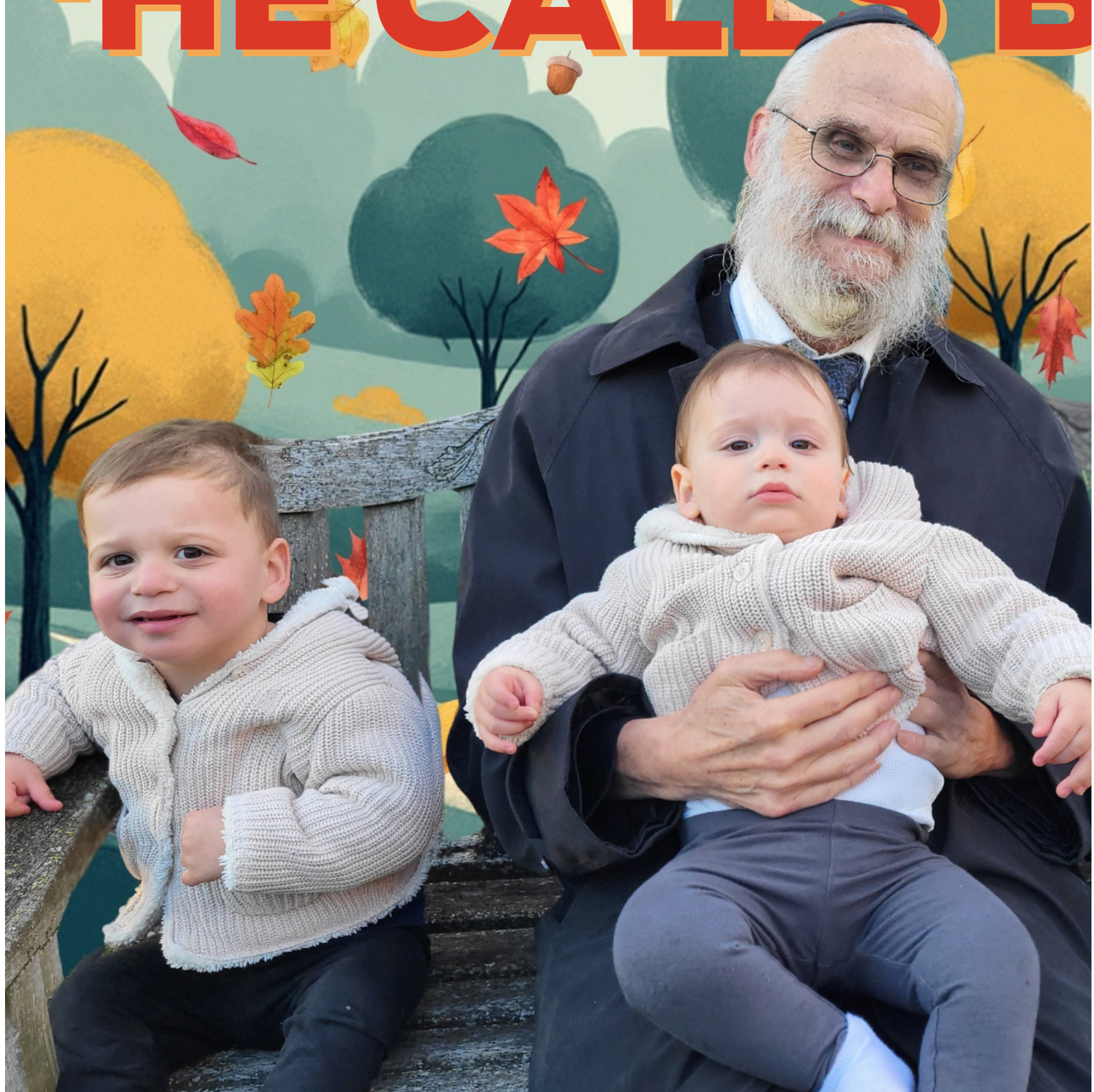


# ‘HE CALLS B







Many years ago, I was sitting in a *sukkah* in West Bloomfield, Michigan (where I was visiting my daughter Zeesy and son-in-law Rabbi Shneur Silberberg and their children). There were lots of guests there, and we had a beautiful *seudah*. After it was over, my daughter asked one couple if they wanted to return for another Yom Tov meal. They declined the invitation and I asked them, "But why not?"

