

# IllumiNations

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



DollarDaily.org

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

*Rabbi Zvi and Chani Zwiebel, Chabad at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA*

## Each Person is a Whole World

By Chaya Chazan

**It's a testament to the Rebbe's vision of shlichus that our relative isolation is somewhat remarkable.**

Tucked away in the picturesque Blue Ridge Mountains, our small, sleepy college town is two hours from the next closest shliach. In a country so heavily saturated with Chabad houses, it's unusual to have to drive over four hours to the closest kosher store and Jewish school.

Both of us were highly motivated to move on shlichus, so despite the obvious challenges, and the fact that another couple had tried and found it too difficult, we decided to move to Blacksburg.

For many small town shluchim, the aphorism "*every person is a whole world*" is an empowering mantra that encourages us to keep giving it our all, despite the small



crowds. Reflecting on the last fifteen years, this mantra has become much more real. We may have only had ten students at our Shabbos table, but now, many of those students are married to Jewish partners, continuing the mitzvos they first learned about around that little table.

Just before Covid, there was a huge uptick of Jewish students. Baruch Hashem, we now keep quite busy, catering to the needs of over 2,000 Jewish students on campus.

We moved to Blacksburg just before Pesach and immediately got to work, searching for Jewish students through Facebook. I eagerly texted each one, inviting them to both sedarim. While we received a lot of confirmations for the first night, replies for the second night trended more towards "*I'll let you know,*" or "*I'll see if I can make it.*" Young, eager, and inexperienced as I was, I took those lukewarm responses as bonafide RSVPs, and my wife cooked up a veritable storm.

The first night, we had a beautiful seder with twenty guests. On the second night, my wife set the table for thirty. Two students showed up.

At first, we were disappointed, but we soon reminded ourselves that *every person is a whole world*, and resolved to make that night count. Instead of doing the typical "abbreviated" version of the Haggadah, we read through every passage and analyzed its meaning for modern times. We sat with those two students late into the night, far-bringing about every topic under the sun.

Greg\*, one of the two lone guests that Seder night, was already a senior, counting down the days to his graduation a few weeks later. He had a non-Jewish girlfriend, and practically zero knowledge of Judaism. That night made such a strong impression on him, he kept in touch, even though he left a short time later. We continued learning over the phone, and, eventually, Greg enrolled in a yeshiva in Israel. He now lives in Jerusalem, raising a growing family of Torah-true Jews.

Truly, every person is a whole world.

Our students are turning to us, now more than ever, for chizuk. They want to know how such evil can be justified; how G-d can seemingly turn His back on His people. To be there for them when our hearts beat with the same questions demands great fortitude and emotional strength. We resolved to refrain from checking the news; enough disturbing stories get through anyhow. It's important to maintain mental health, and reading disturbing and infuriating stories we can't change won't help with that. We choose to focus on the positive; the silver linings. Inspiration is everywhere, if one only chooses to see it.

I'd heard about Ted\* from his friends, and even his family. Although I'd tried contacting him multiple times, he'd ignored every message. His cousin tried to convince him to accompany him to the Chabad house, but Ted refused.

A few days after Hamas instigated the war, Ted knocked on my door.

"Hi, I'm Ted," he introduced himself. "You don't know who I am, but I'd like to put on tefillin, please."

Without letting on that I knew *exactly* who he was, I welcomed him in and showed him the ropes. Ted has been coming every day for the past month to put on tefillin, and daven for the Jews in Eretz Yisrael.

The caller ID displayed an unknown New York number.

"Good morning, Rabbi Zwiebel. This is Chezky Teitelbaum\*. I'll be visiting your side of Virginia in a few days with my partner. Do you have a minyan?"

"On Shabbos, yes," I answered. "But we don't always have daily minyanim."

I could tell Mr. Teitelbaum was a savvy businessman by his next proposal. "If I offer to pay each participant \$100, do you think you could get seven students to commit?"

"They're college kids," I chuckled. "They'll do much more than that for \$100!"

It was a couple of months before I heard from Mr. Teitelbaum again.

"My partner and I own assisted living homes all over the country, including one in Virginia," he explained. "We trusted the manager to oversee operations, but we placed our trust in the wrong man. Unfortunately, things weren't handled properly, and the government has decided to make an example of us. We're being charged for everything under the sun! It seems we'll be staying for a while, for the trial. We'll bring kosher food with us, but will you be able to help us out with a minyan and sefer Torah?"

The more Mr. Teitelbaum told me, the more I commiserated with his predicament. I tried everything I could to help them, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. One day, inspiration struck.

"What about printing a Tanya?" I suggested. "The Rebbe spoke about it many times."



DollarDaily.org

“Done,” Mr. Teitelbaum agreed. “I’ll do *anything* for a zechus. Just let me know how much it’ll cost.”

With the digital file in hand, I searched the tiny town where the trial was being held for an office supply store to start printing. No such store existed. I couldn’t even find a home printer for sale! A friend of mine heard about my search, and directed me to the man who’d bought them all when the only office supply store in town had closed, years before.

The man agreed to let me use his machines, and I immediately got to work, printing the first few copies of Tanya. As the first pages emerged from the printer, still warm, I grabbed them and headed to the courthouse.

“These are, quite literally, hot off the press!” I joked to Mr. Teitelbaum. “Do you want to learn for a bit before the trial begins?”

We sat on the hard benches in the back of the courtroom, learning Perek Alef Tanya together. Mr. Teitelbaum then joined his team at the defense table, while I sat, saying Tehillim.

