

IllumiNations

Issue 65 | Pesach 5783
Shnas Hakhel

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Rabbi Refoel and Chani Silver, Chabad of Curaçao

There's No Such Thing As a *Small Jew*

By Chaya Chazan

For most, the term "Caribbean Island" triggers thoughts of relaxation, vacation, and lazing around on sunny, sandy beaches. For us, while Curaçao does boast some of the world's most beautiful beaches, it also connotes home, shlichus, and a remarkable rejuvenation of Yiddishkeit.

The island's most popular tourist attraction is Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue, built in 1732 by Sephardic Jews. In the 1920s, Ashkenazi Jews also began migrating to Curaçao and formed their own community, Shaarei Tzedek, where we're based today.

Chabad has a long history of its own in Curaçao, with Merkos shluchim visiting the community since the 1950s.

In 1984, the Rebbe sent Rabbi Kotlarsky on a shlichus to Curaçao specifically to further the cause of Jewish education.

In a remarkable instance of Hashgacha Pratis, while stepping out of the taxi that had picked him up from the

airport, Rabbi Kotlarsky encountered a father and son who desperately needed guidance regarding the young boy's education. Rabbi Kotlarsky was the catalyst for a major transformation in the boy's life, arranging for him to attend a yeshiva in New York. Today, he lives in the US with his beautiful mishpacha.

Shortly thereafter, the boy's father wrote to the Rebbe, expressing his gratitude for the Rebbe caring for "a small Jew from Curaçao."

"I must take exception to your referring to yourself as a *small Jew from Curaçao*. There is surely no need to emphasize at length that every Jew, man or woman, has a Nefesh Elohis, which is a part of G-d... Thus, there is no such thing as a *small Jew*, and a Jew must never underestimate his or her tremendous potential."

"Run to 770! Now!"

We were about to move to Curaçao on shlichus. Our shipping container had already been packed and sent. That was when I received a call from a dear friend and shliach, who'd been to Curaçao for many years on Merkos shlichus. He asked me to go to 770 right away and said he'd explain more later.

As I walked in, I was greeted with a hearty handshake from a stranger I'd never met before.

"Rabbi Silver? My name is Avraham. I'm originally from Curaçao, but I moved to Florida a few years ago. Come. Let's sit and talk."

Once we were settled in a quiet corner, Avraham began his story.

"I arrived in NY yesterday for a friend's wedding. Since I was here, I decided to visit the Ohel. It was the first time I'd ever been there, and the first time I'd written a pidyon nefesh. In it, I asked the Rebbe to send a shliach to my

father, who's still in Curaçao. He's going through a pretty hard time and needs someone to guide him.

"I left the Ohel, and, with a little more time before the wedding, I headed to 770. I don't really know anyone in Crown Heights, but I suddenly remembered the bochor who'd visited us in Curaçao for many summers. I called him up to see if he knew anyone who could give me a tour of 770. Hearing my voice, he excitedly told me that if I waited a bit, I'd meet the shliach moving to Curaçao... and here you are!"

Avraham shook his head in wonder.

"I can't believe it. An hour ago, I asked the Rebbe to send my father a shliach, and now, I'm meeting the shliach who'll be moving there in two weeks!"

Indeed, Avraham's father made a special effort to welcome me the first Friday night after we moved here, and he continued to join us for Shabbosim and events, not missing even one until his passing, three years later.

It was an hour before Rosh Hashanah when I received an urgent call from the security guard at shul.

"Come quickly, Rabbi. There's a strange and suspicious-looking man here."

I rushed right over. The "suspicious man" looked as though he'd just returned from a trip to the sun. His skin was bright red and sunburnt, he was barefoot, and his long hair hung in matted locks.

"Ah! Are you the Chabad Rabbi here?" he called out to me, in Hebrew.

"Yes, I am. Come, let's go inside," I invited him.

Yoav, as he introduced himself, was a former soldier in an elite IDF unit. After being discharged, he decided to embark on a sailing journey around the world. His military background had prepared him for rugged life off the grid, but it didn't prepare him for a tropical storm!

He was sailing off the coast of Curaçao when the Coast Guard issued a shelter warning. He maneuvered his boat into one of the bays and sat to think. Although he'd had a totally secular upbringing, a thought darted through his mind. *Why did Hashem send me here? Oh! That's right! It's erev Rosh Hashanah! I'll go to Chabad*, he decided. Without a moment's hesitation, he set off walking in the sweltering heat, arriving 5 hours later, just an hour before Yom Tov would begin.

"This is the first Rosh Hashanah I'll spend in shul," Yoav told me with a disarming smile.

He joined us for every tefillah, with tears pouring down his face and a huge smile across his lips.

Yoav delayed leaving Curaçao, wanting to spend all of Tishrei with us, and joined us for every tefillah and Yom Tov meal. He insisted on making the long walk to Shul on Chol Hamoed as well, saying, "Let Hashem see how



much I want to come to shul!" He received his first aliyah here; bentched lulav and esrog for the first time, and put up a mezuzah on his boat.

This Israeli Jew traveled around the entire world, only to find his true self in Curaçao, where there is no such thing as a "small Jew."

