

IllumiNations

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Shnas Hahkel

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 Moshe and Yocheved Raskin, Chabad of Kampala, Uganda

Resurrection after the Raid: Yiddishkeit in Uganda

By Chaya Chazan

I grew up in a shluchim family. My siblings are scattered around the world, serving a variety of communities. The Rebbe's mission to light up all four corners of the globe was instilled in us from a young age. My wife experienced a similar upbringing.

When we met, we bonded over this shared dream. We'd talk for hours about building our own Chabad house. We envisioned starting a community from scratch and serving a part of the world that hadn't been reached yet. When Chabad's radar alighted on African communities, we jumped at the opportunity to move to Uganda.

It was, and still is, a small community. We only have a handful of permanent residents, augmented by travelers who frequent the country for business or vacation.



Fortunately, we already knew at least one local Jew, who was shomer Torah and mitzvos, who helped us settle in and begin our Chabad house. We've had to get creative, adjusting to a new life, but at the end of the day, we're happy and proud of the position we're in.

A few months ago, just before Rosh Hashana, I got a text from Eli*. Although we'd known him a long time, he never demonstrated more than a passing interest in Yiddishkeit.

Do you have tefillin to sell me? his message read.

I can order some for you, I responded. I'll check out the prices and be in touch!

True to my word, I reached out to a couple of people and found Eli a nice pair of tefillin at a decent price. I sent him a message with a picture of the tefillin and asked who they were for.

Me, he wrote back. I'll explain it all when I see you!

Days later, the precious cargo arrived in Uganda. I called Eli and went to his house to deliver the tefillin.

"Nu?" I urged him, reminding him of the explanation he'd promised me.

"I didn't grow up religious," he began. "We celebrated some chagim and would have a Friday night meal now and again, but that's about it. Religion didn't play a very central role in my childhood. So, when I moved abroad, I didn't bother sticking to tradition. But now, after spending a few years here, I suddenly feel this need to understand my place in the world. And the more I think about it, the more I realize the truth. I'm Jewish. Being Israeli doesn't really mean much, and neither does my genealogy. First and foremost, my place in this world is as a Jew!"

This passionate declaration of his Jewishness seemed incongruous with the handful of appearances he'd made at Chabad functions, and his lukewarm reaction to anything resembling religion. Truly, no matter how buried it seems to be, the pintele Yid will always shine through.

"I feel like there's this generational chain," Eli continued. "Like I'm tied to something bigger than me, and I can't ignore it. I just felt this *need* to put on tefillin." Eli looked up at me. "I know you're probably confused. But believe it or not, these thoughts have been revolving in my head ever since we met."

Eli reached for the tefillin I brought him. He opened the bag and unraveled the leather straps with awe and reverence. Then, together, we put on tefillin for the first time since his bar mitzvah.

Today, Eli puts on tefillin daily, the imprints of the leather straps on his arms proclaiming his pride in his heritage.

It's easy to get discouraged by a perceived lack of progress. Eli's story reminds us daily that we never know the impact we're making, simply by living as examples of Torah-true Yiddishkeit. There could always be something stirring, just under the surface.

Sometimes, shlichus just means being present. Even when we aren't actively doing something, we can still make a difference. Just last week, I saw this truth in action when I received a phone call from a man named Levi*.

"I wanted to tell you something," he said. "Your legacy is being passed on."

I laughed. "My legacy? How?"

Well," Levi explained, "A few months ago, when I was traveling, I ended up staying with some friends in a neighboring country. Since meeting you, I've been trying to put on tefillin more often, so I asked my friends where the closest Chabad was. My friend, Shachar*, offered to take me, since he hadn't been in a while and thought he was due for a visit."

"That's great!" I said.

Levi agreed. "But that's not all! Just last week, I was with those friends again, and I asked Shachar how long it'd been since he'd been to Chabad this time. I was sure he was going to tell me he hadn't been back since taking me. But instead, he gave me a huge smile. It turns out that ever since that visit, he goes to Chabad every day!"

"Wow!" I exclaimed.

"See?" Levi asked. "Now I'm the rabbi! You influenced me, and I influenced Shachar - who knows who's next? It's truly a Chabad legacy!"

We'd only been in Uganda a week when I received an urgent summons to the hospital from a man named Avi*.



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"I don't know what to do," he fretted. "My friend passed away, and I don't know what to do. I need a rav!"

I quickly made my way to the hospital, where Avi introduced me to the doctors, and we ensured his friend's body would be left untouched and prepared for a Jewish burial. It was vital that he not be autopsied.

