

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 Long Short Journey

By Chaya Chazan

I grew up in Borehamwood, England, in a traditional Jewish family that observed the basics of Shabbos and kashrus.

My grandfather, a devout Jew, played a pivotal role in my early religious upbringing, introducing me to the Chabad community. Even as a young boy, I was well aware of who the Rebbe was and familiar with Chabad terminology. For my bar mitzvah, I asked for and received a set of Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam tefillin, which I proudly carried in a velvet bag embroidered with "770," the iconic Chabad building in New York.

Although I considered myself a Lubavitcher, my parents were less enthusiastic about my connection to Chabad. When I was accepted into Gateshead, often referred to as the "Oxford" of yeshivos, my father insisted it was a rare opportunity I couldn't pass up. Despite this, I never truly felt at home there. My 770-adorned tefillin symbolized a connection that made me feel somewhat out of place. By the end of my first year, the Rosh Yeshiva recognized my struggle and advised me to decide which path I wanted to follow.



Seeking a sense of belonging, I eventually found camaraderie with a group of Bobover bochorim. This new connection led me to further explore the Bobover community. On a visit to New York in 2002 to check out a Bobover yeshiva, I couldn't resist the pull to visit 770, the Chabad headquarters I'd heard so much about. Although I felt a strong connection to Chabad, I returned to Boro Park and continued my life among the Bobover chassidim, even transferring to a Bobover yeshiva in England.

A few years later, I got married, but after a few years of married life in England, I began to question whether the chassidishe lifestyle was my true path.

We wanted a fresh start, unburdened by what had been and the people who knew us before. We wanted to move back to Eretz Yisrael, but my parents were adamantly against it and brought up a slew of concerns.

I wrote a letter to the Rebbe, explaining all the pros and cons, including my parents' reluctance. I put it in the *Igros*, and received an answer about how the air of Eretz Yisrael is said to make one wise, and that it would be a good idea to move, despite others' objections. The Rebbe also encouraged spreading Yiddishkeit in Eretz Yisrael.

Armed with the Rebbe's brachos, we moved to Eretz Yisrael. I dropped the chassidishe levush, opting instead to return to my parents' Sefardi roots. We tried our best to make it work, but I didn't have a steady job, and it was very difficult to manage in Eretz Yisrael. Just then, we both received excellent job offers - back in England.

Unsure of what to do, I wrote to the Rebbe again. The letter on the page welcomed the person on their visit to England, and gave a bracha for success.

So, once again, we packed up and moved back to England. Baruch Hashem, it seemed like things were finally falling into place. I renewed my interest in Chabad, learning Chassidus, and following daily Tanya shiurim. I helped the nearby Chabad rabbi in all his activities, and saw myself as a shliach of the Rebbe.

Although we were doing well in England, our desire to live in Eretz Yisrael never fully faded.

Of course, I wrote a letter to the Rebbe. This time, however, none of the letters on the page where I'd placed my note seemed to have anything to do with my question. I was accustomed to perfectly clear answers, so I didn't know what to do. After much discussion and soul searching, we decided to make the move. I wrote to the Rebbe, informing him of our decision. When I placed the letter in the *Igros*, the Rebbe's answer read, "Regarding what you have determined upon, may it be with much success." I understood that the Rebbe was simply waiting for me to make a firm decision one way or the other, to commit wholeheartedly, knowing there was no turning back.

We settled in Ramat Beit Shemesh, just across the street from the Chabad house. I davened there regularly, and offered to help the shliach, Rabbi Farro, in any way I could - giving shiurim, visiting people, setting up events, and more. After a couple of years, Rabbi Farro told my wife and me that there was an opening for an English-speaking shliach in a small community nearby.

We clearly saw this was Hashem's plan for us, and we opened Chabad of Mishkafayim a short while later. Baruch Hashem, there's been tremendous growth over the past five years, and, with Hashem's brachos, there will continue to be much more.

Last summer, we moved into our new Chabad house. We were excited to inaugurate it with an amazing Tishrei, filled with minyanim, celebrations, and, of course, food! Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were beautiful, and Sukkos was wonderful. We decided to celebrate Simchas Torah in style, with a full buffet both at night and the next afternoon.

Hakafos that night were rocking! The room shook with sheer joy and love for the Torah. We all went to bed, exhausted but buoyant.

I woke up early the next morning and ran straight to shul to prepare for the morning minyan. Suddenly, I heard gigantic booms, and the walls shook like they had the night before. This time though, there were no jubilant celebrations to explain the quakes. I thought maybe someone was jumping on the roof, and I even went out to check.

A neighbor, who I strongly suspect is an intelligence agent, passed by. "You'd best get home, Rabbi," he advised me. "We're at war. The sirens will go off very soon. Go make sure your shelter is ready!"

