

IllumiNations

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

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The Chassidische Litvak

By Chaya Chazan

Vilna is almost a magical word that conjures up visions of convivial bearded men arguing over a blatt Gemara as they rush to Shacharis, the sounds of Torah learning wafting through almost every window they pass.

Unfortunately, the “Jerusalem of Lithuania” has lost much of its luster since those glorious, bygone days. The Nazis ym”s ravaged Vilna’s vibrant community, and the Soviets trampled whatever was left.

In the early 90’s, after Lithuania was freed from Communist Russian hold, a small Jewish community was still extant, although most weren’t Torah observant. Still, they knew they’d need a rabbi to lead their shul, so they wrote to 770’s Merkos Office, asking for a rav.

My wife and I went to check it out, arriving in Vilna shortly before Purim of 1994. We met a few elderly stragglers in an old shul and tried to get a sense of the community from them.

“How many people do you think would come if we organized a Purim party here?” we asked.

They looked at each other thoughtfully. “If you could get even 40 people, I’d consider that a huge hatzlacha!” one answered.

We put a small ad in the paper, and hoped we’d fill our room. In the end, over 600 people showed up!



When we came back for Pesach, there were so many people interested in a seder, we had to organize shifts so everyone could attend! We had over 1,000 attendees all in all.

It was clear there was so much untapped potential. Perhaps we’d once again hear davening and learning, floating through the streets of Vilna.

For our first Chanukah, we arranged a public menorah lighting in the main square, outside the mayor’s office. Such an event was still quite new and radical, and it attracted a huge crowd. Amongst the thousands milling about, enjoying the Chanukah songs and watching the massive menorah, was a tiny old woman in a wheelchair. As she watched the flames dance atop the menorah’s branches, tears poured freely down her cheeks.

“Do you know, Rabbi,” she confided in me, “how hard it was for me to get here? I live forty miles outside the city, and it’s quite difficult for me to get around. But when I heard about this event, I told my son I had to be here – at all costs.

“I remember when these streets were witness to the daily beatings, torture, and humiliation of hundreds of thousands of Jews. Now these same streets witness the pride and resilience of our nation. I couldn’t miss seeing it myself, regardless of the difficulty.”

When we started our summer camp, we knew many of our campers had never had a bris. So many of these brave children volunteered to undergo the painful procedure, so we flew out an experienced mohel. He was only staying a couple of days, and he was fully booked, from one bris to another!

There was one camper, a 15-year old boy named Adomas*, who hadn’t signed up.

“Adomas, the mohel is leaving tomorrow morning!” I reminded him. “This is your last chance!”

“I can’t,” he answered. “My father isn’t Jewish, and he would never let me do it!”

“Let’s call your father now,” I suggested. “It can’t hurt to ask.”

I was able to hear every word of Adomas’ conversation. After explaining the situation, his father remained silent for a few moments.

“Adomas, do you really want to do this?” he finally asked. “This is a surgery, and will involve a painful recovery. Before you do this, you need to be *really* sure. Is this what you want?”

Adomas answered immediately. “Yes!”

Early the next morning, right before the mohel ran to the airport, Adomas joined the bris of Avraham and received his Jewish name.

I was humbled by the courage of this giant, who didn’t hesitate despite the hardship involved.

Shlichus means being there for a Jew’s needs, whatever they may be. While we offer many shiurim, minyanim, and Shabbos meals for their spiritual side, we pay just as much attention to their physical needs. Our soup kitchen was one of our earliest programs, and we’re still going strong, thirty years later. We serve between 50-60 meals a day, including delivery for those who are infirm and homebound. We have funds set aside for wood to heat Soviet-era homes in the winter. While our school teaches children the basics of Judaism, our dormitory offers food, heat, and care for students who can’t live at home.

Since she was one of our dorm residents, we were very involved with Lina’s* life. My wife noticed Lina had many unexplained absences. When Lina’s mother arrived to take her home, my wife started to grow worried. She called Lina’s mother and learned the heartbreaking truth: Lina had been diagnosed with cancer. With the limited medical resources available, the doctors just shrugged their shoulders helplessly and told her to say goodbye to her daughter. Lina’s mother was distraught, and even my wife had no idea how to comfort her.

I was on a fundraising trip in South Africa then, and I told Lina’s story as an example of how we could make a real difference for these children.

“I think we can do more for Lina,” the donor I was meeting with said. “Why don’t you send her here, and we’ll get her the best care available!”

At first, Lina’s mother wouldn’t hear of parting with her daughter, but in time, she came to see it would be best for her. Lina flew off to South Africa where she underwent treatment. After a long, hard battle, Lina was in remission!

South Africa had one more life-altering gift to bestow on Lina. She soon met her husband, a nice man from Johannesburg, and they now live in Eretz Yisrael.

“What do we do?” my wife asked anxiously. “Ruta’s grandmother just passed away!”

