

IllumiNations

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*Rabbi Mendy and Devorah Lea Levy,
Chabad of Buenos Aires, Argentina*

Exploring for Jews in Argentina

By Chaya Chazan

*Our journey began with a small Chabad house and a big hope to help
Argentinian Jews grow closer to Yiddishkeit.*

After a while, my parents opened a school and ran it successfully for ten years. In 2018, they opened another Chabad house! Today, we work under my father, Rabbi Avraham Levy to build and enrich the Jewish community in Buenos Aires.

When we first opened the Chabad house, I visited a local yeshiva and asked one of the bochorim to walk around with me and point out any shops that were owned by Jews. He brought me to a small store with an elderly man sitting inside. I quickly learned that Carlos was a tough man with a complex personality.

"Do you want to put on tefillin?" I asked him.

His eyebrows furrowed in annoyance. "No."

I knew it would be a mistake to pressure him. Instead, I sat down and started talking to him. Surprisingly, he opened up, telling me about his family and childhood. We spoke for close to an hour, before I waved a friendly goodbye and promised to visit again soon.

That small store quickly became a regular stop on my journey through the city. I would sit for hours, sharing thoughts

and stories with Carlos. It was an entire month before I brought up tefillin again.

"How do you feel about putting on tefillin?" I asked.

Carlos huffed. "Fine," he said. "But just once."

But that once turned into many more times. Soon, I was stopping by the store every Friday to help Carlos and his sons put on tefillin. His age kept him from making the trip to the Chabad house on Shabbos, but his sons soon became fairly regular faces at our minyanim!

Yaakov owns a small candy shop, across from a school. When I first introduced myself to Yaakov, he was very welcoming - shockingly so.

"I want to put on tefillin," he asked.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It was so rare that I managed to convince someone to put on tefillin, but to have someone else ask me right off the bat was practically unheard of! I quickly pulled out my tefillin bag and helped Yaakov, as well as his employee, put on tefillin.

"I grew up somewhat traditional," Yaakov explained. "We always had Friday night kiddush and went to shul on the

high holidays. Over the years, I've completely lost any connection I once had, but I think I'm ready to rediscover my Jewish roots now."

I promised to come back and visit weekly - with my tefillin, of course. Yaakov quickly became a good friend.

Six months after we met, Yaakov told me his oldest son, Shalom, was turning 13 and ready to become bar mitzvah.

"I want to host the party at the Chabad house," Yaakov said. "We're planning a small, simple family party."

I gave Yaakov a big hug. "Mazal tov! Do you know that this will be the second bar mitzvah in our Chabad house? Thank you for continuing the legacy! Why don't you bring your son to me a couple of times before the bar mitzvah?" I offered. "I can teach him a little about tefillin, tallis, and becoming a bar mitzvah!"

Yaakov happily agreed and set up a time. I organized kosher catering and set up some decorations. I also made sure Yaakov's son was ready for this huge responsibility.

The bar mitzvah was a beautiful event, enjoyed greatly by Yaakov and his family. They danced, sang, and indulged in a completely kosher seudah. Then, Shalom, the bar mitzvah boy, asked to speak. He approached the front of the room and pulled a paper out of his pocket.

"Growing up, I constantly heard stories about what my grandparents went through in the Holocaust," he said. "And even after all the horrible things they went through, they always told me how important it was to have a bar mitzvah. This day is for them!"

After the party, Yaakov thanked me. "This is the first time we've ever felt so welcomed by religious people," he said. "Thank you for making it such a special day."

His gratitude meant a lot to me. I'd worked hard on the party, and it was gratifying to hear that everyone felt welcome, regardless of their affiliation or background.

I continued visiting Yaakov in his candy shop every week, and he kept me updated on his family's growth.

"Shalom has lost all interest in Judaism," he shared. "But my younger son, David, seems more interested. He's about to become bar mitzvah."

"We'd love to host it again," I offered.

Yaakov smiled. "Even if I want to invite more people this time?" he asked. "Maybe some friends, along with my family?"

I smiled widely. "Even better!"

Once again, we prepared a beautiful event and warmly welcomed 150 guests from all walks of life. Many shared how comfortable they felt in our shul, a novel experience they'd never had before.

To this day, Yaakov remains a close personal friend. I continue to visit his candy store with my tefillin, and he continues joining our Yom Tov events and the occasional Shabbos davening.

Jesse had already attended a bunch of events and shiurim at our Chabad house. I felt comfortable enough with him to dig a little deeper.



"What's your Hebrew name?" I asked. "I'd much rather call you by your Jewish name."

Jesse shrugged. "I don't have one."

"The name your parents gave you at your bris," I explained. "It can't be Jesse."

He shook his head. "I never had a bris."