The man explained to me: "Years ago when Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg [Shneur's father] first moved to West Bloomfield, he told me before Sukkos that his goal was for every Jew in West Bloomfield to eat in the *sukkah*. I laughed and asked how he thought he could fit them all in! He replied that he couldn't fit them all into his *sukkah*. But if every Jew he invited would, the following year, build their own *sukkah* and invite guests, and if, the following year, every Jew who was a guest would become a host in their own *sukkah*... before long,

every Jew in the city would be eating in a *sukkah*. So tonight we're here, but for the other meals, we invited Jews who otherwise wouldn't eat in a *sukkah*."

Conversation with  
**Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg**,  
*Shliach of the  
Rebbe to West  
Bloomfield, Michigan*

Rabbi Silberberg turned every guest of his into a

*shliach*. It was completely not about him; it was about getting every Yid into a *sukkah* on Sukkos.

And then one day, in New York, I met a young man who told me that when he and his wife were considering moving to the Detroit area, he called many rabbis of many shuls to try to figure out where they would best fit in. "Only one called me back. Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg. We talked for a long time and he advised us to move not to West Bloomfield but to Oak Park, based on our needs. But Rabbi Silberberg remained my *rav* and I speak to him whenever I need to—he calls back."

After these experiences, and many others, I knew we needed to speak with Rabbi Silberberg and allow readers of the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* to have a glimpse of his wisdom, his humility, and his life experiences. I had a feeling we have a lot to learn from him. Enjoy!

-Rishe Deitsch

The parents of a severely autistic son were told by doctors that there was a 25% chance of other children being born with the same disorder. The parents were unsure whether they should have more children. Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg encouraged the parents, told them to have *bitachon*, and because of his inspiring words and his support, the parents went on to have another son followed by a daughter. Pictured here is Rabbi Silberberg with the couple's grandchildren. L-R: Yaakov Haddad, Adir Haddad, and Maya Haddad.

## PLEASE TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND.

I was born in the summer of 1949 and was raised in the Bronx. My parents were also born in the Bronx, in the 1920s. My father, Berel (Bernie) Silberberg, lost his mother around the age of six during the Great Depression. He was ferried from house to house and even spent some time living in an orphanage. His childhood was fraught with challenges, and he was exposed to far less Jewish observance than my mother Zelda (Selma). My mother's family, though more traditional, was also not fully *frum*.

My parents married in 1946 after my father returned from serving in the Navy during World War II, where he was stationed in Okinawa. I am the eldest of seven children. My mother, a strong spiritual force in our family, chose to send my brother Pinchas and me to the Bronx Lubavitch Yeshiva and my younger sisters to Bais Yaakov of the South Bronx. By the time I was in third grade, my father followed my mother's lead and our home became

*shomer Shabbos*. Soon after that, my mother began covering her hair. I was still quite young, but I felt proud of my family's religious observance. It gave me a sense of purpose.

Our home became a hub of *hachnasas orchim*, welcoming people from all walks of life as my parents shared their newfound love for Yiddishkeit. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of feeding patients at the Jewish Hospital of Incurable Diseases, which was not far from where we lived. My mother and grandmother volunteered there, and they often sent me on Shabbos to help feed the patients there. In fact, my first memory of hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashana was at this very hospital.

## WHY DID YOUR MOTHER SEND YOU TO THE LUBAVITCHER YESHIVAH?

In the early 20th century, the Bronx was home to half a million Jews, yet the number of *frum* Jews was minuscule. The European immigrants serving as pulpit rabbis all over the Bronx struggled to connect with American youth

due to language and cultural barriers. By the 1940s and 1950s, there was only a handful of Jewish day schools, serving about 1,000 students in total. One such school was the Bronx Lubavitch Yeshivah, which opened in the 1940s under Rabbi Boruch B. Putterman, who was appointed by the Frierdiker Rebbe. After Rabbi Putterman's passing, Rabbi Mordechai Dov Altein took over the yeshivah's leadership.

