

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Dedicated in Meomory of Harav Moshe Kotlarsky - Pioneering A Generation of The Rebbe's Shluchim

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The Key to a Jewish Heart, Part II

By Chaya Chazan

I was making one of my daily walks along Duval Avenue, the epicenter of Key West's tourism, visiting the Jewish owners of each shop with a tefillin bag tucked under my arm. When I visited Danny's store, he pointed out a curly-haired young man working across the room.

"He's Jewish," he said in a half whisper. "He's 17 years old, and he's never put on tefillin before!"

Of course, I immediately approached Jacob and asked if he'd like to put on tefillin. He agreed, and as I helped him remove the straps from his arm, I wished him a hearty *mazal tov!*

"This was kinda your bar mitzvah of sorts," I told him. "The first time you donned tefillin. It's a big milestone! Of course, we'll have to celebrate it with a proper party!"

Jacob was excited. A few weeks later, we organized a nice "bar mitzvah" for Jacob in our shul. Over the next few years, we grew closer and learned more about Jacob's history.

His mother struggled with addiction. When he was eight years old, she left him at a bar and disappeared. Little Jacob went to a friend's house and asked to stay the night. One night quickly turned into *forever*, and the friend's family sort of unofficially adopted him as their own. He knew his mother was Jewish, but since his adoptive family wasn't, he grew up without even a vestige of Jewish knowledge.

Jacob was very handy. He came around often, helping me with my car, repairs around the house, and he even taught my kids how to ride a bike. Our interactions taught him more and more about Yiddishkeit. He soon became an honorary uncle to my children, and he accompanied me on a trip to the Ohel.

A few years later, the city of Key West decided to redo all the ancient sewer systems running through the city. Every block in town was dug up in sections as the entire system was gradually replaced. When each section was completed, each home had to reconnect to the new sewer line. This required the services of a knowledgeable plumber. Knowing how expensive that could be, I held off for a while, until the city started sending me angry notices, warning me that I had to reconnect my lines as soon as possible!

When I contacted plumbers to rectify the situation, they quoted me thousands of dollars, citing, in the way of all independent contractors, unforeseen issues that would require complicated repairs and specialized equipment. I didn't have the money, but the city was threatening to foreclose on my home if I didn't fix the problem quickly.

During this hectic time, Jacob came over and bounded excitedly into my office.

"Rabbi, I have a surprise for you! The store ordered new AC units, and I made sure to get an extra one for you! This house is ancient, and it needs central AC!"

"That's really generous, Jacob," I said, thanking him. "Unfortunately, soon, I might not have a *house* to upgrade!"

I explained the problems I'd been facing, and Jacob asked to take a look at the area in question.

"Why didn't you come to me before, Rabbi?" he asked in an accusing tone. "I can do this for you!"

"You can...?" I asked, bewildered.

"Sure! All I'll need is a specific pipe from the store. It should cost around \$60."

I wasn't quite as confident in his abilities as he was, but I was desperate.

"You're hired!" I said, shaking his hand.

A few days later, Jacob brought a friend, and they started digging in my backyard. While they were working, the code enforcement came with the final eviction letter in hand. When he saw Jacob and his friend hard at work, his brow furrowed.

"Are you two licensed?" he asked.

They had to admit they were not.

"This isn't good, Rabbi," the code enforcement warned me. "I have court-ordered papers here because you neglected to fix the issue, and now you've hired two unlicensed goons to do it?"

I felt as though the situation couldn't get any worse. I ran inside and faced the large Rebbe picture hanging in the living room. I closed my eyes, imagined myself in front of the Rebbe, and spoke from my heart. "Rebbe, please help me!" I cried. Feeling much calmer, I went back outside.

"Do you see this binder full of court papers?" the enforcer asked. "I'm throwing it all out. And you boys," he said, calling to Jacob and his friend, "Can you hurry up and finish the job for the rabbi?" Seeing my look of confused amazement, he explained. "You know, my wife grew up in this house. You bought it from my mother-in-law. I can see how well you've fixed it up, and how much care you put into it."

With that, he turned around and left.

Jacob left for Sarasota after a while, and while I wanted to maintain our close connection, we more or less lost touch. I still texted him every so often to wish him a good yom tov, and I knew he had a good job, managing an air conditioning company.

I was shocked when a community member mentioned that he'd seen a notice of Jacob's passing on Facebook. Grieved and still in shock, I immediately called Jacob's mother. After consoling her on the loss of her son, I asked about funeral arrangements.

"He was my only son," she cried. "I want to keep him close to me from now on. I'm going to cremate him, and put his ashes in a necklace I can wear over my heart."

"That's a beautiful sentiment, but a Jewish soul needs a Jewish burial," I argued. No matter what I said, she refused to be convinced. She kept repeating that she wanted to keep him close to her heart. She was planning the cremation just a day or two later. It wasn't enough time to get anything done! I tried stopping it in other ways, but hit one brick wall after another. I was heartbroken that a Yiddishe neshama, not to mention a good



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friend of mine, wouldn't receive a kevrus yisroel. I wrote a letter to the Rebbe, expressing my distress, but there was nothing else I could do.

That Shabbos, I went to Cuba for a Shabbaton. My phone didn't work internationally, but as soon as my plane landed back in Florida on Sunday afternoon, the messages flooded in. Two were from Jacob's mother.

