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

Rabbi Mendy and Mindy Begun, The Wisdom Circle, Los Angeles, California

Healing Body and Soul

By Chaya Chazan

It's my privilege to be a third-generation shliach. I grew up on shlichus in Cheviot Hills, about half an hour from where we live now. From an early age, my parents encouraged us to take an active part in the shlichus.

I remember davening for the amud as a young bar mitzvah boy, and taking on positions of responsibility and leadership. It was the perfect education as I carry on a legacy started by my grandfathers.

The importance of chinuch al taharas hakodesh, as taught by the Rebbe, to use the time when a child's mind is most malleable for Kodesh studies only, was deeply impressed upon me by my parents' dedication. Although Los Angeles now has one of the largest Jewish communities in the world, when I was growing up, it was significantly smaller. The school offered a hybrid program of Kodesh in the morning and Chol in the afternoon. Despite much opposition, as well as expense, trouble, and inconvenience, my parents insisted on picking us up early each day, hiring tutors to supplement extra Kodesh classes instead of the school's curriculum. They were pressured to change their decision, but they remained firm. It is a testament to their determination that the school now offers a Kodesh-only track, utilized by many of the same families that once derided my parents for their decision.



My wife was also brought up on shlichus. We didn't even have to discuss *if* we wanted to open a Chabad house of our own; it was a foregone conclusion.

Baruch Hashem, by the time we were married and ready to look for a shlichus position, almost every inch of Los Angeles was already covered by a dedicated shliach. My grandfather, Rabbi Boruch Shlomo Cunin, the head shliach of California, suggested we take on responsibility for Jewish patients in hospitals, including Cedars-Sinai Hospital, a large Jewish hospital not far from the center of the Los Angeles Jewish community, as well as seniors in nursing care facilities, and at home.

I took two years of Clinical and Pastoral Education training under the head chaplain at Cedars-Sinai, helping me integrate more completely with the hospital and its staff. I also added a few nursing homes and a couple of other hospitals that I make sure to visit regularly.

"Where's your shul?" patients and residents will often ask.

"Right here in your room!" is my standard reply. While there are quite a few shuls within a short walking distance, I keep myself available in case I'm needed on Shabbos. One memorable Kabbalos Shabbos was held in an ICU room, with 40-odd relatives crammed into a room whose rules only allowed for two visitors at a time.

This unique shlichus comes with a unique set of challenges. We see so much suffering, and unfortunately, it's all too often coupled with loneliness. Some patients have been laying in their hospital bed for months, and we've yet to meet a single family member. The emotional toll this takes is enormous, and we've had to learn how to cope. And although we have many patients that recover and return to the warmth of family and home baruch Hashem, that presents us with a financial chal-

lenge. With no steady "community," we're hard pressed to procure funding for our activities. We've had to come up with creative ways to fundraise and establish ourselves.

When we first began our shlichus in 2019, we were excited to explore new opportunities, meet people, and discover where our shlichus would take us.

Then Covid hit, and every door was shut tightly in our faces - literally. We'd been sent to visit hospitals and nursing homes, but they had strict regulations that prohibited any non-essential visitors. They wouldn't even let us send food and care packages in, since at that time, it was widely believed that the virus could be passed through objects.

We knew there were lots of lonely people for whom a friendly visit would do more good than the quarantine and isolation they were forced into for months on end, but there was nothing we could do.

Eventually, we gave up on trying to get into the official facilities, and instead, searched for elderly people living at home. Gloved and masked to the hilt, we delivered food packages to their doorsteps. We were their only visitors in a world gone silent, and they treasured each moment of our interactions.

Getzel*, an elderly Holocaust survivor, invited us in every time, waving away our protestations of health and safety protocols. He shared his memories of the war, inspiring us with his bravery and persistence.

A couple of years later, when Getzel was in the hospital for the final months of his life, we continued to visit often. He'd had a hard time holding onto his faith after the horrors he'd witnessed, and hadn't kept mitzvos since his childhood. But, in the final weeks of his life, he requested to eat only kosher food.

"I'm going to be meeting my father soon," he whispered. "I can't meet him with pig in my mouth."

As a shliach, a rabbi, and a chaplain, I know a question is never a simple matter of yes or no. A good chaplain knows that listening is nine-tenths of the job.

Darren's* mother was suffering from late-stage cancer, and her prognosis wasn't good. Anyone watching Darren pace nervously outside his mother's hospital room could tell how distraught he was.

"Rabbi, can I get a tattoo?" he asked me one day.

No, was the simple answer that sprang immediately into mind. Instead, I invited him to sit and asked him why getting a tattoo was so important to him.

"I want to make sure I never forget this part of my life, and make sure my mother will never fully leave me. I want to get a tattoo of the date she got her diagnosis, and the date of her passing."