My mother's brother was sent to the Bronx Lubavitch Yeshivah after being recruited by Rabbi Altein himself, who walked door-to-door along Allerton Avenue looking for students. Unlike today, when children are often rejected from Jewish schools due to lack of space, back then schools were desperate to fill their classrooms. Most children who attended the yeshivah didn't come from observant homes. Though my uncle didn't become *frum*, his time at the yeshivah wasn't in vain since eight years later, when my mother decided to send me to a *frum* school, she chose that school, which she was familiar with from her brother's experience.

## WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF THE YESHIVAH AND THE ALTEINS?

My parents developed a close relationship with Rabbi and Rebbetzin Altein. Rebbetzin Rochel Altein, one of the few women engaged in outreach at the time, was exceptionally intelligent and charismatic and became a close friend of my mother. I recall going with their son, my classmate Rabbi Laibel Altein, to shake *lulav*



The young Elimelech Silberberg with his parents, Berel and Zelda.





Rabbi Elimelech and Rebbetzin Chaya Sarah Silberberg with their children on a recent trip to Eretz Yisroel. Standing, L-R: Rabbi Kopel (Tamarac, FL); Rabbi Shneur (West Bloomfield, MI); Rabbi Naftali (Brooklyn, NY); Rabbi Eli Nossan (Lincolnwood, IL); Feige Slavaticki (Skokie, IL); Miriam Labkowski (Briarcliff Manor, NY); Malka Bluming (Crown Heights); Nechama Chitrik (Crown Heights); Laya Kleinman (West Bloomfield, MI); Rivky Kaplan (Pomona, NY).

and *esrog* with Jews living in the co-ops, walking up and down many flights of stairs to share the *mitzvah* with Jews—mostly staunch communists—who lived there.

#### WHEN DID YOU FIRST SEE THE REBBE?

When I was in fourth grade, my teachers, including Rabbi Moshe Levertov and Rabbi Aron Serebryanski, brought me to Crown Heights for Shabbos several times. At the time, Lubavitch was small, and the Rebbe *davened* upstairs in 770 even on Shabbos. I vividly remember a penetrating look the Rebbe gave me during *Minchah* on the very first Erev Shabbos I was there—a look that I carry with me to this day.

#### AND YET YOU ENDED UP GOING TO TORAH VODAAS. HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

Although I developed fond feelings for Chabad, my parents were influenced by my non-Chabad teachers to send me to Torah Vodaas for high school in 1962.

Though I wasn't yet a *chossid*, I was known there as "the Lubavitcher" whereas in Chabad circles, I was still called "the Litvak." While in high school, I participated in undercover *Tanya* classes organized by Lubavitchers. In truth, however, Torah Vodaas had a reputation for being neutral vis-à-vis Chabad, and I often served as a contact for Lubavitchers who wanted to have a *hashpaah* on the *bachurim* there. And I continued going to the Rebbe's *farbrengens*. I remember that after larger *farbrengens*, such as on Yud Shevat or Yud-Tes Kislev, my *rebbeim* would often approach me to ask what the Rebbe had said.

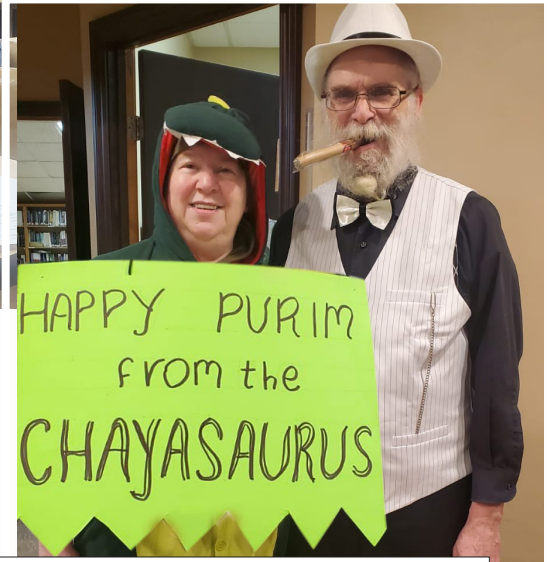
#### AT WHAT POINT DID YOU BEGIN TO IDENTIFY AS A CHABAD CHOSSID?

