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*Rabbi Dov and Shterna Gruzman, Chabad Alumni Community, Vienna, Austria*

## Bountiful Brachos

By Chaya Chazan

**As a born and bred Canadian, when a shidduch with an Israeli was suggested for me, I hesitated. Living in Israel was challenging at the time. Baruch Hashem, he was flexible on where we'd live, and we married in the winter of 1986.**

After a year of kollel, we began looking into shlichus options, and wrote to the Rebbe with a list of different places. We received no answer, although we continued writing for almost a year. We were ready to move - we just needed the Rebbe's approval to tell us where to go!

"Don't just give the Rebbe a long list of places," one of the Rebbe's secretaries advised us. "The Rebbe knows where you wish to live. Do research, figure out which option is best for you, and ask the Rebbe for a bracha for *that* specific place."

Although Europe was a foreign culture for both of us, we narrowed our choices down to Vienna. We wrote to the Rebbe, asking for a bracha for hatzlacha for shlichus in Vienna.

The Rebbe's answer came back almost immediately, with warm brachos for success.

My husband was still apprehensive about moving to such an unfamiliar continent, and needed an extra boost of chizuk. We decided to visit New York for one last Shab-

bos before we moved, to attend a farbrengen and see the Rebbe in person.

At that time, it was an accepted practice for anyone celebrating a significant achievement in spreading Torah and mitzvos to bring a bottle of vodka to the Rebbe's secretaries. Towards the end of the weekly Shabbos farbrengen, those who contributed a bottle would go up to the head table, where the Rebbe would pour from the bottle into his becher and then back into the bottle, while also pouring a shot for the contributor. Not only did the person get a l'chaim with the Rebbe's special brachos, but because of the bit the Rebbe had poured in, the entire bottle would be considered specially blessed by the Rebbe.

My husband was the only contributor that week, and the Rebbe announced the opening of a new Beis Chabad in Vienna. The Rebbe also emphasized how the power of all those gathered would ensure the success of the chanukas habayis of the new Chabad house. As was usual, my husband poured a small l'chaim to a few people around him, and prepared to return to his place. The Rebbe stopped him, and, as I watched from the women's balcony above, asked him to publicly announce the date of the chanukas habayis, and the full address of the new establishment.

The Rebbe explained the significance by pointing out that, with Moshiach's imminent arrival, all the shuls in the world would be connected to the Beis Hamikdash. My husband had announced our date of arrival as Chof Av, the yearzeit of the Rebbe's father. The Rebbe said we'd all be celebrating the chanukas habayis together, in Yerushalayim, with Moshiach, on Chof Av. Although the building would be in Yerushalayim instead of Vienna, it could be identified through its address.

The Rebbe continued giving brachos for our Chabad house to be full of Torah, tefillah, tzedakah, and kindness. Tears welled up in my eyes as the Rebbe then began sing-

ing the niggun *Vaharikosi Lachem Bracha*, urging on the chassidim with an energetic wave of his arms. The Rebbe even half stood up from his chair to encourage the singing!

"So, did you get what you came for?" I teased my husband as we met outside 770 at the conclusion of the farbrengen.

He smiled with satisfaction. "Absolutely. I'm ready to move to Vienna!"

Rabbi Biderman had already started Chabad in Vienna six years before we moved. He asked us to help him with his newly formed afternoon school. (See Issue #96) A driver would pick up public school children and bring them to us for a couple of hours of Jewish instruction. A few years later, we opened a school, with my husband serving as principal.

This was a completely novel concept for Viennese Jews, who saw their Judaism as an impediment, rather than something in which to take pride. I remember how my well-meaning friends instructed me on the basics of living in Vienna: never walk the streets with yarmulkas clearly visible. Always have a cap for the children, and try to minimize anything overtly Jewish-looking. Any time my husband walked home from shul on Shabbos with his tallis over his shoulders, Jewish passersby paled, and urged him to take it off immediately!

It was an uphill battle, as most community members still carried scars from the war, when the Nazis rounded up every Jew in Vienna simply by perusing the community's list of Jewish affiliated citizens. The wariness against being included on any such list ever again was still very strong. My husband spent many summers knocking on doors, earnestly explaining the importance of a Jewish education to parents, and begging them to register their children in our school.

The school grew from year to year, baruch Hashem, and what started as just two small grades soon became a full, flourishing elementary, middle, and high school.

These days, my husband focuses on the alumni, creating programs, events, and shiurim for them. I still work at the school, as well as my pet project, W.O.W., *Woman of the World*, an organization that empowers women to recognize their potential to build, influence, and guide their home, families, and world. It originally started as a program for the female alumni of our school, but quickly spread, so that now, women from all over the community participate. Our committee includes members from the Sefardi, Litvish, Chassidish, Chabad, Orthodox, and Reform communities. The power of the achdus alone is immense, let alone the many events and shiurim we organize!

Although the organization is still young - only four years old - we have an estimated 3,000 participants! Baruch Hashem!



One of W.O.W.'s major annual events was coming up, and I was trying to sell as many tickets as possible. Annie\*, one of my former students, approached me at school dismissal one day, asking about a large number of tickets she wanted to buy. It was an incredibly hectic time, and I didn't have them on me, but I asked if she could pick them up from my house that Friday.

When she knocked on the door that erev Shabbos, I was prepared with the tickets in hand.

