

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 Ripple Effect of Goodness

By Chaya Chazan

Our shlichus adventure first took us to the cold of Russia for five years, near my wife's childhood home.

We led youth programming for another shliach, but we were soon ready to strike out on our own. Originally, we wanted to stay close to home, but we soon realized we needed to broaden our horizons. Even so, Australia was a bit *too* broad. When the option first came up, we almost dismissed it out of hand. Australia was *too* far. All our family and friends would be half a world away! But then we figured - isn't that what shlichus is all about? Besides, in today's global village, is anything really "*too far*?"

Neither of us had ever even *been* to Australia before - let alone a desert area even *native* Australians knew little about! An exploratory trip was necessary, and our plans were already underway when war was declared. My mother-in-law, a Russian native, knew just how unpredictable things could get, and warned us the border would soon close. So, without much further ado, we packed up our three little children and everything we owned and flew across the world to the Sunshine Coast.



If we were at all unsure that we'd made the right decision, all doubts were put to rest almost immediately. As we stepped off our flight and walked through the tiny airport, we met a nice Russian Jewish family. We were able to share some of the matzah we'd packed for the upcoming holiday.

Although the Sunshine Coast was entirely new to us, *Chabad* was *not* new to the Sunshine Coast. They'd been on Chabad of RARA's roster for years, so whenever a tank was loaded up to set off across Australia's regional and rural areas, they always visited the Sunshine Coast, renewing their acquaintance with the Jewish community here.

With Pesach just around the corner, we had no time to gradually integrate ourselves into the community. With a lot of help and support from RARA headquarters, we pulled off a magnificent Pesach seder with over 70 guests! Although we were exhausted by the end of it, we were also exhilarated. *This* is what we'd moved across the world for - to provide matzah, maror, and kosher l'Pesach potato kugel to all these Jews who would've had nothing otherwise. It fueled our passion to continue.

"Hey, Rabbi! Can we chat?" asked a man who introduced himself as Moses* on the phone.

"Sure," I replied.

When Moses came, he told me he was a Christian who had some theological questions. He began quoting one Scripture after another, jumping from New Testament to Old, and asking a bunch of questions.

I answered him patiently, but soon enough, I decided it was *his* turn to sit in the hot seat.

"Tell me about yourself, Moses," I said. "What's your family like?"

"I have a great aunt you'd really like!" he shared. "She told my mum that we're Jewish. She was the sole survivor of her entire family. She used to make special bread and light candles."

After questioning him a bit more, I started to get excited! Chances were pretty high that Moses was actually Jewish! No wonder a so-called "Christian" felt compelled to come speak with a rabbi! After doing some heavy research, I discovered that he was!

Moses now basically lives in our home, soaking up as much Jewish knowledge as he can. He got his family involved too, and his mother is an extremely active member of our community. She follows in her aunt's footsteps by lighting Shabbos candles every Friday night.

The raindrop of Moses's seemingly random phone call echoed out in a ripple of positivity.

I had a wild idea for Chanukah. Instead of a plain menorah, why not honor the culture of the Sunshine Coast by creating a menorah from surfboards?

I reached out to our community WhatsApp group, asking if anyone had extra surfboards they could lend for the project.

"I can introduce you to Liam*," Moses' mother offered. "He's a pro surfer, and I'm sure he's got some extra boards!"

I contacted Liam and explained my vision.

"That sounds awesome, Rabbi!" Liam said, excitedly. "I totally want to help make this happen! I have a bunch of boards you can use, but how exactly are you planning on building this thing?"

Liam helped me create a practical design for our surfboard menorah. He even volunteered to build it, and told me he'd come to the Chanukah event to set it up and make sure everything worked well.

I was amazed at this total stranger's dedication for a Jewish cause and thanked him warmly.

At the event, I had some time to chat with Liam. When he told me his mother had converted to Christianity to escape antisemitism, I was thunderstruck!

"Liam, do you know that according to Jewish law, a Jew remains a Jew, no matter how many times they convert? Your mother is still Jewish, which means *you* are, too!"

I grabbed my tefillin and showed them to Liam, explaining their spiritual and religious significance. I announced to everyone that we'd be celebrating a "bar mitzvah," and I helped Liam place the tefillin on his head and arms. Both of us were emotional, and the crowd burst into a joyous rendition of *Siman Tov Umazal Tov* as another Jew found his way home.

I traveled to Brisbane with a friend to put a mezuzah up at their new Holocaust museum. We had some time to look around, and I saw a video of Holocaust survivors describing their experiences. My interest was drawn to the caption, which named the Holocaust survivor *Suzi Smeed* and her city of residence. Since she lived relatively close to me, I decided to get in touch.

I called her and introduced myself, asking if I could come for a visit. She agreed, somewhat hesitantly. Treasuring the opportunity to meet and talk with a survivor, of whom so few remain, I brought my whole family along.

Suzi welcomed us cheerfully enough, but after we'd settled on the couch, she asked, pointedly, "So, why are you here, Rabbi?"

