

# IllumiNations

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Shnas Hahkel

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*Rabbi Yosef and Rivka Gruzman, Chabad of Aachen, Germany*

## The Gimmel Tammuz I Didn't Spend in New York

By Chaya Chazan

*My parents moved to Vienna, Austria on shlichus just a few months before I was born, so I am a shliach from birth! Vienna has a small, but strong, Jewish community, whose roots can be traced back hundreds of years.*

Aachen, Germany is a little different. It is a barren wasteland, Yiddishkeit-wise, so we found ourselves building from scratch when we first moved.

We spent a couple of years in Dusseldorf, Germany, assisting the Barkahns with their shlichus, before deciding it was time to strike out on our own. We started searching for viable options, keeping in mind a couple of important things: One, we'd already spent years in Germany, so we hoped to stick close by, and two, following the Rebbe's directives, we needed the acceptance of the established Jewish community.

Over the next couple of months, we continued the search. Shabbos often found us in one German city or another, leading a Shabbos service and trying to get a "feel" for the place. Aachen was one option we considered. It boasted a sizable Jewish population, but when I put out feelers about how we'd be accepted, the community leader warned that some

in the community were adamantly against our presence. We crossed Aachen off our list, and continued searching.

Eventually, we found a beautiful city with a similarly-sized Jewish population that was ready to greet us with open arms. The trouble began when we looked for a place to live. Every apartment fell through, for one reason or another.

Our search continued for another year. Finally, Aachen's community leader wrote to me, inviting me for Shabbos as the chazan. While I was there, I had the opportunity to meet my antagonists face-to-face. I had a deep conversation with both of them, and ultimately, they both gave me their blessing to move to Aachen.

Of course, finding an apartment was still a necessary hurdle. I was worried we'd run into the same issue we'd encountered before. Germans are nothing, if not meticulous record-keep-

ers and rule-followers. Applying for a rental requires endless amounts of paperwork and background checks. When we'd tried to rent in the other city, landlords had taken one look at our family of five and politely, but firmly, shut the door in our faces.

The very first apartment we looked at in Aachen was bright and spacious.

"This looks great!" I told the elderly owners. "I'd love to take this apartment!"

"It's yours!" they answered. "All we have to do is sign the contract!"

I was too stunned - and thankful - to say anything. This was their first time renting out their apartment, and they were unaware of the usual procedure. We consider it a miracle that we managed to evade the red tape in *Germany* - a country that wouldn't know how to exist without bureaucracy.

Many people often find themselves unable to make it to New York for Gimmel Tammuz, the anniversary of the Rebbe's hila, and it can be disheartening. However, back during the time we spent in Dusseldorf, my decision not to go turned out to be a life-transforming experience. Initially, I felt a bit down about it, but I resolved to overcome the disappointment and channel my energy into something positive.

On a Shabbos afternoon, Dusseldorf's local synagogue, which was not affiliated with Chabad, was hosting its weekly shaleshuds. Despite the considerable distance, I embarked on the journey, accompanied by my young children, so they, too, could understand the importance of observing this day as chassidim.

When we arrived, the shaleshuds was already winding down, and the men were preparing to leave for Maariv.

I asked to speak and briefly shared my thoughts on Chabad and the Lubavitcher Rebbe. We stayed for Maariv, and then made our way back home.

A couple of weeks later, I met Torin\*, a young man who seemed to be searching for something. He expressed interest in joining us at Chabad, which naturally piqued my curiosity. I wanted to know how he found us.

"Do you have a place for Shabbos?" I inquired.

"Not really," he admitted.

"In that case, come to our house!" I warmly invited him.

He was taken aback. In his culture, it would typically take a long time to be invited to someone's home, and he had never experienced such hospitality from a stranger before!

As we got to know each other better, I asked Torin what had drawn him to Chabad.

"It's hard to say, really," he replied. "I simply Googled 'Jewish, Dusseldorf' and went to the first synagogue on the list. I was sitting in the back, not understanding much, when you entered and started talking about Chabad. It sparked my curiosity, so I Googled what *Chabad* is, and here I am!"

The Shabbos I was unable to spend in New York ultimately led to Torin embracing a frum lifestyle, undergoing a bris, and eventually attending yeshiva in Israel. It is a powerful reminder that Hashem guides us exactly where we are needed.



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Town hall held a special ceremony on November 4th, in commemoration of Kristallnacht, attended by the oberbürgermeister, the lord mayor of Aachen. Chanukah was fast approaching, and I knew I wanted to hold a public event of some kind, but I had no idea where to begin. I figured meeting the mayor was a good start.

I was extremely nervous before approaching him, but I took a deep breath and reminded myself that I was a shliach of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, approaching a German, whose grandparents were most probably complicit in the world's worst atrocity in recent history. I squared my shoulders, and confidently requested a meeting.

"Sure. Call my secretary. I have an opening in three months."