It looked bad. The prosecution piled up charge after charge, which would result in a minimum 20 year sentence for Mr. Teitelbaum and his partner. The judge had a reputation as a strict, no-nonsense lawman, not prone to leniency. His face, as he glared down in stony silence from his elevated bench, reinforced that estimation. They were still discussing how to schedule the trial dates, allowing for Shabbos and early Friday breaks, when the judge suddenly excused himself. He returned about 20 minutes later.

“I’ve been reviewing the case and the witness list,” he said. “I see the defense has called an expert witness whose character and expertise are unimpeachable. If I were the prosecution, I’d rethink this case.”

The lawyers at each table turned to each other in stupefaction.

“With all due respect, your honor, we’ve invested too much into this investigation to simply drop the case,” the prosecution argued.

“Then let the defense plead guilty to just one of the charges,” the judge suggested.

The attorneys quickly shifted through their papers, before informing Mr. Teitelbaum and his partner they’d drop all other charges if they plead guilty to the RICO charge.

“RICO is a minimum ten-year sentence!” Mr. Teitelbaum argued, his face paling. “I don’t want to sit in jail for a crime I didn’t commit!”

“I’ll waive the jail time,” the judge said. Once again, the lawyers were astounded. It was unheard of to serve no jail time for a RICO charge! “House arrest and probation for six months,” the judge ruled, banging his gavel.

“I have travel plans to Israel for the holidays,” Mr. Teitelbaum said. “And we have to go to synagogue three times a day...”

“No problem. You can be trusted not to break your probation. I don’t believe you need ankle monitors either.”

“So, what *can’t* we do?” Mr. Teitelbaum asked.

“It’s probably better to eat out during this time.”

Mr. Teitelbaum and his partner laughed and hugged with relief. From a 20-year jail sentence, to a few months of avoiding restaurants! Everything had changed in the blink of an eye. As I shook his hand and wished him “yasher koach,” we both acknowledged the great miracle that had occurred, and the Tanya which had brought it about.

Mr. Teitelbaum’s lawyer was Jewish. When I’d asked him to put on tefillin before, he proudly boasted that he hadn’t even been asked to put them on when he went to the Western Wall, since he didn’t look Jewish enough to be stopped. When the trial concluded, he was a changed man. He asked me to help him buy his own pair of tefillin.

At the seudas hoda’ah, Mr. Teitelbaum and his partner gave out leather bound Tanys, printed in that tiny little town in Virginia, home of their miraculous redemption from prison through Tanya.

Campus shlichus can be challenging, since our “community” is ever evolving. In the best case scenario, we have four years to build a relationship, before our students fly off to greener pastures. It really makes us appreciate the value of every encounter, and the power of every single mitzvah.

Justin\* had only attended Virginia Tech for one year, so our interactions were limited. Although I hadn’t seen him in over 12 years, I contacted him before Pesach and asked if he’d like a package of shmurah matza.

“I would,” he responded. “But I’m about to leave for Africa.”

“Well, where are you now?” I asked. “I’ll get you the matza as quickly as possible.”

He was in Florida, so I looked up the closest shliach and asked him for a favor.

“Can you please send a box of matza to my friend? I’ll pay for it, but he needs it right away.”

“Pay for it? What are you talking about?” the shliach answered. “Don’t worry about it!”

He visited Justin, gave him the matza, and put on tefillin with him. I soon forgot about the whole thing.

The next year, I was in New York for the annual Kinus Hashluchim. I was standing in line at a resource fair, when the shliach in front of me turned around to say hello. I didn’t remember who he was at first, but he soon reminded me of when I’d asked him to deliver matza to Justin.

“He’s actually become a regular at our Chabad house!” the shliach shared. “That one box of matza was a great investment!”

We took a selfie together, and I sent it to Justin, jokingly captioning it, “We’re conspiring how to get you a pair of tefillin to wear every day.”

A minute later, my phone lit up with Justin’s reply. “I’d love that! How can I get a pair of tefillin?”

I shared the story at a farbrengen with fellow shluchim the next night. One of the attendees volunteered to cover the cost of Justin’s tefillin. When I told Justin, I thought he’d be overjoyed, but he was a bit disappointed.

“It’s my mitzvah, Rabbi,” he said. “I want to pay for it on my own!”

“Tefillin can be quite expensive,” I warned him. “So how about this? I’ll buy the tefillin now, and you can pay it back slowly, at your own convenience. Eventually, I’ll use that money to buy someone else a pair of tefillin!”

Justin loved the idea, and we immediately set it in motion.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

**DollarDaily.org**  
a Project of  
**YadLShiach.org**  
and **COLlive.com**

**COL LIVE**

## IllumiNations is now a book.

Inside, you’ll discover a unique collection of stories, some of which have graced the pages of the weekly newsletter ‘IllumiNations,’ captivating readers far and wide. Alongside these are dozens of previously unreleased tales and details, making each page a new discovery. With intriguing facts, a stylish magazine-style layout, and vibrant, full-color illustrations, IllumiNations takes you on a journey through over 250 narratives, spanning the globe from Alaska to Australia, California to Johannesburg, and beyond. In every story, you’ll feel the deep theme of a Jewish soul finding its way home, one at a time, guided by the extraordinary individuals we call shluchim.

**THE PERFECT CHANUKAH GIFT**

**Now Available Wherever Great Jewish Books Are Sold Or on DollarDaily.org**

