

IllumiNations

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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 Motti and Zlata Lewin, Chabad of Normandy, France

D-Day: Davening on the Beaches of Normandy

By Chaya Chazan

The decision to move on shlichus wasn't a difficult one. Since we're both children of shluchim, the decision felt very natural.

I knew Normandy had a Jewish presence because my brother is a shliach nearby, and would often be called regarding kosher food, funerals, and minyanim. We expected a vibrant Jewish presence, especially when we visited and saw the beautifully upkept shul in the center of town. When we walked inside, however, we were disappointed to see only one person.

This reality gave us pause. We started to wonder whether there were enough Jews to serve in Normandy after all. We decided to write to the Rebbe, explaining our fears and hopes and all we wanted to accomplish with our shlichus. We placed it in a volume of *Igros Kodesh*, a collection of letters from the Lubavitcher Rebbe.



The letter on the page read: *You're moving to a new city, and even though there is only one soul there, your move is worth it, because saving one soul is equivalent to saving an entire world. But regardless, you will see that in actuality there is far more than one soul in the city.*

The relief we felt was palpable. Clearly, Normandy was the right move for us, and our efforts would be crowned with success. We started visiting more frequently, going for Shabbos and some Yomim Tovim. With Yom Kippur approaching, we decided to put our fledgling relationships with the Normandy Jews to the test.

"If there are any Jews in Normandy, I bet we'll see them in shul over Yom Kippur!" I told my wife.

True to the Rebbe's word, 250 people showed up in shul that Yom Kippur, proving to us once and for all that there was a lot of work to do in Normandy. Ten days later, my wife and I had packed up our house and moved into our new apartment in Normandy!

When we first moved, I heard about a little shop owned by a Jew. I immediately visited him and introduced myself, but Pierre* was brusque and decidedly uninterested. He told me he was married to a non-Jew, and seemed to almost delight in his complete ignorance of anything Jewish. I offered to help him put on tefillin, but he refused. When I saw he was starting to get irritated, I backed off of any religious talk, and decided to pursue a simple friendship instead. For me, shlichus isn't about results; it's about effort. If Hashem wants results, He'll bring them. My job is simply to be there and encourage others to learn more about their Jewish heritage.

I visited Pierre, like clockwork, every other week. I'd walk in, have a short conversation, and leave. Six months later, he asked me to help his son prepare for his Bar Mitzvah.

I was hesitant at first since his son isn't Jewish, but Pierre assured me he understood.

"I just want my son to have a little education," he explained, "in case he ever decides to convert and live as a Jew."

For the next few months, I met with Pierre and his son every week. We discussed what it meant to become a Bar Mitzvah, and all the fundamental tenets of Judaism. As Pierre and I grew closer, I eventually felt comfortable offering him tefillin again.

Pierre shook his head and smiled. "I've already put on tefillin today," he told me. "All this talk about Bar Mitzvahs inspired me. I dug my old pair of Bar Mitzvah tefillin up from the attic."

Tears stung my eyes. At 50 years old, this man was inspired to rekindle his relationship with Hashem - through his son, who wasn't even Jewish! I offered to get his tefillin checked by a sofer. Unfortunately the tefillin weren't kosher, but that didn't stop Pierre from committing to this mitzvah! The next day, he bought himself a new pair.

Pierre is now a good friend and a staple in our community. He puts tefillin on everyday and continues to guide his son, should he one day hope to commit to the Jewish journey.

Normandy has a large population of migrating students, and, for many of them, we've become a home away from home. We enjoy hosting them for Shabbos meals and running events.

Louis* came to us for the first time during his freshman year. He had a long ponytail and no desire to become religious. But over the years, he started to appreciate Yiddishkeit. He grew closer to religion, and eventually took an interest in pursuing his own Jewish education.

Louis started coming for Shabbos every week, and avoiding his parents' home, where there wasn't any kosher food. We supported Louis through this transition, as well as with his decision to move to Jerusalem to study at Machon Lev. Today, Louis is living happily in Eretz Yisrael, married to a beautiful and frum young woman!

Claude* was another student who used to frequent our Shabbos table. I knew he was dating a non-Jewish girl, but I was worried about pushing him away, so I never brought it up. One Friday night, Claude and I stayed up late, talking. Finally, I decided to ask him about his girlfriend.

Claude shook his head. "I broke up with her last month," he said.

I kept my face carefully expressionless. "Why?"

"I guess I started to feel uncomfortable," Claude explained. "We'd been together so long, our relationship needed to either advance to the next step or end. And there was this side of me that was celebrating Shabbos and learning about Judaism that just couldn't see myself marrying her. So, I broke it off."



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A Shabbos meal may seem simple, but its power to influence is incalculable.

We recently opened a small store filled with kosher foods and Judaica. Not only does it give our community easy access to kosher goods, it also gives us the opportunity to meet people who are drawn in by our sign.

