

# IllumiNations

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*Rabbi Sholom Ber and Devora Hertz, Chabad of the Golan Heights, Israel*

## Living the Lech Lecha Life

By Chaya Chazan

**I consider myself extremely lucky. Through lots of siyata dishmaya, hashgacha pratis, and guidance from my elders, I was zoche to have experiences with the Rebbe none of my childhood friends received.**

When I was just five years old, my father and grandfather thought it was time for me to experience a Tishrei with the Rebbe. Since many chassidim had the same idea, not everyone was able to meet privately with the Rebbe in yechidus. That privilege was granted only to a select few, whose names were drawn in a raffle. Baruch Hashem, my father and I were lucky enough to be chosen!

After speaking with my father, the Rebbe asked me some questions. Was I in school? Did I know Yiddish? What was I learning?

I answered the Rebbe's questions with assurance, but hesitated at the last one. My class had just finished learning Parshas Noach. In fact, in anticipation of my upcoming trip, the Rebbe had made a special point of marking the parsha's completion and celebrating with a siyum. I couldn't say I was *learning* Noach, because my Rebbe had already said we were *finished*. But we also hadn't *started* Lech Lecha yet, so I couldn't use that for my answer either. I finally decided "Lech Lecha" was the more honest answer.

Then, the Rebbe, with a twinkle in his eye, asked me to teitch the words "*lech lecha*." Since I was ignorant of Rashi's commentary on that phrase, I had to use my own understanding. "Gei arois," I answered. "Go out."

The Rebbe smiled widely and gave me a bracha.

Although I've since learned Rashi's preferred translation, I feel the Rebbe's reaction to my own improvised meaning has given me my mission in life - to "go out" of my comfort zone and travel to strange places to spread Yiddishkeit.

I was thrown into the "deep end" of shlichus, even as a bochur. I was assigned to the yeshiva in New Haven, and part of the job was serving as chaplain for New Haven University. After that, I went to a yeshiva in London, and then New Delhi on Merkos shlichus. The closest shluchim were in Hong Kong and Thailand, so we were pretty much on our own. That's where I learned what being the Rebbe's shliach really means, and just how much mesiras nefesh the role truly demands.

After we got married, we settled near my in-laws. My father-in-law, the famous shliach, Rabbi Aryeh Leib Kaplan, opened *Tzeirei Hashluchim*, a yeshiva for shluchim's children in Tzefas. I ran the yeshiva, but we also wanted a "traditional" Chabad house, so we moved to Rosh Pina, a neighboring town, assisting the shliach there.

Although Rosh Pina was initially a very secular society, over time, it transformed into a beautifully flourishing Torah community. After almost 20 years on shlichus, we were able to reflect on our efforts with nachas. It was then that Hashem threw a curveball into our lives. I was diagnosed with cancer, and had to stay in Florida for extended treatments.

Baruch Hashem, I recovered completely, and we were able to move back to Eretz Yisrael. My wife and I agreed that this was our "Lech Lecha" moment, pushing us to use the setback as a springboard for growth. Looking to "go out" of our comfort zone, we moved to the Golan Heights and began our shlichus anew.

The Golan Heights is a mountainous area with a few scattered, isolated kibbutzim and yeshuvim. They are small and selective; anyone who wants to move to one of their communities must first be approved by a committee. Obviously, a charedi family wasn't high on their lists, so it took a lot of effort to receive permission to move there.

The Golan attracts farmers who are eager for a challenge, and who have the stamina and personality to weather whatever the harsher climate and soil have to throw at them. They are hardy, no-nonsense type of people; brusque and suspicious of strangers.

There are also a lot of army bases around, so we became more heavily involved in assisting soldiers with programs, kosher food, and tefillin.

When we moved, our neighbor turned the entire town against us with an incendiary Facebook post. The comments were filled with vitriol against Chabad and all charedi Jews.

We were undeterred. This was our Lech Lecha. Being *comfortable* and *welcome* was never part of our expectations.

It took a long time, and a lot of work, but very slowly, we won people over. We showed them we weren't there to "brainwash" them and turn them into charedi robots, as the Facebook post had claimed. We were there to *help*. They saw how much we helped the soldiers, and how eager we were to jump into any community effort. We opened a medical equipment gemach, brought in food trucks, and supported the poor.

It's been a long, hard road, but the Purim seuda this year was held in the town center and was well-attended by over 120 people!



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The Golan's mountainous topography and shared border with three hostile countries makes it an important and strategic piece of land. There are many army bases scattered throughout the area, and training for various divisions happens here.

Because of this, serving the soldiers has become as much our shlichus as serving the civilian population. We arrange megillah readings, menorah lightings, matzah deliveries, and shofar blowings for every base in the area.

