

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

Rabbi Shalom and Chana Bakshi, Chabad of Woodbridge, Ontario

Loaves of Love

By Chaya Chazan

Shlichus was a part of the equation from the very beginning. When we first moved to Toronto, it was as a part-time assistant to local shluchim and a teacher in the cheder. After a few years, we moved to Woodbridge, a small suburb of Toronto, to open our own full-time Chabad house.

The area is mostly Italian, with less than 1% of the population being Jewish. When we initially started looking for Jews, we found ten Jewish families and two Jewish owned businesses. Later on, when we brought Merkoz shlichus bochurim, we unearthed a few more. Baruch Hashem, we now know over 120 families, and we're sure there are at least another hundred waiting to be identified.

Most Woodbridgians moved there for its quiet, peaceful lifestyle. They wanted to leave Toronto's hustle, bustle, and flourishing from community behind. In Woodbridge, they were sure they'd be left alone - until we got there,



anyway! It's an uphill battle, but we're here to prove that "black hats" aren't just for big cities; religion belongs in small communities, too. Over time, we were accepted, and, slowly but surely, we started making headway. We've even cooperated with the local Walmart and other grocery stores to carry kosher products and holiday gear.

Since very few Jews had been recognized in the area, no shluchim had ever really *tried* to find Jews there. I was researching Woodbridge just before Chanukah, scouting out likely malls or public spaces where I could hold a public menorah lighting.

As I was driving around, I got hopelessly lost. It was late at night, and I didn't have GPS guidance. Suddenly, I saw a sign for a wedding hall. I recognized it at once - it was the hall in which I'd gotten married, twelve years before! To me, it was a clear sign from Hashem that I was right where I was meant to be.

We give every member of our community freshly baked chalos every Friday as a weekly tradition. Not only does it have a "Yiddishe taam," it's a great way to show the way that we're not trying to invade and turn their lives upside down. We simply offer our gift, introduce the "smell" of Yiddishkeit into their homes, and leave right away. As we made our deliveries each week, we hoped one day we'd be invited in to deepen our connection.

My brother-in-law, a shliach nearby, told me about the Maaravi family, who'd just moved to Woodbridge.

"I'll send you their contact information, but I have to warn you - they're not interested!" he told me.

No problem. That's what shlichus is all about! I immediately called Mr. Maaravi and introduced myself.

"We don't want or need you. Bye," was all the response I got before he hung up.

I was undaunted. I knew that if I just met him in person, I could reach him much better than over an impersonal

phone call. I added him to our weekly challah delivery list, and dropped a bag of the braided loaves on his front doorstep every week.

His mother-in-law pulled me aside one day and told me, "Rabbi, I feel terribly about all the hassle you're going to. You deliver challah and candles every week, but I hate to tell you - the challah goes to the dog, and the candles go straight to the garbage."

"Thanks for the information," I told her. "I'll take it into consideration."

"What's there to consider?" she asked, in wonder. "It's a waste of time!"

I thought about all the stories I'd heard of shluchim who persevered despite clear disinterest, and the rich relationships they'd formed with the people they'd refused to give up on.

I continued the deliveries for the next ten months, although I never received a word of recognition. Whenever we had a holiday event or program, I included the brightly colored flier in the challah package.

It was after our Covid-esque outdoors Sukkos festival, when almost everything had already been cleared away, that Mr. Maaravi showed up with his children.

"We're here for the Sukkot festival," he told me.

I welcomed him warmly and quickly fixed him a plate. I invited him to make a bracha on the lulav and esrog, and to make a bracha in our sukkah. We sat together in the sukkah and spoke. Chana, who was passing by, saw me talking with a stranger, and came over to welcome him as well.

"Thank you so much for coming!" she said. "I see you brought your children as well. I just wanted to let you know that our Hebrew school will be starting right after the holiday!"

The two Maaravi children were the first registrants to our Hebrew school, and, in the ensuing years, the Maaravi family has become good friends and strong supporters of our community.

As the Rebbe told Rabbi Yitzchak Groner, head shliach of Australia, *A shliach's job is not to make calculations about what will accomplish the most. A shliach's job is simply to do!*

A shliach in Florida told me about a girl from his community who'd recently moved to our area with her non-Jewish boyfriend, and was shortly expecting their first child.

I figured my best bet for reaching this Jewish neshama was through our challah deliveries. I figured out her address and went knocking. When she opened the door to find a bearded rabbi standing on her doorstep, she burst into tears. I got nervous, wondering what I'd done to make her so upset.

"I just got off the phone with my father in Florida," she explained through her tears. "I'm nearing the end of my pregnancy, and, at my last appointment, my doctor mentioned that, seeing as I'm Jewish, I should start researching



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brissim. I was so overwhelmed! I called my father, crying, feeling so lonely and apprehensive. I have no family here at all. My boyfriend's entire family is non-Jewish. Would they understand why I want my son to have a bris? Would they even allow it? I just hung up with my father, and then you knocked on the door!"