"I'm sorry, but that's far too late! I need to speak to you about an event coming up in three weeks!" I responded.

Baruch Hashem, the mayor always kept a half hour in the mornings open for urgent appointments, so I was able to meet with him that week. I quickly called a friend whose shlichus was similar to mine, and asked for guidance.

"What should I tell him? What should I ask for?" I asked my friend.

"You don't need to ask him for anything!" my friend told me. "He's the mayor! He doesn't handle permits. Just ask him to be your guest of honor!"

Armed with this information - and a translated book about the Rebbe - I arrived at the meeting. I explained what I wanted to do, and asked him to be our guest of honor.

"That's not how things run here," he told me. "I'm in charge of writing permits and arranging police barricades. Leave it all to me. Just let me know where you'd like to put your menorah."

I learned afterwards that permission for such events must be requested at least six weeks in advance - not the three weeks notice I'd given!

Just before Chanukah, we attended a fellow shliach's siyum Sefer Torah. I was impressed to see reporters and camera crews from the local news station covering his event.

"You must have had to arrange this weeks ago!" I said to him.

"No, not at all! I just called them a couple days ago."

That gave me hope. Maybe it wasn't too late to boost publicity for our menorah lighting? It would be the perfect form of pirsumei nissah, publicizing the miracle of Chanukah! I contacted the radio, newspaper, and TV stations, and our event was featured on the evening news.

The next day, I received a call from an unknown number.

"Hi, Rabbi. I want to know when you'll be lighting the menorah again," the woman on the phone said, introducing herself as Sivan\*.

"We only do the public lighting once a year. Contact me next year, and I'll let you know when and where the lighting will be held," I told her. I'm usually very cautious with strangers, since many Germans still harbor deeply seated anti-Semitism. Something prompted me to ask her, "Are you Jewish?"

"Am I Jewish? I'm Israeli!" she said, in Hebrew. "My husband isn't Jewish, but when he sat down to watch the news tonight, he saw a menorah on the screen. He quickly called me over, and I watched the whole segment. I'm so sorry I missed it!"

"Wow! So nice to meet a fellow Jew! We have many other opportunities for you to connect with your Judaism! We'd love to meet you in person!"

Sivan lived in a small suburb of Aachen. She'd never known there were any other Jews around her. Through our Chabad house, she met some Jewish friends, and became part of our community.

I was walking along a residential street, when a sleek, black car pulled up beside me. The window rolled down and a friendly, Jewish face asked me, "Rabbi, are you lost? Do you need a ride?"

"No. I live just around the corner," I responded.

His eyes opened wide. "I don't believe it! I was sure you were from Antwerp! What are you doing in a place like Aachen?"

"I have a Chabad house here," I explained.

I didn't understand why he was so surprised. He explained that he was originally from Aachen, but after he'd become frum, he'd moved to nearby Antwerp. He still commuted regularly. In fact, his office wasn't far from my house at all!

"I can't believe we've never met before!" I marveled.

"I can! I know *exactly* why we met today," he said, triumphantly. "Just this morning, my wife and I were discussing a property we own here that we no longer have use for. It's a nice-sized commercial space, with a separate living quarter attached.

"I'd love to leave it to a shul, I told her. It's a shame Aachen doesn't really have an active Jewish community that would use it. And then, I bumped into you, right out here, on the streets of Aachen!"

I was leading a CTeen group in Dusseldorf during Elul. We played some games and did some fun activities, but I wanted to make sure they'd have a real Tishrei experience.

"Guys, two weeks from now is Rosh Hashanah. It's a mitzvah to hear the shofar. I want you all to come to shul then!" I told them.

Most of them agreed to meet up in shul, but Erik\* shook his head.

"I'll be out of town," he said.

"No problem! Wherever you are, try to find a shul or a Chabad house, and make sure to hear the shofar!" I answered.

After Rosh Hashanah, I received an excited text from Erik. *You'll never believe who blew shofar for me*, he wrote. *Your brother!*

My brother had recently moved to a small remote town in California. His shlichus was so new, he didn't have a shul, or even a minyan for Rosh Hashana. He'd heard about an elderly Jewish man who lived about two miles away, so he walked over to blow the shofar for him.

On his way back home, he took a different route. He was stopped by a young teen, who asked him where he could find the local shul.

"We don't really have one yet," my brother answered.

"Oh man! I promised my rabbi I'd hear shofar today!" Erik said, disappointedly.

"Well, I can still help you with that!" my brother said, producing his shofar.

Hearing Erik's accent, my brother asked him where he was from.

"Dusseldorf," Erik said.

"My brother lives there! Do you know him? Yosef Gruzman?"

"That's my rabbi!" Erik exclaimed.

"What hashgacha pratis!" my brother marveled.

"My rabbi always says *that*, too!" Erik laughed. "I couldn't agree more. What insane hashgacha pratis!"

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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