It was a trying time for Avi, but through this, he and I ended up building a relationship. I learned that Avi grew up in a wealthy Israeli family, had a wife and kids, and didn't have much connection to Judaism. But over time, Avi started learning more, and soon was putting on tefillin weekly - something he previously hadn't done since his Bar Mitzvah. Avi quickly became more than just a member of my community; he became a dear friend.

But then, one day, seemingly out of nowhere, everything changed. Avi stopped coming to the Chabad house, refused to answer my calls, and stopped putting on tefillin. I decided to give him space - I didn't want to overwhelm him. Months went by in silence. When Pesach arrived, I knew I had to step in - regardless of Avi's apparent cold-shouldering.

Pre-Pesach preparations are, of course, hectic. We do our bi-yearly shechita, in addition to all our cleaning. I knew Avi always spent the Yom Tov at home, in Israel, but I'd heard he was still in Uganda. With just hours to go before the seder, I called him.

"Avi?" I asked. "Are you home for Yom Tov?"

"I'm in Uganda," Avi confirmed. "But I'm not coming to the seder or anything."

"Can I at least send you over some wine?" I asked. "And a few matzahs."

"Sure," Avi agreed. I quickly packed a small care package for him and delivered it to his home.

A week or so later, I decided to visit Avi. Although I wasn't sure what reception I would get, Avi greeted me with a friendly smile and invited me in. We chatted comfortably for a while, and I offered to help him put on tefillin. He agreed and whispered the brachos after me. I started a Mi Shebeirach for his family, but Avi stopped me.

"Liat* is my ex-wife now," he explained.

I started piecing together the confusing events of the past few months.

"I guess I... owe you an explanation," Avi said, and took a seat by the table. "It's been a tough year. My wife de-

cidated she wanted out, and left with barely a warning. I was barely managing as it was - I simply couldn't imagine spending Pesach with my family. I knew I couldn't pretend to be okay around them.

"So, instead, I came back here. I ran away. I planned to spend the chag alone. I was going to eat at an Italian restaurant and indulge in pasta and pizzas and bread... I was going to have an anti-Pesach. But then you called."

Avi dropped his head into his hands and took a deep breath. I sat quietly, listening. "I was getting ready to leave my house when your care package showed up. I didn't believe you'd actually send it, knowing how busy your day must have been. I was sure you'd forget about me. But there it was, on the doorstep, just as you promised. I just started to cry."

Tears rolled down Avi's face. "Hashem was trying to tell me something," he whispered. "And in that moment, I looked up at Him and nodded. I told him I got His message. Instead of going out, I dug up the Haggadah you gave me last year, and I made myself a seder."

One erev Shabbos, right before shkiya, I got a phone call from a young boy, in a city twelve hours away.

"I know I'm really far," the boy said. "But I didn't have anyone else to call."

"Are you okay?" I asked.

The phone was silent for a few moments. The only sound was his labored breathing. "I think I'm going to kill myself," the boy finally said.

I looked over at the clock. There were mere minutes until Shabbos. I knew I needed to act fast. I promised to call the boy back, then found a doctor in my community who I trusted.

"I'll stay in touch with him over Shabbos," the doctor promised. "It's life or death."

The doctor called the young boy every couple of hours over Shabbos. He made sure he ate and was never left alone, and was there to listen if the boy needed to talk. On Motzei Shabbos, we found the boy a ride to Kampala.

For the next few days, this young boy stayed with us. We helped him get better, and gave him time and space to heal. We included him in our events and made sure he felt welcome. Baruch Hashem, he was able to address his

mental health concerns, and felt confident enough to return to his parents' home.

During Corona, the Gefens gave birth to a beautiful and healthy baby boy. Soon after the birth, my wife and I went to visit the new mother in the hospital and asked her if she wanted to perform a bris.

"What's that?" she asked.

We quickly described the tradition, explaining how important it was in welcoming a boy into the Jewish nation.

"I need to check with my husband," Mrs. Gefen answered, noncommittally.

We were hopeful they'd agree, and immediately began brainstorming to find a mohel. The country was on lockdown, and inter-city travel was forbidden. But Hashem always has a way. Days later, two tourists wound up at our Chabad house. They'd planned an extensive tour of the country, but found themselves stuck in Kampala due to Covid restrictions.

"What do you do?" we asked them.

"I'm a shochet and a mohel," one of the men answered.

It was a clear case of Hashgacha Pratis. My wife and I went back to the mother and quickly got her go-ahead.

Within days, we'd organized a bris. We made cake and got the mohel on board, and then we all showed up at the new mother's house, ready to welcome her son into our nation. It was one of the most emotional moments I've ever lived through. I'm sure that was the first bris to ever happen in Uganda. And, just like everything else in life, Hashem orchestrated it all.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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