

# IllumiNations

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*Rabbi Shmulik and Mushka Tewel, Les Institutions Shneor, Aubervilliers, France*

## Shneor's Pride

By Chaya Chazan

**My father is a living example of the adage, *Everyone is a shliach*. Although he's a businessman, and not an official shliach, he never misses an opportunity to bring a fellow Jew closer to Hashem.**

He'd always return from work with stories about how he'd put tefillin on one person, gave a mezuzah to another, or gifted an associate with a Jewish book. So, although I grew up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, I was deeply influenced by the shlichus mindset so embodied by my parents.

As a young student, I got an "up close and personal" look at shlichus by volunteering and assisting shlichim the world over, including Israel, the United States, and Ukraine. This only strengthened my resolve to become a shliach myself. When I started looking into potential shidduchim, shlichus was make-or-break.

Luckily, my wife had similarly strong feelings about shlichus. Her grandfather, the famous chassid Rabbi Moshe Nisselevitch, (also known as "Reb Moshe der Geller") was instrumental in running underground chedarim, yeshivos, and mikvaos in Samarkand, part of the former Soviet Union. Rabbi Eliezer Nisilevitch, carried this legacy by investing in Jewish education after moving to France. Right after their marriage, her mother became the principal of a school at just 18 years old! The talent for chinuch clearly runs in the family, since my wife was asked to take on a particularly challenging class that other teachers hadn't had success reaching. Despite her young age, she built a deep bond with those girls, and,



baruch Hashem, managed to turn them around completely!

We got married in New York, just before Pesach, and my wife suggested we travel to France directly after Yom Tov, so she could finish the school year with her students.

So, just two weeks after our wedding, we packed up our brand new household and boarded a flight to Paris. The original plan was to remain in France for the last two months of the school year, and then begin researching shlichus options.

While my wife went back to her classroom, I busied myself with various projects. I joined a French kolel, visiting local businesses on my lunch breaks to find Jews on whom to put on tefillin. I also started a weekly mesibas Shabbos gathering for groups of boys, arranged shiurim, and other "small" projects that soon grew beyond proportion.

When the school year was over, it was time to decide our future. We wrote a letter to the Rebbe, placed it in a volume of *Igros Kodesh*, and opened a random page to read the Rebbe's response. The letter, filled with encouragement, mentioned "France" and "Paris" specifically, and the Rebbe commented how pleased he was with the great work being done, and how it must be "continued with joy."

It seemed clear the Rebbe wanted us to stay in Paris. It was a difficult adjustment for me, a thorough American. I didn't speak the language, and the culture was totally different! For me, a Smart car was simply a cute, delightful finding to snap a picture of, not the pragmatic vehicle it was for so many Europeans, who had to contend with narrow streets and limited parking. (Ironically, on my most recent trip to New York, I found the massive trucks and SUVs far more diverting, and I snapped a bunch of pictures to show people back in France.)

Louis's\* mother was Jewish; his father was not. For X-mas, Louis asked for, and received, a mezuzah. Once

it was affixed on his door, it became a catalyst for much more. When Louis came across our Facebook page, he was immediately interested and enrolled in our school. His mother expressed interest in discovering more about her heritage, as well.

The importance of a Jewish education is something my father-in-law, Rabbi Eliezer Niselevitch, founder and director of Les Institutions Shneor, is adamant about. He still remembers being forced to attend a Communist public school, and the secret underground yeshiva, operating with immense mesiras nefesh, which was sometimes housed in his basement.

After a slew of anti-Semitic attacks, targeting various Jewish institutions around France, my father-in-law decided to make a concerted effort to enroll every Jewish child in a Jewish school. Those who know him are aware of his unstoppable determination, which allows no obstacle to stand in his way. He fundraised enough to provide transportation and full-ride scholarships for those who couldn't afford the tuition. He was the backbone of the project, and oversaw every detail.

He offered one of those scholarships to Claire\*, a high school student.

"She's almost finished school, and she's fine where she is," her mother refused. "Give it to someone who *really* needs it."

My father-in-law refused to be put off, and he insisted Claire take the spot. My wife added her entreaties to his, promising we'd provide transportation to and from school. To no one's surprise, they won, and Claire attended Les Institutions Shneor for her final years of high school. She did really well, and her entire family was affected by her newfound Jewish education. She went on to attend seminary in Israel, and is now married to a Chabad bocher. They operate a Chabad house for French speakers in Netanya.

Recently, with the stress of the war and the financial hardships that came in its wake, Chana, as she is now called, felt that the challenges surrounding her were insurmountable. She was contemplating ending her shlichus and returning home to France, where it would be easier.

That night, she dreamed of my in-laws and my wife's grandmother. My father-in-law pointed at her and exclaimed, "This is our pride! This is *Shneor's* pride!"

Chana woke up with a start. *She was Shneor's pride!* Of course she could withstand the challenges! The obvious nachas shining from the faces in her dream gave her the spurt of energy she needed to persevere.

