



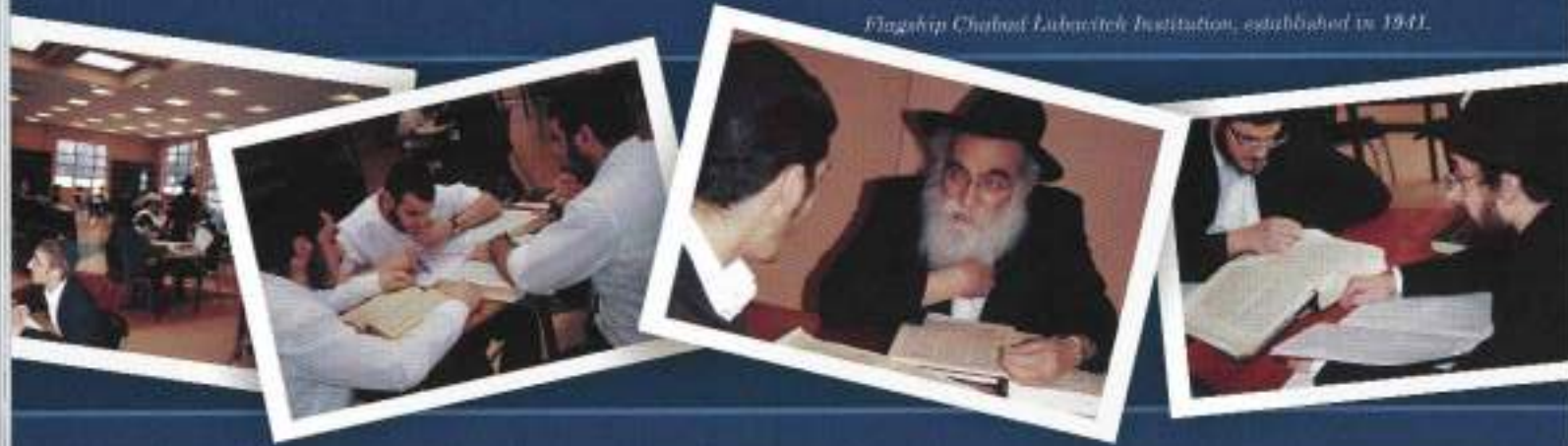
# A DREAM COMES TRUE IN DAYTONA

BY STACY BEYER

On May 18, 2008, a massive kiddush Hashem took place in our little town of Daytona Beach, Florida, with the dedication of our new Chabad Jewish community center and day school. The event was a visible sign of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's miraculous blessings coming to fruition.

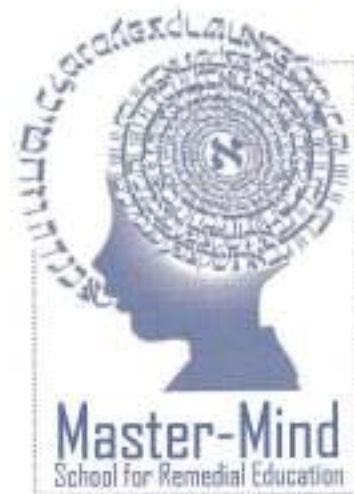
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Daytona Beach is a place known for rednecks, car racing and Harley Davidson motorcycles. Not for nothing is Daytona Beach known as the "Spring Break Capitol of the Nation." Before Rabbi Pinchas and Mrs. Chani Ezagui moved here, a Shlich in Central Florida said that if a Shlich ever moves to Daytona Beach, Moshiach is on his way, as you can't get

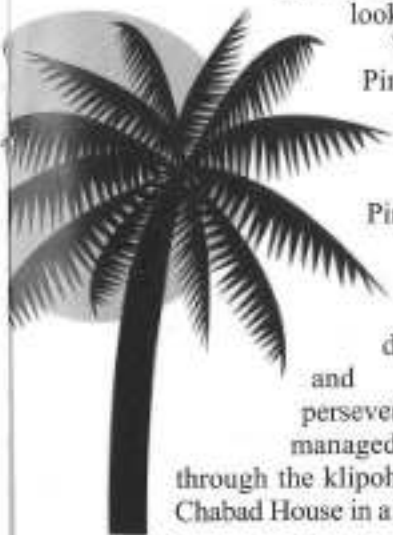


The new Chabad Center.

more "outward" (as in, spreading the wellsprings of Chassidus outward) and "tachtonim" (low) than that. The Rabbi always jokes that a source for Daytona can be found in Parshas Vayaishev, "Neilcha Dotoina" (with Lubavitch accent, "Let's go to Daytoina"). See Rashi's commentary: "Makom muchan l'puranus," a place suitable for trouble!

