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

Rabbi Yitzchok and Nechama Dina Minkowicz, Chabad Lubavitch of Southwest Florida

“Chabad Shows Up!”

By Chaya Chazan

We both knew we wanted to go on shlichus. We were offered many positions in many cities, but we wanted to pioneer and open a Chabad house in unchartered territory.

We asked Rabbi Korf, the head shliach of Florida, if there was anywhere in Florida without shluchim in the area. After considering, he remembered a doctor in Southwest Florida who'd once requested a resident rabbi.

We went to meet the doctor, and explored the area. Fort Myers looked like the perfect place for us to plant our roots. We wrote a letter to the Rebbe, asking for approval. Although we'd previously received no answers each time we'd written about a shlichus opportunity, this time, the Rebbe answered affirmatively.

There were few Jewish happenings in Fort Myers. We opened a small Chabad house in a central location. At first, we received some pushback from the locals. “We left this type of Judaism to come here!” they argued. “Who needs religion in Southwest Florida?”

Despite the naysayers, we tried our hardest to meet people, and, baruch Hashem, we had over 100 attendees at our first Purim party. It expanded from there, until we eventually grew out of our Chabad house and upgraded to a larger, 3.5-acre campus. Most recently, we built a huge Chabad house, including a shul, school, and offices.

We'd heard about a terrible hurricane brewing, but we were busy preparing for Rosh Hashana, and besides, it was headed much further north. On the first day of Yom Tov, we had a large crowd for davening and kiddush, and expected the same the next day. I was surprised to find only one person at the shiur before davening, and just slightly more than a minyan for Shacharis. At the kiddush, my guys told me what I'd missed - the eye of the hurricane was now headed straight for Fort Myers. Everyone was too busy preparing for the disaster to come to shul. Even the people who *did* come to shul wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“Chevra, today is Rosh Hashana!” I told them. “Today is a day for prayer and introspection. Let's try not to focus on the upcoming hurricane, difficult as it may be.”

We enjoyed the bountiful kiddush, and davened Mincha and Maariv together.

That night, I started receiving dozens of calls from community members, asking if they could shelter in the Chabad house.

“Why shouldn't everyone just stay in the comforts of their own homes?” I asked. “Why Chabad?”

“It's a shul! It's a holy place that will surely protect us,” was the reply. “And, because it's a new building, it should be safer.”

I still was unsure about the right step here. I stood before a large picture of the Rebbe in my home, closed my eyes, and asked Hashem for guidance. I heard the Rebbe's voice echoing in my mind: *You are a shliach, and your job is to help the people!*

I let everyone know that they'd be welcomed in the Chabad house for the duration of the storm.

On Wednesday, September 28, 2022, just a day after blowing the shofar and welcoming in the new Jewish year, Southwestern Florida was hit by the devastating Hurricane Ian, a Category 4 storm. When I came to open the shul, early in the morning, the sky was already gray and angry.

Suddenly, the building was plunged into darkness. We had lost power. Those gathered in the lobby watched the rising water outside with trepidation.

“Rabbi, what do we do? Soon, the shul will be flooded!”

I felt helpless. They were all looking to me for comfort and guidance, but what could I possibly do?

“I'm not G-d,” I told them. “I can't stop the rain. But *He* can! Let's go into the shul and daven to Him!”

Since it was a fast day, we read the Torah by flashlight, and all the men put on tefillin. I went back out into the lobby, and, without knowing why, assured everyone that the water would stop rising!

“We all just davened to Hashem, put on tefillin, and read the Torah. The water won't enter the building!”

Baruch Hashem, although the water didn't recede, it didn't continue rising either.

The next morning, when the winds calmed, everyone returned to their homes to find nothing but absolute devastation. In one moment, they'd lost everything.

Our Chabad house was quickly turned into a relief center, and the larger Floridian Jewish community generously donated generators, food, drinks, blankets, and other necessities. The next morning, Yedidim USA set up an outdoor kitchen, and helped us serve hot meals. Realizing that many people had no way of coming to us, we started delivering meals all over the neighborhood.

The Chabad house lost all power, but we were ready to host hundreds of newly homeless Jews for the Shabbos seuda. Rabbi Josh Brody of Boca Raton, and fellow shluchim, sent plentiful challoos, fish, meat, and chicken, and baruch Hashem, despite the disaster surrounding us, we were able to celebrate a beautiful and uplifting Shabbos together.

First Lady Casey DeSantis came for a few hours, helping us ladle out portions of hot food for hundreds of victims. I took her on a “tour” of our relief center, and she was very impressed with our positivity amidst the chaos.

“This has been the most positive visit I've done throughout my whole hurricane relief tour,” she told her secretary. “Maybe we should co-opt Rabbi Minkowitz for the rest of our visits!”

State Senator Rick Scott, when he came to help serve meals, commented, “Chabad shows up.”



When Marsha* came to the Chabad house the Friday night after the hurricane, I immediately asked if there was anything she needed. She was an elderly woman who lived alone, so I was worried about her.

"Thank G-d my home wasn't damaged," she answered. "I don't need anything."

"Baruch Hashem! That's great to hear!" I told her. "If you could do me a favor though - I'm sure there are many others who *do* need help, and don't know where to go. Can you call your friends and see if they're all okay?"

