

IllumiNations

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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

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Mitzvos in Missouri

By Chaya Chazan

I knew I wanted to go on shlichus before it was even a conscious decision. My father encouraged me to be a shliach from when I was a young boy, and my time in the yeshiva system was punctuated by farbrengens and asides about the importance of shlichus and carrying out the Rebbe's mission.

My own life was indelibly influenced by the Rebbe's shluchim, even before I was born. My father was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri to a traditional Jewish family. He learned about Yiddishkeit through Rabbi Sholom Ber Wineberg, the head shliach of Kansas and Missouri. Whenever we'd visit our grandparents in Missouri, we'd always catch up with our *spiritual* "grandfather" as well.

If you throw a branch in the air, it will always land root-side down, says the famous adage. It only made sense for us to return to Missouri where our family's journey had started, to pass the legacy of inspiration on to others.

I'd spent a summer on Merkos shlichus in Missouri, visiting cities and towns from Wichita to S. Louis. I knew all about Columbia, a college town in the center of the state, and was ready for the challenge it presented.

I asked Rabbi Wineberg if we could move there, and he invited us to fly out for an exploratory visit to see if it could work for us.

I contacted the Hillel house and asked if I could give a class to their Jewish students. It was just before Pesach, so I offered a crash course on the history and rituals attached to the holiday.

There was a family in Columbia who'd been asking Rabbi Wineberg to send a shliach for many years. They were desperate to learn more about Yiddishkeit, and begged for a rabbi to teach them more. When we came for that first visit, they greeted us ecstatically and convinced us to call Columbia our new home.

Columbia may be in the middle of nowhere, but it has the advantage of being in the *middle* of nowhere. It's a two-hour drive in either direction towards Kansas City or S. Louis, both of which boast larger Jewish communities and infrastructure.

We traveled to Columbia in the summer of 2011 to look for a house. We were shown around one promising property by the owner, who kept shooting us quizzical glances.

As my wife and I discussed the merits of the place, he blurted out, "You don't want to live here!"

We turned to look at him in surprise. "You'd be right in the middle of all the student housing," he explained. He pointed to our young toddler. "It gets very noisy here at night, and she'd *never* be able to sleep!"

We just looked at each other and laughed.

In the end, we found a house directly opposite the dormitories. It was the perfect location, and for us, coming from Brooklyn, it felt palatially spacious.

We spent the next month in a frenzy of packing and preparing for the Yomim Tovim. Then came the moving itself, and the hassle of *unpacking*. Finally, with no commotion to distract us, our new reality set in with a sudden shock.

We're here! We told ourselves. ... *Now what?*

Ken* was a student whose brother was very involved with Chabad in a different college. He'd told him all about it, and Ken was so excited to have a Chabad of his own.

"We gotta start a Jewish club so you can do stuff on campus, man," he told me. "Let's set it up!"

Ken was incredibly helpful in helping us find our feet and meeting other Jewish students.

A few months later, when the first Pesach rolled around, Ken had a great suggestion.

"The Jewish fraternity organizes a seder every year," he told us. "Why not join them and help organize it?"

We were *thrilled* with the suggestion! It was a great opportunity to take what was really just a glorified dinner for Jewish students and turn it into a proper, traditional seder, with kosher l'Pesach food, matzah, and Haggadahs. In the end, Hillel asked to join us as well.

Baruch Hashem, it was a great success and a very unifying experience.

There's a small city near Columbia with a tiny population. A man who lived there contacted me and asked if I could visit him. Of course, I was happy to oblige.

Mitch*, as he introduced himself, was so excited to meet a real, live rabbi. He'd been trying to teach himself about Judaism by reading books and articles, but even he knew they could only take him so far.

We started a weekly chavrusa, and he soaked up information like a sponge.

Mitch had his own English siddur and Chumash, but he didn't always understand the full context of the tefillos. He told me that he woke up every night at midnight to recite Tikun Chatzos, as clearly stated in the siddur.

"Wow!" I responded, thinking of all the Baal Shem Tov stories with similar themes. "It's not everyone who recites Tikun Chatzos. It's usually only said by special, holy people - like *you!*"

Tali* spent almost every Friday night with us throughout his years in college, but I always wondered if he gained anything from us other than a hot meal. He came from an Israeli family, and always spoke about how his mother followed Jewish culture. They had a Friday night dinner every week at home, and kept some of the more basic mitzvos. I'm sure our Ashkenazi gefilte fish was quite different from whatever his mother typically prepared, but was he learning and growing from *our* Shabbos table?

At the farewell dinner we gave for our graduating class, Tali stood up and thanked us for hosting him every week.



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"At home, we kept Shabbat as a cultural celebration. At Chabad, Shabbat dinners were much more than that. They were full of light and holiness. It wasn't just some traditional foods laid out on the table – everything was infused with the beauty of Shabbat and the sanctity of the day."

My question had been answered.

Danielle* almost *lived* in our house. She was an excellent babysitter, and, since we'd just had a baby, her help was indispensable. Of course, there were many customs and rituals we had to explain to her. She accepted everything with a smile and a cheerful attitude, but we always wondered, *What's going on in her mind? Does she think we're just nuts? Is anything leaving an impression?*

We gifted her with a pushka, which she decided to keep in her car. It traveled with her everywhere for the next few years.

