

Kol Nidrei: “Shto takoia” Chabad?

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

How to become a card-carrying Chabadnik

Chabad Humanitarian Relief

This week, one of our congregants called to thank me for Chabad’s work. He said that his mother-in-law lives in Fort Myers, in Florida, the area that Hurricane Ian hit hardest. Last week, on Wednesday afternoon, they lost contact with her, because the Verizon tower nearby collapsed, leaving all Verizon users without service.

They knew she was staying with her son in the same area, but they could not figure out how to contact them. They reached out to the local emergency services, who took her information and promised to reach out, but they warned them that they were under immense pressure and did not know when they would actually get around to it.

Left without options, his brother here suddenly remembered something. “When you go down to Florida,” he said, “you usually pray at Chabad. Why don’t you reach out to the Chabad rabbi?”

The Chabad Rabbi of Bonita Springs answered his phone, but said that he wouldn’t be able to help due to the flooding in the streets. However, he suggested that he reach out to Chabad in Fort Myers itself — the Chabad Rabbi there was working with a special hatzalah team from New York which had arrived with all their equipment to assist the local Jewish community. Fort Myers Chabad Rabbi was indeed able to help — he sent a team, they knocked on the door, and the mother-in-law and everyone in the home were shocked and surprised to discover that Chabad was sending a team on a Friday afternoon to find out how they were doing. As it turned out, his mother-in-law and the entire family were safe and sound.

When I repeated the story to someone else, he asked me, “What exactly is Chabad? Are you an organization to strengthen Judaism, or a rescue organization for national disasters?”

Why the Craziness

Many of you know that I have two brothers serving as Chabad rabbis in Shanghai, China. The covid pandemic has made travel in and out of China very difficult.

My brother Avraham has been there since the start of covid; he hasn't left even once. My brother Shalom left China with his family a year ago for a short trip, but has since been left stranded outside of the country.

When they originally tried to return, one of the family members tested positive for covid, and they were therefore barred from the country for 6 months. Months later, as they tried to board another plane for China, they once again took a covid test and this time my brother himself tested positive even though no one else in the family did.

This time, they told him that it may have been a mistake and if he tests negative for two consecutive tests and waits 2 weeks, they would let him into the country. That didn't solve the problem, however. This took place only several weeks ago, and the two week deadline meant that he would arrive in China on the day before Rosh Hashanah. As per Chinese regulations, all new arrivals need to be quarantined in a Chinese hotel, and only then, if he once again tests negative, he will earn the 'privilege' of entering the country. In other words, in the best case scenario, he would be spending Rosh Hashanah in a Chinese quarantine hotel.

It just so happened that Chabad in Phuket, Thailand, was looking for an English speaking Rabbi to run their high holiday programming for Americans. He was happy to offer his services, and he and his family are currently spending the holiday there with the hope of entering China afterwards.

A fellow here in our community who is acquainted with my brother and his wife asked me to explain something to him. "Why does your brother insist on returning to China? It is a place which is becoming increasingly less free. It is inhospitable to tourists and business. Why does he insist on remaining there? Why doesn't he relocate?"

On a similar note:

Many of you know that I also have a sister, Chaya, who directs Chabad in Odessa together with her husband, Avraham Wolf.

When the war began, they ran a complicated rescue operation to bring out all the children in their orphanage along with many mothers and babies of families whose husbands and fathers were drafted to the war effort. The German government was instrumental in facilitating their journey, and then the entire group settled into a hotel in Berlin.

Since then, the entire group — 300 women and children — has been stuck there, in Berlin. For the first 6 months, they remained in the hotel; nobody imagined that the war would take so long. Then, the hotel that was hosting them informed them that they needed to leave by August 15th. After a long search, they found a nice — and very expensive — place to host the entire group.

Thousands of Jews remain in Odessa as well. Therefore, my sister and her husband continue to remain involved in both communities; they visit Odessa on a monthly basis and make sure that the Jewish community remains functional to whatever extent possible. The synagogue is active on a daily basis, the soup kitchen continues to provide services, and most importantly, the Jewish Day School remains open and children attend on a daily basis.

On September 1st, the first day of school in Europe, Chabad in Odessa opened two schools — one in Odessa and one in Berlin. For the opening ceremony, they held a zoom meeting for both schools together so that the students would see each other; it was a very emotional gathering.

At the moment, my sister, her husband, and their entire family are spending the holidays in Odessa; they chose to be with their community, despite the bombs and air raid sirens that they encounter.

