

# IllumiNations

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

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## A Promise Fulfilled at Last

By Chaya Chazan

**In 1941, the Frierdiker Rebbe began the National Committee for the Furtherance of Jewish Education's flagship program, *Released Time*.**

The Wednesday afternoon program took advantage of the last hour of the school day to teach Jewish kids in public schools about Judaism. The program was wildly successful in Brooklyn, and Rabbi Hecht, the organizer, was soon ready to introduce it to schools in other parts of the state.

I'd only recently returned from yeshiva, and I was soon appointed to head the Long Island division of the program. I got to know the area well, so when I married in 1976, it made sense to use my connections and build a more permanent shlichus there.

Over time, the once-a-week Released Time hour turned into so much more, including a full-fledged Hebrew school, adult education, minyanim, holiday programs, and so much more.

When we first moved, we were the only shluchim in Nassau County. Now, 35 couples serve the same area!



In those early years, to make sure we were reaching as many people as possible, we split Nassau County into four parts, and made sure to organize a program in each quarter on an ongoing basis. We held classes in different peoples' homes, attempting to create a warm community atmosphere amongst a smattering of Jews spread out across 200 miles.

We were zoche to be among the first to create programs that are now ubiquitous in Chabad houses all around the world, such as Hebrew School, Model Matzah Bakery, and reinvigorating life into pre-existing congregations.

As the only shluchim in such a large area at a time when shlichus was relatively new, it felt like we had a blank canvas. There was so much to be done; so many Jews to meet; so many demographics to cater to! We decided early on that we'd always try to be on the "cutting edge" of shlichus, trying to fill and anticipate every need of any Jew in our area.

In the late 90's, there was a growing sense of unease and disillusionment amongst teens. Knowing how much the Rebbe emphasized positivity and empowerment, we wanted to do something to change the trend. The Columbine school shooting was the final straw.

We began the Good Deed Awards for Long Island Teenagers, which asked public schools throughout the county to nominate their students for a good deed or accomplishment. Since its inception, we've given the award to over 1,500 boys and girls. Many of them are now leaders in their respective fields, be it law, politics, or business.

Every year, we hold the ceremony, inviting previous winners, community leaders, and elected officials to join in celebrating these future leaders. It's always a highly anticipated event, which not only encourages teens to be a force of good, it allows us to reach every segment of society in a positive way.

Every summer, we held a "Moonlight Cruise with Yiddishkeit." We rented a boat for the night and invited about 50-60 people to join us for a cruise with kosher food, drink, music, and an inspirational speaker.

One year, I sent our flier to the Rebbe for approval and a bracha. The flier was beautifully designed and advertised the event, including "music," "champagne," and "guest speaker Rabbi Hecht."

A short while later, I got a call from Rabbi Leibel Groner AH, the Rebbe's secretary. "The Rebbe crossed out the word *champagne*," he told me.

"Of course, I'll do whatever the Rebbe says to do," I agreed. "I just wanted to clarify – the champagne we're serving is a special brand, with hashgacha from Rabbi Garelik. We were very excited to promote it!"

I received a reply almost immediately. The Rebbe said that *champagne*, by itself, can be taken as unkosher. The flier must specify that this was *kosher champagne*.

I reprinted the fliers with the correction, and the Rebbe gave us a beautiful bracha for success.

I'd heard the president of a synagogue in Long Island was ill, so I went to visit him in the hospital. After speaking with him for a while, I headed out. I was crossing the main lobby when a doctor ran after me.

"Excuse me, are you a rabbi?" he asked, breathlessly.

With the ink on my semicha barely dried, I felt unworthy to own it, but I admitted that I was.

"I need you!" he said. "Follow me!"

Completely at a loss, I followed him through a dizzying maze of white hallways, until we arrived at a man on a stretcher. His face was ghostly pale, and although I wasn't exactly sure what the defibrillators the doctors were holding did, I knew they weren't omens of good news.

"Do something!" the doctor urged me.

I looked down at the man on the verge of death, my mind racing. To receive my semicha, I'd been tested thoroughly on melicha, but how would knowing how to salt a chicken help this poor man? All I knew was that a Jew should recite the most important, fundamental prayer before passing. I recited Shema loudly and with fervent concentration.

"His daughter is waiting there," the doctor pointed out to me. "Go speak with her."

I was a newborn rabbi without any experience at all. What could I say to her? Knowing how the Rebbe emphasized positivity, I spoke with her about the journey of the neshama, and how mitzvos help our neshama connect with Hashem. I hardly knew what I was saying, or why I was saying it!

A few minutes later, the doctor stuck his head out into the hallway and gave me a thumbs up. Without stopping to think, I suddenly raced out to the parking lot. I'd just purchased mezuzos for someone earlier that day, and they were still in my car. I grabbed one and rushed back to the ill man.