In my *bais medrash* years, still in Torah Vodaas, I connected with Rabbi Herschel Lustig, a Lubavitcher *bachur* (future educator and principal of Oholei Torah). Together, we began learning Chassidus, which deepened my bond with Chabad.

Rabbi Silberberg learning with Marty Goodman, a dedicated supporter of Bais Chabad and steady *chavrusa* for many decades.



Every Purim the Silberbergs dress up in a way that makes the whole community happy!



## THE OLDEST: Rabbi Eli Nossou Silberberg

I was not yet two years old when the Rebbe sent our parents, together with my infant brother and me, to West Bloomfield, Michigan. My earliest memories include knocking on doors with my father to find a tenth for a *minyan*. One man told him, "I've already told you, Rabbi, I don't believe in G-d." My father calmly replied, "And I've told you that I don't believe you—I think that you do believe."

I also remember going together on a Mitzvah Tank to do *mitvza'im*, throwing Chanukah and Purim parties in nursing homes and hospitals, and creating and running the first children's matzah bakery. "What would you do if you met Arafat in the street?" my father asked the children as he pounded away at the dough. (He stopped asking that when mothers started complaining.)

On many Friday afternoons, we drove to downtown Detroit to pick up an old man in a nursing home and bring him to our house for Shabbos. My mother made a name tag for him to wear on his shirt, so that if he walked out of the house on Shabbos he wouldn't get lost.

One fine day, a stranger took up residence in our home and stayed for a couple of months. We later found out that my father had heard that he was in a local jail for a petty crime, so my father went to court and testified on his behalf and accepted responsibility for him. "After all, he's a Yid," my father explained simply.

One of the things that continues to amaze me about

my father, may he live and be well, is his ability to be fully dedicated to his *shlichus* and community while also being intensely involved in *limud HaTorah*. He always has a *sefer* in hand ("what if I get stuck in a line while buying something?") and keeps the Alter Rebbe's *Shulchan Aruch* on his steering wheel (for stops at red lights). My mother was relieved when we finally got a car with a cassette player.

From time to time, when we noticed that my mother was preparing a special supper, we knew that Tatty was making a *siyum* on a *misechta* again. At the *chanukas habayis* of the Bais Chabad in 1982, my father made a *siyum haShaas*.

I always saw the tremendous love and respect people had for him—as well as the disrespect he sometimes endured. He never responded. "The customer is always right," he told me on a couple of occasions. "After all, we are here to serve them."

One more memory:

In the summer of 1986, we drove to New York to spend time with our grandparents in a bungalow colony. One afternoon, I saw my father writing at a table on the lawn, deep in thought. He somehow looked different than when he would typically write. I came closer, and he showed me that he was writing a *din v'cheshbon* (*duch*) to the Rebbe—an account of what had transpired in the past year at Bais Chabad. This made a powerful impact on me.





Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg receiving a dollar from the Rebbe on 28 Cheshvan 5750. JEM Photo ID#34322.

After receiving *semichah* at 21 from the *Rosh Yeshivah* Rabbi Gedalia Schorr (whose grandson Yitzy Bluming ended up marrying my daughter Malka some 40 years later), Rabbi Lustig and I had a strong desire to transfer to 770 to learn under the Rebbe's direct influence. The Torah Vodaas *hanhalah* wished for us to stay and we therefore sought the Rebbe's advice in a joint *yechidus*. At our *yechidus*, the Rebbe quoted the *maamar Chazal* that one should learn in the place his heart desires. We understood this as the Rebbe's approval for us to transfer to 770.

In Elul of 1971, Rabbi Lustig and I arrived at 770 and continued our studies together for three more years. Those years were the most productive of my life. They deepened my feelings of *hiskashrus* with the Rebbe and provided the

knowledge that continues to sustain me in my *shlichus* today.

#### HOW DID YOU MEET YOUR WIFE?

When I entered *shidduchim*, I met my wife, Chaya Sara (née Schulkind), who came from a *chassidishe* family of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park. My wife was first introduced to Chabad thanks to Camp Emunah's policy: "*Ohrem oder reich, du zeinen alleh gleich*—rich or poor, always an open door." As a child, her parents couldn't afford the cost of sleepaway camps but longed to send her out of the sweltering city each summer. They were advised, "Call Rabbi J.J. Hecht. He has a camp and will take your girls for whatever you can manage to pay." They followed that advice, and it was at Camp Emunah that Chaya Sara made friends with Lubavitcher girls and began to feel a deep connection to Chabad.