Notwithstanding all this, Daytona consists of some 1,800 Jewish families, of which a few dozen are Israelis.

Before the Ezaguis arrived in 1993, two Shluchim attempted to open up shop here, but quickly moved on, not willing to take the plunge into an area so desolate of any trace of Yiddishkeit. One even received an express answer from the Rebbe to look elsewhere.



Yet, Rabbi Pinchas and Chani, with the Rebbe's brochos, Pinchas's Sephardic background, and their deep warmth and incredible perseverance, managed to break

through the klipoh. They opened a small Chabad House in a strip mall in Ormond Beach (part

of Greater Daytona), from which they launched their famous farbrengens. In this way, they began to draw Jews out of the woodwork, including this author.

What started out as a one hour kiddush after the Shabbos morning services ended up becoming a whole day event, as men and women would stay literally from kiddush to havdolah. The warmth of the Rabbi's words was contagious and soon everyone in the room would be lifting their own cup to repeat some dvar Torah, to reflect on something that happened to them, or just to offer a wish from the heart to the people assembled. There was a feeling in that room of true ahavas Yisroel, as if everyone was part of one family.

Fast forward some five years. It's summer 1998. Central Florida saw wild fires like never before in its history. Almost half a million acres had burned throughout the state. The turning point for Daytona Beach was when the fires jumped from the mainland over Interstate 95 and were racing towards the coastal areas. As a precaution, Ormond Beach was placed under a mandatory evacuation order, while some homeowners began hosing

down their roofs hoping to save their properties. Nobody knew what to do. The fear and anxiety that the children were feeling was enough reason to evacuate. But that would also mean closing down the Chabad Center, possibly for more than just a few days.

Rabbi Pinchas wrote a letter to the Rebbe, then hurried back to listen to the news.

The mood was tense late Thursday evening, while the phone rang non-stop with inquiries from the community ("Will there be services this coming Shabbos?"). Rabbi Pinchas opened a volume of the Rebbe's published letters, searching for inspiration. There in volume 12, page 350, the letter read: "In response to the letter... in which he writes about the fire that broke out."



One of the famous farbrengens inside the Daytona Beach Chabad House.

The Rebbe then referred to the promise of the Alter Rebbe that after a fire one becomes rich. The letter concluded that this blessing will surely be fulfilled.

The prospect of evacuation quickly ceased to be a threat, and a new wave of hope replaced Rabbi Pinchas's discouragement. At the time, Rabbi Pinchas was also in a financial low point, due to the diminished support from his Israeli balabatim. Most of their businesses were largely dependent on the tourism industry, which had basically come to a halt due to the wildfires. The Pepsi 400, the annual car racing highlight of the year, was completely cancelled (for the first time in Nascar history) as a result of the fires. Reading the letter of the Rebbe gave him tremendous hope and encouragement.

However, Rabbi Ezagui's elation was short lived.

Several months after the wildfires, in September 1998, Rabbi Pinchas was driving to his Chabad House when he noticed a sign on the neighboring church property, saying "Contract Pending." His heart dropped. Rabbi Pinchas had had his heart set on this property for years. The property was a beautiful three acre lot, right on the main road and most suitable for a future Chabad Center. He had even received a promise from the pastor that if they ever decide to sell, they will notify Chabad first. Rabbi Pinchas immediately pulled into the church parking lot to have a talk with the pastor. The pastor apologized profusely and admitted that he had totally forgotten his promise. But when Rabbi Pinchas learned that it was the local Conservative temple that had the contract, he felt sick to his stomach. To top it all off, the pastor told him that it wouldn't pay to follow up should this contract not go through, as there was another contract right behind it that would go into effect if the first one failed.

Rabbi Pinchas and Chani Ezagui's pain over the whole situation was shared with their balabatim when they

learned of the church contract. Everyone's hope for the future of Chabad in Daytona was crushed.

