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The Rebbe's Challenge

By Chaya Chazan

When we first received an offer to be shluchim, I was deep into earning my masters in mechanical engineering.

We regretfully turned it down, but Rabbi Itche Wagner wouldn't take no for an answer. Israel was inundated with Russian-speaking immigrants, and little had been done for them until then. Rabbi Wagner was determined to change that. He kept pressuring us, but I couldn't fathom handling two such high pressure roles.

Around that time, I saw a video of Rabbi Steinsaltz passing by the Rebbe for dollars. He told the Rebbe he was juggling three big responsibilities, and asked which one to drop. "Add another!" the Rebbe encouraged him. "Hashem will give you the strength to succeed in all four!"

I took the message to heart, and agreed to become the shliach for Russian speakers in Ashkelon.

I work as a mechanical engineer during the day, and in the evenings and on weekends, I take care of our growing community. I think my academic background enhances my shlichus; people take me more seriously because of my scientific degree. We have weekly minyanim, women's shiurim, and host between 30-40 people every Friday night.

Additionally, in the last few years, the Zhitomir children's orphanage relocated to Ashkelon, and I help with that, too. Twelve years ago, I would've never predicted that I could hold three thriving - and demanding - positions, but, exactly as the Rebbe blessed Rabbi Steinsaltz, Hashem has given us the strength to succeed.

Our location has the dubious distinction of being the closest neighboring city to Gaza, so we regularly experience rocket showers. It's frightening, but we will not be bullied into leaving our land, or curtailing our activities.

It was the Shabbos before Purim, and, as is customary, my wife wanted to go to shul to hear Parshas Zachor being read. Unfortunately, the eruv at that time wasn't particularly reliable, so she had no choice but to attend a vasikin minyan near our house.

As she walked down the quiet streets at 5:30 am, she met Irina*, a Russian neighbor who'd never attended any shiurim or events, walking her dogs.

"What are you doing out so early in the morning?" she asked my wife.

"I'm going to shul to hear Parshas Zachor," she answered. "By the way, did you know tonight is Purim? We're hosting a megillah reading in our house. Please come!"

To our surprise, Irina took my wife up on her invitation, and brought her husband along. That one megillah reading sparked a real connection between our two families. They began coming to shul regularly. Irina lit Shabbos candles, and her husband put on tefillin every day. Although their secular friends tease them about their newfound "charei-di-ism," Irina and her husband remain strong in their faith.

A series of seeming coincidences - impatient dogs, and an unreliable eruv - kindled the inspiration for another Jewish family.

Mikhail* was one of a group of Russian emigres. We invited him to join us for Sukkos and Simchas Torah, which Mikhail participated in as assiduously as only a Russian can. In the midst of the joyous revelry, Mikhail began to cry.

"My rabbi in Russia gave me an opportunity to have a bris and I turned him down!" he sobbed. "Now I'll never get another chance!"

I put my arm around his shoulder. "Do you really want a bris?" I asked him. Mikhail nodded, tearfully. "No problem!" I assured him. "I'll speak to the mohel right after Yom Tov!"

The next day, I called the mohel and arranged a bris for Mikhail.

Michoel, as he is now called, committed to his Yiddishkeit heart, mind, and, not least of all, body. He now puts on tefillin every day, and comes to shiurim and minyanim regularly.

I received a call, shortly before Rosh Hashanah 2021, from a man in Dnieper. He told me his father, Vadim*, had just emigrated to Israel, and wanted to join the Russian community in Ashkelon.

"He's having some issues with his feet," he warned me.

"In that case, maybe I could connect him to another shliach, someone closer to him, so he won't need to walk as far to shul on Shabbos," I offered.

"No, no. He wants to be with other Russians," his son insisted.

We met Vadim a short while later. He was full of life and passion for Yiddishkeit, and joined every minyan, shiur, and event. We noticed he walked with a little difficulty, and he shared his woes with us. He'd developed complications as a result of Corona, which culminated in necrosis of his toes. Doctors in Russia told him he needed to immediately amputate his foot and possibly part of his leg, but Vadim refused to listen. He'd consulted Israeli doctors, too, but they'd told him the same thing. Vadim was adamantly against it, since he was still able to walk. He consulted another specialist, who gave him a shred of hope. The specialist told him the case wasn't as urgent as the doctors predicted, and he could afford to delay the amputation for a bit. In the meantime, he was given medication that would hopefully ease the symptoms.



On Simchas Torah, Vadim heartily partook of the l'chaims, and danced with unbridled abandon. The next morning, he returned to shul, his face shining with an inner light.

"Rabbi, you'll never believe it!" he told me. "Last night, after all that dancing, my toes fell off! I feel completely better! It's a miracle!"

After Yom Tov, when Vadim checked in with his doctors, they couldn't believe what they were seeing. Indeed, Vadim's toes were gone, and they had taken his ailment with them, permitting him to continue to live his life and walk as he normally would, no foot amputation required.

"We've never seen anyone recover from necrosis like this," they said, in wonder. "It truly is a miracle!"

It's been over two years since that memorable Simchas Torah, and Vadim is still happy and healthy!