"We came to visit you!" I told her, with wide-eyed innocence. "We want to hear your story, and maybe share a bit about what we do here in the Sunshine Coast."

Suzi shared a heartbreaking story of how she'd been hidden in the barn of a non-Jewish neighbor for the duration of the war. She was only two when the Nazis invaded Hungary, and she spent her early childhood trying not to make a sound, and barely surviving. She'd come within inches of death multiple times, but each time, was miraculously saved. She proudly showed us her memoir, *The Courage to Care*.

Robbed as she was of her childhood, it was clear Suzi had never been introduced to Yiddishkeit. Her husband wasn't Jewish, and her only biological child had tragically passed. She was 84 years old, and had never had any contact with any Jewish community.

This year, Suzi lit a menorah for the first time in her life, crying tears of joy as she kindled the flames. She tasted matzah for the first time in all her 84 years. Her pintelev Yid could not be quenched.

When news of the horrific October 7th attacks spread, people were frozen in grief and fear. We have a large contingency of Israeli backpackers that spend months in our area, working on farms to comply with visa regulations. They'd often spend Shabbos with us, and we'd get to know many of them pretty well.

That motzei Shabbos, we knew we had to be there for them. Wanting to give them the comforts of home, we scoured the house for any Israeli snack we could find, and loaded the car with Bamba, Bissli, and Crembos. We headed to one of their hangouts, and found the group huddled together, crying, sobbing, shaken to their cores. Many of them were running to catch the first flight back home, while others wondered how or when they'd be able to get back home.

Our own broken hearts had no answers for them, but we sat and listened. We gave out snacks and sang uplifting songs together - songs of hope, of peace, and of love.

One of the backpackers, Daniel Lifshitz, was beside himself. Rumors that Hamas had taken over 200 hostages were swirling, and he'd heard his grandparents, Yocheved and Oded Lifshitz, were among them. He was in agony, not knowing whether his elderly grandparents were alive, dead, or - maybe even worse - captive in Hamas' underground tunnels.

Daniel flew back to Israel as soon as he could. Baruch Hashem, his grandmother was one of the first hostages released, although his grandfather still remains in Hamas custody.

Our home became a base for Israeli backpackers who wanted a safe place to gather and take comfort in their shared sorrow. I told them all they could use our storage for their stuff while they traveled back to Israel. While some have returned to claim their belongings, too many are still fighting a war against evil, hoping to return every hostage to their homes and families.

I got a call from a hospital about an hour and a half away, asking me to come visit one of their patients who had requested a rabbi.

When Harvey* saw me standing in the doorway of his room, tears welled up in his eyes.

"Rabbi," he cried. "I've been a bad Jew!"

I calmed him down and asked him to tell me about himself. I learned that he'd abandoned the faith of his youth, marrying a non-Jewish woman. It'd been years since he'd last thought about his Judaism or contacted a rabbi. Now that his health was failing, he felt a sudden urge to reconnect.

I pulled out my tefillin and offered him a chance to put them on. Harvey cried and his hands shook as he held the small black boxes.

"I haven't worn tefillin since my bar mitzvah!" he said.

After we put on tefillin, I asked Harvey about his end-of-life plans, delicately explaining the importance of a Jewish burial.

"Of course!" Harvey agreed. "I don't want to be cremated! I'd also like for you to be here when it's my time to go."

I asked the hospital to inform me when Harvey's condition changed. The call came not too much later.

"You'd better come, Rabbi," they told me. "He's not doing well."

I rushed straight over and was shocked by the differences. Harvey's eyes were closed, and his breath rattled. He wasn't

conscious, so I whispered Tehillim by his bedside until his neshama left his body.

I informed the hospital of Harvey's last request to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. When I called to get an update a few hours later, they told me he was going to be cremated!

His wife had assumed complete power-of-attorney and wanted to cremate her husband. Although I tried arguing, begging, and persuading in turns, nothing I said made a difference. I even tried to contact a lawyer, but I had no legal recourse to countermand her power of attorney.

Although I was saddened at my failure to grant him his last, most important request, I was happy that I helped him put on tefillin one last time and facilitated the peaceful departure of his neshama.

We have plans to build a large community center in Queensland, complete with a shul, kosher restaurant, Judaica store, and more. Obviously, this is a huge undertaking, and I was understandably nervous about it.

On a trip to visit family overseas, I visited the Rebbe's Ohel in New York. Amongst many other things, I asked for a bracha for our new building. As I walked out of the Ohel, I saw a volume of *Igros Kodesh*, a collection of the Rebbe's letters. I opened a page at random. Both letters on the page were about buying and constructing new buildings. The Rebbe advised the recipient to begin construction even before having all the funds secured. Fundraising could continue throughout the construction.

I shared the letter with my wife and both of us felt uplifted and inspired by the Rebbe's clear bracha and support, as we begin the next exciting chapter of our shlichus here in the Sunshine Coast.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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