We got our hands on a large food truck and drove from base to base, making sure soldiers had good, hot, kosher food to eat. A part of our food truck served as a "shul," where soldiers could put on tefillin and open a sefer for a few minutes.

After the war began, our truck parked permanently in the largest base and became a sort of command center. Many kind hearted people donated tactical gear and other necessary supplies, and we kept it stockpiled in the corner, available for any soldier that needed it. We make sure a huge urn of coffee is constantly brewing, so soldiers on night guard duty always have a fresh supply to stay awake. Many religious soldiers would subsist on nothing more than fruits, vegetables, and chocolate spread sandwiches, if not for our kitchen on wheels. For soldiers on duty, we send prepackaged meals and Shabbos kits. We even send microwaves, so they can enjoy a hot meal when they get a minute.

The Jewish people are resilient. This past year has been incredibly difficult emotionally, physically, and financially. The attacks from Lebanon mean the air raid siren is almost never silent, and we're sent running to our shelters every half hour. The constant strain and fear stretches every nerve to its last fiber.

When one family in a settlement a few towns over wanted to celebrate a chanukas habayis, we were only too happy for an opportunity to celebrate. I promised I'd come with my musical parsha group - a program we started where a group of musicians accompanies a shiur on the weekly parsha - and they promised to provide kosher food for the whole crowd. We were expecting 50-60 people, and the family cooked up a storm!

The day of the event, Lebanon decided to participate in the celebration with their own hellish version of fireworks. The entire city was advised to stay in their bomb shelters. The host family called me in distress. They'd worked so hard, and were so looking forward to it. Would it all be for nothing? No one would dare venture out under such dangerous conditions!

The realities of my position have forced me to visit targeted areas under attack on occasion, so after weighing the options carefully, I told them I'd still come. I didn't think too many others would be willing to leave the safety of their shelters, but I was determined to help this family mark their happy occasion.

Baruch Hashem, as I approached the city limits, the restrictions were lifted, and people were allowed to leave their shelters. A slow stream of visitors trickled in, but not nearly enough to do justice to the piles of food the hostess had so lovingly prepared.

But when word spread that I was there with my musician friends, more and more people started to join. In the end, a day that had started with explosions and rockets ended with camaraderie, Jewish pride, and some solid learning. Am Yisrael Chai.

The period after receiving the cancer diagnosis was the darkest time of our lives. We found comfort and hope in the Rebbe's letters to others in similar situations.

A friend, whom I had not subjected to a full description of my pains and complaints, sent me a letter the Rebbe had written to someone who was gravely ill. The Rebbe encouraged him to study Shaar Habitachon three times and truly internalize it.

When the friend called the next day to ask how I was feeling, I answered, "It's complicated."

"Didn't you read the letter I sent you?" he scolded. "What gives you the right to talk like that? Internalize the bitachon, and you'll know it's as simple as simple can be. Nothing complicated about it!"

His strong words were just what I needed to hear to lift me out of my despondency and encourage me to carry on!

The doctors advised me to travel to Florida for extensive treatment. It felt wrong to leave our shlichus; to leave the Holy Land. But we read a letter from the Rebbe that comforted us and showed us the way forward. The Rebbe wrote to a man who needed to travel from Eretz Yisrael to America for medical treatment, explaining that the reason his treatment was taking him to America was because he had a specific mission to fulfill there. He needed to spread Torah and Yiddishkeit to the people of that community. The more he focused on *his* mission, the quicker the doctors would be able to fulfill *their* mission of curing him, and the sooner he'd be home in Eretz Yisrael.

This letter reminded me of my mantra: Lech Lecha!

When I arrived in Miami, I told Rabbi Lipskier that I wanted to be available for the community in any capacity I could. He could always call on me to give a shiur, farbreng, meet with someone, or anything else he thought could be helpful. Even when I was completely depleted after a chemotherapy session, I still tried to show up and fulfill my mission.

One day, I was visited by Mark\*, who attended one of the nearby Chabad houses. He'd heard about my illness, and wanted to share his own experience with the dreaded disease. He wanted to encourage me, to show me recovery was possible and to inspire me to continue the fight. As we spoke, we touched on the fact that he wasn't married yet.

"Rabbi, one day, I'm going to get married, and *you* are going to officiate under the chuppah," he cried, emotionally.

"Amen," I said, privately wondering if I'd even be alive by then.

Although the doctors were pessimistic about my chances, by Hashem's miracles, I survived.

I'm looking forward to next month, im yirtzeh Hashem, when I'll be flying to Florida to officiate under Mark's chuppah.

The treatment was brutal and draining. One chemo session followed another, and every surgery seemed to require one more.

Before my surgery, I asked for a mezuzah to be placed under my pillow, and that a dollar I'd received from the Rebbe be attached to my hand.

When I awoke from the surgery a couple of days later, a team of doctors were in my room to assess my mental state and recovery.

