

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

Rabbi Hersh and Fraidy Loschak, Chabad at Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ

How Rowan is Growin'

By Chaya Chazan

I grew up in a shlichus household in beautiful S Barbara, California. It's hard to remember a time when my house wasn't hosting a revolving clientele of visitors and guests. Students from the nearby community college often dropped by as well, so I got to know the "college lingo."

My wife and I were open to lots of different options, but soon faced a challenge unique to young, newer shluchim: without a family "in," we'd be unlikely to receive an offer of shlichus. If we wanted to open a Chabad house, we'd have to take the initiative and find one on our own.

Everyone who heard we were researching options made the same comment: "You would be perfect on a college campus!" My wife and I agreed it sounded appealing, so we began by focusing on colleges that didn't have shluchim on campus yet.

Our search began on Google. I researched colleges in my and my wife's home states, checking to see if they already had an established Chabad house or Hillel, and, if not, if it had a promising enough Jewish population to warrant one. If it did, I searched for the nearest shliach and asked if they

were already servicing the college, or if they'd appreciate another set of hands, dedicated to the students.

After unfruitful searches in both Florida and California, I looked into colleges in the tri-state area. I soon found Rowan University in nearby New Jersey. The nearest shluchim, Rabbi Avi and Mina Richler, were happy to have us nearby, so they could focus wholly on their community.

We began with some small activities to gauge whether it would be sustainable as a full-time shlichus. Already, the small state university was growing, gaining reputé as an excellent engineering school. Rabbi Richler introduced us to the Jewish students he knew, and we began advertising. Our events and Shabbos meals drew more students week by week, and we were happy to see we were making a difference in the community.

At one point, we'd tried to host a Simchas Torah celebration for the students. The holiday was completely unfamiliar to them, and it was hard to celebrate such a joyous holiday with barely any participants. We felt dejected, and decided to spend future Simchas Torahs with family and friends instead.

Last year, since Simchas Torah immediately followed Shabbos, we decided to stay and host hakafos on campus. We hosted a Shabbos meal, well-attended, as all Shabbos meals are, and encouraged everyone to join us for hakafos. Already, we were starting to hear whispers and see furrowed brows.

The murmuring only got louder as the Yom Tov continued. Students were worried about their friends and family in Israel, and were desperately trying to reach them. In the chaos, many of them turned to us for guidance and support.

"Today is Simchas Torah," we explained, gently. "Although our hearts are broken, our feet must continue to dance!"

In hopes of inspiring ourselves and our students, and to show everyone that we were undaunted, we carried the Sifrei Torah on campus, and danced in the public square. As we passed by our campus sukkah, we were surprised to see a girl sitting in it, apparently waiting.

We were able to wish her a gut Yom Tov, and invite her to join in our celebration.

It was clear why Hashem wanted us to stay for Simchas Torah that year.

We hosted a vigil for the victims and hostages, and had the largest turnout of any event we'd held before. Everyone put on tefillin and took Shabbos candles, and many signed up for the Ezri challenge, in which they committed to put on tefillin for 40 days in a row. If they texted a selfie of themselves wearing tefillin every morning, they received a gift.

So many of our students completed the challenge, and became proud owners of their very own tefillin sets.

Lucas* was one of dozens of students that joined the tefillin challenge, but he took it to lengths no one else did. Every day, he made arrangements to borrow someone's tefillin so he could put them on. Sometimes he met a friend outside of class, sometimes he went to a friend's room, and sometimes he came to us, but he never missed a day.

Lucas had never been particularly involved before then, and he definitely hadn't displayed this intense an interest in tefillin before. I once asked him what drove him.

He looked at me, his eyes glinting, and his chin in firm lines. "I couldn't be *that Jew*," he answered. "I didn't want to be the one who had nothing to do with Judaism and nothing to say when people spoke about Israel."

I admired Lucas's devotion and tenacity, but knew he'd have some difficulty over winter break. Lucas was interning in Argentina, and he was worried about finding a pair of tefillin every day.

The first leg of his internship was in the Five Towns, in a motel neighboring the Chabad house. Lucas explained to the shliach, Rabbi Wolowik, about his tefillin commitment and his upcoming travel plans. He asked if he could borrow a pair of tefillin to use on his trip, promising to be very careful with them, and apologizing for asking for such a huge favor.

He called me a few minutes later, a tremor shaking his voice. "The rabbi just handed them to me and told me they're *mine*. He's letting me *keep* them! I have my *own tefillin!*" he told me with barely contained emotion.

Lucas made sure he never missed a day with his treasured tefillin.

There is a large statue of our school mascot, *The Rowan Owl*, on campus. It was there that a group of pro-Hamas activists staged a protest. Draped in keffiyehs and waving flags, they shouted out *From the river to the sea*, and chanted for intifada.

We decided to hold a counter protest the very next day, at the exact same location. I borrowed tefillin from every person I could think of, and had about 18 pairs ready to go. Each of our "protestors" was able to put on tefillin, and



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we sang *Hiney Ma Tov, Am Yisrael Chai*, and other uplifting songs.

As we sang, a young man passed by. His eyes lit up when he saw us, and he practically ran to the tefillin table.