After graduating, Danielle got a job as a teacher in a public school. While attending the usual pre-school year staff meetings, the principal asked each teacher to bring in a "show and tell" object – something that typified who they were.

"You know what I brought?" Danielle later reported to my wife. "My pushka! I told everyone that the Jewish mitzvah of charity and giving is who I am and who I want to be."

My wife had many conversations with Lisa* about the importance of dating and marrying Jewish. After Lisa broke up with her non-Jewish boyfriend, the conversations became even more pointed.

"I get it!" Lisa said, throwing her hands up in mock defeat. "I'll date a Jewish guy. But I'll need your help! Meeting people is hard enough without disqualifying 80% of the male population. I'm already in my senior year, and I really want to find *the one* and settle down. Find me a Jewish guy to date, and I'll go out with him! I'll give you six weeks!"

They both laughed, but my wife knew that Lisa was serious about wanting to settle down. If she found someone she liked after these six weeks were up, she might just decide to date *him*, regardless of his religious ethnicity...

It was my wife's first foray into the jungle that is the college dating world. Unfortunately, she didn't find a Jewish candidate in the given six weeks. All she could do was continue emphasizing the importance of dating and marrying Jewish, and davening that Lisa would soon meet a nice Jewish boy.

Lisa remained single for the next few weeks, and then got busy preparing for her Birthright trip. When she returned from the trip, she told us about her trip to the Kotel.

"I promised G-d that I'd only date Jewish guys," she said. "You've convinced me how important it is."

When we first met Jonathan*, he seemed like a typically Jewish liberal. He knew very little about Yiddishkeit, and prided himself on being a bit of a social justice warrior.

Over time, as he started attending Shabbos meals, classes, and other programs, he became quite a close friend and supporter. He joined the Jewish fraternity and became our student president! He signed up to join the Pegisha, a Crown Heights Shabbaton for college students. While in New York, he bought himself a pair of tefillin and started putting them on regularly.

Jonathan had learned and grown so much, it was distressing when he started dating a non-Jewish girl. They were together for many years, and even bought a house together! We made sure to keep in touch with him, and often mentioned how important it was to marry Jewish.

"I know," he admitted. "But there's no way I can break up with her! We've been together for too long, and have built too much together. *She'll* have to break up with *me*."

There was nothing we could do except maintain a connection and daven for him.

It seemed incredible, but Jonathan's girlfriend *did* break up with him. A short while later, Jonathan met a lovely Jewish girl.

When Jonathan called to tell us he was engaged, and to ask me to officiate at his chuppah, we were moved to tears. My wife began teaching the laws of Taharas Hamishpacha to his fiancée, and we both flew out to celebrate their wedding.

Jonathan's transformation had come full circle.

When we first moved, our eldest son was just a toddler. We had to bring him along with us every time we visited the fraternity house or tabled on campus. He's on the spectrum, so it wasn't always easy to have him tagging along. Sometimes, his behavior made the neurotypical students very uncomfortable. Many of them didn't know how to talk or relate to him.

As time went on, things changed - not because our son behaved differently, but because we built a rapport with the students. We were no longer that strange family coming to disrupt their frat life. We were *their* family. And our son was family, too.

Last year, we celebrated our son's bar mitzvah. Of course, it was extremely special to have family fly in to celebrate with us. It was equally as heartwarming to be joined by our other "family," – our students – serving as his fan club, clapping for him and cheering him on.

One day, I got a call from Greg*, a non-Jew who lived in a tiny city in the middle of nowhere, Missouri.

"Although I'm not Jewish, I want to keep as much of the Torah as possible. I even follow the daily studies of Chitas everyday, by listening to Rabbi Josh Gordon's podcast! I know there are seven laws for non-Jews to follow, and I'd like to learn more about them. Can we meet?"

I was intrigued, and, of course, agreed to meet with him.

Over the next months, we kept up a regular correspondence. Greg asked a lot of insightful questions, and offered support in any way he could.

After October 7, Greg called me, his voice sounding unusually somber.

"I know mitzvos are the key to winning this war," he told me. "We need as many people to put on tefillin as possible. Since I'm not Jewish, I can't *wear* them, but I'd like to sponsor a pair for one of your students who is willing to make a commitment to use them daily. In that way, I'll have a part in the mitzvah."

One of our students agreed to wear them, and Greg was so happy and proud to do his part.

My childhood was overshadowed by a defining event that cemented my zeal for shlichus. My mother, Pesya Leah Lapine HY"D, was murdered al kiddush Hashem. The Rebbe spoke about my mother's heroism a great deal, crying over her tragic passing, and personally attending her levaya. My mother's mesiras nefesh is a constant reminder of how she'd want me to live my life. I know she's shepping nachas from up in Heaven as we carry out our shlichus, sacrificing the comfort and ease of a Jewish community, proper schooling, and accessible kosher food.

To honor my mother's memory and legacy, we decided to build a mikvah carrying her name. She gave her life for Yiddishkeit, and now hundreds of Jews will begin the process of creating *new* life in purity and holiness in her honor. The mikvah is well underway, and I derive much comfort from the progress we've made so far.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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