

IllumiNations

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*Rabbi Shmuel and Batya Vishedsky,
Chabad of Kobe, Japan*

A Life Saving Delivery

By Chaya Chazan

There is nothing scarier than the unknown, and there were a lot of unknowns when we first started looking for shlichus. We knew there was a small, negligible almost, Jewish population, and Japan was an extremely expensive country to live in.

Rabbi Shmuel and Batya Vishedsky, Chabad of Kobe, Baruch Hashem, we were convinced to try it out. We came for Purim, and hosted a small party. There was a small Orthodox community, and many more interested Jews than we thought. The community asked me to stay as their salaried rav, and agreed to allow me to merge my Chabad house duties with the position.

Baruch Hashem, Kobe now boasts a thriving Jewish community!

A few years ago, a man in his 50s came to the door of our shul. He walked straight up to me and shook my hand.

"Hello," he said. "My name is John*. I'm Jewish."

I asked him to sit down and tell me about himself. After all, it wasn't too often that the opportunity to help a Jew literally fell right into my lap.

"I live in a small city, four hours away, with my wife and kids," he told me.

"Welcome to Kobe! What brings you here?" I asked.

"I came to speak with the rav. I just need some guidance about some personal issues."

I spent the better part of the next hour talking to him, and trying to help. We approached the issue from a few angles, but nothing I said seemed to resonate with him.

"I'm sorry," I apologized.

Seeing John's look of disappointment as he gathered his things, I tried one more thing.

"Do you have a mezuzah?" I asked him.

John shook his head. "I barely know what it is."

I gave him a mezuzah, explaining its meaning and significance as a symbol of G-d's protection. John thanked me

and promised to hang it when he got home. It wasn't what he'd asked, but I was pleased that at least, he wouldn't have to leave empty-handed.

A few days later, John video-called me to make sure the mezuzah was hung correctly. He repeated the words of the bracha after me, and we stayed on the phone for a few more minutes, chatting. I invited John to join us for the upcoming Yom Tov. He happily agreed and actually drove the four-hour distance. By the next holiday, John brought along his wife and children as well.

After Yom Tov, John told me, "Ever since hanging the mezuzah, I feel more connected to Judaism. I feel like I'm seeking out reasons to call you or come here. It's like my soul is craving the connection. I'd like to learn more."

Of course, I was happy to help. Over the next few months, I slowly started introducing John to Jewish philosophy, basic prayers, and what it meant to be a Jew. John soaked it all up.

"I need more," he told me. "I think I need to become religious."

I knew John was enthusiastic, but I was happily surprised at his determination to see it through, no matter what. I braced myself for an inevitably painful conversation.

"John," I began, softly. "This is a very momentous decision. We've discussed what it means to be a Jew. First and foremost, a Jew is born from a Jewish mother. However, since your wife is not Jewish, none of your children are considered Jewish either."

John nodded. "I know. We've discussed it, and we're willing to do what needs to be done. My wife and children have been on this journey with me. We all want to live a Jewish life."

I breathed a sigh of relief and signed John's family up for conversion classes through a Beis Din in Australia. The family threw themselves into their Jewish studies and did everything the rabbanim told them. They moved closer to the shul and community, gave up their jobs and careers, and, for all intents and purposes, started over. But it was worth it. Within a few weeks, John, now Elyahu, and his family were leading a Jewish life. They were keeping Shabbos and kashrus. His wife was lighting candles every week and his children were davening in the morning. They converted k'halachah, and became a present, cherished, and active part of our community. All from a mezuzah.

The entire community was ecstatic when the Meisel family* had a baby boy, but the timing was complicated. It was just before Pesach 2020. The entire country was on complete lockdown. The airports were closed and I didn't see any way to get a mohel into Japan. I tried preparing, even before the baby was born, but there didn't seem to be any solutions.

I was forced to give the Meisels some difficult news - their son wasn't going to have a bris. At least not yet. I explained to them how hard I'd tried and promised to keep searching.



"I understand," Mr. Meisel said. "To be honest, I expected this, but it still hurts."

The weeks of sefira flew by, and the baby remained uncircumcised. The issue was never far from my mind. I called everyone I could think of that might possibly be able to help. Whenever I met someone new, I immediately asked them if they knew of any way to get a mohel to Japan. Every inquiry turned to nothing.

With little other choice, I turned to some government connections I'd built over the years. The Japanese officials reacted harshly to the very *idea* of a bris, and I knew I had to back off before they outlawed the practice altogether.

A few weeks later, I was on the phone with a fellow shliach from the US and, as I did in every conversation I had, I asked if he knew anyone coming to Japan. To my utter surprise, he did! A Jewish soldier was being sent to Japan for military purposes. For the first time in a long while, there was some hope.

