"In India, a few years ago."

"I was on that trip too," Idan shared. "I remember watching Adi transform. She suddenly cared about religion. I should have known it was only a matter of time before she convinced me to follow her!"

"Such a small world," I marveled.

"But it's more than that, Rabbi," Idan answered, earnestly. "I didn't become religious just for Adi. I work in high-tech in Tel Aviv and I'm the only religious guy in the entire office. All these young guys have beautiful wives, fancy cars, and huge houses. They have it all, and they're still depressed. So, I started teaching them Torah. It's just once a week, nothing too serious, but I've seen them change. It's given them meaning, Rabbi - and that's the real reason I do it!"

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