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*Rabbi Immanuel Storfer, Yeshiva Torah Ohr,
Miami, Florida*

An Unforgettable Experience

By Chaya Chazan

In the early 1970's, Rabbi Avraham Korf, the head shliach of Florida, fulfilled a life-long dream by opening a yeshiva for baalei teshuva.

After a few years, the financial burden of housing the bochurim became too heavy, and Rabbi Korf had to, regretfully, close the yeshiva. He assured the Rebbe it was just temporary - he'd get his finances in order and reopen as soon as possible.

In 2009, when I was looking for a shlichus position, I remembered this story. I flew to Florida to meet with Rabbi Korf. I told him I wanted to reopen Yeshiva Torah Ohr, and, with Rabbi Korf's blessing, support, and invaluable experience, the yeshiva was up and running a few months later.

I was then fresh out of yeshiva myself, completing a year of kollel after my marriage. I knew it would have to be a gradual process. With nothing more than a laptop and determination, I convinced a tragically underused shul to host us. Baruch Hashem, Florida is graced by many wise and learned rabbis, who all generously agreed to give a couple of shiurim. I sketched out a ten-day winter program, and spread the word of our "Miami Torah Experience" to campus shluchim all over the country. It seemed incredible, but fifteen



young men registered for that inaugural winter program.

Buoyed by the success of the yeshiva's debut, I suggested to Rabbi Korf that we make the yeshiva a permanent, year-long program. On my birthday that year, I wrote to the Rebbe, placing the letter inside a volume of *Igros Kodesh*, a collection of the Rebbe's letters. The letter to which I opened mentioned shlichus in Florida, and contained brachos for success.

I grew up in Teaneck, New Jersey with a typical suburban childhood. My first experience with Judaism was a forceful encounter with a bochur on a mitzvah tank.

I thought I looked the part of a typical college kid, so I was surprised when a black hatted, bearded young man singled me out of the crowded Manhattan sidewalk and asked me if I was Jewish.

"Uh- maybe," I answered, deliberately vague. The bochur pressed once again. I tried to wave him off, but that didn't seem to deter him in the least.

"Yes! You're Jewish! Here," he said, shoving a cardboard box into my hands, "Take a menorah!"

"No thank you. I'm not interested," I said, trying to remain polite.

"You *are* interested! Take it!"

Pesachiyah Korf, as he soon introduced himself, informed me that he was a shliach of the Rebbe! Although he said it in quite an impressive tone, it didn't mean much to me.

Pesachiyah then told me how the Rebbe had saved his life. As a child, he'd been stuck in a burning building. They managed to pull him out, but he had to be airlifted to the hospital with a very grim diagnosis. The doc-

tors shook their heads and spoke about mere *hours* remaining.

It was Purim, so his father attended the Purim farbrengen. The Rebbe gave him a dollar, and wished him a *refuah shleima* for his son. Despite all the odds, Pesachiyah awoke from his coma and fully recovered.

The story impressed me deeply, and I accepted his contact information. He invited me to experience a proper Shabbos, and we met up a few more times. Our interactions led me to Chabad at NYU, where I deepened my commitment to Yiddishkeit.

It was my first Rosh Hashanah after rediscovering my Judaism.

I asked my friends in NYU for suggestions for an "authentic" Yom Kippur experience.

"You gotta be in Crown Heights for Yom Kippur," a friend told me. "It's the biggest Chabad house in the world!" He found me a place to stay, and I was excited to experience the "real deal." The Chabad houses I'd visited had ample, comfortable seating, a crowd of people just like me, and a rabbi that announced which page to turn to.

As I entered 770 Kol Nidrei night, dressed in my holiday finery, I stopped short. Yes, the sight that met my eyes was shocking, but I was actually stopped in my tracks simply because there wasn't an inch of space to move forward! Somehow, I found a place in the center of the swarm, learning very quickly why it's lovingly referred to as "the washing machine." I couldn't hold my brand new machzor more than two inches in front of me without poking at least three people's backs, but I settled into place, trying to ignore the elbows and knees jabbing me from every side.

I tapped the shoulder of a bochur next to me. "Excuse me," I said. "Can I ask a question? Why do Chabad people dress this way on the holiday? I mean, the suits are very appropriate, and the hat is a nice touch too. I even see a tie or two around the room. But honestly - everyone's slippers and sneakers just don't seem to fit!"

While I eyed his shoes - a pair of slippers I myself would only wear indoors - he eyed mine with no less interest. His eyes bulged.

"They're leather!" he cried.

"Yes!" I responded, proudly.

"It's Yom Kippur!" he said, desperately.

"I know," I answered, patiently. "That's why I'm here!"

He asked the *rav*, Rabbi Marlow A"H, what to do.

"He needs to take them off," Rabbi Marlow paskened.

I couldn't believe they'd actually ask me to remove my nice, leather shoes in a room crowded with thousands of people.

