

# IllumiNations

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*Rabbi Yaakov and Chanie Zucker, Chabad of the Florida Keys, Key West, FL*

## The Key to a Jewish Heart, Part I

By Chaya Chazan

**“You can try, but there aren’t many places left,” I was told when I tried finding somewhere to move on shlichus, shortly after my engagement in 1995.**

It was true. As hard as I looked, I couldn’t find too many options. There were already 600 shluchim in the Kinus photo! I couldn’t imagine how we could add any more to that already impressive number.

I was almost ready to give up the search for shlichus when I heard through a friend that Rabbi Yossi Biston of Chabad of Parkland and North Broward, Florida was looking for someone to open a Chabad house in the Keys. He was looking for an Israeli-American - someone who could relate to both of those key demographics. As someone who



was born in America, but made aliyah as a boy, I figured I fit the bill.

We met in Elul of that year, three months before my wedding. Rabbi Biston told me to visit Key West for Rosh Hashanah so I could see what it was like for myself. There was a rabbi that drove down to Key West almost every Shabbos to host a minyan in a rented storefront. The minyan had recently ceased, but I was able to get the makeshift shul’s key from someone who still had it. I rented a hotel room nearby, bringing catering from Miami with me.

I walked around the island before heading to Duval Street, the epicenter of the island. Many of the little shops and kiosks were owned by Jews. I extended invitations to everyone I met, and was pleasantly surprised when seventy people showed up for davening on the first day of Yom Tov! Even more showed up for Yom Kippur!

It was a great initial experience that showed me just how much work could be done in the Keys.

The original plan was to visit for Chanukah, which was just 3 weeks after our wedding, and then return to Crown Heights, which would remain our base for the next year or so. We thought we’d visit Key West a few times that year to run minyanim and programs, and otherwise, we’d have the traditional “shana rishona” year in Crown Heights.

When we arrived for Chanukah, we saw how much the community needed us. Somehow, we just never went back.

The owner of the storefront had never rented it to anyone else, so I approached him and negotiated a fair rental contract. That was a simple enough transaction, but when it came to finding a place to live, things were a bit more complicated. It was winter in Florida, so every house was taken by “snowbirds.” The only place we could find was a small studio directly across the street from our rented storefront.

In the past 30 years, our Chabad house, the southernmost in the continental United States, has grown tremendously, baruch Hashem. We have over 100 baalei teshuva, some of whom are now shluchim in their own communities! We received the ultimate nachas when, a half a year ago, our daughter and son-in-law joined us, opening another branch in Key Largo.

Key West has a surprisingly rich Jewish history. It’s home to the oldest Jewish congregation Jewish cemetery in southern Florida, with ancient gravestones dating back to the 1880s. Jews fleeing persecution in Russia by ship somehow landed on the shores of the Keys. Back then, there were no bridges connecting it to the mainland, so perhaps it made them feel safe in their relative isolation.

Key West became one of the wealthiest cities in Florida due to the many boats shipwrecked on its shores. All the cargo those ships were carrying floated onto the beach (to say nothing of the other precious booty from the crews), where it was gathered by eager locals for resale.

The congregation, now Conservative, is still running, and the cemetery can be used as well.

Since we’d moved to Key West so suddenly, most of our furniture and boxes were still in New York. After a couple of months of making do with lawn furniture, we looked into shipping everything down south. We were shocked to learn it would cost \$1,200.

At that point, I had \$200 – but I was still missing \$1,000! I had no idea how we’d get our sefarim, dishes, and brand new furnishings we’d received as wedding presents.

I decided to leave it in Hashem’s more than capable Hands, while I concentrated on things that were within my control. I grabbed my tefillin, and started my usual rounds on Duval Street.

I was just about to walk into the first store, when Amos ran up to me, slightly out of breath. Amos was the owner and manager of a few other stores on Duval Street, and I knew him well. Before I could even greet him, he pulled a wad of cash out of his pocket and counted out ten brand new, crisp hundred dollar bills.

“Wha—?” I stammered, taken utterly by surprise. Amos had donated to us before, but he’d never searched for me and voluntarily given me money!

“This isn’t for the shul!” Amos warned me. “Use it on yourself, for something personal!”

“I will!” I said, still amazed. “Thank you! If I can ask – what inspired you?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “I was looking at a picture of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and I suddenly had an urge to give you \$1,000! I can’t really explain it myself.”

It was another confirmation that we were in the right place.

When we first moved to Key West, the Conservative congregation didn't have a rabbi, but having one in town gave them the impetus they needed to find their own. A few months later, a very nice man named Rabbi Grob moved down to take over leadership of the Conservative temple.

