

# 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

## Rabbi Gavriel and Chava Sebag, Chabad of Toulouse, France

# To Win in Toulouse

By Chaya Chazan

**I was born and raised in Morocco, in a traditional Sefardi family. I was first introduced to Chabad and Chassidus by Rabbi Yehuda Leib Raskin, the Rebbe's shliach to Casablanca, which had a tremendous impact on me.**

In 1981, the Rebbe opened a yeshiva in Morocco, and Chabad bochurim came from all over the world. I joined them, and when they returned to New York afterwards, I followed them to study in 770. I was barely settled before I was asked to become a shliach in the Lubavitcher Yeshiva in Brunoy. I was one of only a couple of French-speaking bochurim at the time, which made me the perfect choice. I was honored to be hand selected by the Rebbe's hanhalah.

After our marriage, we settled in Crown Heights for the kollel years. We wanted to go on shlichus, and wrote into the Rebbe about many different suggestions. When we brought up shlichus in Toulouse, the Rebbe responded with a bracha for hatzlacha. Throughout the entire process, we constantly asked the Rebbe for guidance, and were zoche to receive many brachos and instructions.

We joined Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Matasof, the head shliach of Toulouse, and have been working together for the past 38 years. We now have a large team of shluchim working in and around Toulouse. We serve the wider community, the youth, and the many college campuses in the city. For the past 20 years, I've also served as a chaplain for the air force base here.



Before moving, I received the Rebbe's haskamah to teach in the local community school here, which I've continued to this day. Whenever I returned from a prolonged absence from school, I explained to my students why I'd been missing. When I described the annual Kinus Hashluchim to them, their eyes lit up.

"Rabbi, why can't we take a trip like that?" they asked.

I thought about it. "You're right!" I said. "Let's do it!"

I've been leading a group of teens to New York every year since. Over the years, we've led hundreds of teen trips to the Rebbe, and have received much nachas from them! Many of them are now influential members of their own Chassidishe communities, and some are even shluchim, with Chabad houses of their own all over the world!

I once got a call from a very worried mother.

"My son, Chagai\*, is studying in Toulouse," she told me. "Could you invite him over, or get in touch with him in some way?"

"Of course!" I answered. I called her son a few days later and invited him to join us for Shabbos. I told him where we lived, and he told me he'd take the Metro.

"I'll meet you at the station!" I told him.

That Friday night, I took my two little kids with me, and we walked to the station, hand in hand. They chattered away in childish innocence while we waited for Chagai. The people leaving the station all seemed to be middle-aged businessmen and women, hurrying home for the day. The only other commuter was an intimidating figure, dressed completely in black. His pants were laced with chains, and he had piercings in every available spot. His black makeup was eerie, and his big, clunky combat boots made his tread uneven and ungainly.

*He can't be coming towards me!* I thought to myself. But the figure stopped just before me, lifted a heavily made up eye, and asked, "Rabbi Sebag?"

I quickly collected myself and greeted him warmly. As we walked towards my home, I could see every passerby eyeing the incongruous pair we made. My kids threw him wide-eyed side glances, and scuttled silently all the way home.

We had a few other guests that night, and I carried on as usual - singing the same niggunim, coaching my children to share what they'd learned about the parshah, and sharing some insights from the Rebbe.

When our unusual guest departed, my wife gave me a look.

"I think you went too far this time, Gavriel!" she said. "Did you see how terrified the kids were? They hardly said a word the entire time!"

I spread out my hands helplessly. "He's a Jew! He's a Jew, and I have to help him."

A few years later, I was in 770 with a group of French youth, when I was approached by a neat-looking young man with a yarmulke and beard.

"Shalom, Rabbi Sebag!" he greeted me. "I remember the last time I saw you. I had the best chicken soup I've ever had!"

"That's nice," I said, politely. "When were you at my house?"

"Don't tell me you don't remember!" he chided. "I'm sure you can't forget all the chains and makeup I wore!"

"That was *you*?" I asked, incredulously looking at his white shirt and pressed slacks.

"My mother nudged me so much about visiting you for Shabbos, I finally gave in," he reminisced with a cheeky grin. "I put on every piece of clothing I owned that I thought would make you turn away in horror. I wanted to provoke you, so I could go back to my mother and show her what a fraud you were. Instead, you treated me with kindness. The inspiration you shared at that Shabbos meal made a deep impact on me, and I decided to do a little more digging in my own backyard. I started learning, and now I'm a mashgiach in a yeshiva!"

Every day, I made time to bring a hot, kosher meal to Mael\*, a university student. The campus was far, and the trip cut a precious hour out of my day. Mael was an engineering student with a demanding workload, so every time I tried to make the food delivery a little more meaningful with an invitation to put on tefillin or learn together, he always turned me down, telling me he had to run to another class, or complete a pressing assignment. I soon started to wonder, *was it really worth so much of my time, just to bring one student a kosher meal?*

Mael finally had time to visit, and my son offered to teach him a Chassidic maamer. After that, Mael grew more and more involved, until he decided to adopt the Torah way of life as his own.

"Do you know what changed my mind about Yiddishkeit?" he told me, many years later. "I came to your house on a Shabbos Mevorchim. Your daughter was nine or ten years old at the time, and she had spent all morning saying Tehillim. She finally finished the entire sefer - her first time accomplishing such a feat! She was so excited and proud of her accomplishment, she ran around the table laughing and singing with glee. Her unrestrained joy for kedusha made a life-changing impression on me."

As part of my chaplain duties for the Air Force, I was asked to join a military mission to the base on Cote d'Ivoire. Just before we boarded the plane, one of the soldiers approached me.



