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

Rabbi Yossi and Shternie Lew, Chabad of Peachtree City, GA

Everything is Peachy

By Chaya Chazan

Our shlichus “story” was a series of twists and turns spanning many years and three different states. It exemplifies what the life of a shliach is truly about - doing what needs to be done, when and where ever needed.

We started off in Long Island as a young married couple, when Chabad in the area was just getting started. After a while, we moved onto the school in New Haven, Connecticut. A few months later, we were invited to Atlanta, where we helped build the Chabad community. After nineteen successful years, we were offered an opportunity we couldn't resist - to start a new community in nearby Peachtree City. Baruch Hashem, we are now approaching our thirteenth year in this shlichus.

Years before we even thought of moving, a friend in the community asked if I'd ever heard of Peachtree City. I had to admit I hadn't. He told me he'd met a

Jewish woman from there who asked him to tutor her son for his bar mitzvah. He'd taken the opportunity to explore the community, and had been very impressed by what he'd seen.

Peachtree City is a beautiful and verdant city, flanked by tranquil rivers. In true Southern fashion, everyone is friendly and neighborly, and there's a sizable Jewish population with lots of potential.

The main challenges we faced were convincing people to look beyond the scary beard and black hat, and to trust that we were nice folks. Once we'd established cordial relations, we then faced the up-

hill battle of convincing them that Yiddishkeit was necessary and would benefit themselves and their children.

Slowly but surely, we made inroads. Soon, we had a dedicated group regularly attending shul every week. The pandemic forced us to close our doors for a full year. By the time everyone was ready to venture outside once more, we'd lost our entire base. Some had moved, others had passed away, and a dispiriting number of people had simply fallen out of the habit.

Our journey took us on a frightening and unexpected turn when I developed life-threatening complications from Covid and was hospitalized for an extended period. Even after Hashem miraculously saved me, my recovery was long and difficult.

We began our shlichus all over again, as we'd done many times before. We had to start from the ground up, introducing ourselves and our mission to the community, meeting Jews, forming friendships, and slowly rebuilding our minyan.

It hasn't been easy, but, Baruch Hashem, we're seeing continuous growth.



At first, I drove to Peachtree City every two weeks to give a class. The group would decide on a topic that interested them, and I'd prepare a shiur for the following session. We covered a wide variety of topics in Jewish philosophy, halachah, Tanach, and Chasidus.

Shortly before Rosh Hashanah, one of the men approached me on behalf of the whole group.

“Will you be holding High Holiday services here?” he asked.

“Honestly, I wasn't planning on it,” I answered, truthfully, “but if that's what's needed, it would be my honor!”

He assured me it was very needed - and wanted.

“If so,” I mused to myself, “this is becoming a more serious, independent shlichus. I should visit the Ohel before starting this new chapter in our lives.”

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I caught the next flight out to New York, and was rushing through security when my phone rang. It was Mr. Schwartz*, a good friend and loyal supporter.

“What’s this I hear about Peachtree City?” he asked.

I excused myself, as I needed to catch a flight, but promised to get back to him after I landed. I called him back when I was seated in the Ohel, just past midnight. I explained we’d soon be opening a Chabad house in Peachtree City, and some of the ideas I had on how to get started.

“I like it!” Mr. Schwartz declared. “Would \$2,000 a month work for you?”

I was flabbergasted. I hadn’t even asked for a bracha yet, and here it was, streaming into my arms. Deeply inspired, I wrote my letter and entered the Rebbe’s Ohel. In all the years I’d visited the Ohel, it was the first time I’d ever been the only one there. It was just me and the Rebbe in the cool night air, with no distractions. It almost felt like a yechidus!

The next time I visited the Ohel, a couple of weeks later, someone I hadn’t met in a while greeted me with, “I heard you’re starting a new shlichus! Here’s a check to help you out!”

It was a month and half before I got to visit the Ohel again, and, once again, I was approached by a friend, who handed me a check and wished me hatzlacha in my new endeavor.

I took it as the Rebbe’s way of saying, “Here’s something to get you started. Now, it’s up to you!”

Whenever I can turn a chance encounter into an opportunity for spiritual growth, it makes no difference if I’m speaking with a Jew or non-Jew.

One warm Sukkos morning, I was walking to shul with my lulav and esrog in hand. I was stopped by a middle-aged couple ambling along the road in companionable silence.



“Excuse us, but can we ask you a question?” they asked.

“Sure!” I replied with a smile.

“We’ve seen lots of people with these tree branches like you’ve got here. We take this same walk every morning, and we’ve never seen it before! What is it?”

“Are you familiar with the Bible?” I asked.