"I want to put on tefillin! I'm an Israeli! Can I join you?"

Of course, we helped him wrap the straps around his arms.

"I was walking here yesterday, on my way back from class," he explained. "I saw the protest and heard them calling for intifada. It felt like they ripped apart wounds that had barely begun to heal. I felt shaken, targeted, and unsafe. Just 24 hours later, I pass by the same spot, and see the complete opposite! You've made me feel hopeful again. I know I'm not alone. Am Yisrael Chai!"

I think my wife may have inadvertently created Instacart.

We had a family wedding out of town just a couple of days before Rosh Hashanah. We were planning on hosting Yom Tov meals for lots of guests, so we knew we had to plan very carefully. We selected a flight that would get us back home with just enough time to shop, cook, and prepare.

Almost as if they knew how tight we were on time, the airline announced a delay. We were stuck in the terminal, nervously calculating the hours until Yom Tov, and wondering when we'd have time to fit everything in. We'd be getting back too late at night to shop. Leaving everything for the next day, trying to shop, cook, and clean on erev Yom Tov was unfeasible.

My wife quickly pulled out her phone and posted on social media. *I need a miracle worker!* She posted. *Can anyone do some holiday grocery shopping for us...?*

A few moments later, her phone dinged with a hopeful chime.

"Brenda* said she could do it!" my wife exclaimed, reading the message happily.

While we waited for our flight to finally take off, Brenda video chatted with my wife, asking which products to buy and which had reliable hechsherim.

When we arrived home much later that night, exhausted, we saw that Brenda had found everything we needed. We'd be able to start cooking immediately the next morning, and have everything ready by Yom Tov.

Thank you times a million! My wife texted Brenda. *You are a lifesaver! Thanks to you, dozens of people will be able to enjoy their holiday meals. What would we have done without you?*

You don't need to thank me, the phone buzzed a short while later with Brenda's reply. *I should be thanking you.*

Brenda told us that she'd been struggling with her mental health, and had attempted suicide a few times before.

"You may not know this, but today is Suicide Prevention Day. It made me think. I just couldn't help questioning what my purpose is, and why I'm needed in the world. If no one needed me or would miss me, why bother at all? That's when I saw your message. It filled me with meaning and showed me that I *am* important; that I *do* have something to offer. Thank you for proving that I matter."

Kevin's* time in Hebrew school had taught him one thing: he hated rabbis, and rabbis hated him. Judaism held no place for the kid who'd been kicked out of Hebrew school more times than he'd attended class.

When Kevin came to Rowan, he cut a wide swath around our Chabad house. He would've never stepped foot inside, if not for the timely intervention of hashgacha pratis.

Kevin was approached to begin a chapter of AEPi, the Jewish fraternity, on campus. He was excited to accept, but realized that to get members, he'd have to come to Chabad. Although he originally came to meet Jews and convince them to pledge, he soon started enjoying the atmosphere, despite himself. Soon, he began coming for his own sake, and he quickly became a close friend and involved member of Chabad.

Around the same time, we met Gail*. One fateful, terrible day, while walking to class, Gail saw someone jump to their death off a high roof just yards away from her. She was, as anyone would be, deeply traumatized by the event, and was too shocked to even think straight! Her heart knew exactly where she needed to go, and she soon found herself on our doorstep.

She came in and spent a while sobbing her heart out. Eventually, we were able to talk with her and help her process her emotions.

From that day, Gail began coming regularly.

We were beyond delighted when Kevin and Gail began dating. Baruch Hashem, we officiated their wedding a short while ago. It was our first time marrying off two of our "children," and we hope to celebrate many more!

We had a couple of bochorim helping us out with Sukkos mivtzoym during one of our early years on shlichus. They were excited to meet Charlie*, who, by his own admission,

had never heard of Chabad, Sukkos, lulav, or pretty much anything Jewish.

"Chabad is hosting a sushi party tonight," they told him. "Please join!"

Charlie came to our sukkah that night, and we were delighted to meet another Jewish student whom we could help.

I texted him many times, asking how he was doing, inviting him for Shabbos, and informing him of upcoming events. He never responded. After that one sushi in the sukkah event, we never saw him again.

About a month after October 7th, Charlie messaged me on LinkedIn.

My mother is Jewish, but my father isn't, he wrote, *so I never felt connected to my Jewish side. Last month changed everything. I feel a pit in my stomach like I've never felt before. It's made me question my identity. I need to feel connected. My heart is calling out, telling me it's time to join my people. I regret ignoring your messages all these years, and not being involved. Can we meet?*

It was a pure and primal cry, straight from his pintele Yid.

When we met, I helped him put on tefillin, and we had a long heart-to-heart. He lived in a neighboring city, so I connected him with the shliach closest to him.

Charlie was determined to make up for lost time. He became extremely active, and soaked up information like a sponge. A few months later, Charlie's Jewish identity was so strongly developed, he decided to take it a step further and cement it with a physical mark. He volunteered to undergo a bris, despite the intense pain and difficult recuperation. He chose a Jewish name, symbolizing the complete reversal of his identity and his pride in his heritage.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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