It was a pressing issue. Ruta was one of our students. She lived with her grandmother and had no other family at all. We were about to leave on an extended trip, but Ruta couldn’t be left alone by herself!

“I don’t see the problem,” I replied. “We’ll just take her with us, as one of the family!”

As Ruta had no other relatives, we took her in and became her legal guardians. She slept in our daughter’s room, and joined us for all our family activities. That is, until Shabbos came, and we were all ready to go to shul.

“I don’t want to go to shul!” Ruta protested. “On Saturdays, I go to church!”

We were dumbfounded. How could a Jewish girl, who’d been enrolled in a Jewish school for years, say such a thing? When had she ever visited a church?

We discovered that a group of missionaries had snuck themselves into Ruta’s life a while before. It was clear that Ruta’s grandmother wouldn’t live for too much longer, and they saw a quick and easy conquest. They offered Ruta’s grandmother financial aid she desperately needed, and began introducing Ruta to Christianity.

Grateful and trusting, Ruta fell right into their trap.

Meanwhile, the situation was growing worse and worse. In school, Ruta began exhibiting signs of defiance throughout the Jewish classes. Our daughter, with whom she shared a room, showed us the Bible Ruta kept in her bedside table. Trembling, I removed the Bible and disposed of it. We were out of our depths, and contacted an anti-missionary group for advice.

“Put it back!” they told me. I could hardly believe my ears. “She needs to be the one to remove it,” they explained. “It does nothing but harm when you remove it against her will.”

I put the Bible back where she’d left it, davening that Hashem would soon show us how to reach this poor, misguided neshama.

A while later, we hosted a group of students from Kaunus (Kovno). One of them, Jakob*, hit it off with Ruta. In her personal desire to settle down and begin a Jewish family,

Ruta forgot all about her Christian leanings. She and Jakob eventually married, and now live in Jerusalem with their beautiful children.

We have eleven children of our own, kein ayin hara, and our oldest ones are already married and parents in their own right. We were looking forward to the “grandparent” era of parenting, gratefully closing the chapter on bottles, terrible twos, and potty training, when Hashem gave us our own “Lech Lecha” challenge.

We got a distraught call from Rosalia*, an elderly woman, who told us her daughter’s stability had resulted in the termination of her parental rights. Her three little children were about to be lost in the foster system, shuffled from one non-Jewish family to the next.

We drove to Kaunus to meet them. We originally thought we’d place them in our dormitory, but when we saw them, we knew we couldn’t do that. The youngest was a tiny two-year-old toddler, who sucked his thumb vigorously and peered at us through scared eyes. We knew these poor children needed as much love and stability as possible. There could be no replacement for a home with a father and mother figure. We became their legal guardians and adopted them, welcoming them into our family and our home.

These children have suffered trauma far beyond their years, and don’t know how to properly express their fears and emotions. It presents a set of challenges to navigate as we try to learn to live with each other.

The first time they watched my wife light Shabbos candles, they stared in wondrous amazement. When we took them to shul on Shabbos, and brought the Sifrei Torah close so they could kiss it, you could almost see the purity of their neshamos shining on their faces. It was the first time these innocent souls had even experienced kedusha, and it was incredibly moving to see how deeply it affected them.

We know every child is a bracha, and we thank Hashem for the zechus of raising another three neshamos. We daven every day that Hashem helps us find the path to overcome the upheaval of their past and raise them joyfully and successfully.

I was waiting in line to board a flight to Johannesburg, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to find an average-looking man smiling at me.

“I think I know a shortcut,” he said. “Follow me.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “I’m from the tribe, too.”

I knew we wouldn’t have much opportunity to speak in the few minutes we had before we’d board, but when he pulled out his boarding pass, I saw his seat was right next to mine.

It was a long flight, and we spent the first few hours chatting comfortably. He told me his grandmother was a Holocaust survivor. Her bitter experience made her want to forget she was a Jew, to spare her family from the horrors she went through. She kept her heritage a secret for many years. Even after the family found out, they had no interest in learning anything more about their Yiddishkeit.

We both dozed off. When I woke up a few hours later, sunlight was streaming through the airplane’s windows. I washed my hands and went to the back of the plane to daven. As I wrapped up my tefillin, I debated whether I should bring them to my seatmate. From what he’d told me, he wasn’t interested in anything Jewish. But how could I not even offer? I figured it was worth a try. To my surprise and delight, he agreed, and accompanied me to the back of the plane.

“The Shema prayer we recite is the same one said by thousands of Jews as they were marched to the gas chambers,” I told him as I wrapped the straps around his arm. “It’s the quintessential statement of unbounded belief in G-d – a faith that has sustained us for millennia.”

As he repeated each word of Shema after me, he broke down in tears that even he couldn’t explain.

“This is so unlike me,” he said, shaking his head. “I didn’t even say kaddish at my mother’s funeral! We must be closer to G-d, up here in the clouds.”

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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