The first one read: *I'm so sorry for not taking your advice, Rabbi. I cremated my precious Jacob. But I'd still like to hold a Jewish memorial service for him.*

The next one made me jump up in my seat

I had a nervous breakdown on Tuesday, and was hospitalized. I'd already signed all the forms for the cremation, so I knew they'd be processing Jacob meanwhile. I was just released, and I found out that they didn't go through with the cremation after all because I'd missed one form. Now I'm thinking - maybe we should give Jacob the Jewish burial you were talking about?

I was overjoyed, and immediately made arrangements with the shliach in Sarasota, Rabbi Steinmetz, to give Jacob the kevrus yisroel he deserved.

When we bought a house a few years into our shlichus, our first priority was to build a mikvah. Thanks to the generosity of Meir Gutnick and others, we were able to afford a small mikvah in our backyard.

I contacted a local builder, Johnny, who promised to build our "mixer" at cost price.

"I don't want to make money off of G-d," he said. "You'll just pay for supplies."

With that taken care of, we needed to apply for permits. I knew it would be a major headache since our home was in the historic district, and any renovations or upgrades to the home had to be approved by a specialized board. I knew they were strict on things as basic as house colors! How would they view an application for a public ritual bath?

"I know people on these city boards," Johnny assured me. "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it."

As it turned out, my more pessimistic predictions came true.

"A public ritual bath?" the board member looked almost apologetic.

"No, no! Not really public!" Johnny hastened to explain. "It will really just be used by a handful of people. There won't be crowds streaming in every day."

The city planning official peered over his glasses as he flipped through my application again. "According to the city laws, 30% of your property needs to be greenery. If you build this bathhouse, it will cover too much of your yard. You can't do it."

It seemed pointless to argue. We turned around to leave, but Johnny turned back just as we got to the door.

"You're messing with the L-rd, Larry!" he warned the city official.

"...wait - wait! Come back!" Larry relented. "If the rabbi agrees to remove the carport currently on his property, then he can build his... ritual bath."

"I knew you'd come around, Larry!" Johnny congratulated him. "You don't want to mess with the L-rd!"

With the mikvah finally complete, I wanted to put a sign up in front of my home with the mikvah's name. When I went to order the sign, the owner flat out refused to make it until I got official permission from the council. When I asked around, I was told I needed to speak to the head of the historic council, a Mr. Mancini.

"Ah, Rabbi!" he greeted me, when I walked into his office. "I've been meaning to get in touch with you! I saw an advertisement for your Hebrew language crash course. Can I join?"

"Sure!" I said, taken aback. "Can I ask why...?"

"My mother was a Sephardic Jew," he answered. "But that's not why you're here. What can I do for you?"

"I want to apply for permission to put up a sign," I explained.

"Oh, sure! No problem!" he said. "You came to the right man! I'll get that sorted for you right away!"

When I came back to the sign store, authorized permit in hand, the owner was flabbergasted.

"I never thought they'd let you do it," she said. "This is almost miraculous!"

All these miracles and occurrences of hashgacha pratis told us clearly that we were doing exactly what Hashem wanted.

The main part of the mikvah was complete, and just needed aesthetic details, like tiling, painting, and fixtures, before we could open. Unfortunately, we were \$2,000 short. No small number in those years.

Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky OBM was then aboard a chazanus cruise organized by Rabbi Korf. When the ship stopped in Key West, I showed our almost completed mikvah to the chairman of Merkos, sheepishly explaining that it would look far more beautiful as soon as we secured the final bit of funding.

Rabbi Kotlarsky immediately went into action. He took me aboard the ship as a guest, and, with a few words to the right people, ensured that the rest of the money was raised.

Baruch Hashem, after 13 years in the Keys, our shlichus outgrew the storefront and the house we'd bought, and we started to look for bigger properties. We moved to a few other places, but really wanted to purchase or build our own Shul. We soon found the perfect building - a church that had started construction, but had run out of funds just before completion. It was a beautiful, spacious, oceanview building, and, with many miracles and brachos, and the help of Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky OBM, Moshe Tabacnic, and local community members, we were able to purchase it.

The church hadn't been able to finish the plumbing, electricity, or AC, so I started on that right away, making sure to get all the proper permits and licensed contractors.

Meanwhile, the city granted me a temporary CO to use it for Yom Tov. After a while, I went to the city board for final occupancy approval so we could use the building permanently. They refused, and pointed out that I was a few parking spaces short of the minimum.

"There's a medical building just down the street whose owners are good friends and congregants of mine," I countered. "Since their offices are closed for the weekend anyhow, can we consider their parking lot an extension of our own?"

The city officials agreed, and we were happy to finally be officially allowed to use our building - or so I thought.

Months later, I was still waiting on the final CO, and started receiving tickets for not having enough parking spots.

"What about the doctor's office?" I asked.

"They expanded their building, so the papers you signed before no longer apply," was all the reply I got.

It was a preposterous allegation. We'd have to settle in court. I made sure to get a court date in Adar, to take advantage of the special mazal we have. In addition, I wrote to the Rebbe.

The judge asked the city to present their grievances, which they did with much unnecessary aplomb, making it sound like I'd done everything in the most shady, haphazard way. The case did not look good.

"Is the city planner here?" the judge asked. It turns out the chief city planner was out of town, but his assistant was there. When they approached the witness stand, the judge asked, "What does the rabbi need to do to finalize and finish these permits?"

The city planner shrugged. "Nothing. He did everything he was supposed to do."

The judge turned a severe eye on the prosecution. "Did you hear that? Your own city planner says the rabbi isn't at fault! I see him running around the city all the time. He's a busy man! Why are you wasting his time? Give him his permits and CO and waive the processing fee!"

It felt like a modern day Purim miracle!

**Some names changed to protect privacy.*

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