

# IllumiNations

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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 Elisa Goldstein, Chabad of West Houston and Chabad Outreach of Houston, Texas*

## Tefillin on Death Row

By Chaya Chazan

***Both of our families became frum through Chabad when we were kids, but by the time my wife and I met and got married, we were both solidly dedicated to a life on shlichus. We researched various options. When Houston came up, it seemed like the perfect placement.***

In the last 28 years, we've expanded the *Living Legacy Hands-on Program*, which gives children a glimpse into the world of making tefillin, Sifrei Torah, mezuzas, shofros, matza, and more through interactive and educational workshops. We do various programming, including visiting prisons, giving shiurim, hosting minyanim, and more.

I was asked to give the West Houston community JLI classes. Those classes formed strong bonds, and, a short time later, we established our Chabad house there. The building houses our Hebrew School, shul, and the *Friendship Circle Garden*, a program that caters to special needs individuals and their families.



I'd been visiting federal and state prisons for years, working closely with the head prison rabbi. When he passed away, I succeeded his position as the Texas State rabbi for prisons.

Zevi\* was serving an eight year sentence, but none of his religious needs were being met. He wasn't allowed to keep his tefillin with him, and he received no accommodations for kosher food. He was only able to eat food bought from the commissary - at prohibitive costs.

Eventually, we managed to get him transferred to a prison just outside of Houston, where I was able to visit him more often and bring him food and other necessities.

Zevi asked me many times to arrange for a sukkah for him. It was an issue I brought up at a meeting about Jewish prison policies, and what changes needed to be made. They promised they'd consider it. About a month later, I called for an update.

"They said no," I was told.

I knew that if I could just plead my case and explain the importance and significance of a sukkah, they'd change their minds. I called one of the top prison officials and asked her what had happened at the meeting and why they'd decided against it.

"What meeting? We never discussed it!" she answered. "But we can arrange a time for me and another official to inspect the sukkah. Then we'll make our final decision. Can you build a sukkah for us to see?"

"Of course!" I said.

On the arranged date, I met with a few top officials. We walked through the prison, discussing various points of the new policy, and how they'd be implemented. As we finished our inspection, I once again brought up the sukkah.

I had a pop-up sukkah set up for them to see. They walked around it a few times, asked a couple of questions, and finally agreed that the sukkah could stay. As I left, I saw Zevi and shared the good news with him.

A week or so later, his mother called me to let me know that Zevi had collapsed and had been rushed to the emergency room. He was diagnosed with acute leukemia. I visited him and recited Tehillim by his bedside, but, unfortunately, he passed away on the second day of Rosh Hashana. At his funeral, I promised to continue his fight, and ensure that any Jewish inmate in the future would have all their religious needs provided for.

Two weeks later, the sukkah that he'd pushed so hard for stood proudly in the prison courtyard. He'd fought for it for so long, so when he'd received news that the sukkah was officially permitted, his neshama finally felt relieved of its burden, and free to return to its Maker. In his zechus, there is now a glatt kosher kitchen in prison, weekly shiurim, and many more amenities for any frum inmates.

I had a long list of policies I wanted to implement in the prison system to help Jewish inmates connect to their Yiddishkeit. Wherever I turned, there seemed to be more red tape and regulations.

When I flew to New York for the annual International Kinus Hashluchim, I brought a copy of the policy to the Ohel. I asked the Rebbe to intercede on my behalf to Hashem, and send me brachos for the policy to be fully achieved.

When I left the Ohel, I sent the policy to a Jewish House representative who lived in the Houston area, and who I knew had a vested interest in Jewish causes and prison reforms.

"Your email arrived at the perfect time," he responded. "I was just appointed to the oversight committee of practices and procedures in the prison system!"

Clearly, Hashem sends the refuah before the makkah.

"Hi, Rabbi Goldstein. I'm working with the Innocence Project to halt capital punishment across all prisons. Did you know there's a Jew on death row in your prison?"

I wasn't aware of any Jews on death row, but as there are over 150,000 inmates in the Texas prison system, I only meet with those who apply for the Jewish program. Apparently, this particular inmate, Fred Davidson\*, hadn't applied.

I immediately looked into him and discovered some interesting facts. He'd had a difficult childhood, which had affected his mental state. He'd been convicted on multiple counts of manslaughter. His only Jewish contact was an old penpal from New York, who now sold Kabbalistic amulets. He'd asked to be cremated after his sentence was carried out.



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I tried explaining to his mother how terrible it was for the soul to be cremated, but she wasn't religious at all and couldn't care less. She was annoyed when I persisted, and asked me not to try and convince her son out of it.

I wanted to visit Fred to put tefillin on with him, say viduy together, and talk to him about the afterlife. Death row inmates are not granted the privilege of contact visits, but I got religious dispensation for a twenty minute personal visit.

