

IllumiNations

Issue 73 | Parsha Behaaloscha
5783 Shnas Hakhel

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 Dovid and Goldie Tiechtel, Chabad at the University of Illinois and Champaign, IL

From Darkness into Light

By Chaya Chazan

I grew up in Crown Heights, where we were exposed to sichos and farbrengens from a very young age. With two parents in education, and a legacy of great-grandparents who were killed at kiddush Hashem, my path in life was clearly defined for me.

Hearing these stories throughout my childhood deeply affected me, and taught me what it means to serve Hashem with sincerity.

Every one of my aunts and uncles, from both sides of the family, are on shlichus, even though it wasn't as popular among young Chabad couples as it is today. My parents only stayed in Crown Heights because of a direct instruction from the Rebbe, who requested they build the chinuch organizations locally. Shlichus was just the most natural thing in the world; almost a given.

I was open to almost anything, but I knew being a campus shliach wasn't for me. I wanted a stable community, with members that would remain a part of our family for many years. When the head shliach of Illinois asked if I'd consider a campus shlichus, I unequivocally answered, "No!"

A few weeks later, I attended a farbrengen with my uncle, Rabbi Zalman Itkin OBM, shliach on a campus in Hamilton,

Ontario, and Rabbi Eli Silverstein, senior campus shliach at Cornell, who strongly underlined that there was no such thing as "shlichus shopping." You go where you're needed, not where you want! I came home from the farbrengen inspired, and my wife and I decided we'd accept any shlichus position asked of us.

Champaign, home to the University of Illinois, had already spent years asking for a shliach. The university is a leading magnet for technology, engineering, and business. Its alumni founded YouTube, PayPal, and more. Champaign, and its neighboring city, Urbana, is a college town with a growing population.

The day before our flight to Illinois, I filled my tank with gas. As I replaced the nozzle, everything shut down. A major blackout blanketed the city. We ate our last meal in New York sitting on moving boxes, tealights perched precariously

around us. We flew out of the blackout, on our way to bring illumination to the city and students of Champaign.

We were greeted with excitement; people had been clamoring for a Chabad house in Champaign for years. Some, however, warned us that Chabad of Champaign had no future - the population was elderly, without any infusion of young blood, and the campus was extremely secular and resistant to change. "We're Jewish here," they told us. "With more *ish* than Jew. This is the Midwest after all, not New York."

"Now we know why we're here," my wife and I told each other.

Baruch Hashem, in the past 20 years, we've built a thriving student community. We have daily morning minyanim, and my wife and I teach six weekly classes on various topics in Torah and Yiddishkeit. We are the only college campus in the country with university-affiliated Jewish housing, including a complete kosher meal plan. Our network of alumni are spread throughout the country, establishing Torah homes built on the foundations they discovered at U of I.

On our first Shabbos in Champaign, twenty years ago, we hosted 14 students in our tiny, one-bedroom apartment. We soon moved into larger quarters, but even that wasn't enough for our growing crowd. We put up tents and tried to fit in as many students as we could, but we knew we needed a larger place.

There was a school building just across the street that seemed perfect. Every time I went to the Ohel, I asked the Rebbe to intercede to Hashem on my behalf that we get this building, no matter what! But every time we were ready to close, something happened that delayed the final contract signing.

For over ten years, we were on the verge of closing - and then the rug was pulled out from under us. The constant rise and fall between hope and despair seemed worse than flat out denial. "Hashem, if you don't want us to have this building, just say no!" I thought.

A couple of years later, the chancellor called me for a meeting. I was ebullient as I drove down to his office. *He must be calling to tell me they'll give me the building*, I reasoned. His words were a splash of ice water over all my dreams.

"We're selling the property to a developer," he told me.

"What?! Is that what this meeting is about?" I asked in shock.

We spent a long while discussing the deal and the history of my failed transactions.

Within thirty days, we heard about a brand new, 27,000 square foot building in the center of campus that, due to financial challenges and other technicalities, was now for sale. Baruch Hashem, we were able to buy that building, which so perfectly fit our needs, it seemed to have been made for us.

We aren't always lucky enough to see the thread of hashgacha pratis weaving itself so expertly into our lives, but I realized why we'd been put through the ringer for all those years. Had they outright refused to sell it, I would've looked elsewhere, or tried to expand on our current property. I never would've dreamed of building such a large and imposing building, in such a perfectly central location on campus.



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Hashem planned it all and gave us exactly the building we needed.

I like reaching out to students individually, with a friendly “how’s it going?” text. I texted Justin* one night, and I was already asleep when my phone vibrated with his incoming reply. *Rabbi, it’s amazing you messaged me right now! Can we meet in private tomorrow?*

Of course, I replied, and we chose a time that worked with both of our hectic schedules.

“I took the train home to Chicago yesterday,” Justin told me. “Across from the train station was a parking garage. I rode the elevator to the top floor, and went onto the roof. I couldn’t believe what I was about to do. I walked to the edge of the deck, and started to climb over the railing.