The next day, I called the soldier and shared our story.

"I'm a mohel," the soldier told me.

I started to laugh. I couldn't believe that after almost six months I had finally found a mohel - and one that could enter the country freely!

"I am begging you," I told him. "We need to give this boy a bris." I knew it was a big ask. Leaving his base would require a 14-day quarantine and delay his return to his family, but I was desperate.

With barely a moment's thought, he agreed to give up two weeks of his life so we could give this young boy a bris. I was shaken by his kindness towards a stranger.

I arranged a date for the bris, gathered research on how to perform a bris on an older child, and prepared for the day to finally come. I didn't tell the Meisels just yet. They'd been waiting for so long, and I didn't want to raise their hopes unless I knew for certain the bris would be taking place.

Two weeks before the scheduled date, Mr. Meisel nudged me during davening, asking for an update on his son's bris. I hesitated, but seeing the look in his eyes, and counting on the fact that it was only two weeks away, I told him what I'd arranged.

"It must be kept a secret," I warned him. "The soldier is doing us a favor and we don't want to get him in any trouble with his commanders."

Of course, the news spread like wildfire. Within minutes, I was being bombarded from every side with well-meaning friends asking about the details of the event. Every-

one wanted to attend the bris. Eventually, I gave in. The community is small and tight-knit. Each person considered the Meisels their family and wanted to be there for the long-awaited moment. In the end, we flew to meet the soldier with 50 members of the community in tow.

Boruch Hashem, the bris went off without a hitch. The baby didn't even cry! We all sat around, eating and celebrating, enjoying this incredible milestone for our community. I took some time to get to know the mohel that had done us such a great kindness.

"I know you have a wife and children to get home to," I told him. "What inspired you to delay your return for two weeks, just in order to help a stranger?"

The man smiled. "I'm not a Chabad chassid, but I still go daven at the Ohel once a month. A couple of months ago, as I was walking out of the Ohel, I paused at the large video screen which plays continuous videos of the Rebbe. The Rebbe was speaking about Ahavas Yisroel, and how it applies even when it's inconvenient and requires some mesiras nefesh. With the Rebbe's words still ringing in my ears, I walked outside, and answered my ringing phone. It was you, telling me about this baby who so desperately needed a mohel. How could I say no?"

Our shul is over 50 years old. The community that started the shul had a strong connection with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. When it came time to start building, one of the community members flew out to New York to show the Rebbe the plans for the shul.

The Rebbe looked at the blueprints and asked where the mikva was.

"There is none," the man answered.

The Rebbe looked up at the man. "Why not?" he asked.

"Because there's no room."

The Rebbe took a pencil from his desk and started to draw over the blueprints. Then he handed the paper back to the man. "You can put a mikva right there," he said.

But the man refused. "There's no room," he said again. "We already started building and there's not enough money."

The Rebbe, however, didn't back down. "Build the mikva," he said again, "And the mikva will end up protecting you."

The man eventually agreed and the Rebbe sent him back to Japan with a bocher to help guide them in the building. Years later, in 1995, there was a devastating earth-

quake that caused the majority of the buildings in the city to crumble. But the shul remained standing. It stayed in perfect condition and ended up serving as a safe house for the Jews that had lost their homes in the disaster.

As a shliach, you have to be prepared for anything, at any time. It was a Friday afternoon, and we were busy preparing for Shabbos. I received a call from Rabbi Meir Quinn, founder of Refuah V'simcha, a medical support organization in Eretz Yisroel.

"I hate to bother you on an erev Shabbos," he began, hesitantly, "But it's truly a matter of pikuach nefesh. There's a young boy here, suffering from cancer. The doctors said there's a chance of one treatment being successful. The only problem is it's only available in Osaka."

"No problem!" I said. "I can get it right away."

"Thank you!" Rabbi Quinn said. "There is still the problem of getting it to Eretz Yisroel, but we'll deal with it one step at a time."

"I have a solution for that, too!" I said, cheerfully. "B'hashgacha pratis, I happen to have a flight to Israel tomorrow night! I'll bring it myself."

Rabbi Quinn almost broke down in grateful sobs. Knowing the urgency of the situation, I immediately drove to the pharmacy, and sent Rabbi Quinn a selfie of the pharmacist handing me the precious package. I made sure to pack it in my suitcase securely, and, when my plane landed, I drove it straight to the hospital.

Rabbi Quinn told me he felt so bad calling me on erev Shabbos, he was debating whether or not to push off the call to motzei Shabbos. Baruch Hashem he didn't! His call was perfectly timed for me to buy and deliver the life-saving medication immediately! Hashem has everything perfectly timed.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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