

# IllumiNations

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Shnas Hakhel

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

## *Rabbi Yossi and Malke Marrus, Chabad of Boerne, Texas*

# Shlichus in the Sun, Rain, and Freezing Cold

By Chaya Chazan

*It was a freezing day in Brooklyn in 1996, and the wind blew through the cracks of the yeshiva dining room at 1414 President Street as we huddled over hot bowls of soup.*

I was just envisioning myself in a nice, sunny climate, when a bochur came in and asked, "Anyone here have a decent voice and wants to help out a shliach?"

I immediately jumped up. "Me! Where are we going? It's gotta be warmer than here!"

A few days later, I found myself on a plane to San Antonio, Texas. It was my first time ever visiting the Lone Star State, and I loved it on-sight. The scenery was beautiful, the people were friendly, and the weather was warm year-round. I hit it off with the shliach, and we became friends. Over the next year and a half, I returned again and again, helping out for different Yomim Tovim. At the end of that year, I met my wife and got married. We stayed in Crown Heights for six months of kollel, and af-



ter that, moved to San Antonio and became the second shluchim there.

San Antonio has deep Mexican roots and influences, but the Jewish community is also well established. Rodfei Shalom, an Orthodox shul, has been around for over 100 years. The first shluchim, Rabbi and Mrs. Block, were sent by the Rebbe in 1985. San Antonio is one of the largest cities in America, and one of the fastest-growing, too. There's a Jewish population of about 15,000.

We lived in San Antonio for over 25 years, focusing on Chabad House work and chinuch; my wife working in the preschool, and me in the local day school. After the day school closed, we started the Starr Family Jewish Day School, which is the only Jewish school in the city. Being involved in chinuch, sometimes for multiple generations in a single family, has helped us reach the wider community in a very real, tangible way.

Like Rabbi Akiva, who started learning Alef Beis at 40 years old, after 25 years of successful shlichus, we decided to branch out. We opened our own Chabad house in Boerne, about a half an hour drive from San Antonio. It's an exciting challenge. Starting a Chabad house is usually left to the young ones, but here we are, starting from scratch as grandparents!

We moved the week of Parshas Lech Lecha, following our forefather Avraham's footsteps in leaving our familiar and comfortable surroundings, to travel to a new land and spread awareness of Hashem to a whole new group of people.

Texas' weather is warm and sunny for most of the year. It doesn't rain often, but when it does, it pours!

It was chol hamoad Sukkos. I was scheduled to visit a prison, but the rain was torrential and I just couldn't see how I could possibly do it.

I decided to follow the Rebbe Maharash's mantra of "lechatchiler ariber" - to leap over obstacles without

considering the odds. My brother, who was visiting at the time, joined me in the car, and we began driving.

We were the only car on the road. The rain continued without pause, and the puddles were already over a foot deep. Water was beginning to seep into the car.

We made it to the prison without mishap, albeit soaked to the bone.

Since we were officially on the schedule for that day, the inmates were waiting in the room. When we walked in, shaking water from our coats and hats, their jaws dropped.

"We were taking bets on whether or not you'd show up!" they said. "You're absolutely crazy for coming in this weather!"

It was crazy - the type of crazy described in Chassidus as "shtus d'kedusha," a holy craziness that goads you to do the unthinkable for the sake of Hashem. Overcome with this feeling, my brother and I began dancing wildly, our feet sloshing in our wet shoes. The inmates all joined us in an indescribable frenzy of joy and triumph.

Levi\* was one of the prisoners in attendance. Years later, after he was released and successfully rehabilitated, he became a baal teshuva, moved to Eretz Yisrael, and became a sofer.

"Do you know what started this whole thing?" he asked me. "It was that time when we danced together in prison. That moment changed my life!"

I taught Helene\* in grade school, but she kept in touch over the years. Although she was a self-proclaimed atheist, she called from time to time to engage in philosophical discussions about G-d and religion.

One day, she called me and said, "Rabbi, you'd be so proud of what I did today!"

"Uh oh, Helene. What did you do?"

"I enrolled in a course on religion in college. There were thousands of students in the lecture hall. A Reform rabbi was giving the class, and he started saying that the Bible was written by different rabbis over time, so its laws aren't binding, and it's not meant to be taken too seriously. I stood up and said loudly, *I'm not a practicing Jew. I don't keep kosher, or Shabbos, but I do know one thing - there is one Torah, and it was written by G-d!* You know where I learned that, Rabbi? From you!"

One lesson impressed on her from grade school was the importance of marrying Jewish. She had a highly successful career in San Antonio, but she gave it up and left to a larger Jewish community so she could meet a nice Jewish boy.

She met Joey\*, and they settled in Pittsburgh.

"We're keeping kosher and Shabbat!" she told me. "Can you send me challah and candles for Shabbat?"

I asked a shliach in Pittsburgh to reach out to them and get them what they needed.

Helene is a powerful testament to the impact of chinuch at a young age.

In more recent years, my wife and I got involved with Maayanot, leading Birthright trips, and we lead a group every summer.

