

IllumiNations

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Rabbi Eli Moshe and Mirel Levitansky, Chabad at S. Monica College, S. Monica, California

Breaking down Barriers

By Chaya Chazan

As children of shluchim, both of us agreed shlichus was our future.

“I’ll go anywhere,” I said. “I just have two caveats: I don’t want to do college campus shlichus, and I don’t want to work with family.”

The fact that we ended up at a community college, right where I grew up, working alongside my brother, is mostly the fault of my very good friend, Rabbi Chaim Brook.

As the shliach at California State University, Northridge, Rabbi Brook met many students who’d transferred from a two-year community college in S. Monica.

“SMC needs a shliach!” he told me. “You’re perfect for the role!” Although I declined and politely explained my reasoning, there was no stopping Rabbi Brook. He even roped others into the effort, until we couldn’t say no anymore. We tentatively started researching.

Just before Shavuot in 2007, I flew to California for an exploratory trip. Over Yom Tov, my father was hospitalized. He passed away two days later. When Rabbi Kotlarsky, the

vice chairman of Merkos visited to pay a shiva call, he told me he’d already secured funding for Chabad of SMC from Mr. George Rohr’s Seed Money Grant. Before he’d spoken the final wishes of comfort, we’d officially committed to opening Chabad of SMC.

Now, 17 years later, we are launching a building campaign of 4.5 million dollars to bring our new state-of-the-art student center and Chabad house to life.

For our first Sukkos on shlichus, we got permission to set up a sukkah on campus that would remain there for the whole yom tov. One day on chol hamoed, a group of Jews for J showed up, and started giving out flyers right beside our sukkah. I called the campus police, but they just shrugged their shoulders.

“They’re just exercising their right to freedom of speech. It’s a public campus, and the first amendment allows them to be here. If there’s no actual harassment, we can’t do anything about it.”

I gathered some students, and formed a ring around the Jews for J missionaries. We sang and danced in a circle around them, making it very difficult for them to meet with any passersby. Eventually, they gave up and left.

Fast forward to fall of 2008. It was VIP day, a sort of orientation for freshmen and their parents, giving them the opportunity to tour the campus and see what programs and clubs were on offer. Every organization that could, set up tables piled with freebies and fliers. Of course, we wanted to set up a table of our own. However, since clubs are extracurricular, they’re all represented together, rather than each club receiving their own table. Some administration officials soon came over with frowns furrowing their foreheads.

“What is your organization? Is Chabad a club?”

“I’m a club, and not a club,” I responded, in true Jewish fashion.

They pursed their lips and called for the campus police.

“I’m just exercising my right to freedom of speech,” I told them. “It’s a public campus, and the first amendment allows us to be here.”

In using their words against them, we established our rightful place at college proceedings. Although Chabad is considered a club, we are now invited to other special events - the only club to hold such a distinction. We’ve built a great relationship with the admin - and the campus police.

Kobi* was a walking incongruity. His mother was Israeli, and he was born and raised in Israel, but held very leftist views. While in the IDF, he was arrested for joining an Arab protest *against* the IDF. When another activist student made a Yom Haatzmaut event, Kobi showed up with a Lebanese friend, both of them equipped with large signs denouncing the “Zionist state.” For the seder, he brought along a friend - from *Egypt*. When I explained that we lean left while drinking the four cups, Kobi quipped, “Of course! Who’d want to lean right?”

Kobi and I maintained a good relationship, but although he attended many of our programs and events, he remained aloof from Yiddishkeit. He agreed to have a me-zuzah on his door, but not much more than that. After completing SMC’s program, he moved away and we lost touch.

It was a few months until I heard from Kobi again. It was Motzei Yom Kippur when he called, saying, “Rabbi, you’ll never believe what happened!” That morning, he’d had a sudden urge to attend shul. He’d never gone to any religious institute other than Chabad, so he searched for the nearest Chabad center, only to find a Chabad house around the corner.

Soon after he got there, the rabbi delivered his sermon. “I’d like to repeat a story I heard from a rabbi in Los Angeles, Rabbi Levitansky,” he began.

Did he just say Rabbi Levitansky? The only rabbi in the world I actually know? How crazy!

Kobi was dumbfounded, and resolved to call me immediately after Yom Tov. We chatted for a while, catching up on the past few months. Again, I didn’t hear from him again until months later. This time, he was inviting me to his wedding.

I wonder if the bride is even Jewish, I thought to myself. Kobi’s next words almost made me fall from my chair in disbelief.

“Since I’m getting married in LA, I was wondering if you could read the Rebbe’s letter under the chuppah.”

“What?” I almost shouted, just trying to make sense of what I’d heard.

Kobi chuckled and explained how he’d made such a radical change. His Yom Kippur visit had renewed his desire to connect, and he began attending some events. That was where he met Karen*, a new baalas teshuva. He was interested in her, but his lack of Torah observance didn’t



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appeal to her at all. Things would've continued at a standstill, had not Karen posted a request for help fixing her laptop.

"I knew computers," Kobi told me. "And if I didn't - I'd figure it out! This was my chance, and I wasn't about to waste it."

