

# ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

*Rabbi Moshe and Bracha Peles, Chabad of Ashkelon, Israel*

## An Open Fridge Door Policy; Chabad of Ashkelon Part II

By Chaya Chazan

**Although rockets were falling steadily and the drone of the siren remained constant on October 7th, Gideon\* was determined to visit his parents and make sure they were okay.**

He drove through the eerily empty streets like a madman, trying to make it before the sirens would sound again. He knew he'd have only seconds to find safety before the rockets would complete the short journey from Gaza and land with crushing finality.

Just as he neared his parents' block, the sirens blared. He rammed the car into park and jumped out, but it was already too late. A rocket landed just yards away from him, sending debris and shrapnel in all directions - including Gideon's arm.

He was rushed to the hospital and the doctors gravely shook their heads. They thought they'd need to amputate.

Although Gideon was not an active member of our community and had never shown any interest in Yiddishkeit, I made sure to visit him in the hospital. He

was very worried about his arm, and I explained the significance of having kosher mezuzos. With his permission, I checked the mezuzos in his house and replaced them with kosher ones. Gideon also agreed to put on tefillin, and I wished him the opportunity to put on tefillin many more times - using both arms!

It was a miracle even the doctors couldn't explain. Gideon recovered and regained full use of his arm.

To this day, Gideon puts on tefillin every day.

The women's Chanukah event was beautiful and uplifting. My wife explained the spiritual significance of lighting candles and how they bring holiness and light into our lives. She invited all the participants to share something that lit up their lives and brought them joy.

"I'd like to share something," volunteered Camila\*, a newcomer to Chabad of Ashkelon. "I was born in Mexico, but I made aliyah as a teen. It was hard to adjust, especially since I moved from high school to college to army service and back. A few months ago, I decided to settle down and chose Ashkelon.

"I love the city and the closeness to the ocean, but it's really hard being alone here, without friends or family. My sister lives up north, but we don't get together as often as we'd like. And my friends are all getting married now and are busy with their new lives. The only close relationship I maintained was with my father. He remained in Mexico when I made aliyah, but we chatted almost every day.

"I resigned myself to spend most Shabbatot and chagim alone. On rare occasions, I spent them with my sister and her family. Mostly though, I was by myself. Except Chanukah. I had a long-standing tradition to light candles with my father. Over video call, we'd light our menorahs at the same time, singing and celebrat-

ing together. I looked forward to Chanukah every year, and the eight special nights of celebrating with my father.

"A few months ago, my father told me he was making aliyah! I was so excited! Not only would I get to see him more often, we'd be able to light the menorah together in person and make it a truly memorable holiday!

"But just after he moved he Israel, he got very sick and died. The suddenness of it was almost more unendurable than the loss of the person I loved most, and I was paralyzed with grief. I sunk into a deep depression that only got worse as Chanukah approached.

"On the first night of Chanukah, the menorah was set up on the table, waiting to be lit, but I couldn't bring myself to strike the match. I sat opposite it, hugging my knees and weeping for the gaping hole my father left behind.

"When I heard a knock at the door, I dragged myself off the couch and opened it. To my surprise, there were three young rabbis at the door.

"Do you want to light the menorah?" they asked.

"I do, but I can't!" I answered, my voice echoing with emptiness and despair.

"Undaunted, they came in and helped me light the shamash, recite the brachos, and kindle the menorah.

"Who sent you?" I asked them.

"The Lubavitcher Rebbe," they replied. They gave me a card with your number and a flier for this event. I knew I had to be here tonight. You saved me and helped me find light in the darkest moments. You showed me that I'm never alone."

On weeks that Camila is not busy with her sister up north, she spends Shabbos with us. She's become an honorary member of our family so that on weeks when she isn't with us, our kids ask where she went!

Our children are now excitedly looking forward to their "sister"'s wedding, and argue over who will be the first to spend Shabbos with Camila and her chosson.

My father always had a close relationship with the Rebbe, so I was zoche to accompany him many times on his trips to New York to meet the Rebbe. I amassed a collection of dollar bills I'd received from the Rebbe and treasured every one.

A few years ago, I was facing a crossroads that presented me with a unique quandary: we were looking into two different houses to buy, each with different thing to recommend it.

The first house was bright and spacious, and, more importantly, within our budget. The second house had a higher price tag than we were able to pay, but it was much closer to our Chabad house. I knew that being next door to the shul would help us enhance and strengthen our shlichus, as our home would be an extension of the Chabad house. We'd be much more available for our community, but the financial burden



of the higher price tag felt daunting, leaving us torn between the practical, budget-friendly option and the one that felt like a true extension of our mission.

As we debated between the two, doubting which was the right option for us, one of our community members approached me with a timely question.

"We're in the middle of renovating our house," he told me. "Everything is taking longer than expected, and the costs just seem to be rising! We had plans to expand our house significantly, but I'm wondering if we should just stop now and be satisfied with what we've already done."