"I'm so sorry for making you go out of your way to pick these up. I put them right here so I don't have to waste any more of your time."

"Nonsense!" Annie declared. "In fact, I want you to give them to me in your kitchen!"

Confused, I led Annie to the kitchen, where various pots were simmering on the stove for the Shabbos meals.

Annie breathed in deeply. "There's nothing like the smell of your Shabbos cooking," she declared, a beatific smile on her face.

"Oh, come on," I brushed it aside. "I'm sure you've smelled the same things, if not better, in almost every Jewish home in Vienna!"

Annie's face quickly turned serious. "Shterna, you don't understand the significance *your* Shabbos aromas have for me. Do you remember the weekly Shabbatons you hosted many years ago for us students? Every class got a turn to stay with you for Shabbos, and I couldn't wait until it was my turn. My parents were ambivalent at best towards anything Jewish, and we definitely didn't celebrate Shabbos at home. When I walked in here, as a young, impressionable girl, and smelled the aromas wafting from your kitchen, it filled me with belonging and purpose. I vowed I'd build a home with the same warmth and meaning I'd found in the fragrance of your cooking."

Skiing instruction is obligatory for every Viennese child, and, of course, we included it in our curriculum as well. Every year, we spent a week in the mountains and hired ski instructors to teach the children. The highlight of the trip was Shabbos - one of the only authentic Shabbos experiences many of the children had ever had.

At the conclusion of the trip, we sat down with Oskar\*, a ski instructor who'd been with us for years already, to coordinate the dates for next year's ski trip.

"With all due respect, I don't understand how you can do this," Oskar said. "You constantly tell the children that Moshiach is coming any minute. How can you plan an event a year from today when you anticipate Moshiach every moment?"

Being rebuked by our non-Jewish ski instructor was a humbling lesson in emunah, albeit with a certain sense of satisfaction that we'd drilled in the message about Moshiaich so well, even Oskar knew about it!

Our community is our family. We share in their joy and their sorrows. While we've weathered our fair share of tragedies, we make sure to mark the happy moments as well. My husband makes a point to attend every simcha he's invited to, especially alumni's weddings. He tries his hardest to be there for every chuppah, sparing no time, effort, or expense.

Back when we were still a fresh, naive, young couple, tragedy struck the community. I was teaching in the Modern Orthodox's community school at the time, and one of my students, Frida\*, died quite suddenly.

The visit to the shiva house is etched indelibly on my memory, as it was the first shiva house I'd ever visited. I hardly knew what to say or do. I was still reeling from the news, trying to process it. Her classmates were all gathered in a somber little circle, and they turned as I entered the room. To my shock, I realized they were looking to me for guidance; for answers I was struggling to find myself. I suggested holding a weekly class, where we'd explore what faith really meant, and they'd be welcome to ask all their questions. We read through Simon Jacobson's *Towards a Meaningful Life*, and I emphasized, over and over, that the best way to find meaning in tragedy is to take a lesson from the departed, so their legacy can live on forever. These classes were held in Frida's home, and her mother, Bianca\* often sat in to listen.

Bianca poured out her soul to me, and we became close friends. I was inspired and amazed to see how Bianca rose from the ashes, choosing to honor her daughter's memory by spearheading her synagogue's women's committee for many years!

Liliana\* was seriously dating one potential suitor, but was still unsure if he was her bashert. She wrote to the Rebbe, asking for guidance, and placed her letter in a volume of *Igros Kodesh*, a collection of the Rebbe's responses on a variety of topics. Since she couldn't read Yiddish, she asked me to translate it for her.

As I read paragraph by paragraph, she grew more and more amazed.

"The letter addresses every one of the concerns I wrote about!" she marveled.

"Look at the date," I told her. It was dated Chof Beis Shevat, the *yahrzeit* of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka. "See how the letter begins?" I continued. "The Rebbe says *I haven't*

*heard from you in a long while - not since the last time you visited.* Lilianna, don't you remember the last time you visited New York? It was last year, Chof Beis Shevat, when I took you to the annual Kinus Hashluchos! The Rebbe is talking directly to you!"

The clear answer reassured Lilianna, and they are now almost engaged.

I remember being told, as a very young shlucha, that my main task in Vienna was to teach the laws of Taharas Hamishpacha to all the women. My initial reaction was one of chagrin. I was prepared to teach about Shabbos, kashrus, challah, or anything else - except Taharas Hamishpacha. But when I soon realized the wisdom of those words, I began holding classes.

I began to explain how the mitzvah enhances a marriage, and brings so many blessings to the home. I could tell most of the women were skeptical at best. Then one woman stood up and loudly declared, "Everything you're saying is utter nonsense! It's absolutely primitive! That's how they lived back in the old country. We're no longer in Russia! We're in Vienna! We're modern women! There's no way we're going to keep these outdated laws!"

I could feel every ounce of self-confidence I had ooze out of me, but I somehow held it together long enough to finish the evening and thank everyone for coming.

As I walked home, I cried out to Hashem and thought of our Rebbe. "Rebbe, what do you want from me? I'm trying my best, but it's not easy! How can I change the culture of an entire city?"

I wondered then if Vienna would ever utilize its mikvah properly. Today, Vienna boasts three gorgeous mikvaos, and the mitzvah of Taharas Hamishpacha is kept by the vast majority of the local women.

The Rebbe's bountiful brachos have indeed borne fruit.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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