The three southern Caribbean islands are called the *ABC Islands* - Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. Aruba receives the most tourism, while Curaçao is the largest in size and population.

With less than 20,000 residents, Bonaire has the smallest population.

This past Chanukah, we decided to organize Bonaire's first ever public menorah lighting. A community member from Curaçao owned a mall there in a prime location, and they graciously offered the premises. We spent the next few weeks planning the event and doing our best to get the word out.

The morning of the planned lighting, I and three other community members boarded a tiny plane, each of us carrying boxes of menorahs, latkes, and donuts. During the short flight there, I farbrengeed with them a bit.

"The Rebbe said there's no such thing as a *small Jew from Curaçao*. That means there's no such thing as a small Jew from Bonaire, either! Even if only one person shows up tonight, this entire thing will be worthwhile."

"But Rabbi," one of them interjected, "Didn't you call the governor of Bonaire? And the TV station? What if they come to cover it, and it's just us five there?"

"Then we'll explain to them, too, that there's *no small Jew*. Don't worry about it."

I knew of only 5 or 6 Jews in Bonaire, so I fully expected his prediction to come true.

Incredibly enough, over 50 people attended the menorah lighting! We met many more Jewish residents I hadn't known about, and Jewish tourists from all over the world who'd heard about the well-publicized event.

I noticed one guy, standing off to the side, who had an intense look etched on his face. I asked him to come up and light one of the candles on the menorah, and he did so, his hand literally shaking with emotion.

"I recently moved to Bonaire," he told me. "And this is the first positive Jewish experience I've ever had. All my life, being Jewish was the root of my family's grief and loneli-

ness. It's why my parents suffered in the Holocaust, and why I never had any living relatives. Tonight has shown me what Judaism can be and how it can positively impact my life. I'll be inspired by the joy of this night for the rest of the year!"

Owen asked me to help him plan his grandson's destination bar mitzvah in Curaçao. He wanted to hold it in our shul, with a fully kosher meal. I met with him and discussed various details and logistic plans.

The bar mitzvah was perfect. As I was helping the bar mitzvah boy remove his brand new tefillin after davening, Owen's cousin from Switzerland came up and introduced himself.

"I only recently discovered what it means to be a Jew," he declared. "My parents were Holocaust survivors, and cut off all ties with Judaism out of anger. They told me never to step foot in a shul, or visit Israel! Just recently, I decided to finally do what I was taught not to... I bought a ticket and flew to Israel. The minute the plane landed and I stepped on Israeli soil, I was overcome with emotion. I don't cry easily, but let me tell you, Rabbi - I sobbed like a baby. I just felt this indescribable feeling of *rightness*. I just knew - *this was my home*. I bought a house in Israel, and I fly there from Switzerland every Friday to spend Shabbat in my home."

"That's beautiful! But have you ever put on tefillin?" I asked him.

He shook his head. And so, on that morning, a sixty-year-old Swiss Jew who spends every Shabbos in Israel, put on tefillin in Curaçao for the very first time in his life.

During the first few months of Covid, there were no outgoing or incoming flights to Curaçao. Even when the airports reopened, there was a long list of countries on the "red list." It was during this challenging time that we, baruch Hashem, had a son. Of course, we were ecstatic - but where would we find a mohel?

Most of the mohalim I knew were from countries on the "red list," and wouldn't be allowed to enter the country. After lots of research (and equal amounts of stress), someone connected me to a mohel that happened to hold a Polish passport. He specialized in adult brissim, but Poland was one of the few countries on the green list, so we had to have him!

Baruch Hashem, everything went smoothly and he arrived in Curaçao a day before the bris. We held an out-

door, drive-in event, so as many people could participate as possible.

I thanked everyone for coming, and introduced the mohel as "a man who flies all over the world, and has helped thousands of adults enter the bris of Avraham Avinu."

Later, a man approached me and said, "Your introduction reminded me of my cousin in France, Jacques. His family was very involved in the French Communist party, so he grew up completely divorced from Yiddishkeit. Lately, he's grown more interested. But he's never had a bris! Is there anything we can do to encourage him to have one?"

"Small world!" I answered. "My father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Pevzner, is a well-known Shliach in France! Let's introduce them!"

The day after our son's bris, I sent my father-in-law Jacques' contact details and asked him to reach out.

Two weeks later, on the third night of Chanukah, I suddenly received a photo from my father-in-law - a selfie of him, his arm around Jacques' shoulder, in front of the menorah they'd just lit together in Jacques' apartment. "*The bris will be January 4th!*" he'd captioned the photo. Even my father-in-law couldn't explain it. He'd driven over just to meet the guy, but something inspired Jacques to commit to having a bris right away. Within half an hour, they'd already picked the date and time!

My father-in-law was sandek at Jacques' bris, and they all celebrated his bar mitzvah in the Chabad house the very next morning. We woke up at 3 AM to watch the ceremony on Zoom, and sent a cake that said, "*Mazal tov on your bris/bar mitzvah! From your Chabad of Curaçao family.*"

The astonishing chain of hashgacha pratit that led to us hiring a mohel who specializes in adult brissim, and eventually, to Jacques' bris, is clearly *Yad Hashem* guiding our lives.

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