Three days before his execution date, I took Rabbi Mendy Traxler with me, and we were led into a small room. A few minutes later, two prison guards escorted a heavily chained Fred into the room and sat him across from us.

"Rabbis, thank you for coming. I want to make it clear - I am *not* interested in Judaism. If that's what you came here to discuss, we can end this meeting now."

We only had twenty minutes to change his mind. Failure was simply not an option. I knew he'd grown up in Dallas, where I'd also spent part of my childhood, so I brought up sports, hoping to establish a friendly connection. With the ticking clock in mind, I tried sneaking in some Jewish tidbits, but Fred immediately caught on. He slammed his fist on the table, narrowed his eyes, and yelled, "I told you! No Jewish-talk!"

"I'm sorry; I'm sorry," I apologized. "No more Jewish-talk."

We began to discuss how he'd ended up in prison. It was a fascinating, if unnerving, experience to hear a murderer's perspective on what had led to his killing spree.

The twenty minutes were up, but the guard on the other side of the glass was taking a well-deserved nap, so I eagerly pushed my luck again.

"I know you don't want to talk Judaism, but I heard you have a Jewish friend who's into Kabbalah."

Fred's eyes lit up. "I love Kabbalah!" he exclaimed.

"Really?" I asked, surprised. "What Kabbalah have you learned?"

"I love the Hebrew alphabet, and the significance of the letters," he enthused.

"Which letter is your favorite?" I asked.

"Shimu!" he answered, confidently. He held up three fingers. "Shimu!"

"Oh, shin! Why is it your favorite letter?"

"I read that King David had a shin on his shield. King David was a mighty warrior, so I love King David!"

"Do you want to be a warrior like King David, Fred?" I asked him, sensing my opening. His eyes opened wide. I opened my tefillin bag and removed the shel rosh. "See?" I showed him the engraving on the side of the box.

"That's the shin!" he said, excitedly.

"Exactly! Just like King David! Would you like to put them on?" I offered.

"Okay," he agreed.

I crossed to his side of the table and began wrapping the tefillin around his manacled arms. He repeated Shema after me, word by word, before breaking down in sobs. It was surreal to see such a large, intimidating man, who'd ruthlessly killed others in cold blood, crying like a child. We continued with the rest of the tefillah, as well as viduy.

I judged the time ripe to open the most important discussion. I broached the topic of cremation and started to explain why a Jewish burial is so important.

"I don't really care either way, Rabbi," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "If you think I shouldn't get one, I'll tell my mother to call you to discuss it."

The guard, now awake, began motioning to us to wrap it up.

"Fred, I'm sure we'll see each other again. Until that time comes, I bless you *chazak ve'ematz* - may you be strong, and may G-d be with you," I told him. "Before I leave, I have one small request."

"What is it?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Can I give you a hug?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "Only if it will make you feel better."

"It will," I assured him.

He agreed, and let me give him a hug. With that, we said farewell, and left.

Three days later, on the day of Fred's execution, his mother called me. I thought she'd be upset that I'd spoken to Fred about cremation after she specifically asked me not to, but she'd called for a different reason.

"Rabbi," she began. "My son has been on death row for eight years. He's been constantly mistreated by everyone. In all those years, the only person to lay a loving hand on him was you. Fred called me and told me about your visit, including the hug you gave him before you left. I can see you truly care about him. I'll sign over the rights to his body, and you can bury him as you see fit."

Fred Davidson, after a life of wandering, was buried with full Jewish dignity.

I was driving to a prison in Huntsville, my station wagon loaded with Pesach and seder supplies for the Jewish inmates there. I was about twenty minutes out when I got a call from a Jew in New Jersey.

"I belong to Partners in Torah, an organization that pairs up chavrusas to learn together over the phone," he explained. "My chavrusa, Pete", lives in some small town in Texas. I was told you visit prisons all over the state, so you often pass through many of these small towns. If you're close by, would you be able to give him some matzah and seder items for Pesach?"

"I'd be glad to help if I can!" I responded. "Where does he live?"

"It's a town called Huntsville. Have you heard of it?"

"I'm actually on my way there now!" I told him. "Where exactly in Huntsville is he?"

"Motel 6," he answered.

I glanced to my right as I exited the highway. "I'm passing the Motel 6 right now!" I told him. "I'll be there in one minute!"

I knocked, and Pete opened the door.

"Rabbi, what are you doing here?" he asked, in wonder.

I pointed to the phone, still in hand. "Your chavrusa in New Jersey asked me to check on you and give you some Passover supplies!"

Allan was very thankful, and his chavrusa was too!

"You Chabadniks are just like the kohen in the Beis Hamikdash that found that last jar of oil! You're always on call, and I know I can fully rely on you!"

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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