The following Shabbos, one could barely find a smile in shul. We were all worn out from the dwindling economic situation. Now our dream of



Rabbi & Mrs. Pinchas and Chani Ezagui in front of the new Chabad Center.

building a proper shul, within walking distance to the residential community where we lived, was shattered.

But then there was "the farbrengen."

The concept of the "power of a farbrengen" was already in our blood, but this Shabbos everyone seemed to take it much more seriously. Several hours into the farbrengen, after many lively and emotionally charged songs, one man banged on the table and demanded silence. He began to talk very slowly with tears rolling down his cheeks. He cried out: "Rebbe!"

Bear in mind, this was not some visiting chossid from Crown Heights. This was a regular, run-of-the-mill Daytona Beacher who, like many others, had had his neshomoh washed clean with hundreds of hours of soul-warming talks by Rabbi Pinchas and his wife Chani. By this time, there already were many actual shomrei Shabbos, men with beards and kapotes, women with wigs and long sleeves, in the shul.

"We know you are here, and we know you are listening!" he cried out to the Rebbe. "As the nosi hador who feels the pain of every Jew, and *lo yaazov es tzon mariso*, you do not

leave your flock, please, we need your brochos now more than ever. For our future Chabad Center, we need a miracle now that we should not lose the property. Help us to realize our dream for a new building!"

His words expressed the feelings of everyone in the room. Except for the heartfelt sighs, not a sound could be heard, despite the fact that it's usually not easy to maintain quiet with a bunch of Israelis in a room during a day-long farbrengen. His sincerity touched everyone in the room. Everyone grabbed their cup and poured whatever bit of mashkeh they could find and they responded in unison with a loud and emphatic

written, "*Hanochas Even Hapinoh, 5748.*"

These were dollars he had received from the Rebbe when the Rebbe laid the cornerstone for the expansion of 770 Chabad Headquarters in 1988, 10 years before, and they had been in his pocket ever since. Rabbi Pinchas came dancing down the ladder, exclaiming: "I just received a dollar from the Rebbe!" Chani, not realizing exactly what he was talking about, passed him off as



The Beyer family. L to R: Sammi, Zachary (9), Bill, Chana (kallah), Stacey, Becky and Ben (13)

"happy" from the earlier farbrengen, but gladly took the box of clothing for the guest who was now due to arrive.

The following Monday, Rabbi Pinchas got a call from the pastor. "Someone must have been pulling strings for you lately, because the temple's loan didn't come through. The other contract also fell through and I feel morally bound to you, so I'm giving you the first right to sign the contract."

The property was selling for close to three quarters of a million dollars and a very large down payment would be due in a couple of months. Nevertheless, Rabbi Pinchas wasted no time; he quickly ran over and signed the contract.

Within about a month, by miracle only, he received a large unexpected donation which enabled them to pay the down payment and even make some renovations to the building. This happened in the middle of the summer. That Rosh Hashanah, we davened in the new building!

**F**ast forward five years again, to 2003. More men with kapotes, women with shaitels and families with babies are filling the now-small building on



The new Chabad Center (street view).



the lot, as Yiddishkeit is bursting at the seams in Daytona. One very dedicated Israeli couple single-handedly paid for and maintains a beautifully designed, state-of-the-art mikvah, built on the property of Chabad Center. The small Chabad Center is filled beyond its capacity, with daily minyanim, shiurim and activities drawing more and more Jews out of the secular streets and into the sweet garden of Torah.

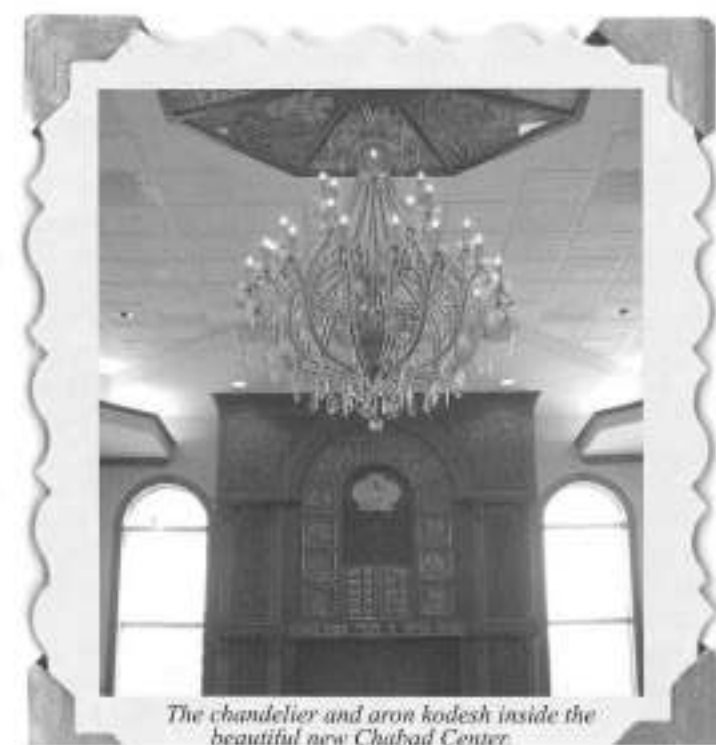
*"Money makes the world go round; if you pay for the school, we're ready to build!"*