“Just then, my phone buzzed. It was a message from you, asking how I was. *Is there really someone who cares about me and how I’m feeling?* I thought to myself. *Is there someone who thinks I’m important? Maybe life is worth living after all.* I climbed back over the railing onto solid ground and called my mom to come pick me up. I’m about to check into inpatient care, but I just wanted to thank you for saving my life.”

When I walk into a Friday night dinner with 150 students standing about, chatting with each other, I don’t see a successfully large crowd. I see 150 Justins; 150 individual worlds. It’s not a numbers game. It’s about forming connections with each person and meeting them on their level. It’s about texting “how are you?” to a random student, simply because they’re a fellow Jew and therefore deserving of all our love and care.

Every so often, we set up a stand on the quad and try to engage passing students. One scorching summer day, we decided to give out ice pops. Stephanie* stopped by our stand, and as she munched on her ice pop, we talked a bit about Yiddishkeit and the programs we offered. Stephanie waved goodbye, hopped back up on her bike, and pedaled away.

The next day, she called me, shaken.

“You saved my life, Rabbi!” she said.

“I did? How?” I asked.

“After I left your stand yesterday, I headed to the gym. Along the way, my blood sugar dropped dangerously low, and I passed out from hypoglycemic shock. When I came to in the ambulance, they asked me what I’d eaten that day. *‘I just had an ice pop not too long ago,’* I told them. *‘That ice pop saved your life,’* the medic said.”

We try to be there not just for our students’ spiritual needs, but to be their home away from home; a place where they know all their needs, spiritual and physical, will be cared for,

no matter how trivial. Our students hang out in our Chabad house late into the night. That’s the way we like it!

Our children are the most important part of our shlichus. Although they’re exposed to more than most from children their age, we’ve worked hard to instill a sense of pride in them, giving them the courage to be dugma chayos, living examples of a Torah-true life. Our children speak at the Shabbos table every week, even our little four-year old. This life of mesiras nefesh is all they know.

One year, Purim coincided with spring break, when the entire campus empties out. I figured it was the perfect opportunity to give my children a real Purim experience in a frum community. We traveled to Eretz Yisroel and enjoyed a seuda with my wife’s family in Kfar Chabad. After the megillah was read, shaloch manos received and delivered, and kreplach eaten, we drove to Yerushalayim, to be greeted by the sight of hundreds of people dancing in the streets, infused with simchas Purim.

“Now it feels like Purim,” my young daughter said, a satisfied smile on her face.

“Didn’t you like the meal with your cousins? And everyone dressed up, giving and sending shaloch manos?”

“Yes,” she said, “But *this* is Yom Tov: celebrating with hundreds of people!”

I once got a call from a hospice pastor in Hoopeston, a small city 45 minutes from Champaign.

“There’s a woman here who needs to meet with you,” he told me.

I drove to the hospice and met with Marcia*. “My mom is in the late stages of cancer,” she said. “She’s still alive, but—”

“Is she alive because she hasn’t died yet, or is she *alive* with purpose and meaning?” I interrupted.

She looked at me and shook her head. “Come meet my mom,” she said, opening the door. I saw an elderly woman in her 90’s, sitting hunched over, with her head on the table. I repeated my question to her, explaining that clearly, G-d had a plan for her. Since she was still alive, there must be a reason G-d wanted her down here. We continued speaking for a while on this theme, and eventually, she warmed up and shared details of her childhood.

“I remember, as a young girl, lighting the Shabbat candles with my mother and grandmother,” she recalled, fondly.

“What was that, Mom?” Marcia asked, in shock.

“Shabbat candles! Every week!” her mother repeated.

Marcia looked dazed. “Maybe that’s the reason you’re here now,” I told her. “To pass down this special tradition to your

daughter! Tomorrow is Friday, so Marcia can start right away! I’ll send you all the information you need.”

Her mother passed away on Sunday, but not before transmitting the tradition to the next generation.

“Is this the Jewish church?” asked the woman on the phone. “I work in an assisted living home in Effingham, Illinois. We have two Jewish residents here - twins. They were put into state care as babies, and grew up in the system. Both of them are mute. The reason I’m calling is that one of the brothers, Larry*, is very sick, and the doctors aren’t giving him much time. Is there anything we should know about Jewish end-of-life care?”

“I’ll take care of everything,” I assured her.

“He only has \$500 in his account,” she warned me.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

Immediately after hanging up, I called the chevra kaddisha Chicago. “I have a guy here, very close to death. We can’t really find out any information about him. We don’t know who his family is, or trace his ancestry. Still, he needs a kevaras yisroel. Can you help?”

“It’s so strange,” they answered. “We just got a call about a very similar situation!”

A rabbi in Chicago had called them, inquiring about burying his long-lost brother. His parents had only recently told him he had *twin older brothers*, but he couldn’t trace them in the system.

“I can’t believe you found him!” the rabbi exclaimed.

A short while later, when Larry passed away, I contacted the Chicago chevra kaddisha and he was buried in the Jewish section of the cemetery.

Through the nurse’s timely intervention, the surviving two brothers were able to reunite, and another neshama was laid to rest with dignity.

*Names changed to protect privacy

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