"Believe it or not, I've been grappling with the same question myself!" I chuckled. "I can tell you that the Rebbe greatly encouraged home ownership, even if it meant budgeting in other areas of life. In fact, in 1988, the Rebbe promised \$100 to anyone who bought property that year!"

I may have been answering his question, but I knew I was speaking to myself as well. It made me realize that we should buy the second house; that's what the Rebbe would have wanted. But I couldn't silence that remaining doubt, *Is this really the best choice?*

That night, I got a call from a friend, a shliach in another city.

"Moshe, you'll never believe what I found!" he almost shouted. "It's a Rebbe dollar - with your name on it! I'll bring it over right away!"

My heart skipped a beat and I sat down to catch my breath. I knew exactly which dollar it was - twenty years before, I'd misplaced one of my dollars and had since given it up for lost. Miraculously, it had made its way back to me - just as I needed confirmation that I'd made the right decision.

I immediately called my realtor. "We're ready to buy the house!"

I was walking down the street one morning when I passed by a young man I'd never seen before.

"Shalom!" I greeted him. "I don't think we've met. My name is Moshe. What's your name?"

"Binyanim\*," he answered, shaking my outstretched hand.

We began to chat and Binyanim soon admitted that while he'd been raised in a typical Bnei Brak home, where the highest standards of halacha were most carefully adhered to, he'd never felt comfortable. At 14 years old, he dropped out of yeshiva. Within a short while, he'd dropped everything else too. The black hat

and jacket were quickly followed by davening, tefillin, kashrus, and Shabbos observance. A few years later, even his parents would have had difficulty recognizing him.

He married Noah\*, and they moved to her hometown of Ashkelon. Of course, they'd never come to Chabad; had they known its exact location, they were more likely to avoid the street altogether.

"You must come to our Chabad house!" I told him. He grimaced, so I quickly added, "You don't need to come for minyan! We host a lively kiddush at 11 every Shabbos morning. Come say l'chaim with us!"

Binyamin promised he would come, but it was still a surprise to see him that Shabbos morning. I welcomed him warmly and poured him a shotglass of whiskey.

Binyamin continued coming every week - never before 11:00 of course. A few weeks later, his wife and children joined him, and within a few months, they were comfortably ensconced in our community. Everyone came to love Binyamin for his heart of gold and kindness.

"I haven't stepped foot in a shul in twelve years," Binyamin marveled. "And if Chabad closed tomorrow, I'd probably never step foot in a shul again. But you make it feel so welcoming! I don't feel like I'm coming here to be educated - it feels like I'm joining a family."

The changes happened gradually at first. Binyamin started coming a little earlier to shul and even leafed through a siddur on some occasions. He asked about kashering his kitchen. Soon, he enrolled his children in Chabad schools. His eldest son, Ehud\*, joined my son's class and they became fast friends. When my son started researching yeshiva options for mesivta, Ehud joined with gusto and applied as well.

Today, the family is indistinguishable from any other Chabad family in the city. Binyamin has already visited New York a couple of times to visit the Rebbe's Ohel, and plans to do so again in the future.

We'd just opened the doors of our neighborhood Chabad house for the first time. Baruch Hashem, we had a large crowd, and even some new faces!

"This is not a shul," I told the assembled crowd. "We call this a Chabad House because we want you to treat it as a second home. We want you to feel completely comfortable here - like it's actually your house! There are no assigned seats here - the space belongs to each of us equally. Good Shabbos - and welcome home!"

After Shabbos, one of the newcomers approached me and thanked me for a wonderful Shabbos experience.

"I'd like to help you renovate and make this place really beautiful," he said. He walked around the room, peering into corners and carefully inspecting every wall and ceiling. "This place can use a new roof, a good paint job, and new books and furnishings. I'll write you a check."

"Tha-thank you!" I stammered. "I really appreciate this generosity! If I'm not mistaken, it's your first time here. What inspired this largesse?"

"A couple of years ago, I woke up one Shabbat morning and decided I wanted to be holy. For the first time in a very long time, I walked to shul and sat in an open seat. I was just about to open my siddur when I got a tap on my shoulder.

"This is my spot," the man said, apologetically.

"I moved to the next row, but I soon received another tap on the shoulder from the owner of that seat. The third seat I chose also belonged to another shul member. When I asked where visitors could sit, I was directed to some flimsy, plastic garden chairs set up in the back of the shul.

"The inspiration with which I'd greeted the day faded entirely. I left the shul and lit a cigarette. That was the start and end of my Shabbat observance.

"Last week, a friend told me about a new shul opening next door to me.

"That's nice," I told him. "But I don't go to shul!"

"He kept nudging and pressuring me until I finally decided to get him off my back by coming to check it out. As I entered the shul, I heard you telling everyone that this was a house belonging to everyone equally, without assigned seats.

"Does it surprise you that this is a shul I want to invest in?"

He kept his word, helping us transform the shul into a beautiful home. He has since become one of our greatest friends and supporters. He is always first to volunteer for anything we need, and we consider him an extended member of our family.

*\*Names changed to protect privacy*



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