Through the warmth, true ahavas Yisroel and dedication of Rabbi Pinchas and his wife Chani, my husband, my children and I all became baalei teshuvoh (see sidebar). When the time came and I felt ready to begin covering my hair, it was definitely not easy. One morning, with mixed feelings, I left to work wearing a shaitel for the first time. I work at a home for the aged as an occupational therapist, and I was quite nervous about what the other staff members would think of my wig.

I called Chani, and she calmed me down. She asked me, "In this crazy town, who will even notice you're wearing a wig?" People wear all sorts of crazy getups here! With that in mind, I gathered my courage and entered my workplace.

My initial grand entrance went completely unnoticed, but after about an hour the embarrassment came. I heard someone scream all the way down the long hallway: "Is that a shaitel I see?!" I couldn't believe my ears. Even if someone could tell I was wearing a wig, who in this town would know it's called a "shaitel"?

The man calling me turned out to be a frum businessman



*The chandelier and aron kodesh inside the beautiful new Chabad Center.*

## STACEY'S STORY

My family was the average secular American style: parents working, kids in public school, and a dog in the backyard. Growing up in New York, I remember hanging out with friends, attending after school activities and sight-seeing around the city. One sight that my father always insisted on pointing out was not on the local tourist map and was one I knew nothing about. Whenever we were in Brooklyn and happened to be passing Eastern Parkway, my father would point out to me, "That's where the Chassidim pray." He'd say it with no emotion attached, like "The sky is blue," or "There is the Statue of Liberty on the left." Just, "That's where the Chassidim pray." Little did I know that in that building, "where the Chassidim pray," sat a man who not only cared deeply about me, but who also put events into motion that would change my life and the lives of millions of others around the world.

At the age of nine, I had the privilege of spending quality time with my Grandma Rose in Loch Sheldrake, New York. Summer after summer, on Friday nights we would light Shabbos candles, eat soup, and then I'd be off to the movies and ice cream parlor. After the long summer came to a close, I'd go home and continue this tradition. At sunset I would stop everything I was doing, light my candle, and sit and watch until the flickering flame finally went out. But after a few months of being teased by my sisters, I would stop keeping this tradition. And when my Grandma Rose moved away, so did my summer candle lighting experience.

Growing up in the seventies, I had a fascination with the hit show M.A.S.H., which dramatized the adventures of soldiers in the U.S. armed forces. I graduated high school and joined Uncle Sam's army. Against all my wishes and attempts to change my duty station, I ended up in Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas. There I met my Jewish husband, Bill, and we got married. Of all Grandma Rose's fourteen grandchildren, I'm the only one that married a Jew.

I attended various programs and classes at the El Paso Chabad House, run by Rabbi and Mrs. Yisroel and Chani Greenberg. The classes were inspiring and brought me closer to Judaism. In July of 1993, we moved to Daytona, Florida, with our three young daughters. We set up a "kosher" home, or so I thought. We joined the local Reform temple. One day, I received a flyer from a friend about a Jewish camp in Ormond Beach. It was a thirty mile drive from our home and we had a hard decision to make. In the end we took the plunge and enrolled our girls in the camp. The thousands of miles we drove to Camp Gan Israel and back over the years put my family and me on a path I never expected.