I paused for a careful moment. "Would you be willing to have one?" I asked, gently. I explained the great importance and significance of joining Avraham Avinu's bris. I also outlined the procedure in full detail.

Jesse took a few minutes to think and then nodded. "Sure," he said. "Sounds like a plan to me."

I was moved by his quick determination to undertake such a painful procedure.

Today, Jesse, now fully recovered, is looking for a nice Jewish girl to settle down with.

Most days, my wife takes our children out to the park or on a short hike. One day, while walking down a windy hiking path, a middle-aged woman stopped my wife and placed her hand over my son's kippa.

"You're Jewish," she said.

My wife nodded.

"So am I," the woman shared. "The last of my family. My children have all passed away. They were sick."

My wife placed a hand on the woman's shoulder. "You should come to visit our Chabad house," she said. "I know it won't replace your family, but it's still a community, and we'd love to be there for you!"

Today, that woman is at every kiddush, event, and Yom Tov program that we host. She has truly found community in us, and we, in her!

One Motzei Shabbos, my father got a phone call from an unknown number.

"There's a Jew about to be cremated," the stranger said. "Please come and stop it."

Without a second thought, my father got in his car and raced over to the mourner's house. There was a crowd surrounding the family, but that didn't deter my father. He walked to the front of the room and started crying in front of the mourning family. He cried and sobbed almost uncontrollably.

"I didn't know your father," he said. "But I know he was a Jew. He deserves a Jewish burial. Please, don't burn his body."

The family was taken aback, but my father went on. "His neshama needs to find peace. Please give him the chance he deserves. I will take care of all of it, just let me give him a Jewish burial."

For hours my father sat and spoke to the family, telling them how important the neshama is and why their father's body belonged in a Jewish cemetery.

"If you came all the way here, crying so hard, this must be really important," one son said. The family finally agreed to a kevrus yisroel.

My father organized and paid for every last detail, happy to offer a Yid the opportunity to be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

A couple of weeks ago, my wife and I took our kids on a short vacation to a primarily Christian city about an hour and a half outside Buenos Aires. We rented a nice vacation home and enjoyed the time off with our family. However, while there, the blinkers in my car stopped working. With a long trip home coming up, I wanted to fix the car before taking it on the highway.

I found a local mechanic and had him inspect the car, but he couldn't pinpoint the issue.

"I can refer you to an electrician," he said. "He'll have an easier time figuring out what's wrong with your car."

I piled all my kids back into the car and drove the short distance to the electrician. He took us in right away.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Mendel," I answered. "It's Hebrew."

The electrician nodded. "My Hebrew name is Yitzchak."

I immediately shook his hand and told him how excited I was to meet him. I never expected to meet a Jew here, of all places!

"I grew up pretty religious," he shared. "I went to a Jewish school and was really part of the community. But after being turned away time and time again when I needed help, I didn't feel like being Jewish anymore. I married a non-Jew and moved out here, where no one would think to find me."

I listened to his story of pain, rejection, and anger and then told him to never forget he was a Jew.

"Let me get my tefillin," I said. "I can help you put them on!"

Yitzchak was hesitant but eventually agreed, and for the first time in years, this Jew living in a Christian city did the mitzvah of hanachas tefillin.

I was browsing Facebook Marketplace when I came across someone selling an old GMC Safari. I'd never seen this type of car in Argentina before, so it immediately piqued my interest.

I clicked on the seller and was surprised to see the name "Dudi Azulaury" - the most Israeli-sounding name possible. I quickly decided to send him a message in Hebrew. He answered minutes later.

"Why are you selling the truck?" I asked.

"I can't get it fixed," Dudi explained. "It's a mobile home that my girlfriend and I have been living in for the past few months, but something's wrong with it, and without knowing the language, it's been hard to get it fixed. We decided to just give up and sell it."

"Let me help you," I responded. "I speak Spanish and would be happy to send you a couple numbers for mechanics."

Dudi was thankful. He'd just told his girlfriend how desperately they needed to find someone who spoke Hebrew to help them.

"It's my pleasure," I replied. "How about you guys come over for Friday night dinner too?"

Dudi agreed. He and his girlfriend came to Chabad the next day for Shabbos davening and then dinner at my house. They left close to midnight with a sincere goodbye and a bag packed with homemade kosher food.

The next day, I sent Dudi the promised phone numbers.

"Thank you, Rabbi," he said. "We decided to sell the car after all, but we'd be happy to come back for Shabbos dinner next week! Religious people are different than we thought. My girlfriend and I are interested in talking some more."

As they became more familiar with mitzvos, they committed to making kiddush every Friday night. They have a steady streak now, despite their travels to exotic and out-of-the-way locations. A few weeks ago, they gathered a few other Israeli tourists and prepared a Shabbos meal of their own!

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