She started her own Torah Cafe in Netanya, helping other women gain the empowerment they need to survive these difficult times.

With a long flight ahead of us, we stopped first to grab a bite to eat. The line at the restaurant was extremely long, and we had a flight to catch, so we went to a patisserie instead.

While we waited to order, a mother and her two sons walked in and stood behind us.

"My name is Claude\*," the little boy said. "Do you like my haircut? I just got it!"

"It's very nice!" I complimented him. He was such a cute, engaging child, it soon felt like we were best of friends. "Are they enrolled in a Jewish school?" I asked his mother, Aimee\*.

"No," she answered. "It's just too confusing. I don't know where it is, what it would entail, and I'm sure it's much too expensive!"

"It just so happens," I said, "That we're in the middle of a campaign to get every Jewish child enrolled in a Jewish school. Please, let me take down your information, and I'll send you everything you need to know. You're welcome to check out the school anytime you like!"

We soon had to leave for the airport, but Claude's mother eventually *did* drop by the school. She was impressed with what she saw, and signed up both of her boys. Claude is now our son's classmate, and his older brother, who will be attending our yeshiva high school next year, was the star of the end-of-the-year performance.

Aimee regularly attends *Torah Cafe*, a morning program for women, created and led by my wife. Mothers drop off their children in school, and then join the program to daven, learn, and sing together, so that they, too, can deepen their Jewish knowledge.

A trip to nourish our bodies turned into a feast for the soul!

Yakob\* was a student at our school, but the rest of his siblings still attended public school. His mother, Alice\*, was a regular at Torah Cafe, and had expressed deep appreciation for everything she learned, but had never taken the leap to commit to anything in particular.

The entire family attended our Purim event and had a great time. Alice's husband, John\*, was an intimidating fellow. His entire look warned everyone to stay away! Despite that, he was a good friend, and was involved in many of our programs.

Towards the end of the evening, we raffled off a large, framed picture of the Rebbe.

"It's beautiful!" Alice exclaimed. "I'd love to win that! You know what? If I win, I'll take it as a sign from G-d to sign my other children up for Jewish school as well!"

The winner was announced... and it was Alice! She kept her word and enrolled Yakob's siblings in our school. One thing led to another, and Alice soon committed to covering her hair with a sheitel, which she proudly wears to this day.

John joined a trip to New York in honor of Yud Shevat, the anniversary of the Rebbe's acceptance of leadership. His connection deepened, and although his eyes still hold a warning not to mess with him, he now sports a beard and yarmulka, and has started to keep Shabbos.

A few months ago, the completion of the eighth children's Sefer Torah was celebrated in Yerushalayim. Of course, in the months leading up to its completion, we organized a major campaign, ensuring that every child bought a letter in the sefer Torah.

We deal mostly with teens, and the sefer Torah is only for bar/bas mitzvah and under, but I still put some flyers up. We asked our teens if they had any younger siblings that didn't yet have a letter.

"My brother, Andre\*," one teen volunteered.

I sent him home with the form, and he brought it back, filled out, with one euro attached.

At that time, Andre was enjoying Camp Gan Israel. A week or so later, they took a trip. During the trip, Andre wandered off for a few minutes with a friend. In those few minutes, someone attempted to kidnap them, but they screamed for help, and, by some miracle, they managed to escape and return to the bus unscathed.

"I don't believe it!" Andre's mother exclaimed. "I just received a certificate in the mail, bearing his name and letter in the sefer Torah. I have no doubt that's what protected him!"

We were long overdue for a family vacation. Our kids chattered excitedly as we loaded bag after bag into the car, until, finally, we were ready to leave. I reached into my pocket for my phone to enter the address into the GPS, but came up empty.

"Where's my phone?"

It wasn't anywhere in the car, or the house. We even drove to school and checked there. It was nowhere to be found. We searched for close to two hours, to no avail.

"Hashem!" I cried out, in my mind. "I'm sure there's a good reason for all this, but what is it? The kids are all ready, and they're so excited! Why is this long delay necessary? Please show me!" I took a few deep, calming breaths, and reminded myself that Hashem does everything for a reason. A few minutes later, my wife called the phone for the umpteenth time. We hadn't heard it ring in the house, the school, or the office. But finally, we heard its muffled tones in one of the bags in the car.

With the phone finally found, I was ready to hit the gas and try to make up for the lost time. Just before we flew out of the parking lot, my wife pointed and exclaimed, "Hey! Aren't those two of your boys?"

I jumped out of the car and ran over to the two long-haired teens.

"Hey! What's going on, guys?" I greeted them, heartily. "Did you put tefillin on yet today?"

"No, not yet."

I wrapped the tefillin around their arms and we danced together. One of the boys committed to putting on tefillin every day, and was the major inspiration behind our "daily tefillin selfie" campaign.

Hashem kept us around for two hours, searching in vain for a phone that was two feet from us the entire time, so we could help these two neshamos and change their lives for the better.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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