The chief surgeon hesitated for a moment and then asked, "If you don't mind my asking, I couldn't help but notice the dollar bill in your hand during the surgery. Why was that so important to you?"

I explained it was given to me by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, along with special blessings. "I wanted to bring the spiritual blessings into the room, to accompany your physical prowess. When the two work in tandem, G-d makes you His messenger of miracles."

I was happily surprised to see the doctor accepted my explanation with respect. When I asked him to put on tefillin, he readily agreed.

It showed me that anyone who tries to do what the Rebbe asks can be a shliach - even while they're unconscious!

My wife and I felt my illness and miraculous recovery had to serve as a yeridah l'tzorech aliyah. We took it as a sign to "Lech Lecha" - continue to challenge ourselves and move forwards. When we heard that the small cities and towns in the Golan were in need of a shliach, it felt like the perfect challenge for us.

I went to New York for Gimmel Tammuz that year, and rented a bed in the local hostel. I went to the Ohel in the early hours of the morning when it was mostly deserted. I wrote a long, heartfelt letter to the Rebbe, explaining the reasoning behind our move and asking for a bracha. Although I never do this, I also asked the Rebbe to show





me a sign that I was doing the right thing. After all, it was no easy feat to restart at 40 years old, to uproot our children and lives and begin again in a new, strange place!

I returned to Crown Heights and went to lay down for a short while, but found my bed was already occupied. When others realized what had happened, they wanted to wake the interloper, but I told them to leave him alone. It was almost morning anyhow, so I could do without the sleep.

A while later, I was sitting in the lobby when I heard someone calling my name. It was the man who'd taken my bed.

"I'm so sorry!" he apologized. "I heard you told everyone not to wake me. I want to show my appreciation by giving you a gift. Here!" He pulled out his wallet and took out a dollar bill. "This is a dollar from the Rebbe." As he handed it to me, he added, with a grin, "I'll say to you what the Rebbe said - *bracha v'hatzlacha!*"

Getting a dollar in such an unusual way, accompanied by the wishes of "*bracha v'hatzlacha*" was an obvious answer to my request. I knew I was doing the right thing.

After my miraculous recovery and our move to the Golan, we felt reinvigorated. We'd survived the worst life could throw at us, and things could only get better from here on out.

I'd recently started a new program called Music and Parsha. Professional musicians brought their instruments to a kumzitz-style shiur. I'd explain a sicha of the Rebbe on that week's parsha, and teach the musicians a chassidish niggun. The program was hugely popular, and other Chabad houses wanted to see how they could implement it for themselves.

While we were riding high on this wave of success, our son Yehuda started complaining of headaches. He was dizzy, weak, and throwing up. Warning bells clanged in my mind, and we immediately rushed him to the hospital for testing. Our worst fears were confirmed: Yehuda had a giant tumor in his head that was growing and would soon affect his heart.

From his hospital bed, Yehuda recorded a video message, thanking everyone who was praying for him, and assuring them all, with a big smile, that he'd soon recover, with Hashem's help. His innocent sincerity touched the hearts of everyone who saw it. We received a flood of messages from people all over the world telling us they were taking on a special mitzvah for Yehuda.

Baruch Hashem, with some more incredible miracles, Yehuda made a complete recovery. Our Music and Parsha classes continue on with a special added energy and joy. Everyone in the room can feel it, and I can still see a few people wipe away their tears as they watch Yehuda passionately swaying and singing along to the musical accompaniment.

Simchas Torah night was beautiful. The shul was packed with people, all dancing and singing with Chassidic and joyous abandon.

The next morning, we were in the middle of Shacharis when Yoav\* came in and motioned to me from the back of the shul. Yoav is the chief of police for the Golan. His face was ashen and serious, but I could never have predicted just how bad the news he carried was. Succinctly and solemnly, he explained what had happened. It took



a few moments for the full import of his words to sink in, and even then, I had trouble believing it.

"Chevreh," I said, standing at the head of the shul to address the congregation, "We now have the hardest test of all. We need to dance through our tears; to rejoice even as we mourn." I broke the terrible news as gently as I could.

"Boaz\*!" cried a man hoarsely, his voice cracking. "Boaz went to the Nova festival!" It was Ronen\*, Boaz's father. We all turned to look at him in silent sympathy. "I need to talk to him. I need to see if he's okay!" Ronen ran out of shul, barely containing his rising panic.

Unfortunately, he couldn't reach his son, no matter how many times he called.

We hosted hakafot shniyot as scheduled the next day, but with a much smaller crowd than anticipated. As we danced, the crowd grew smaller and smaller, as men received calls from their commanders, calling them up for immediate reserve duty.

