Tefillin Brings Life

Miriam Butler as told to
Musia Gurevitch

I was raised in Williamsburg in the 1950s by my Polish and Russian parents and grandmother. We were not religious, and unfortunately, the Satmar *chassidim* in Williamsburg were taught to reject non-Torah-observant Jews. I still vividly remember being mocked and called a "Shabbos goy" as a child. When I was eight years old, I was violently attacked and abused by a man from that group. Besides for the physical and emotional trauma, this act shaped my perspective on Jews for many years to come. I hated them with all my being, and believed G-d was cruel and Judaism was evil.

My family moved to Crown Heights when I was a young teen, in the 1960s, but I refused to associate with Judaism at all. The only Jews I would speak to were my parents and grandmother. All my friends were gentiles, and I married a gentile. I made it my business to avoid Jews and religion, and managed to live most of my life completely unaffiliated with any sort of Judaism. In fact, I was very active in a church and considered myself a devout Christian.

This worked for me until 13 years ago, when I was 53, and both my parents died.

When my father passed away, a reform Rabbi took care of all the proceedings and life moved on for me. But 11 months later,



Miriam Butler (L) with Rivka ("Rivi") Feldman, at the Ohel, Elul 5776



Rabbi Gourarie wrapping tefillin on my cousin Allan.

Right: Rabbi Moshe and Rebbetzin Sara Chana ("Chani") Gourarie of Chabad of Toms River, NJ, and their children.

when my mother passed away, I was heartbroken. This time there was nobody to take care of business but me. My father was always the supporter of the home, but my mother was my best friend. I wanted to say Kaddish for her.

But how? I was a Jew swimming in a sea of gentiles, without a single Jewish connection. So I turned to the internet and searched "Kaddish prayer," and a website called AskMoses.com came up. I browsed a little and came across two words that I had never heard in my entire life: Chabad Lubavitch. When I googled what that was, I was absolutely shocked to find that Lubavitch comes from the word Love. I didn't realize that there were Jews in the world who believed in not just accepting but loving every person. The website offered to find me *A Chabad establishment near you!* So I put in my address and was immediately shown the contact information for a Chabad Rabbi and Rebbetzin in Toms River, right near my home in New Jersey. On a hot Friday in August, I sent them an email explaining that I was a Jewish woman practicing Christianity who wanted to learn to say the prayer of Kaddish for my mother.

That very Friday, Rabbi Moshe Gourarie called me. He asked me if I would please come to a Shabbos meal in his house where we could discuss everything I wanted to know.

Initially, I refused. I had no interest in connecting in any way with a Jewish family but, needless to say, the Rabbi stayed on the phone with me for hours until I finally agreed to come for a meal.

On Shabbos, I knocked on the door of Rabbi and Rebbetzin Gourarie. When he opened the door, I froze. He was wearing a black hat and the garb that I knew so well. He was a *chossid*!

I said "Rabbi, I am not coming inside."

He said, "Okay then, I'll come outside."

So we walked and we talked and eventually the incredible Rabbi made me comfortable enough to enter his home. I sat there with his family and we talked for hours. He put all his effort into proving to me that Hashem is a loving G-d who cares for His chosen people. He kept asking me, "What is it, Miriam? Why do you hate God and *chassidim* so much?" and I finally blurted out that I had been attacked by a *chossid* as a child. I did not expect the Rabbi's reaction. His eyes welled with tears and his face was red, and I felt his and his wife's pain for me almost as much as I felt my own pain.

When I left his home that Saturday night, close to midnight, the Rabbi and Rebbetzin gave me a Shabbos kit and I promised to light candles the next Friday.

I have been lighting Shabbos candles every Friday night for the past 13 years now.

Over the years, my connection to the Gouraries, and Rebbetzin Chani Gourarie's parents, Rabbi Dovid and Mrs. Rivka Feldman, has deepened to the level of family. The Gouraries named their child Leah, after my mother whose name was Leah. I am a part of the Chabad community and a practicing Jew, working every day on returning to my roots. The love I felt from Chabad Lubavitch melted my heart that had been frozen to Judaism. I finally returned home.

In June of 2012, for my 65th birthday, I celebrated my bas mitzvah, inviting many friends and publicly thanking G-d for bringing me home. I gave a talk which began:

I am a committed Jew, a work in progress but nevertheless committed. In the last seven-and-a-half years, I have come a long way. I am proud to stand before my Torah, with my Rabbi and his family, and proclaim that I am a Jew. If you could see my heart you would see it bursting with joy and pride to be part of an amazing



people, a people who struggled and came through with such resiliency that the world has the greatest respect for us. G-d chose a man named Abraham and said, "I will make a great nation of you." That is where I come from...

The year 2015 was a very challenging year for me. A personal relationship of 23 years came to an end. In March, I got a cat scan and two massive tumors were found. I discovered that I had a rare and dangerous type of cancer. My Chabad family was there for me. They prayed, they brought me to the Ohel, they said *Tehillim.*

Two of my truest friends, Rivka Feldman and Sarah Leah ("Sandy") Mantel, were there for me every second of the day, praying for me, helping me and supporting me. I met the remarkable Sandy through Chabad, also!