We grew stronger as a family, constantly climbing in Yiddishkeit. After Chani Ezagui introduced me to the mitzvah of taharas hamishpochoh, I gave birth to my first son, Benjamin, in 1995, and to another son, Zachary, in 1999. Eventually we moved to Ormond and joined the

from Chicago named Morris Esformes, who was in Florida visiting someone who lived in the home where I work. Mr. Esformes had been visiting this town from Chicago for seventeen years, and never knew there was any Yiddishkeit in Daytona. Until he saw my shaitel! He was shocked to learn that there was a kosher restaurant in town and equally surprised that we had a mikvah and a flourishing Jewish community. He eagerly took down the contact information for Chabad, and I urged him to meet my Rabbi.

The next few lines I write with tears pouring down my cheeks. I am humbled by the thought of where one small mitzvah can lead.

Mr. Esformes walked into Rabbi Pinchas's office and asked him boldly: "Where's your Jewish day school?" Rabbi Pinchas responded with the same charismatic chutzpah as the questioner, singing with a tune: "Money makes the world go round; if you pay for the school, we're ready to build!" On the spot, Mr. Esformes responded, "It's a deal!"

On Sunday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008, five years later, the exquisite 5.5 million dollar (25,000 square foot) Esformes Chabad Jewish Community Center and Day School was dedicated. Rabbi Pinchas, Chani, my family and the Daytona Beach community saw clearly that the Rebbe does not abandon his flock.

*P.S. The Shluchos in Daytona Beach report that the most poignant moment of the evening came when Mr. Morris Esformes, the philanthropist, benefactor and main speaker of the event, asked Stacey to stand up and be acknowledged for being the key connection that brought the entire six million dollar building to life.—Ed. ■*

dozens of other shomer Shabbos families like us.

After my father passed away, I felt that I needed to take on a new mitzvah. It was time to cover my hair. Needless to say, that didn't go over well at home, with my husband, mother or sisters. On the very first day that I, with great trepidation, wore a shaitel to work, I merited to see incredible hashgochoh protis; an on-the-spot reward for my commitment. It is one thing to read the Rebbe's letters about the great blessings a woman brings to herself and her family by wearing a shaitel. I personally experienced them in a most open and revealed way, not only for myself but for my entire community.

Rabbi Pinchas and Chani have brought so much to my family. I am ever grateful to the Rebbe for sending them to Daytona. They are most inspiring role models and have wonderful children who truly follow in the path of Avrohom and Sarah. They are so welcoming to everyone. I want nothing more than to emulate their behavior and teach the same values to my children.

*Hazorim bedimah berinah yiktzoru.* Those who plow with sweat and tears will reap with joy. Today my oldest daughter Chani lives in Crown Heights, together with her husband, Aryeh Rosenblatt, and son Levi. Becky teaches in the Esformes Hebrew Academy. Sammi is currently attending Rhor Bais Chaya Academy in Coral Springs. My boys, Benjamin and Zachary, are attending the Esformes Hebrew Academy in Ormond.

If you come to Florida, you should definitely plan to spend a Shabbos in Daytona. There's nothing like it.

## Please Join Rochie's Friendship Network

Rochie is a 26-year old mother currently in critical condition. On Wednesday, Isru Chag Shavuos, she failed to wake up in the morning and is now in a coma and on life support. Although her heart is, thank G-d, beating, the doctors say she needs a miracle. The cause is unknown as she was perfectly healthy with no previous medical conditions. Her husband, 11-month-old-child, parents, brothers, sisters, and many friends all over the world are all praying for her to be restored to them. The doctors and hospital staff are doing their part, but she desperately needs our prayers and good deeds to aid her recovery. If there is one thing that characterizes Rochie it is her devotion and caring as a friend. Her family and friends therefore feel that the most appropriate way to aid her recovery is by committing to help others and to being a true friend. The hope is that groups of friends will unite to put forth a concerted effort to help someone in their own circle and change lives for the better. Someone may need a hand at home or financial help, someone may need help finding a shidduch, someone may need emotional or physical support. Reach out to your friends. Do it today instead of tomorrow in Rochie's merit. Rochie's family and friends have created a blog [www.rochiesfriendshipnetwork.blogspot.com](http://www.rochiesfriendshipnetwork.blogspot.com) as a place to log efforts on her behalf. Please join us, say tehillim and increase in maasim tovim l'zchus Yocheved Chaya Rochel bas Esther Malka. Ad Mosai! Moshiach Now!