She invited me in and shared all the research she'd done so far. She was strongly leaning towards hiring a doctor.

"Can I offer you some advice?" I asked, gently. I explained the difference between a halachic bris and a medical circumcision, including all the benefits, both physical and spiritual, of a proper bris performed by a mohel. "Here's the card of the mohel I've personally used for my own children," I told her. She looked thoughtful as I left.

When I returned the next week with her challah delivery, she told me she'd been speaking to her father again. "He told me that you turning up right after our conversation is a Heavenly sign I can't ignore. He urged me to take your recommendation and use a proper mohel. I'm not against the idea, but I'd like to think about it more."

Each time I visited her, she remained hesitant, but finally, decided to commit, 100%. Not only did she hire a proper mohel, she asked me which kosher caterer to use, and promised to keep the wrapping on so I could see the hechsher for myself. She even asked about buying a becher and which mikveh to toivel it in!

Her son now attends a Jewish day school, and her younger daughter was named in a shul in Toronto.

The city-province recently opened a state-of-the-art hospital which is just a short drive from my house. During COVID, I was only able to visit sporadically, but now, I visit more often. I've seen many letters and talks in which the Rebbe writes to host public menorah lightings in hospitals, as it creates a positive atmosphere that invites an air of healing.

On my occasional visits to the hospital, I've met one Jewish patient, and one Jewish staff member. Despite knowing of only two Jews - one of which would be out of town - I decided to light the menorah in the hospital anyhow.

I walked around from room to room in search of more attendees, and even asked around the emergency waiting room.

"Look! There's Madeline!" my wife suddenly called out. We recognized her from our previous pediatric practice, where she worked as a nurse. She was happy to help us, and even paged a Jewish doctor who she knew was on call.

We began the menorah lighting, accompanied by one patient, one doctor, and one nurse. Despite the small crowd, it was an emotional and moving lighting. The patient, a former self-proclaimed atheist, cried like a baby, and shared his story of finding G-d.

After the lighting, Madeline pulled us aside.

"You live in Woodbridge? I have a brother who lives there, too. Unfortunately, the past few years have been very hard on him. He got divorced, and then COVID struck, and he was stuck indoors. He became very depressed, and hasn't left his basement apartment in months! If I give you his address, will you visit him?"

The next day, there was a heavy snowstorm, but we braved our way through the snow the following day and knocked on his door. He was so happy to see us. He kept hugging me and thanking me, over and over. We took a selfie for his sister, and offered him some latkes and jelly donuts.

"You know," he said, thoughtfully. "This reminds me of my childhood in South Africa. My father used to celebrate Chanukah just like this! In fact, he passed away sometime around Chanukah. I remember people visiting us in the hospital with menorahs and dreidels. He passed away right after that."

"Which day was that?" I asked him.

He gave me as many details as he could remember. I did some quick calculations.

"I think tonight is your father's yahrzeit!" I said, excitedly. It was as if we'd received a calling from another world.

We called Madeline for confirmation. "Yes, come to think of it, it is!" she said.

I arranged for a minyan to recite kaddish on his behalf.

Over the next few months, we slowly but surely drew him out of shell, and gave him a new lease on life.

"You have the best excavator in Woodbridge," someone once joked. "You manage to dig up Jews from nowhere!"

When our kids grew tired of staring at their screens for "Zoom school," we'd announce, "Mezuzah drive!" All our kids would whoop with delight and pile in the car, armed with pencils and pads. We drove around the streets slowly, looking for homes with mezuzos on the door. We'd carefully mark down the addresses, and make sure to visit them at some point.

That's how we met Helen. While we were chatting, she mentioned her neighbor Samantha, who she knew was Jewish and didn't have a mezuzah. I visited Samantha at

the next opportunity, which happened to be chol hamoad Sukkos.

"How did you find me?" she asked, suspiciously.

"Helen told us about you! She said you needed a mezuzah!"

"No, thank you."

"Would you like to make a blessing on the lulav and esrog?" I offered.

Samantha wasn't interested. "I lost my faith in G-d a long time ago," she said.

"No problem. It was a pleasure to meet you! Please be in touch if there's anything we can do for you."

Clearly, Samantha didn't want to see us ever again. I added her to our challah delivery list. When she opened the bag and smelled the fresh challoos, her eyes lit up.

"Is this challah? Who made it?" she wanted to know. "I've always wanted to learn to bake challah."

"You're in luck! My wife is hosting a women's event soon," I told her. I asked again if she'd like for me to put up a mezuzah, but she refused. "I told you - I don't believe in G-d. I tried to have a baby for years, but it was just one miscarriage after another. I want nothing to do with a G-d who can be so cruel."

"The mezuzah is a G-dly protection for the home and the family," I explained. "It brings G-d's blessings to the home. Would you like to try it out?"

She begrudgingly agreed. Within a week, Samantha was a transformed individual. She'd wanted nothing to do with us before; now, she couldn't get enough. She wanted to attend classes and events, and anything that we had available! She'd allowed G-d into her doorway, and through that, into her life.

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