"Hold this," I said, helping his hand enclose the rolled parchment. I noted with satisfaction how his weakened hand clung to the mezuzah, and I returned to the lobby to continue speaking with his daughter. A short while later, the doctor gave me another thumbs up. With her father's life now secure, I returned home.

During the drive, I scrutinized my reactions throughout the entire encounter. Had I done the right thing? What if I was just making it all up?

When I got home, I took out a volume of the Friediker Rebbe's *Igros Kodesh* and opened a page at random. The letter spoke about the protective qualities of a mezuzah, and how just being in close proximity to one was enough to guarantee protection for one's health.

A few days later was Purim, and I went to visit the patient, now on his way to a full recovery. I gave him some mishloach manos, and helped him put on tefillin for the first time in his life. Fittingly, his name was Mordechai!

Many years later, I was visiting new patients on my rounds as the hospital chaplain. One woman peered at me closely and asked, "Rabbi, do you remember me?"

When I apologized and told her I didn't, she told me she was Mordechai's daughter. "I've never forgotten the conversation we had while my father hovered between life and death," she said. "It had a profound impact on me. My father lived another five years after you met!"

Her diagnosis wasn't good, and when she passed away a short while later, I was honored to fulfill her last will and conduct her funeral.

I got a call about a Jewish woman, Claudia\*, who was very ill. She was unaffiliated with any synagogue, so she didn't have a rabbi visiting her. Of course, I was happy to visit her and do whatever I could to help.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much to do for her except prepare for the end. Claudia had a little two-year old son, Greg\*, and I promised her I'd make sure he had a bar mitzvah. She passed away a short while later, and I officiated her levaya. Greg's father wasn't Jewish, so while I tried to invite them to classes and events, he

became more and more distant. When he remarried a Christian woman, that was the end of Greg's Jewish education. They removed him from his Jewish preschool and enrolled him in the church kindergarten instead. They had him baptized, and raised him as a Christian.

Unfortunately, as time passed, I grew busy with so many other things, and my promise to Claudia completely slipped my mind. Thirty years later, I was giving a class for prison inmates, when one inmate introduced himself as Claudia's brother-in-law. I immediately remembered my neglected promise, and asked him to give me Greg's contact information.

When I told Greg who I was, he was so happy.

"I've been waiting for your call!" he told me.

He told me about his childhood. When he was a boy, his grandfather had come for a visit. He noticed a cross in Greg's wallet, and was taken aback. Quietly, he asked Greg to accompany him on a walk. He gently explained that Christianity and crosses were not for him. Greg listened respectfully, but it was hard to understand why he couldn't embrace something he'd known his entire life.

When Greg was 14, he was standing on the church stage for his confirmation. The priest introduced him, mentioning his mother by name. When Greg heard his mother's name, something came over him, and he knew it just wasn't for him.

Greg always knew a rabbi had promised him a bar mitzvah. He tried finding me, with no luck. Since then, he'd been waiting for my call.

At the ripe age of 32, Greg learned how to read Hebrew, and celebrated his long-overdue bar mitzvah. Now, he's a regular at our Chabad house, and his wife and children are very involved as well.

"Hi, Rabbi. This is Susie\*," said the woman on the phone. "I was wondering - can you officiate my father's memorial?"

"I've officiated many funerals before, but what exactly is a memorial...?" I asked, with a sinking heart.

"Well, my dad passed away in Florida. We're going to cremate him, and then inter his remains in the family plot up here. We'll have a nice ceremony, and I was wondering if you can come and do the *Jewish* stuff."

I immediately began explaining the importance of a proper Jewish burial, and the pain cremation causes the neshama. Susie was polite, but noncommittal.

"I hear you, Rabbi," she answered. "I wouldn't want my kids to cremate *me*, but what can we do? My dad only left a couple hundred dollars to cover the expenses!"

"If that's the only issue, leave it to me!" I said. "I'll make sure your father receives a kosher burial."

I called the Chevra Kadisha in Florida to see what could be done. They recommended transferring the body to Long Island and burying it here. I quickly raised the necessary amount and made the arrangements.

I called Susie to update her, and explained the next stage in the process: the taharah. Susie sounded discomfited.

"My dad picked out a special outfit to be buried in," she explained. "It's his favorite golfing set - a beautiful green plaid."

"That sounds so nice," I said, patiently. "But I assure you, your dad no longer wants that. Now that he's in Heaven, amongst the other souls, he wants to be just like them. Simple, white burial shrouds will give him entry to every palace in Heaven."

Susie agreed, and we carried on with the preparations. At the last moment, Susie asked for one final favor. "He loved golf so much, and really wanted to have *something* from golf buried with him. Can we do that?"

After considering it for a while, I was able to accede to her request. We buried her father with a proper kevarah - and added some golf balls alongside his plot.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*

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