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Once I understood the emotion behind the question, I was able to draw him into further conversation about his mother and the impact she had on him. Only then did I gently suggest finding another form of remembering her, as tattoos are forbidden in Jewish law.

I know that Darren would've had a much more difficult time accepting the *no* if I'd come right out and said it right away. Our discussion made him feel valued, heard, and ultimately, made it easier for him to find an alternative to tattooing.

I saw Sammy* in the hallway, and followed him back to his room.

"Good," he said. "I was hoping you'd come."

We sat down for a chat, and Sammy shared his views on religion.

"I've learned all about it, and done all the research, but it's not for me," he told me. "It's how I've lived my life, and how I've planned for my afterlife. I've decided to be cremated. Yes, I know," he said, holding up a hand to forestall me, "I know the Torah says not to. I had another Chabad rabbi visit me who talked my ear off about it! Every time he visited, all he talked about was the evils of cremation. I got tense just watching him walk towards me! I asked him to stop coming, since his arguments weren't doing any good, anyhow."

I made sure never to introduce the topic, knowing that silence is often more effective than discourse.

A few weeks later, Sammy asked, "So what's so bad about cremation anyhow?" I could tell he was now open to an honest discussion, and I explained the bond between neshama and guf.

"Interesting," was Sammy's response. He continued asking me about Jewish cemeteries, and the burial process.

I continued visiting him for the next few months, while he was in and out of the hospital. Shortly before Rosh Hashanah, I gently prodded for an opening. I asked him about his bar mitzvah, and he shared his memories.

"Oh! By the way," I said, innocently. "I have a pair of tefillin available for patients. I just realized that I've never offered them to you. I just want to let you know they're there."

"I remember when two Chabad boys ambushed me outside a store and tried to get me to put on tefillin,"

Sammy reminisced. "They didn't know who they were dealing with! Of course, I refused."

We continued speaking about various topics for a while longer, until the radiologist came to take Sammy for an x-ray. He'd already come in almost an hour before, and we'd asked him to return later on.

"I guess we've been talking for a while," I told Sammy. "I'll leave now, so you don't miss this opportunity for an x-ray!"

A little while later, I received an email from Sammy. *Hey Rabbi! Are you still around? We were in the middle of a conversation about tefillin. I'd like to continue it.*

I headed back up to Sammy's room, leaving the tefillin outside, in the hallway.

"So tell me more about tefillin," Sammy requested.

I explained what tefillin are, and their significance. I specifically did *not* ask him to put them on.

"If that was something I was interested in," he said, slowly. "Would you be able to help me?"

"Of course! I'd be happy to!" I answered.

After a few more minutes, Sammy asked me to help him put on tefillin. I retrieved them from the hallway, wrapped the straps around his arm, and guided him in the bracha. Sammy was noticeably emotional, and told me it was his first time wearing tefillin since his bar mitzvah.

"What changed your mind?" I asked him.

"When you said having an x-ray was an opportunity I didn't want to miss. It made me think, *what kind of opportunity is having an x-ray? There are much more special things I should take advantage of!* That's when I emailed you."

"I'll be going around to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah," I said. "Would you like me to blow it for you, too?"

Sammy nodded, his eyes shining with tears.

When I came to Sammy's room a few days later, on Rosh Hashanah, I found his bed empty. His neshama had returned to Shamayim.

The tefillin had been an opportunity he *couldn't* miss.

It was excruciating to hear Reed* scream out in pain while undergoing aggressive cancer treatment. Nothing

the doctors could offer seemed to help, and the nurses were beside themselves, unsure of what to do.

When I visited Reed, I helped him put on tefillin, daven, and say a few kapitelach of Tehillim. I sat by his bedside and chatted for a while.

"The doctors have tried everything to relieve my pain," Reed told me. "Nothing helped. But now, after putting on tefillin and davening, the pain has completely disappeared!"

Jayden* reached out to ask for support through a very tough time. His father was deteriorating quickly, and the doctors were pressuring the family to make decisions for his care. The official medical counsel was to make his father comfortable, and prepare for his passing. Jayden wanted to fight and install a feeding tube. He also asked me to visit his father and put on tefillin with him.

When I visited his room, I found a whole group of family members there as well. I put tefillin on all the men, and we sang Jewish songs together. I led a short tefillah, and the atmosphere lightened considerably.

"I can already feel the energy working," Jayden told me, excitedly.

That day, his father began speaking coherently once again, and even managed to swallow some liquids.

"Maybe we don't even need a feeding tube!" Jayden rejoiced. The doctors agreed to wait for developments. Two weeks later, his father was sitting up on his own, eating normally, and ready to be discharged.

"I know the tefillin and davening had a major impact on my father's recovery," Jayden said. "He began improving immediately after your visit!"

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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