Though our backgrounds were different, we shared a commitment to Chabad Chassidus. The language barrier between our fathers—one speaking only English and the other only Yiddish—was bridged with smiles. We married in Elul of 1972 and, with Hashem's help, have been abundantly blessed in our over 50 years of marriage.

#### HOW DID YOU END UP ON SHLICHUS IN MICHIGAN? CAN YOU DESCRIBE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES YOU FACED OVER THE YEARS?

Though we knew we wanted to go on *shlichus*, we were unsure whether it would involve *chinuch* or outreach. Several *shluchim* reached out with various opportunities, including Rabbi Berel Shemtov, veteran head *shliach* of Michigan. We sent a letter to the Rebbe listing our options, and



Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg dancing with Guido Aidenbaum at the 2016 *siyum sefer Torah* for Bais Chabad of West Bloomfield.

the Rebbe responded by circling the words “West Bloomfield, MI.” Our answer was clear.

At the time, *shlichus* was in its infancy, and the idea of moving to a completely secular city where there were no *frum* Jews was still novel. West Bloomfield had many Jews but virtually no *shomer Shabbos* families. Before we left for *shlichus* in Kislev 1975 with our two baby boys, we merited our final *yechidus* with the Rebbe. The Rebbe told us, “*Hatzlachah b’gashmius ub’ruchnius lemaalah min hameshuar*. You will succeed physically and spiritually more than you can imagine.”

This *brachah* has been the foundation of our success for the past 50 years.

When we arrived in West Bloomfield, there was a small Shabbos *minyan* held in a local public school, led by Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Lipszyc. One of the most challenging aspects for me personally was the lack of a daily *minyan*. For the first ten years of our

## WE ASKED Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg for tips to young *shluchim*:

- Introduce your students and *balabatim* to quality *sefarim*. I find that many *balabatim* enjoy the weekly *Chayeinu* which contains *Chumash*, *Rashi*, *Tanya*, *Rambam*, *Sichos* and *Igros Kodesh* among other subjects.
- Prepare well for every *shiur* that you give.
- At a Shabbos or Yom Tov meal, don’t underestimate the value of plentiful food, singing *niggunim*, and sharing *chassidishe* stories. *Sipurei Chassidim* from Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin remains my favorite resource. Try to stay away from politics (and *shtusim*) as much as possible.
- Include your children in the *shlichus*. It’s helpful if they can share a *dvar Torah* or a story at the Shabbos table. One of the keys to success lies in awakening your guest’s desire for his or her children to be like your children.
- Try to include an in-depth class in *halachah* among your classes. Many people are interested in contemporary *halachah* and there are new *sefarim* in English that are great even for beginners.
- Always keep in mind that we are *chassidim* and *shluchim* of the Rebbe and may at times do things differently than others. If asked, we should be able to explain the reasons behind the differences.
- It’s important to maintain a proper and (when possible) good working relationship with the other Rabbanim in the community, even those you might perceive as competitors. Take the high road and try to stay out of any *machlokes*.





Rabbi Silberberg blessing his granddaughter Simcha Kleinman as she *bentshes licht* for the first time on her third birthday.



Rabbi Silberberg helping lucky grandson Dovid Kleinman put on *tefillin* properly for the first time.

*shlichus*, other than Shabbos and Sunday mornings, a *minyán* was almost nonexistent.

We arrived with two young children, and raising them in an environment with no *frum* peers was difficult. The only other children in our apartment complex were non-Jews. One child, a Japanese boy named Naotaka, befriended our sons. On Friday nights, we would sing and dance to *Shalom Aleichem* together with Naotaka who especially enjoyed the “kirrish” grape juice.

Another challenge we faced back then was the lack of resources available to *shluchim*. Today, tools like Kehos publications, Sichos in English, Chabad.org, and JLI have made Torah knowledge and outreach strategies far more accessible. Back then, we poured tremendous effort into creating from scratch community programs such as matzah bakeries and shofar workshops.