I was anxious to build a friendly rapport, so I called him right away to welcome him to town. I was nervous, not knowing if he saw Chabad as "the enemy," or if he'd be willing to keep an open dialogue.

"Rabbi! I'm so happy to hear from you!" he returned my greeting. "Can you do me a favor? The congregation gave me a fully furnished home, but I'm not sure if the mezuzos are kosher. I know I can trust Chabad to check them. Can you come over?"

As I new how to check mezuzos, I was more than happy to oblige. I checked through all his mezuzos, finding a few that were questionable. I showed them to him, explaining how they might be fixed, but Rabbi Grob waved me off.

"I'll just get a whole new set of Chabad mezuzos," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

It was the start of a great friendship. A while later, Rabbi Grob asked if I wanted to have a chavrusa with him, to join in the new cycle of Daf Yomi.

"Of course!" I answered. We began a daily chavrusa, and Rabbi Grob often brought members of his shul to mine, to join in the learning session. We continued learning together for over three years, covering half of Shas!

During that time, we grew even closer. Rabbi Grob anonymously donated a sefer Torah to our shul, a gesture whose generosity shocked me. When I asked him what inspired a Conservative rabbi to give such a generous gift to a Chabad rabbi, he told me that before coming to Key West, he'd served as a rabbi in North Carolina, in a Conservative shul close to Rabbi Yossi Groner's Chabad house.

"Rabbi Groner once brought me to New York to get dollars from the Rebbe," Rabbi Grob told me. "When we finally stood face to face with the Rebbe, he handed me a few dollars and chanted, *Pesachya Hakohen! More Yiddishkeit! More Yiddishkeit!*"

"Since then, I've tried my best to live up to the Rebbe's expectations. I bring my shul members to you, so they can get *more Yiddishkeit!*"

I was taking a post-cholent Shabbos walk on Duval Street when I passed by a man working in one of the Israeli-owned shops on the boardwalk.

"Shabbat shalom!" I greeted him.

He waved me over, and we started talking. I found out Michael was from Montreal. I mentioned the parsha of the week, and Michael blurted out, "Oh! It's my bar mitzvah parsha next week! I even remember how to read it!"

"That's amazing!" I said. "We're going to be reading it soon, during Mincha. Why don't you come lein for us?"

"But - my job..." he said, biting his lips.

"Don't worry. There's plenty of other shops on Duval! Come for Mincha, and stay until the end of Shabbos. If you're going to be our baal korei, you can't go back to work after reading the Torah!"

"Okay. I'll speak with my boss," he said, a worried wrinkle still furrowing his brow.

When he showed up for Mincha, some other members of the shul were upset.

"This is who'll read the Torah for us? Someone who spent the whole Shabbos working?"

"Right now, he's not working. He's in shul, and he'll be staying the rest of Shabbos," I answered. "At this moment, he is a tzaddik, keeping Shabbos just like everyone else. What he did before is no one's business but his own."

They nodded, and settled in their seats.

Michael read the Torah flawlessly, and stayed for the farbrengen and Maariv. He loved every minute, and left extremely inspired. That was the last time he ever worked on Shabbos.

Today, he lives a Torah observant life, and he teaches others about the beauty of Yiddishkeit.

I was visiting the Tzemach Tzedek shul in the Old City of Yerushalayim last summer. I noticed one man who kept staring at me. Finally he came over and introduced himself.

"I'm David\*," he said, shaking my hand. "Are you the rabbi in Key West?"

"Yes," I answered surprised. "How do you know who I am?"

"Mah pitom?" he said. "You and your wife's food brought me back to Judaism!" I couldn't remember him or what he was referring to, so he explained. "Years ago, a friend and I went to Florida after completing our army service. We had a wild night in South Beach, partying it up. We heard Key West was the place to go for after parties, so we hopped in the car and drove down.

"When we got there, we couldn't find any after parties, but we met a few other Israelis in the shopping district. We were just hanging around with them when you showed up, looking for a minyan. When you spotted us, you headed right over and asked us to join your minyan. We kept trying to refuse, but you wouldn't take no for an answer. You promised it would just take ten minutes, so we finally gave in and followed you.

"Of course, it took a lot longer than ten minutes, since you still had to find the rest of your minyan. Then you tried to convince us to stay for Arvit. We were famished and just wanted to get out and get something to eat, so we said no. You were clearly desperate, and you promised to serve us supper if we stayed for Arvit.

"After davening, your wife brought out plates full of food, fish, potato kugel, kishke - the works.

"But that davening, and the chat we had while we ate, made me think about my Judaism for the first time in many, many years. It inspired me to learn more, and now, you see me as I am today - a proud, Torah observant Jew!"

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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