Every year, when our Birthright trip visits Masada and learns the heartbreaking story of the mass suicide that took place there, I take the opportunity to talk about the Torah perspective of their deed. It leads to a greater discussion about mental health.

"If you ever feel like you've reached rock bottom; if you feel hopeless, give me a call. It doesn't matter where you are, or what time it is. Call me."

Danny\*, one member of the group, was a party animal, who seemed to have joined the trip for no other reason than to have a good time. Over the course of the ten-day trip, we had some discussions about spirituality and the meaning of life. He confided to me that he was struggling with alcohol and substance abuse. Unfortunately, after the trip, we lost contact.

A year and a half later, I got a call from an unknown Chicago number. "Hey Rabbi! Remember me? It's Danny!"

"Danny! It's nice to hear from you! What's up?"

Danny was clearly still living at home, because I could hear his mother in the background, asking him who he was speaking to.

"It's my rabbi!" he called out to her.

"Danny, Danny! I'm your rabbi?! We spent ten days together - a year ago!"

"Yeah, of course you're my rabbi. We have a soul connection!"

"So how can I help you?" I asked him.

"I'm an addict, and I'm really struggling. I'm also severely depressed. I'm in law school, but between the depression and addiction, I'm failing badly. I'm scared I'll do something I can't undo. I wouldn't have called you," he hesitated for a second, "but I remembered how you told us to call you anytime, anywhere, if we felt like we hit rock bottom. Rabbi, I need your help."

I had a long talk with him, and spoke to his mother. Baruch Hashem, we got him into rehab and helped him turn his life around. He completed his law degree, and now holds a steady, lucrative job.

Our whole Birthright group was gathered by the Kotel, exchanging impressions from the trip. Wendy\*, an introverted 25-year-old, stayed quiet. She came over to me privately and asked, "Rabbi, would it be inappropriate to put this into the Wall?" She held up a yellow, nondescript envelope.

"Depends," I answered. "What's inside?"

"My grandmother's ashes," she replied.

Of everything I expected her to say, that was definitely not on the list. I hardly even knew what to reply.

"There must be a story here," I said. "What made you bring your grandmother's ashes?"

"My grandma was a young girl during the Holocaust. Her bitter experience made her vow to have nothing more to do with Judaism. She married a Catholic, and raised my mother and aunt as Catholics as well. They each married non-Jews, and none of us even knew anything about being Jewish until a few months ago, when my grandmother told us all about it. She told us her dream was to go to Jerusalem, the home of the Jewish people. She passed away recently, and I signed up for this trip to pay my respects to her."

My mind quickly ran through relevant halachos. I knew for certain that bodies couldn't be buried anywhere in the Old City of Jerusalem.

"I'm sorry, Wendy," I said, gently. "It wouldn't be appropriate to put your grandmother's ashes in the Kotel. I'm sure she had a very special soul for her remains to have ended up in the holy land."

I got everyone's attention and held up the envelope. "In here lie the remains of a Holocaust survivor, who, after many years of suffering, has finally come home. No one has ever said kaddish for her. Let's all recite it now, together, in this special place."

There wasn't a dry eye in the crowd as I said her Jewish name and recited kaddish for her neshama.

Two and half months later, Wendy sent me a selfie of herself and her mother lighting candles on erev Rosh Hashana.

Her grandmother thought that denying her Jewishness would bring her peace, but in the end, her neshama found true, Jewish revenge.

Although our Chabad house is just starting out, we decided to go for broke this Chanukah, with three public lightings in three separate counties. When people asked me why we were doing so much, so soon, I would answer, "I'm not a spring chicken anymore! I have to catch up with all these young guys starting out!"

The first and second menorah lightings were great successes, each with their own large crowd. The third event was on the night of an Arctic blast. As my son Sholom and I drove to our destination, deep in the Texas Hill Country, we watched the temperature gauge drop into the single digits. The wind howled around us, and we bundled up as best we could. We didn't think anyone would show up in the freezing cold, but we set up the menorah and waited. The menorah shook in the gusts of wind, and the ladder kept blowing over.

One guy showed up. He was an elderly man named Hank, and he shivered despite the many layers covering him.

"Hang around for a bit!" I urged him. "Take a latke and a donut!"

"I'm sorry, Rabbi. I'm too cold!"

"Okay, I understand. Let's just light the menorah, and we'll get out of here."

My son tried to light the menorah, but the lighter was frozen solid.

"Sorry Rabbi. I gotta go. It's too cold for an old man like me." I gave Hank our website information, and invited him to contact me for a Torah class. Hank jumped into his car and drove off.

As we packed up and headed home, I couldn't help but wonder why Hashem had sent us there. We didn't even get to light the menorah! I reminded myself of stories I'd heard where just one person's life had been changed, and comforted myself that we never know what impact our actions will have.

The next day, I was pleasantly surprised to receive an email from Hank: *It was a pleasure to meet you and your son. I apologize that I had to leave so abruptly. But I do want to take you up on your offer. I want to learn more!*

He's now part of our shiur on Shaar Habitachon and joins every week. He even ordered a volume for himself.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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