When Aleksander* immigrated to Israel, he mistakenly left his tefillin at home. I offered him a pair to use until his own could be sent to him, and he was very grateful. Seeing how open he was to Yiddishkeit, I asked him if he'd also be open to having a bris. He brushed me off, so I kept bringing it up.

"I don't want a bris," he finally told me, quite firmly. "Please stop asking me! If you keep hounding me about it, I'm going to stop coming to shul!"

"I apologize," I said. "Of course, no one can force you. I'll respect your decision."

I kept my word, and never mentioned it to him again, but - ironically - his friends and other members of our shul began pressuring him to have a bris. I sensed he was wavering in his refusal, and approached him one more time.

"Look, I'm not asking you to make a split-second decision," I told him. "Two months from now, we'll be commemorating Chof Zayin Adar, the day the Rebbe suffered a stroke. If you agree to have a bris by then, we'll turn the farbrengen into a special celebration for you!"

To my great joy, Aleksander agreed. We celebrated his entrance into the bris of Avraham Avinu two months later.

A while later, after Aleksander had recovered, he asked me for a favor.

"My friend from Russia, Leonid*, is considering having a bris," he told me. "He has a lot of concerns about it. Could you please speak to him?"

I reassured Leonid as best as I could, pointing to Aleksander's full and timely recovery. Leonid agreed, but he was busy at work, and couldn't find time to take off. Finally, he told me we could schedule it for Yom Hazikaron.

I knew that Yom Hazikaron in Israel meant massive traffic pileups, even in the smallest towns, as everyone converged

on the cemeteries to pay respect to their loved ones. But it was the only day that worked for Leonid, so I agreed. I drove to Rishon Letziyon to pick him up, and then to Bnei Brak to meet the mohel. A drive that should've taken no more than an hour ended up taking more than five! But every moment spent in that bumper-to-bumper traffic was precious to me - it meant another Jew was about to enter the sacred covenant!

"What do you think about having a bris?" I asked Pavel*, one of our regulars.

"I'm open to it," he answered. "There's one problem, though. I really, really like one specific name, but I haven't met anyone with that name in Ashkelon, so I think it must not be a Jewish name. I really had my heart set on it, though."

"What's the name?" I asked in curiosity.

"Azriel," he told me.

"Great choice! It actually *is* a Jewish name - it means *G-d is my help*. Let's schedule a bris as soon as possible, Azriel!"

My wife runs a lecture series on the laws of Taharas Hamishpacha. Baruch Hashem, it's been very successful.

One attendee, Nina*, approached my wife and began crying. She and her husband had been trying to have a child for years without success. Although Nina herself observed Torah and mitzvos, her husband didn't.

Nina attended the first lecture of the series, and spoke of it in such glowing terms that her husband agreed to abide by the laws of Taharas Hamishpacha. Within weeks, they received the joyful news that they were expecting.

Gabriel* grew up in Sao Paulo with a single mother and never gave a thought to G-d or religion. When he was a teenager, a Chabad house opened down the block. They constantly had comings and goings, which annoyed him, but nothing was worse than Lag Ba'omer. They had a public - and loud - rally in the street, and Gabriel's grumblings grew more profuse.

Hearing his rough condemnation of their neighbors, his mother interjected. "Gabriel, we're Jewish, too!" she told him. Gabriel's entire world was rocked. What did it even mean to be Jewish?

Searching for answers, Gabriel joined the Naaleh program, which introduces foreigners to Israeli life and culture. While some Naaleh graduates return home, many find a permanent home in Israel. At that time, I was undergoing a life transformation of my own. I'd just transferred from a Tel Aviv high school to a yeshiva in Ashkelon. The Garelik

family welcomed me with open arms, adopting me as an honorary son. It was in their home that I met Gabriel. Being of a similar age, we naturally gravitated towards each other, and became good friends. At the end of the Naaleh program, Gabriel moved to Tel Aviv, and we lost touch. I thought I'd never see him again.

There were some complications with my paperwork, and I had to serve in the army for a few months. Those months taught me that being in the Israeli army is the strongest countermeasure against any religious interest. The atmosphere is extremely antagonistic towards religious practices, and keeping the simplest mitzvos becomes a challenge.

As I left the registry office with my completion papers in hand, I bumped into Gabriel, on his way to enlist.

"How are you doing?" we greeted each other, happy to be so unexpectedly reunited.

What a pity, I thought to myself. *In the army, he'll never hear a word about Shabbos, kashrus, or tefillin.*

We said our goodbyes, knowing our lives were diverging drastically.

Recently, we were visited by Rabbi Mendel Groner, who'd just led a farbrengen in honor of Gimmel Tammuz for the Chabad community of Rechavia.

"Do you remember Gabriel, a Brazilian kid?" he asked me.

"Sure!" I answered.

"Well, he wants me to send you his warmest regards. He's now a full-fledged Lubavitcher!! He remembers all the discussions you had in the Garelik's home, which eventually led him to the path of Torah and mitzvos."

Remembering my last encounter with Gabriel ten years before, I was astonished. We're not always lucky enough to see the fruits of the seeds we've planted, but in special circumstances, Hashem gives us the gift of clarity.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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