“Of course!” they answered. “We’re about to attend services with our pastor.”

“So you’ll remember the verses from Leviticus that reference these plants,” I reminded them. “While some of these have a pleasant aroma and are edible, others have just one or the other, or neither! On this holiday, we unite them together, showing that every person, regardless of talent or ability, is equally important to the nation as a whole. When we are united, G-d wishes to join us and celebrate with us.”

The couple opened their eyes up wide and nodded slowly.

“That’s beautiful, Rabbi. Thank you for sharing,” the wife said.

“We were about to head to services,” the husband added. “But I think we can go back home instead. We’ve received *our* dose of spirituality for the day!”

Once a week, I serve as the chaplain in Atlanta’s International Airport. My job requires me to walk around the concourse, be present for the busy passengers rushing by, and see if there’s anyone I can help.

Once, I got a call from a brother and sister who were waiting in the airport on a layover for a flight home for their father’s funeral. He’d passed very suddenly, and they hadn’t had time to organize themselves or even pack food! They asked if I’d be able to provide them with any kosher food.

I immediately stuffed a bag full of sandwiches and snacks and delivered it to their gate.

Since then, I’ve worked to put kosher food in the airport, and baruch Hashem, it’s now possible for any Jewish traveler to pick up a delicious kosher meal along their way.

One day, a woman entered the busy terminal, her face creased with confusion and anxiety. I overheard her asking a passing worker for directions to her concourse, and although he told her exactly where to go, I could see she still looked dazed and at a loss.

“Excuse me, maam,” I said, “you seem upset. Is there anything I can do?”

She burst into tears. Through her sobs, she told me how her mother had recently passed, and before she’d even begun to process that loss, her sister was diagnosed with a terminal illness. She told me how she hated airports, and was perpetually confused by them, but decided to brave them to go see her sister.

“I can take you to your gate,” I told her, kindly. “Just follow me.”

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I led her through an admittedly dizzying array of escalators, trains, and moving sidewalks until we reached her gate.

“Who are you?” she asked, looking at me in dazed wonderment.

I laughed. “I’m the Jewish chaplain here. Have you ever met a Jew before?”

“No,” she admitted. “But this is a great first experience! I can’t believe how much you went out of your way to help a total stranger!”

As I was walking through the airport concourse, on the lookout for anyone who needed help, a man approached me.

“Excuse me, Rabbi. Can I read to you from the Bible?” he asked.

“Ummm... which part?”

“Numbers. Chapter 5,” he replied.

At my nod, he opened his Bible and read the Priestly Blessing aloud. “May G-d bless you and guard you,” he intoned.

“Thank you!” I said, surprised. “What made you pick those verses?”

“I just felt the need to bless a Jewish person. What better words could be used other than G-d’s own blessing?”

I opened the siddur app on my phone and showed him Birkas Kohanim. “Here are those same words in the original Hebrew. I’d like to return the blessing!”

A couple of weeks after October 7th, I got a call from a man who introduced himself as Chris*.

“I belong to the church down the road,” he told me. “I’m not Jewish, but I’ve always been curious about Judaism. I’m devastated by the news from Israel, and I want to do my part. I can arrange for a group to stand guard outside your synagogue every week.”

“I appreciate the offer - and the sentiment,” I told him. “I’d like to meet with you first, if that’s okay.”

Chris agreed, and came to my house to meet in-person. After an hour’s conversation, I was convinced of his sincerity and good-heartedness, and agreed to his generous offer.

Since then, one or two pickup trucks are conspicuously parked outside the shul, where their owners, mostly former military, keep a sharp eye out for any would-be troublemakers.

We did some minor renovations in our shul garage. While construction was underway, the garage was covered with a large tarp.

“I’ve got to know what’s going on with that tarp!” a lady told me over the phone. “I live down the street

and pass by your synagogue every day on my way to work. Every time I pass it, I make sure to slow down and look at it. It fills me with spiritual strength to go about my day. Does the tarp mean you’re closing? Has the antisemitism gotten so bad you feel threatened?”

“G-d forbid!” I told her, and explained what was going on.

“Phew!” she exclaimed. “I need your synagogue to stay exactly where it is!”

One morning, a young woman entered the Chabad house and asked to speak with me. She introduced herself as Sarah*, and told me she was dating a very nice man named Michael*. Things were getting serious between them, and Michael had brought up marriage. Since Michael was Jewish and Sarah wasn’t, she felt some hesitation.

“If we start a family, I want my kids to know where they stand,” she said. “So I figured I’d start with Judaism. Can you recommend any books?”

I recommended a few titles, and added, “Really, it’s best to start with the source. You couldn’t find a better crash course on Judaism than just reading through the Bible.”