Recently, a man walked into the store and, as he browsed the aisles, I asked him about himself. He introduced himself as Jacques*, and told me he was biracial - his father was African, but his mother was Jewish. I immediately asked him if he'd ever had a Bar Mitzvah or put on tefillin. He told me he hadn't. I offered to help him, right there in the store, and he agreed. Jacques celebrated his Bar Mitzvah, as an adult, in the middle of the only kosher store in Normandy.

I made a point to stay in touch with him, and invited him for Shabbosim, events, and even our Pesach seder.

"Can my wife come to the seder too, even though she isn't Jewish?" Jacques asked.

The unfortunate reality in our community is that many are assimilated and intermarried. In almost every family, there's a parent, spouse, and/or children that aren't Jewish. Of course, everyone is invited to bring their families along to all our events, so having non-Jews at our table is nothing new.

"It's up to you," I responded. "You should do what feels right to you."

The next day, Jacques called me back to tell me he'd come alone.

At the seder, Jacques sang and ate and listened closely to the divrei Torah. As the seder wound down and everyone began to leave, Jacques remained seated, staring blindly at nothing in particular. Soon, only he and I remained.

"How did you enjoy the seder?" I asked him.

Jacques began to cry. I placed an arm around his shoulders.

"Forgive me," he said. "The last time I was at a Pesach seder, I was 6 years old! We celebrated at my grandfather's house, and the memories overwhelmed me. Thank you for having me!"

Last year, we celebrated my son's upshernish. We always make family celebrations into community affairs and try to teach by example by explaining the significance of each gathering. A week before the party, I was in the supermarket, when perfectly accented Hebrew halted me in my tracks.

"Kvod HaRav!"

I turned around to see a man smiling at me. He didn't look Jewish, but his Hebrew was impeccable.

"Nice to meet you! What's your name?" I asked, shaking his hand.

He told me his name was Jean*. He was 83, and had been living in Normandy for 50 years.

"I've only been to a shul three times in my entire life," he said. "I haven't even had a Bar Mitzvah!"

"You should come to us for Shabbos," I invited him. "Maybe you'll enjoy yourself!"

"Sure," Jean agreed. "But not this week. I'm visiting my son for the weekend."

"Then come to my son's upshernish!" I said. "It's a special kind of birthday party!"

We said goodbye, and Jean promised to attend. He kept his word. I introduced him to my family and some members of the community.

"It's already a party," I said. "Why not have a Bar Mitzvah, too? Would you like to put on tefillin?"

Jean laughed. "One day," he said. "But not today."

My father-in-law, however, is a very persistent man. He overheard our conversation and was determined to change Jean's mind. He followed him around the party, asking him every few minutes to put on tefillin. Jean continued to say no. I started to worry he would get angry and leave.

I breathed a sigh of relief when our video presentation on the meaning of an upshernish and our son's namesake forced my father-in-law to pause - but, as soon as the video was over, he approached Jean again.

"Are you sure you don't want to put on tefillin?" he asked, one last time.

I looked on incredulously as Jean nodded and began rolling up his sleeve. Amidst blue balloons and the entire community all around him, Jean celebrated his Bar Mitzvah at 83 years old.

There aren't any religious schools in Normandy, so we homeschool our children. To help us with their secular studies, we employed two young girls. Amelie* was Jewish, but had a non-Jewish boyfriend.

Over the years, she became a part of our family, and she often came for Shabbos and other family events. Eventually, Amelie decided to break up with her boyfriend. Tzniyus and Shabbos followed soon after.

Today, Amelie volunteers to help us with our children and events, and when we offer to pay her, she refuses.

"I do it for myself," she says. "It keeps me committed to my religious journey."

My wife runs special programming for the women of our community, creating a communal Jewish sisterhood. Usually, our events center around a Yom Tov, and we host shiurim often as well. My wife was concerned that these "lighter" evenings of entertainment weren't having the impact she wanted. She wondered if it was worthwhile to continue.

One time, my wife hosted a painting event. She gathered a bunch of inspirational quotes and had the women each choose one and paint it.

Juliette* had attended the event, and called my wife a week later to thank her more personally.

"It's been a hard year," she told us. "My husband passed away a few months ago, and I've been sick for weeks. When I came to the paint night, I was given the quote *Modeh Ani*. I hung it in my bedroom, and every morning when I open my eyes, I see the words *Modeh Ani* - that I painted - and it gives me strength for the rest of the day!"

Hashem had sent a clear answer that my wife's events were having an incredible impact!

However, in truth, she never needed to look too far to receive that answer. Francoise* was an embittered woman, who preferred to remain a recluse. Her two daughters were estranged, and she seemed to find little joy in life.

However, once she started coming to my wife's events, everything changed. She had friends for the first time in years. She was enjoying other people's company and learning what it was like to be surrounded by people who loved her. It serves as a reminder that *building a community* is, in and of itself, the reward for building a community.

*Names changed to protect privacy

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