I don't understand these Chabadniks, I thought to myself. When it comes to tefillin, they can't wait to get the leather on me. Now, they're driving me crazy to take it off!

On campus, if I wasn't in the mood to listen to my holier side, I knew various routes to my dorm that circumvented the rabbi's tefillin stand. But what could I do here, surrounded by thousands of chassidim, all convincing me that removing my shoes was as much a mitzvah as putting on tefillin? I gave in.

Just then, the aron kodesh was opened, and the Sifrei Torah were taken out. Standing there in my stockinged feet, I had no inkling of what was about to happen. While a giant of a man used pure force (and a hefty dose of elbowing) to make his way from the front of the shul to where the chazzan stood with the Torah in hand, every person in the shul tried to press forward to touch their fingertips to its velvet cover and give it a kiss. I was caught directly between the two opposing forces. While fifteen bodies simultaneously converged on me from either side, a large man stepped on my unprotected feet. Caught in the swaying mass, I fell to the floor, where I was treated to a few more bruises that would last for weeks before I finally managed to get back up.

I was done, but the bochorim around me, truly contrite, convinced me to brave it out just a little while longer, promising it would be worth my while. So, I stayed. The niggunim sung were hauntingly beautiful, their power intensified by thousands of voices melding as one.

"Can I at least get a pair of shoes to wear?" I asked, tiredly.

"I have an extra pair of slippers at home," one bochor offered.

"Thank you! So, I'll wait here while you go get them?"

"I can't do that," he admitted. "Carrying is a melacha. Come with me to my house."

"But I don't have shoes!" I protested.

I still don't understand how, but they convinced me to walk, shoeless, down the streets of Crown Heights.

The first couple of blocks weren't too bad, but then my guide led me down President Street, where just hours before, thousands of chickens had sat for Kapparos. The street was still littered with their waste. Grimacing all the way, I tried to pick my way through as best as I could. By the time I made it to the bochor's house, I'd already made up my mind.

"This is not for me!" I declared.

The bochor - Rabbi Gershom Avtzon - spoke with me for a while, cajoling me and convincing me to give it one more try.

The next day, I returned, fortified with the borrowed pair of slippers, and the determination to give return push-for-shove.

It was the final moments of Yom Kippur that convinced me. The year before, I'd broken my fast on a non-kosher pepperoni pizza. Now, I watched in awe as thousands of men, weakened from fasting all day, jumped up and down with joyous abandon and seemingly limitless energy, while singing the jubilant niggun, *Napoleon's March*. The walls shook with the force of their joy, and it felt like Moshiach would be walking through the door at any moment. I knew I'd found my place.

I had a ticket booked back to the States for Pesach. I was fired up with newfound idealism, and I wanted to spend Yom Tov in Crown Heights. My rabbi advised against it, telling me I belonged at home, with my family.

I was disappointed, but I followed his counsel and returned to Teaneck.

It was exactly the disappointment I'd imagined. The first seder was motzei Shabbos, and throughout Shabbos, cousins, uncles, and aunts traipsed in and out of the house, buying last-minute provisions and basting the turkey that would be the centerpiece of the table. No one wanted to read through the Haggadah - let alone hear the insights I'd prepared - so we rushed through Maggid, barely pausing to breathe. My cousins poked fun at my newly religious persona, and joked about me being "a little rabbi." It didn't help that I tried my best to ensure everyone was eating a proper kezayis of matzah and marror and four cups of wine. They were annoyed at me for interrupting a perfectly lovely family meal with my inane assertions that it should be done properly. Things came to a head when

I accidentally knocked over a glass of wine, spoiling the tablecloth. Somehow, that turned into a general complaint session about how much I'd changed, and how I wouldn't eat out or go shopping with them any more.

Like the Jews in Mitzrayim, I'd had enough. I changed into sturdy walking shoes, and began trekking down Route 4. The Hudson wouldn't split for me, so I crossed over the George Washington Bridge, and continued through Harlem. The streets were filled with weekend partiers, just heading home after a night of carousing. They stared at me openly, and I couldn't blame them. A religious Jew in tzitzis and a yarmulke trudging through Harlem at 3 AM wasn't an everyday sight!

"Where are you going?" some of them asked me.

"I'm going to daven with the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 770!" I answered them, unbothered whether they understood or not.

"Aren't you scared?" they asked.

"It's Leil Shimurim," I shrugged. "And besides, I'm on my way to the Rebbe. Nothing can stand in my way!"

Neighborhood after neighborhood fell before my aching feet, and I watched the sun rise over Manhattan. I stopped to rest in the Klausenberger shul in Boro Park, before doggedly continuing my exodus. Finally, *eight hours and forty five minutes later*, I arrived in 770, just in time for Shacharis.

Yes, I was exhausted, and my feet protested loudly every time I tried to stand, but that davening was absolutely unforgettable. I'd never seen the Rebbe, but between the adrenaline and 770's special kedusha, it felt like I was truly spending that moment with the Rebbe.

**Names changed to protect identity*

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