I didn’t hear from Sarah for a few days, until she called me with barely suppressed excitement in her voice.

“I’m midway through Exodus, and I have too many questions to be answered before I continue! Do you have some time?”

“Fire away!” I answered.

Sarah began shooting questions almost faster than I could answer them. She cross referenced multiple parshiyos and asked truly insightful and intelligent questions.

Sarah devoured every book I recommended and took to it like a fish to water. Soon, she was ready for more intense study. She and Michael began attending my classes, and I also taught them a personal class. First we covered Shabbos, then kashrus, then Taharas Hamishpacha, and more.

After a few years, Sarah was ready to fully commit. She converted through the Beis Din in Atlanta, and, a few months later, we celebrated at her wedding to Michael.

They are some of the most central figures in our community and lead by example.

We were ready to move to Peachtree City, but we needed a house. I gave our agent a long list of qualities we were looking for: near the highway, a large

backyard, enough bedrooms for all our kids, a large kitchen, etc.

She excitedly told us she'd found the perfect place, and warned us not to wait too long or else it would be snatched up by someone else.

We put in an offer, and worked with our agent to iron out an agreement with the sellers. Unfortunately, there were major changes within the real estate agency, and our paperwork was lost in the chaos. Things ground to a standstill, and the sellers started to get annoyed at the delay. They told their agent to reject our offer and relist the property.

We were very disappointed. We followed news of what we considered "our house." Amazingly, they didn't receive a single offer, or even inquiry in weeks! When they investigated the matter, the agent realized they'd forgotten to press "submit" when they'd tried to relist the property.

Almost immediately after listing the house, a buyer from Milwaukee called and expressed interest.

"I'm leaving my house right now and driving down," he said. "I'll be there on Saturday! I'm ready to sign the papers - I just need to see it in person first."

He drove for hours and began his tour of the house. He loved everything about it, and couldn't stop marveling over all its features. Then he headed to the backyard and winced.

"Is this place next to the highway or something...?" he asked. "I can't hear myself think! There's no way I could live in a house like this. I'm sorry; deal's off. I'm heading back to Milwaukee."

The seller's agent turned to the owners. "I think this is a clear sign that the house belongs to the rabbi," he said. "I really think you should offer it to him and trust that everything will work out."

Clearly, Hashem wanted us to move to Peachtree City.

We were lucky enough to find a property with two detached garages. One was kept for personal use, but the other became our shul. Almost immediately, we saw that it was too small for our needs. But at that point of our shlichus, we simply couldn't afford to buy a property.

When a neighbor mentioned a house a couple of blocks away that had gone into foreclosure and was being offered for pennies, it seemed too good to be true. The property was close to our house, large enough to allow for expansion down the road, and the price was almost laughable. I told my agent to contact the bank immediately! He told me the bank was already under negotiation with a company, although no contracts had been signed.

I couldn't pass up on this golden opportunity, but even though the price was incredibly low, it was still a sum I didn't have. How could I raise that much quickly enough to compete with the other company? I sat at my desk and opened my calendar, noticing I had a lunch appointment with a wealthy philanthropist. The meeting had been scheduled months before, but the timing was prescient.

As I drove to the meeting, a friend messaged me that he was in Alma Atta, about to enter the kever of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, the Rebbe's father. He offered to write a tzetel on my behalf, and I gratefully took him up on the offer.

After we chatted and made some small talk, the philanthropist got right down to it. "What's going in, Rabbi?"

"Actually, a lot!" I answered, and explained the whole story.

"Sure," he agreed, almost casually. "I'll buy it."

I was amazed. I hadn't even planned to ask him for the whole sum, and here he'd offered it of his own volition!

There were a couple more ups and downs, but, baruch Hashem, with Hashem's kindness and the Rebbe's brachos, we were able to purchase the property. It serves as our Chabad house, shul, and event center, and is as perfect as we imagined it would be.

We rarely have a minyan on Shabbos, so we don't get to read the parsha each week. Instead, I take that time to teach the parsha with all the richness of the various midrashim, insights, and explanations.

One couple that attended every week was Shimon and Chana*. Chana grew up in a chassidische home and attended Bais Yaakov through high school. She went to Israel the year after high school, and dropped her Yiddishkeit. She met Shimon there and they got married, eventually moving to Peachtree City.

After a year or so of attending shul every week, Chana told me, "If they had taught me Chumash in school the way you teach it every week, I probably would've stayed frum. The way we learned it just felt... boring and impersonal. You really make it come alive!"

Chana is now returning to the ways of her youth. She is shomer Shabbos, and is continuing on her path of teshuva.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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