Over the next few days, Ronen continued his search for Boaz. His phone calls remained unanswered, but his signal pinged in Gaza. Had he been taken hostage? Determined to find answers, Ronen chartered one of the buses from his company and volunteered it for army duty. He brought along a few soldiers who were part of the chevrah kadisha. They walked through fields of atrocity, transferring the bodies of the slain to be identified and buried with dignity.

Finally, Ronen found his son. His body was flung over the body of his fiance, who he'd protected to the last second of his life. Boaz's funeral was heartbreaking, a microcosm of the global grieving every Jew felt.

It was the final meeting before Talia\* and Shai's\* wedding, which would be a couple of days later.

"So who will walk you down to the chuppah?" I asked Talia. "Is it your custom to have your father, your mother, or both?"

Talia looked uncomfortable. She finally admitted that she hadn't spoken to her father in 15 years. When I asked what had happened to cause the rift, Talia explained.

"As a little girl, my father was my hero. He was an important army officer, tall, strong, and handsome, and had such an air of command about him that everyone rushed to carry out his orders. I looked up to him so much.

"When I was a teenager," she continued, her voice breaking, "my father was involved in a terrible car accident that left him disabled. I couldn't believe that my strong, powerful father was now reduced to such a pitiful state, unable to do anything for himself. It hurt too much to look at him, so I avoided him for as long as I could. Once I left home, I never called or visited. One month turned into two, and the years passed by without a single communication between us. The longer I stayed away, the harder it became to overcome."

Talia lapsed into silence and stared down at her tightly clasped hands.

"Talia, you need to make amends," I said, quietly. "You need to speak with your father and get his blessing before you get married. It will be hard, but the challenge will just be momentary. After the first few seconds, you'll see how naturally you and your father reconnect."

Talia was still hesitant.

"I'm afraid that I won't be able to marry you without your father's blessing," I said, knowing she needed a bit of pressure to convince her.

Talia knew how impossible it would be to find another officiant so close to the wedding date, so with no other choice, she agreed to visit her father.

"You were right," she told me, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "It was really hard to knock on his door, but after that, everything was easy. We hugged and cried and made up for all the lost years."

At the wedding, Talia's father asked to be lifted up onto the table. He rained shekel bills down on the crowd, smiling hugely the entire time. Most thought it was just a father showing the usual joy at his daughter's wedding. Only a few people knew just how joyous the occasion truly was.

Hashem gives us so many ways to connect with Him. My job is to help people find the connection that speaks to them the most.

When Gilad\* and Ehud\* returned home from the Technion in Haifa, they were curious and ready to explore. Torah and mitzvos were new to them, so I kept the conversation broad. Seeing the sefarim on my shelf, they selected a couple and browsed through them. They were particularly intrigued by the Kuzari and Mesilas Yesharim, and asked me dozens of questions. They were bright boys, but I worried a crash course in the intricacies of Jewish philosophy was too much. However, their



eyes shone with excitement, and their curiosity seemed bottomless.

After a short while, I sent them to yeshiva, where they were able to quench their thirst for knowledge. They blossomed, and were soon indistinguishable from any other Chabad bochur in any yeshiva. They learned, far-bred, and did mitzvot with the best of them.

Baruch Hashem, we recently celebrated Gilad's wedding, and hope to soon see Ehud begin his own home, filled with the light of Torah and Chassidus.

It was the night before Yom Kippur, when we received a call about five soldiers on a remote army base in the Golan who had nothing to eat before or after the fast. As soon as we heard, my wife whipped up a spread and

packed it all up. It was a long drive to the base, but the smiles, excitement, and appreciation on the soldiers' faces made it well worth it.

Nestled high at the peak of Har Cheron is a small yishuv, home to the Bechor\* family. Mrs. Bechor asked me to come check her mezuzos, so I climbed the mountain and took down every mezuzah in her home.

One of the bedroom mezuzos had a word missing. I told her the mezuzah was pasul and would need to be replaced, but since it was just a couple of days before Yom Kippur, we could wait until after Yom Tov.

Mrs. Bechor called me again the night before Yom Kippur. Knowing a mezuzah was pasul was bothering her too much, and she couldn't stand to wait even one more

day! She begged me to bring a replacement as soon as possible.

After kapparos, in the early hours of the morning, I headed back to the Bechor house, replacement mezuzah in hand. As I affixed it on the bedroom doorpost, Mrs. Bechor thanked me and asked why the other mezuzah was pasul.

"The word *matar* - dew - was missing completely," I told her.

Mrs. Bechor gasped. "I don't believe it!" she cried. "This room, with the pasul mezuzah, is where my son sleeps. He works for an agricultural company, developing a technology that can sense water flow in fields and areas through satellite imaging. Things have not been going well at all. Now I'm sure everything will turn around!"

A while later, I heard her son's company succeeded and was doing very well.

\*Names changed to protect privacy

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