

IllumiNations

Issue 64 | Parshas Tzav 5783
Shabbas Hagdol Shnas Hakhel

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

Rabbi Yisroel and Leah Wilhelm, Chabad of the University of Colorado, Boulder, CO

Be Bold as a Boulder Shliach

By Chaya Chazan

Shlichus was a dream we both shared. A newly formed organization, Chabad on Campus, was supporting shluchim on college campuses and creating a global, cooperative community.

Dealing with inquisitive, impressionable, and idealistic young adults appealed to both of us, so we began searching for campus shlichus options. Rabbi Scheiner, the head shliach of Boulder, Colorado, hired us as full-time shluchim for Colorado University.

I'd never been to Colorado before, and knew next to nothing about it, but I'm a firm believer that Hashem sends us where we're needed, and that the Rebbe has a plan for every shliach.

The university is only 30% locals, and in general, it has a very laid-back, mild, and fun-loving atmosphere. While that means we basically have a blank slate to work with, it also presents the challenge of breaking through their

apathy towards spirituality. It's not hard to get someone to put on tefillin once, but we're not having intensely philosophical conversations about Yiddishkeit at 3 AM either.

The Rebbe commented that there's a fifth son by the Seder - the one who doesn't even know there's a Seder to attend! Baruch Hashem, we've reached many "fifth sons." Our numbers dipped a bit during Covid, but since then, we've never had a Shabbos with less than 100 students. However, we are, more often than not, dealing with the "she'aino yode'ah lishol." They don't ask because they're completely ignorant of the wealth of meaning Yiddishkeit has to offer.

It was a quiet Tuesday night. I was sitting on the couch with a sefer when there was an unexpected knock on my door. I opened it to find Sam standing on the doorstep, an incriminating bottle of whiskey in his hands. Thumping music from down the street told me what Sam's probable destination was. He turned beet red and turned to go.

"No, no, it's alright," I told him. "Come on in!"

Sam was so embarrassed that he'd shown up at a rabbi's house, ready to party, he turned and fled down the walkway without a single word.

Several years later, I was in Eretz Yisrael, accompanying my Birthright group on a tour of Mayanot, a yeshiva for baalei teshuva. A bochur with a neat beard tapped me on the shoulder.

"Hey, Rabbi Wilhelm. Remember me?"

Unbelievably, it was Sam. We both smiled, remembering the last time we'd met.

"How'd you wind up here?" I asked him.

"My roommate in college sadly overdosed. It was a wake-up call for me, and I decided I needed to find spirituality and meaning in life," Sam began his story. "I landed in India, sat in a few ashrams, and met a few gurus. I thought I'd found my path in life, but then I remembered the one or two times I'd attended Chabad. It had always felt so warm and welcoming; sincere and genuine. I decided to go to Israel for one week before making any radical changes to my life. That one week turned into five years. I've been here in yeshiva, and now I'm fully frum!"

Sam is now a wonderful yungerman with a beautiful family. He works with kids who've gone off the derech, guiding them in their recovery.

Pinny's parents had given up on him. He'd completely rejected the frum lifestyle with which he'd been brought up. For us though, he was a G-dsend. Pinny was entirely uninterested in davening and refused to take part in any minyanim. However, due to his upbringing, he was plenty familiar with the kosher kitchen and all the laws of kashrus. So while I conducted minyan in the shul, Pinny helped my wife set up the kiddush in the kitchen. He was a hard worker, and we figured this was a win-win scenario for all involved.

One Shabbos, there was a football game scheduled that many students wanted to attend. We davened earlier than usual, knowing that if we held minyan at the regular time, no one would show up. In a wonderfully surprising turn of events, the students decided to stay for cholent and skip the football game. Since we'd davened early, lunch wasn't ready. I proposed a short shiur until the meal was ready.

One of the concepts we discussed was *bechirah chofshis*, free will. Rather than a threat with which Hashem can punish us, free choice is the greatest gift Hashem gives us. Pinny wasn't sitting at the table, but he overheard the discussion and was powerfully struck by the idea.

Since then, he hasn't missed a single minyan. He started putting on tefillin again, and completely turned his life around.

Sometimes all it takes is one shift in perspective.

A shliach is never off the clock.

Even our family vacations are on-the-clock. Wherever we go, we visit alumni in that location, and make sure our trip is filled with purpose and meaning.

It had been a crazy Tishrei. My wife and I desperately needed a short break, and planned a night away in the beautiful Rockies - for us, a short, convenient drive. Our plans were postponed (as they are more often than not) because we had to officiate at a levaya for someone who'd passed away unexpectedly.



When I returned from the funeral in the early afternoon, we tried to make our getaway work, even though it would have to be shorter than we'd originally planned. We called every hotel in the vicinity, but they were all full. Colorado was experiencing magnificent fall foliage, and anyone and everyone was coming to enjoy it.

