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

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Starting from Scratch

By Chaya Chazan

People often consider starting a new shlichus as the exclusive purview of the young. We beg to differ.

We got married in 2009, and settled in Crown Heights while searching for shlichus. When we welcomed a healthy baby boy a year later, we were sure our lives would continue to follow a predictable pattern. We never gave up on our dream to open a Chabad house, and continued to research options. Our friends were all doubling their families, and some were even celebrating the arrival of their third child, while our son remained an only child.

Our plans for shlichus got put on hold as we dealt with secondary infertility. After almost 9 years of hoping, praying, and waiting, baruch Hashem, we had a beautiful baby girl!

Of course, at this point, we were well established in Crown Heights. Both of us had jobs, and we lived on the same block for almost a decade! And though our friends laughed at us and thought we were crazy, we still cherished hopes of going on shlichus. When I met a shliach from Arizona at a simcha, shlichus, as always, was on my mind, and I asked him if he knew of any availability in Arizona.

"Well actually," he said, a gleam in his eye, "Rabbi Levertov, the head shliach of Arizona, has noticed an uptick of Israelis moving to Phoenix in the aftermath of Covid. He wants to hire shluchim to help them integrate and feel part of the community."

Our friends teased us that we were experiencing an "early onset mid-life crisis," but we took the suggestion serious-

ly! We went to check it out, and saw how needed an Israeli Center was. We moved to Phoenix in 2022, and finally fulfilled our life-long dream of becoming shluchim!

Everything was set for our move to Arizona. Our son was then 12 years old, and had just started 7th grade in his school in Crown Heights. He was happy there, had a lot of friends, and was learning well, so he was nervous about switching schools. He asked if he could stay in New York while we moved to Phoenix.

At first, we wouldn't even consider it. How could a 12-year-old live away from home? But when we consulted with rabbanim and mechanchim, they advised us to listen to him and allow him to take ownership of his learning.

It was gut wrenching to say goodbye to our young son, even though we knew we were leaving him in the very capable hands of our good friends. We wiped away our tears and pretended to be brave as his face disappeared amongst the crowded airport.

Even though we flew him to Arizona periodically to visit home, it was still very hard to have him so far away.

I flew to New York for his hanachas tefillin. As I was walking down Kingston Ave, I saw a friend I hadn't seen in months.

"Hey, Shneor! How are you?" he greeted me. "Don't worry! I remember that I promised you a Rebbe dollar before you'd move on shlichus. I have it! I'll give it to you tomorrow, b'ezras Hashem!"

Later that day, I went to the Ohel and poured out my heart, asking the Rebbe if we'd really made the right choice in keeping our son so far away. I asked the Rebbe to show me that we'd done the right thing, and to give my son a bracha for hatzlacha.

The next day, when my friend handed me the dollar, I noticed the date written at the top of the dollar, referencing when the Rebbe had distributed it, was the same as that day!

"Yeah!" my friend said, seeing my excitement. "I just picked a dollar at random, and it had today's date!"

"Today is my son's hanachas tefillin!" I explained. "The Rebbe is giving me a clear answer, letting me know that everything will be fine, and giving my son a bracha. Thank you!"

At his bar mitzvah, I presented the dollar to my son, explaining that while it had been handed to me, it was clearly meant for him.

With the wintry days heralding the approach of Chanukah, we traded New York's frigid winds for Arizona's arid heat.

We heard that some of the new Israeli families had organized a Chanukah party, so we invited ourselves over. It was such a great way to meet so many people at once! They were all very happy to hear a new rabbi had come, and promised to help and support us.

"How are you settling in? How's the unpacking going?" one of the men asked me, jovially.

"Well... actually... our truck hasn't arrived yet," I explained. "We were just informed that it will be delayed for a few weeks."

"But what will you do about beds? Tables? Chairs?" a woman piped in, a furrow in her brow.

I shrugged. "We'll figure something out!"

"Chevra, our new rabbi needs our help!" a man declared to the whole room. "His truck is delayed, so he needs furniture for the time being. Who can help?"

It was incredible. Within a few days, they'd managed to find us everything we'd need to get us through the next weeks until our furniture arrived. Accepting their help in this way was a most powerful beginning to a fruitful friendship. They felt invested in the success of our shlichus almost as much as we were!

This foundation soon had a chance to be tested again.

About a month after we moved, we decided to throw a "me-sibat Tu B'Shvat." It would be our first event, and we were anxious for everything to go perfectly. This event would set the tenor for our whole shlichus, and could be the deciding factor for many in the community.

We invested much time and effort in every detail. The invitations had already been sent, the menu drawn up, and plans laid. We were just two days away from the event when my wife gave birth to our fourth child, three weeks early! Of course, we were ecstatic, but what would be with the Tu B'Shvat party?

Our newly born community stepped up once again. Volunteers offered to help set up, organize, and clean up. The event was a smashing success, not least of all because the community felt personally invested. It was *their* party!

Gideon* grew up in a chareidi home in Israel, but, in his teen years, he rebelled against his parents and the life he'd been taught to lead. After throwing off his yarmulka and shaving his peyos, he vowed never to have anything to do with religion ever again.