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"Rabbi, I don't believe in G-d," he declared.

I looked at him in surprise. Why would he declare such a thing, unprovoked? I offered some reply, and we boarded the plane and took our seats.

As the chaplain, I was given a manifest of all passengers aboard. My eye was immediately drawn to the one Jewish name on the list - Arnaud Cohen\*. *I'll bet anything he's the soldier that approached me before to declare his atheism, I thought to myself. Of course, he was.*

Once we were settled in Africa, I invited Arnaud to join me in my military villa (as clergy, I was given the nicest accommodations on base). He arrived late Friday afternoon, shortly before Shabbos.

"I know," I began, "that the entire purpose of my military mission is for you."

Arnaud was taken aback, so I explained the concept of Hashgacha pratit.

"I don't believe in G-d," he reminded me, shaking his head.

"Humor me," I begged. "The sun is about to set. We only have these few precious moments left, since I'll be heading back to France early Sunday morning. Can you please put on tefillin?"

I made a compelling case, and Arnaud agreed. Shabbos came in just a few minutes later, and I invited him to join my solitary Shabbos meal. I sang the tunes of Kabbalas Shabbos joyfully, and began to sing the age-old tune of *Sholom Aleichem*.

As I sang, Arnaud the atheist began to sob.

"It's been twenty years since I've heard kiddush," he cried. "I left my parent's home so angry, resolved never to have anything to do with G-d ever again. I married a non-Jew, and was proud to be an atheist. You Sholom Aleichem brings me back."

A servicewoman in New Caledonia asked me to prepare her son for his bar mitzvah. Despite the time difference, we started to meet over Zoom, and I introduced him to the Alef Beis, brachos, and the rudiments of Judaism.

Once he was reading fluently and davening on his own, I told his mother he was ready for his bar mitzvah. The chaplaincy office felt it was only right that the rabbi who taught him should be there to celebrate with him.

The government paid for me to visit New Caledonia - during Covid, no less - to celebrate a Jewish child's bar mitzvah.

As I sat at that strange table with my airline style kosher meals, the bar mitzvah boy's non-Jewish father eating treif beside me, I reflected on the calling of a shliach - "*Ve'atem teluktu l'echad echad - You will gather them, one by one.*" Why else would I fly 16 hours to help the lone Jewish family on the entire base?

And yet, the tremendous effort I'd spent on this individual family was amply rewarded. The boy committed to putting on tefillin. By the next Shabbos, their meal looked completely different. This time, they ate on paper plates, and the menu consisted of jarred or canned food - the only kosher items his mother could find on such short notice.

I walked into the classroom ready to begin my lesson, but I sensed a certain tension in the air.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"One of our friends has a question, but he's too embarrassed to ask," one of the boys volunteered.

I sat behind my desk and smiled. "No one should ever be embarrassed to ask a question."

"I have a girlfriend," Ruben\*, another boy in the class blurted out.

"Okay," I responded. In a school like ours, where none of the students came from religious homes, this was nothing unusual. "I just hope she's Jewish!"

Ruben's red face and downturned head were all the answers I needed.

I knew we weren't going to get through the day's lesson plan. Instead, I launched into a discussion about the importance of marrying (and dating) Jewish. I told Ruben that no matter how difficult it was for him, it was imperative that he break up with his girlfriend.

"I'll do it now," he said, pulling out his phone. He quickly punched in a text and smiled weakly. "There. It's done."

As I prepared for bed later that night, I reflected on Ruben's challenge, and how readily he'd accepted my advice.

I pulled out my phone and sent him a quick text, even though it was already midnight. *I'm so proud of what you did today, I wrote. All my years of teaching were worthwhile, just for that moment of helping you overcome a challenge and do the right thing.*

The next morning, Ruben approached me at recess.

"Rabbi, I want to tell you the truth. Yesterday in class, when I said I'd texted my girlfriend, I lied. But then late last night, I got your text. I was so touched that you were thinking of me so many hours after school, that I actually *did* break up with her."

"Thank you so much," Mr. Jacoby\* said, as I finished affixing the last mezuzah on his doorpost. "Here; I have something for you." He handed me two checks. "This one is to cover the cost of the mezuzos," he said, "and this one is a donation for the school."

I accepted the first check, but took the second and ripped it in half.

"How can I take a donation for the school, knowing your children are enrolled in public school?" I asked him. "Keep the money. Give me your children instead!"

My heartfelt plea was heard. Mr. Jacoby enrolled his daughter in our school, where she continued through 12th grade.

My wife was 8 months pregnant when the ultrasound revealed a worrisome complication. The umbilical cord had bunched up, creating a blockage between the fetus and the placenta. The doctors worried for the baby's health and shook their heads sorrowfully.

Hoping the cord would loosen, they ordered my wife to rest, and told her to come back in a couple of weeks.

A few days later was Gimmel Tammuz. I caught the next flight to New York, so I'd be by the levaya. We followed the Rebbe's aron to the Ohel, and, somehow finding a paper and pen, I jotted down a request for a bracha for my wife and unborn baby. My tzetel joined the shower of dirt and rocks that formed the burial mound. I felt an immediate sense of relief and assurance.

When I returned home, I told my wife, "Everything will be fine. When we go to the next appointment, you'll see."

A few days later, we went back to the clinic for the next scan. The doctors glanced at each meaningfully, and spoke to each other in hushed tones.

"What's going on?" my wife asked, nervously.

"We don't know why or how," the doctors explained. "But there is absolutely no obstruction anymore. Look at the difference between the last scan and this! I don't understand how it changed so quickly!"

We smiled. We knew *exactly* how.

\*Names changed to protect privacy

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