We found someplace to stay in a different town, but it was already so late, and if we didn't leave soon, we'd probably never actually get out of the house. We packed a few essentials, but figured we'd just buy kosher food at the local grocery store when we arrived.

There was no grocery store. It was a small town, dedicated to entertainment and amusement. We had to drive to Idaho Springs, the next town over, for a proper grocery store. We were browsing the aisles for kosher food when my phone rang.

"My name is Stephanie," said the girl on the phone. "I'm calling every Chabad in Colorado to see who can help me. It's a bit of a strange request - do you know anyone in Idaho Springs who has a pair of tefillin?"

I was absolutely dumbfounded.

"I know someone stuck there who really needs tefillin," Stephanie continued. "Would you?"

"I'm in Idaho Springs right now!" I virtually shouted, interrupting her mid-sentence.

"No way! Where?"

"In the Safeway," I answered.

"Me too!" Stephanie screeched. "I'm in the parking lot!"

Her boyfriend had committed to putting on tefillin every day. They, like so many others, had gone to the mountains to bask in the gorgeous fall scenery when he realized he hadn't put tefillin on that day. They began calling shliach after shliach. After two hours on the phone, they called me, not knowing that I was just 50 feet away!

My oldest son, Yitzy, was diagnosed with autism at six years old. As any parent of a special needs child knows, it can be extremely challenging and sometimes feels isolating. Our struggle is compounded by the fact that we're on shlichus. Our private lives converge almost constantly with our public ones, so maintaining the balance of caring for our son, our other children, and our students is a difficult juggling act.

We share this feeling of isolation with many other shluchim who also have special needs children. I know

firsthand how much support we need and how much it helps to have respite care, talk with others in similar circumstances, or even financial assistance for expensive medical equipment and therapies. That's why we started Yaldei Shluchoi Harebbe, an organization which strives to do all this and more. We help shluchim deal with this special challenge so they can find personal strength to continue to give so much to others.

My son's uniqueness also gives us wonderful opportunities of reaching people who are amazed at him wearing yarmulka and tzitzis, a beard, and being a proud Yid. Yitzy attended public school in Boulder for many years, and although we would've preferred a more heimish option, it introduced us to teachers, assistants, parents, and paras we would've never met otherwise.

I recently officiated the funeral of a woman who had zero affiliation with Chabad or any other Jewish organization. We were connected because her daughter's friend was my son's para on the bus to and from school, ten years ago! When they tried to think of a rabbi they knew, they remembered Yitzy and called me.

Ben was a parent from my son's public school. When he saw Yitzy marching out of school with a yarmulke perched proudly on his head, he introduced himself to my wife. He'd survived the Holocaust as a young boy by hiding away in a monastery. He hadn't stepped in a shul since arriving in Boulder in 1960, and had married a goy. After he met our family, he attended shul on Yom Kippur, and has returned every year since.

I asked him many times to put on tefillin, but he always refused. A few years ago, I had a bochur over to assist during the busy Tishrei season. He made it his mission to convince Ben to put on tefillin. I don't know what he said or did, but he succeeded in his goal, and snapped a picture to remember the occasion. Ben had that photo enlarged and framed, and it now hangs in a prominent spot in his office.

Fifteen years ago, I thought my son's diagnosis spelled the end of our shlichus. Today, Yitzy is the glue holding our community together. His sincerity and tenderness make a profound impact on people, and reach them in ways I never could. No one can say no to Yitzy.

Shmuli came from a frum home in Brooklyn, but he'd dropped everything and was living with his non-Jewish girlfriend in Boulder. He came to a bunch of events and

shiurim, and was generally pretty involved. Around Tishrei time, he disappeared. He stopped coming, and didn't respond to texts or calls. I didn't feel comfortable pushing any more than that. Clearly, he was busy and needed time to decompress.

Such social niceties are lost on my son. On Simchas Torah night, without telling me or my wife, he walked to Shmuli's house, woke him up, and shlepped him to shul. Like I said, no one tells Yitzy no. Shmuli danced that night with all his heart and soul. That night marked a major turning point in his life.

Henry Davidson originally messaged me for business reasons, but seeing his last name, I invited him to shul for Shavuot. He came with his two young sons, but he looked clearly uncomfortable and out of place. I gave him a siddur and a welcoming smile, and tried not to push him too far out of his comfort zone.

Just before Birkas Kohanim, my son, unbeknownst to me, went around and handed a tallis to every single person, including Henry.

After davening, Henry broke down.

"Rabbi, this week has been the hardest of my life. I just got divorced, and I've never felt more alone. That's why I came to shul. When your son gave me that tallis, and I wrapped it around myself and my sons, it literally felt like a hug from G-d."

It was his first time in shul in over 27 years. Now, Henry owns his own pair of tefillin and is an active member of our shul.

We can all learn from Yitzy's unadulterated love and purity. He is the greatest inspiration to me and our community.

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