Marsha called me back on motzei Shabbos. "I just spoke to my friend, Linda*. She's in an apartment with five other seniors. They haven't eaten a hot meal since Tuesday!"

"No problem! I'm sending my son right now, with hot meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, as well as a box of dry goods and drinks."

When Linda and her friends opened the door and saw my son standing there with his box of food, they all burst into tears.

"Thank you for not forgetting about us!" Linda thanked him, tearfully.

Yaniv* owned a snug little property, right on Fort Myers Beach. He'd sunk all his capital into a shipment of goods for his start-up small business. Unfortunately, everything on the beachfront was destroyed beyond recovery. He lost his home, his business, and with it, his investment and savings, in one fell swoop.

He came to me, crying and despondent.

I put my arm around his shoulder. "Yaniv, my friend, I wish I knew what to tell you. I don't have any answers. What I *can* tell you is that when you have nothing, the best place to begin is by helping others. Why don't you volunteer at Chabad for a little while? Chazal says those who pray for others are helped first."

Yaniv agreed, somewhat reluctantly. It was amazing to see how being involved in chessed lifted the cloud of gloom from his shoulders. He was so busy helping others, he forgot about his own sorry situation.

On Shabbos morning, he rushed into shul, waving his cell phone in the air.

"Rabbi, you have to hear."

"One second, Yaniv," I interrupted him. "It's Shabbos. Gift yourself with an hour - just an hour - of keeping Shabbos. No phone; no distractions; no interruptions. If a person's life is in danger, of course, we'll drop everything and run. But if they're just calling about food, or something similar, it can wait until after Shabbos."

Yaniv listened, shutting off his phone, donning a talis, and joining us for Shacharis. After davening, he approached me, and said, "Rabbi, you saved me. I was fielding all these desperate calls, and my stress levels were building up higher and higher. You calmed me down, helped me refocus and relax. Thank you. This was the best gift you could've ever given me."

Later, Yaniv threw himself into helping people reconstruct their destroyed properties. He now has a thriving construction business, founded on the basis of Ahavas Yisroel.

Baruch Hashem, the main building of our Chabad house was spared, but our mikvah was entirely flooded. Even after the water receded, the pool was filled with residue that would take considerable time - and expense - to clear.

I recorded some footage of the damage and posted it on social media, asking for help to restore our mikvah. Shortly afterwards, I received a substantial donation from a stranger. I immediately messaged him, thanking him for his generosity, and asking for his information so I could send him a proper thank you letter.

"It's not necessary. You've given me so much; this is just my way of giving back," he replied.

"I don't think we've met," I answered. "What do you mean?"

"You're right. I live in Brooklyn, and we've never met. I listen to your online shiurim every week! I love the way you explain the Rebbe's discourses. You're my Torah teacher. I just wanted to give back, in some small way."

After the devastation was cleared away, we began looking towards rebuilding. Dozens of frum contractors, public adjusters, and construction workers came to Southwest Florida. To accommodate them all, we began an early morning Chassidus shiur, minyanim for every tefillah, and, of course, even more food.

I encouraged them all to find meaning in their visit - to find Jews and awaken their Jewish souls. Many of them returned to the Chabad house with Jews they'd found in town, or gave me numbers to call.

That's how I met Samuel*. One of the contractors met this elderly Jew and gave me his number. I invited him to the Chabad house for a hot meal, and whatever other resources he needed. When he came, I invited him back for Yom Kippur, a few days later.

Samuel and his wife arrived just before Yom Kippur started. They both looked pale and haggard.

"Welcome, welcome!" I greeted them. "It's a mitzvah to eat before Yom Kippur! Please, sit down, and enjoy some fresh, hot food!"

Samuel and his wife both filled their plates and ate with relish. They stayed for Kol Nidrei and davening as well.

The next morning, Samuel was the first to arrive in shul.

"I have to confess, Rabbi," he said. "I wasn't planning on fasting this Yom Kippur. I haven't eaten a proper meal in a few days, and I just didn't see how I could do it. Then, you sat us down at the table, and we had a proper, nourishing meal. It gave me the strength and courage to fast today!"

Samuel has been a steady shul member ever since, and comes faithfully every Shabbos.

I received a call from a rabbi in Miami, who told me that one of his Facebook friends had family in the area, and they needed food for Shabbos.

"No problem! That's what we're here for!" I answered, cheerfully. I contacted the family and got their information. Before we hung up, they asked what kind of car I'd be using.

"I'm not sure exactly. I think our volunteer has a Toyota Camry. Why?"

"Oh no! That won't work at all!" they responded. "The streets around our house are completely flooded. A regular car won't make it through. It has to be an SUV or some larger vehicle."

"I'll do what I can," I promised. I started making some calls, but couldn't find an appropriate vehicle. Just then, I saw a volunteer from West Palm Beach, on his way out.

"Hey! Didn't you drive in with a van?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said.

"Perfect! Would you be able to make one more delivery?"

Through the cooperation of a Miami rabbi, a friend from cyberspace, and a volunteer from West Palm Beach, the family received their package of fresh, hot food for Shabbos, right on time.

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