The question again arises: “Why the insistence? Why must they go to a place which may harbor danger for them?”

What is Chabad

In Israel, there’s a well-known Rabbi named Menachem Cohen, who was active in the Histadrut, which is Israel’s national trade union, and was a member of the Knesset for a period of time as well. In the 1960s, he had the privilege to meet the Rebbe for a private audience, and a warm relationship ensued.

At that time, Israel's medical services were controlled by the political factions; your medical coverage depended on your political affiliation. Chabad was apolitical, which was an anomaly in the early State of Israel. Therefore, Kfar Chabad had a difficult time obtaining proper coverage, and a meeting was held to resolve the issue.

The officials asked that Chabad join a faction to receive coverage, but Kfar Chabad insisted that the Rebbe does not allow Chabad to become political. Therefore, they could not agree. The officials were stumped; it was a situation they could not understand; "What is chabad and why can't you join a political party?"

Menachem Cohen was present at the meeting and asked for the floor.

"It happened once in the Soviet Union," he related, "that a mail censor found a letter which had the word 'Chabad' in it. 'Shto takoia chabad, what is Chabad,' he asked, perplexed. None of his colleagues knew, so the letter went up in the ranks until it reached the chief censor himself — a Jew, from a Chabad chassidic family, no less.

"Seeing the word 'Chabad,' the censor began pacing back and forth. 'Go explain Chabad to a non-Jew,' he was muttering to himself..."

Menachem Cohen looked around at the officials and said, "I can't explain Chabad 'on one foot' — but they are special; this is something we should approve."

He made the necessary impact, and they unanimously approved the medical coverage.

The Rebbe

What is Chabad?

Chabad is the Rebbe. Everything comes through his inspiration.

What is a Rebbe?

During one of those rare occasions when the Rebbe explained the role of a Rebbe, he said that his role is to care for every Jew wherever he is, regardless of

character or status.

If a leader says that he could only work with a certain type of Jew — only scholars, or only wealthy, and so on — he's not a true Jewish leader. The Jewish people are compared to a Torah scroll, and every Jew is compared to one letter. If a single letter is missing, the scroll is invalid. If a single Jew is left out, the Jewish people are incomplete (12 Tammuz 5726. Toras Menachem vol. 47 pg. 157).

The Rebbe saw that our generation was going through a spiritual breakdown. With assimilation on the rise, there was an immediate need to save as many Jews as possible from spiritual drowning. Therefore, he focused all of his emissaries and all of his activities on spreading Judaism; it was a question of spiritual life and death. Over the past 70 years, this has been the most urgent need for the Jewish people. Every day, more and more Jews lose their connection to the Jewish people through assimilation.

However, whenever there was an immediate humanitarian crisis, the Rebbe was involved.

In 1986, there was the famous nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl, the most severe meltdown in the 20th century. The communist regime tried to hide the severity of the event, and failed to inform the locals of the impact it could have on them, and especially on their children.

One fellow wrote to the Rebbe, saying that there were many Jewish children in that region, dangerously exposed to nuclear radiation, and nobody was thinking about them. The Rebbe immediately sent a short note to the Chabad activists in Israel, instructing them to deal with the crisis.

They immediately began working on getting the children out. In 1990, the first group arrived in Israel numbering 196 children. Another 80 groups followed, bringing a total of two and a half thousand children from Chernobyl, many of them followed by their parents. The children were housed in Kfar Chabad where they received first rate medical treatment and education, and the program was later recognized and praised by the United Nations.

A parent takes care of all his child's needs, both physical and spiritual. There's no expiration date for his love and care and concern. Even if your child is 45 years old — you'll do everything you could to benefit him.

The Rebbe is a father to every Jew, and a true chossid tries to emulate the Rebbe. Whenever there's a problem for Jewish people, it's a problem for Chabad. If there are still Jews in China, it's the responsibility of the Shliach. If there are still Jews in Odessa, it's the responsibility of the Shliach. A parent will never say, "that's not my problem," and the same is true about the Rebbe — every Jew's problem is his problem.

My friends, you don't need a black hat and a beard to be an emissary of the Rebbe; when you take responsibility for another Jew, you too, are a Chabad rabbi.

On Yom Kippur, we approach G-d and say, "our father, our king," please forgive us...

When we treat another Jew as a parent treats a child, G-d will treat us as his child as well. Just as a parent will forgive a child even a thousand times and will always seek his well-being, G-d too, will grant us a happy and sweet new year.