They bonded over Karen's broken laptop, and as their relationship grew deeper, Karen schlepped him along to more shiurim. Wanting to please her, Kobi attended with an open mind. The classes left a deep impression on him, and he started committing to one mitzvah after another, until, a few months later, he and Karen were poised to begin their lives together, building a home based on Torah and mitzvos.

Today, Kobi, Karen, and their beautiful children live in a large Jewish community, and are active members of their shul.

I met Ruslan just before Sukkos, and invited him to join us for Yom Tov. Ruslan had only recently emigrated from Russia and spoke very poor English. He came for Sukkos, and for Shabbos after that, but was clearly uncomfortable. He felt out of place, and it frustrated him to not be able to communicate. Slowly but surely, his English improved, and he began to open up more.

I invited Ruslan to sign up for Sinai Scholars. That semester, only two other students joined. By the third class, they'd both flaked, and it was just me and Ruslan, week after week. We both enjoyed our one-on-one classes, and developed a close relationship.

JLI, Sinai Scholars' parent organization, holds a retreat every year, which includes special programming for 150 Sinai Scholar students. I highly encouraged Ruslan to register. Mirel and I attended the retreat as well, as shluchim chaperones.

The retreat was held in a gorgeous hotel in Palm Springs, but Ruslan couldn't enjoy any part of it for the first day or two. He was confined to his room with a virus, which, baruch Hashem, soon cleared up, and he was eventually able to join the sessions and programs.

On the final night of the retreat, the shluchim and a group of about thirty students, farbrenged deep into the night. As the hours wore on, the farbrengen intensified. It was already past 3 in the morning, when one of the shluchim asked everyone around the table to share their experience from the retreat, and to publicly declare which mitzvah they'd commit to from then on.

When it was Ruslan's turn, he shared how he'd come to Chabad, and how he'd felt so uncomfortable to begin

with. In describing his feelings, he became very emotional, and everyone listened sympathetically.

"I'm an only child," Ruslan said. "Until today, I thought I had no siblings. Now I know I have 150 brothers and sisters."

Tears sprang to everyone's eyes.

"I commit to wearing tefillin every day!" Ruslan declared.

"Do you have your own pair?" a shliach asked him. "If not, I'd be happy to gift you a pair."

"I don't," Ruslan replied. "But I don't want to accept gifts. I'll start saving money now, and I'll buy the tefillin myself when I have enough."

"But that could take a while, and every day gone is a wasted opportunity to do the mitzvah!" the shliach argued. "Let's make a deal. I'll get you a pair now, and when you save enough to buy a pair, give them to a friend!"

Ruslan reluctantly agreed.

The next day was the farewell luncheon. One of the highlights of the luncheon was the raffle drawing. Throughout the retreat, students had written down their mitzvah commitments on cards and slipped them into a box. Now, a few lucky cards would be drawn as winners of various prizes. Winner after winner was called out and congratulated, until finally they reached the last prize: a brand new pair of tefillin. The student picking the raffle had been at the farbrengen the night before, and as she drew the final card, her eyes widened. She beamed as she called out, "Ruslan!" The entire room erupted in cheers! So many students had been at the farbrengen when Ruslan had bared his soul, and the deep significance of the moment was not lost on them. Those who were confused by the heightened excitement were quickly filled in, and more than a few people wiped away their tears as Ruslan hugged his new tefillin tightly to his chest.

One Shabbos, a couple I'd never met before walked into the Chabad house. Eitan and Jennifer, as they introduced themselves, had recently moved into the neighborhood. The parents of one of Eitan's clients had become a baal teshuva through my parents, and when he heard Eitan was moving to S. Monica, he insisted he visit the Chabad house. They joined us for the kiddush, and returned again a couple of weeks later.

Eitan and Jennifer were soon "regulars," and were taking massive strides on their journey to Yiddishkeit. They were eager to explore all they could, and we learned with them regularly. As their wedding date approached, we began

teaching them about mitzvos pertaining to marriage. They accepted everything with equanimity, except for when we brought up wearing a sheitel. We could see that the very idea made Jennifer extremely uncomfortable. She agreed to cover her hair with a tichel or a hat; wearing a sheitel was clearly off the table.

I officiated their wedding, and they moved to an established Jewish community to begin their new lives together.

They celebrated the birth of one child, and then two more, but then Jennifer started to experience difficulties when trying to have more children. She decided to create a keili, a vessel for blessing, by starting to wear a sheitel.

A short while later, I received a text from Eitan.

"Holy cow, Rabbi."

My heart dropped. What had happened? I quickly called him.

"Jennifer is pregnant," he told me.

"Besha'ah tova!" I congratulated him.

"With triplets!"

"Woah! Now I understand your text!" We continued chatting for a bit, until a sudden thought struck me. "Eitan, how many sheitels did Jennifer buy?"

"Three!" he answered.

"Incredible! She bought *three* sheitels, and right after that, you discover you're expecting *three* babies! What a bracha!"

"It's a miracle!" Eitan agreed. "The doctor told us that in all his thirty years of practice, he's never seen a triplet pregnancy that was completely natural!"

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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