Gideon had made it very clear to us that he was not interested in joining us for minyanim, shiurim, or programs.



October 7th changed everything.

Gideon called us, almost crying.

"I need to feel connected again. I want to feel a part of my people!"

We were happy to invite him for Shabbos, and he graciously accepted. At the Shabbos table, we could see flashes of the former Gideon surfacing. He looked at the challah with nostalgia, and joined hesitantly in our zemiros.

Gideon returned many times, and we also set up a weekly chavrusa. He began putting on tefillin daily once again, and trying to keep Shabbos and kashrus to the best of his ability.

His pintele Yid refused to be quenched, and helped Gideon find himself in his past.

Most Israelis are either religious, traditional, or completely secular. It's unusual to find Reform Israeli Jews, but Meidad* was one of them. He had some semblance of a bar mitzvah in his temple in Tel Aviv when he turned 13, but Yiddishkeit had played a very silent second fiddle ever since. He married a non-Jew, and tried to assimilate into American life as much as possible. I often tried inviting him for Shabbos, but he ignored all my invitations.

After October 7th, Meidad finally responded to one of my Shabbos invitations.

"Can I please come this week?" he asked. "I want to be with my people."

Of course, we were happy to have him.

"I've never experienced anything like that in my life!" Meidad told us after Shabbos. "I've celebrated Shabbos before, but this was my first *real* one!"

It was the first of many Shabbosim for which Meidad joined us. We soon formed a weekly chavrusa session, which Meidad enjoyed so much, he asked if he could invite friends to join. Now, we have a weekly shiur, hosted in Meidad's home!

Meidad was making great strides in his Yiddishkeit, so I felt comfortable pushing him one step further.

"What about tefillin?" I asked.

"What about them?" he responded in mock confusion. "Tefillin weren't part of my bar mitzvah, so I never put them on before."

"Would you commit to wearing them every day if I got you a pair?"

"Betach!" he responded, without hesitation.

I found a sponsor and presented Meidad with his own set of tefillin, which he proudly wears every day.

It all started with a text message sent directly from his neshama.

We were a few months into our shlichus, and although everything was going well, there were still the nagging questions: had we made the right decision? Was the impact we were making worth the sacrifice?

Meeting Yaron* and Gila* was a turning point. It was obvious they were expecting, and they told me it was a boy.

"What are your plans for the bris?" I asked. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

They looked at each other uncomfortably. "We weren't planning on having a bris," Yaron confessed. "We were just going to have a circumcision performed in the hospital."

"By a professional," Gila added, emphasizing the last word.

I didn't push it further right then, but I texted Yaron later. *Why don't you and Gila come over, just to chat?* I asked. *No pressure! We'll sit on the couch, Chanie will make cookies, and we'll just talk.*

They agreed, and came over later that afternoon. We sat together for over an hour, trying to explain the importance of having a bris done properly, and reassuring them of the mohel's expertise and safety. They agreed with most of what we said, but were still very apprehensive about allowing such a delicate procedure to be done by anyone other than a medical professional. I put them in contact with the mohel, and he was able to answer all their questions satisfactorily.

When their son was born a few weeks later, we hosted his bris in our home, and I held him on my lap as he was ushered into the bris of Avraham.

For the rest of my life, if I ever doubt the nature of my impact, I can look at this baby and know how much of a difference every person can make.

Our son's birthday is in Cheshvan. We'd been planning his bar mitzvah celebration for months, but after October 7th, we questioned whether or not we should cancel the event entirely. How could we dance and celebrate while our people were mourning? How could we feast while our brothers and sisters sat in captivity? It felt wrong.

We consulted with other shlichim and asked for their advice. They showed us a sicha of the Rebbe, where he explains the pasuk "*Hashem tzilcha al yad yiminecha*" - "*Hashem is your shadow; He is by your right hand.*" The Rebbe explained that the word "shadow" proves that Hashem follows our lead. However we act, Hashem responds in kind. If we remain b'simcha and focus on joy and happiness, Hashem will act the same way towards us.

We informed the community that we'd be continuing with our plans, but assured them we understood if it was too difficult for them to come.

At the bar mitzvah, we shared the video of the Rebbe's sicha explaining the pasuk. In my speech, I explained that we'd thought about canceling the event, but knew that nothing would give our enemies greater joy than destroying the happiness of a Jew hundreds of miles away. The party was our way of showing Hamas that they couldn't intimidate us or trample on our celebration.

Throughout the night, and for a long time afterwards, people thanked us for holding the event.

"You have no idea how much I needed this, Rabbi," they'd say. "At home, all I do is watch the news and hear one horrible report after another. It completely envelopes you in a fog of negativity, pessimism, and depression. A good, Jewish celebration is exactly what I needed to break me out of the cycle and bring joy and hope back into my life. Thank you!"

The Rebbe video was also impactful. I saw someone quoting the Rebbe's sicha on our community WhatsApp group, encouraging everyone to be happy and inspire a similar response from Hashem.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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