A few months earlier, I made an unexpected friend who became a huge help to me at this point in my life. I met Maureen Ferrito in a coffee shop, where we struck up a conversation and felt a natural rapport. I didn't have any interest in developing a friendship though, because she was a gentile and the majority of gentiles in Whiting, New Jersey, were extremely hostile and anti-Semitic. But G-d has His ways, and He wanted Maureen and me to become friends. Maureen kept texting and emailing me, until I couldn't resist anymore and a beautiful friendship began. Maureen has so much love for Jews that she is teaching a Jewish Scrapbooking Course at the Chabad House once a month and it's amazing, spiritual, and fun!

When I was diagnosed with cancer, Maureen was the greatest gift from Hashem. She went with me to doctors and hospitals, and was a great support. She is truly a righteous amongst gentiles.

When I had to go to the University of Pennsylvania, where the greatest specialists in the field of my cancer preside, Maureen and Sarah Leah came with me. The doctor told me that my disease could not be treated by chemotherapy. Instead I would have to undergo a risky surgery where my tumors would have to be removed in one piece. These tumors were 10 and 12 cm large, and the chance of getting them out intact was slim. I was also warned of the possibility that I would lose my bladder forever.



An initially hesitant Phillip put on tefillin at the exact time my life was saved during surgery.

I called Rivka Feldman, Rebbetzin Chani's mother, and she told me: *Miriam, Hashem still has lots in store for you. We're going to continue praying and it will be okay.*

The original date my surgery was scheduled for was June 8th, but I said I could not do the surgery on that day. "Why not?" I was asked. I answered that June 8th fell out right around Shavuos, and I could not and would not go into surgery before the day that all Jews become a nation and receive our Torah. The secretary promised to pass on the message to the doctor and before hanging up, she told me she "is in awe" of the Jewish people and my commitment to my faith and who I am.

Later that night I got a call from the doctor who allowed me to push off the surgery till after Shavuos. Then I told him I also needed to change the time of my next appointment due to Shabbos, and he laughed. "Is there anything else I need to know about the Jewish ways?"

I believe G-d put me in that hospital to elevate and bring Torah into its halls. The nurses and doctors would stop by my room to discuss G-d and Judaism. I bought yarmulkes for two of my doctors who wanted to wear them in respect to my faith.

The day of my surgery arrived. Rabbi Gourarie, my close friends, and my two cousins Phillip and Allan came to the hospital. The Rabbi brought *tefillin* to do some *mivtza'im* while I would be in surgery, in the merit of my speedy and complete recovery. Meanwhile, Rebbetzin Chani was at home reciting *Tehillim* with her children.

My doctor said he was hoping for a good outcome. When I brought my last scan to the surgeon, he too said things looked good and he did not think my bladder would have to be removed. I was ecstatic and ran to tell Rivka. "Do I look surprised?" she asked. She indeed did not. "I told you, Miriam, Hashem is going to take care of you."

Disaster struck during the surgery. One of my arteries burst, and I lost 4 liters of blood. I was in danger of losing not just my bladder but my life.

Outside in the waiting room, the Rabbi asked my cousins Allan and Philip to put on *tefillin*. Allan agreed but Philip did not. Rivka Feldman turned to him and explained to him why it was so vital to do this *mitzvah*. She said, "If I were a man I would run to do this *mitzvah*. Do it for your cousin's sake!" At 5:00 pm, he agreed, and the Rabbi helped Philip and Allan put on *tefillin*.

Back in surgery, a new doctor came flying in. He was a professional in the field, and although he was not supposed to be in the hospital that day, by Divine Providence he was. At 5:00 pm, he and the surgeon saved my life—and my bladder. I thank G-d first, and then I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Douglas L. Fraker and Dr. Timothy Guzzo.

Should I also thank my cousins for putting on *tefillin* (which they had not done in years, not since my bas mitzvah) at the exact same time?

Right before the surgery, I finally began keeping kosher. I had been trying on and off for years, but I finally made the commitment and kashered my kitchen. I had discussed it with Rebbetzin Chani on Shabbos, and the next day Rivka—who had no idea what I'd told Chani—called and asked me if I think I'm ready to keep kosher. It had struck her on Shabbos, while praying the *Amidah*, that this would be the right next step for me. Rivka told me it would bring a new spiritual perspective to my life, and it has. Keeping the mitzvah of kosher has given me peace and happiness, and has instilled in me a desire for Judaism like never before.

Now I didn't become kosher to make a deal with G-d. G-d is not in the business of making deals. He is in the business of love, kindness, and compassion. I became kosher so that if in fact I would die, I could show Hashem how much I wanted to connect with Him. Shortly after, Hashem showed me how much He cares about His child by stretching His Hand down from heaven onto my operating table, and saving my life.

I recovered speedily from the miraculous surgery and returned home with a deeper love and appreciation for every type of Jew and for Hashem. •