I was a bit skeptical, but his prediction came true a short while later. I ran back home, and we huddled in the shelter for safety. The sirens seemed unending. No sooner had one quieted than the next began its unearthly wail. Final-

ly, in the early afternoon, the sirens settled. When enough time had lapsed, we felt safe enough to walk around.

We realized no one in our community had prepared lunch for that day - they all thought they'd be joining us in shul. We packed up all the food and brought it to a friend, who had a large bomb shelter. We also brought the Sifrei Torah along, so we could dance and celebrate with them. We spent the rest of the day there, farbrenging and encouraging each other.

It was only after Yom Tov, when we turned our phones and computers on again, that we learned the devastating truth.

My neighbor, Mr. Becher, was worried about his son Yehuda, who'd traveled south for the Nova festival. He spent hours searching for him, until we learned the tragic news that he'd been murdered. Yehuda's final message, a prescient and heartrending rendition of *Elokai Neshama*, has been heard around the world.

We helped arrange the funeral and shiva. Many of Yehuda's friends came, and it was amazing to see how their pintele yid shone forth. While they may have looked like typical secular Israelis, their souls yearned for meaning in the midst of tragedy; to tighten their grip on their Father's Hand.

Mishkafayim is a sleepy little neighborhood in Ramat Beit Shemesh. There are no bustling avenues with large shops and hundreds of pedestrians roaming around. It makes mitzvah tefillin a bit harder, but, of course, there are always opportunities around!

There is one store with the distinction of being the only grocery open on late Friday afternoons. Because of this, there's quite a bit of traffic then. My son suggested it as the perfect place to set up a tefillin stand.

Of course, the first person we met was Avishai*, the curly headed teenager manning the counter. I asked him if he wanted to put on tefillin, and he flatly refused. His accent sounded quite familiar, and, as we got to talking, I found out he'd grown up in Borehamwood as well!

"I rarely meet other Jews from my hometown!" I told him. "What incredible Hashgacha Pratis that drew us here together!"

We soon bonded over shared memories, and Avishai's icy demeanor melted away completely. When I asked him again if he wanted to put on tefillin, Avishai nodded.

After a couple of weeks, Avishai shook his head again when I asked him to put on tefillin.

"I already put them on today!" he said with a cheeky grin.

After a while, Avishai moved on to bigger and better things. Three years later, he visited me and shook my hand solemnly.

"Rabbi, you changed my life," he said. "Three years ago, I was just a drifting teenager, hooked on drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol. When you walked into the store, you shook me up and compelled me to change. I've gotten my life back in order, all thanks to you!"

Devorah*, one of the young women in our community, recently gave birth to her first baby. Unfortunately, there were some complications, and she had to remain in the hospital.

I was hosting a farbrengen in honor of Pesach Sheini, and I dedicated it to a refuah shleima for Devorah.

"May Devorah come home by the end of the week!" I said. Everyone answered "Amen," and drank l'chaim.

The next day, Devorah was released from the hospital with a completely clean bill of health!

Rivka*, one of my seminary students, confided in me about her difficult home life. Her parents were going through an acrimonious divorce and she felt pulled between them. Finances were extremely tight, so though she knew she wanted to go to med school, she had no idea how she'd pay for it.

"Emunah and bitachon are the keys," I told her. "If you can work on yourself and place your trust in Hashem, He will take care of everything."

She was still extremely anxious, so I tried to give her pointers on how to strengthen her emunah and bitachon.

After finishing seminary, she went on to Einstein College. A few months later, she called me, excitement and wonder still palpable in her voice.

"It worked!" she said. "I worked really, *really* hard to place my trust in Hashem and calm my anxiety. You'll never believe what happened! A donor offered to pay the tuition of every new Jewish student in college! Baruch Hashem, everything has been taken care of, exactly as you told me it would!"

After discarding my Chassidische levush, I got a job on the diamond Bourse. I was anxious to fit in and look the part of a commensurate businessman, so I decided to start trimming my beard. It felt strange after so many years of growing it out, but I felt I had no choice. Parnassah was tight, and this would ensure I could provide for my family.

I rode the train to work every day, and usually picked up the free Chayenus that were given out in every train station in Israel. I enjoyed keeping up with the daily Chitas, as well as the many other learning resources Chayenu included.

One day, shortly after taking the job, I used my commute to read through the Rebbe's letters included in the Chayenu. The words struck me like lightning: *Hashem's shefa comes through the beard. Even though you've already begun trimming, you should stop and regrow it, and see how Hashem's brachos flow.*

It felt like the Rebbe was speaking *directly* to me. I was shaking and trembling all over. When the train doors opened, I saw a friend, a Chabad chassid, standing on the platform. I immediately went over and asked him to read the letter with me again, as I doubted the evidence of my own eyes.

Although I was unsure of my path in life and which derech I would follow, the Rebbe never gave up on me.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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