When we began our *shlichus*, the intermarriage rate was under





Rabbi Silberberg learning with lucky grandson Sholom Silberberg.

#### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SECRETS TO YOUR SUCCESS ON *SHLICHUS*?

My wife Chaya Sara has been my steadfast partner. In addition to her legendary Shabbos meals, she is renowned for her vast knowledge and vibrant, not-your-typical rebbetzin energy—like the creative Purim costumes she thinks up every year.

Our ten children *ka”h* have always been our greatest asset in inspiring others. When people see well-mannered, selfless children, they naturally want to emulate what they see. They realize that the foundation of such behavior is Torah and *mitzvos*. Investing in raising children with good *middos* is not only essential for *their* future, but also to the future of the community.

10%. Over the decades, that number has risen exponentially, presenting one of the greatest obstacles we face today. Issues like defining Jewish identity, conversion, and intermarriage have become far more complex. In contrast, the challenges 50 years ago were more focused on introducing people to Shabbos and *kashrus*.

Being a *rav* often involves navigating intricate halachic and personal issues, especially in matters of marriage and conversion. I’ve always sought the guidance of a *rav*, initially Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dworkin *z”l* and more recently Rabbi Dovid Schochet *z”l*. Their wisdom has been invaluable, particularly in difficult situations where upholding *halachah* while maintaining sensitivity is critical. I believe it is essential for every *shliach* to have a trusted *rav* to consult with on such matters.

Rabbi Silberberg urging President George Bush to stand up for Eretz Yisroel.



Over time, our Chabad House has earned a reputation as a warm, unified *kehillah*—a place where everyone feels like family. Maintaining such an environment involves resolving disagreements quickly, as unresolved conflicts can erode a community. The Rebbe’s emphasis on genuine *ahavas Yisroel* remains central to both our outreach and inreach efforts. One of our greatest joys is the diversity of Jews who come through our Chabad House—we have all levels of observance. This is a testament to the power of *ahavas Yisroel*.

Another deeply rewarding aspect of our *shlichus* today is attending the weddings of the grandchildren of our original *mekuravim* and witnessing the multigenerational impact of the Rebbe’s vision.

#### CAN YOU SHARE A MEMORABLE SHLICHUS EXPERIENCE?

A couple we had grown close to adopted a baby and wanted to convert her right away. The Beis Din was hesitant about immersing a baby in the *mikvah* and suggested delaying the conversion. The mother, however, was deeply concerned. She exclaimed, “You taught us that Moshiach is coming imminently and that after his arrival there will be no more converts! What if Moshiach comes tomorrow? Will my baby be Jewish?” Her sincere *emunah* moved the Beis Din to act immediately, converting the child without delay. This moment exemplified the deep faith and yearning for Moshiach that many in our community genuinely live with.



#### WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE ANY PARTING WORDS?

West Bloomfield today is almost unrecognizable from the city we first arrived in. In 2009, my son Shneur and his wife Zeesy joined us on *shlichus*, and *baruch Hashem* the transformation has been extraordinary. What was once a small seed has blossomed into a vibrant community with dozens of families of *baalei teshuvah*, and countless more have been inspired and uplifted by the Rebbe’s vision.

Our Bais Chabad is alive with *minyanim* three times a day, and in the *bais medrash*, you’ll find Jews of every background learning together. The city now boasts four *frum* shuls, a yeshivah, a kosher *eruv*, and the

recently renovated Mallor Walder Women’s Mikveh, which stands as the crown jewel of our community. On Shabbos afternoons, the streets come alive with the sight of children dressed in their Shabbos best, filling the neighborhood with joy as they go to visit friends and family.

The global success of Chabad Houses brings us all a deep sense of pride and gratitude. Yet, one thing is clear: As long as Moshiach has not yet been revealed, our mission is not complete. We pray that by the time these words are read, our *shlichus* will have reached its ultimate fulfillment—with the revelation of Moshiach Tzidkeinu, and the long-awaited reunion with the Rebbe, our beloved *Meshaleiach*. ❧

*N’shei Chabad Newsletter* extends special thanks to Rabbi Eli Nosson Silberberg, Rabbi Shneur Silberberg, and Mrs. Laya Kleinman, children of Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg, for holding this conversation with their father and making this feature happen.