



By Rabbi Yitzchok Frankfurter ●

Conquering the World Through Torah and Mitzvos

An exclusive interview with **Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky**, director of the International Conference of Chabad-Lubavitch Emissaries and vice chairman of Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, the educational arm of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement

Who is unfamiliar with the Lubavitcher Rebbe's teachings about never losing hope regardless of the obstacles? "Think good and it will be good," he would famously quote the third Chabad Rebbe, known as the Tzemach Tzedek. And yet, I see Rabbi Kotlarsky's consent to host me at his home a week before the Kinus Hashluchim after numerous refusals to do an interview *not* as the result of my persistence, but as something close to miraculous.

Rabbi Kotlarsky, who is an eloquent and inspiring speaker whose speeches at the annual Kinus banquets are always one of the highlights of these amazing events, rather incongruously shies away from the limelight and is actually media shy. That he opened his heart and candidly shared his thoughts about the Rebbe's vision to spread *Yiddishkeit* by sending emissaries to every corner of the world will undoubtedly move you as much as it did me.

I suggest you listen in.



Rabbi Kotlarsky receiving a dollar from the Lubavitcher Rebbe

People from every sector of the Jewish community have encountered *shluchim* in various ways. When the Satmar Rebbe Rav Aharon Teitelbaum travels to California, where does he end up? In a Chabad House. I went to Bogota, Colombia. Where did I go? To the Chabad *shliach*. People are curious about how it all started.

In 1946, even before he became Rebbe, the Rebbe established something called Merkos Shlichus. *Bachurim* would give up their summer vacations and go out to visit Jews in places all over the world. You might say that that was the Rebbe's first foray into outreach. The idea was to be *mekareiv Yidden* through Torah and *mitzvos*. To conquer the world through Torah and *mitzvos*.

So spreading Torah and *mitzvos* is the primary goal of every *shliach*.

Absolutely. The fact that we are there to be able to help a *frum Yid* when he needs something is undoubtedly a big *zechus*. One of the pillars of Chabad-Lubavitch is the mitzvah of *ahavas Yisrael*, which means that when a *Yid* walks in and needs anything from a cup of coffee to a *mikvah*, we try to take care of it to the best of our ability. But that's only the icing on the cake.

Every location has its own population that has to be served through Torah and *mitzvos*. In some places, it's the local community. In other places, it might be backpackers. Israelis who backpack after finishing their army service is very common. How many of these people became closer to *Yiddishkeit* because they ended up in a place like Bangkok? The Rebbe once said that if there are 10,000 Jews in your city and you reach 9,999 of them you'll get a lot of *schar*, but you didn't fulfill your *shlichus*. The truth is that you can't worry about *klal Yisrael* if you don't worry about Reb Yisrael [each individual]. The Rebbe worried about Reb Yisrael the same way he worried about *klal Yisrael*.

Today, there are many *chasidische, lomdishe Yidden* who came from a secular background and were *niskareiv* through the *shluchim* around the world. There is no *shliach* who doesn't have such people. But the Rebbe would never use the term "*kiruv rechokim*," because there's no such thing as a "*rachok*." I once went to the Rebbe with someone named Mr. Kashani, who was from Bangkok. I told the Rebbe, "This is Kashani from Bangkok." The Rebbe said, "You are from a place in the East that is not called near." The Rebbe didn't want to use the word "far" for a Jew. He was meticulous to use a *lashon* that isn't negative.

Rabbi Yosef Wineberg used to travel around the world to raise money for the central Lubavitcher *yeshiva*. He once had something very urgent to write to the Rebbe, so he tried to catch Rabbi [Chaim Mordechai Aizik] Hodakov, the Rebbe's chief secretary, but he had already gone into the Rebbe's room for the last time that night, so he slipped the note under the door, figuring that Rab-



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Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky with his son, Rabbi Mendy Kotlarsky, just before the iconic shluchim picture in front of 770

bi Hodakov would notice it. But he didn't see it, and the Rebbe ended up picking it up from the floor. When Rabbi Wineberg found out what happened, it bothered him very much and he wrote an apology to the Rebbe for being *matriach* him. The Rebbe replied in a letter, "*Halo zeh kol inyanai, uftzuhoiben, bifrat vos andere, farkuken*—But lifting up is what I do, especially that which others overlook."

From day one, the Rebbe's vision was to bring the *Shechinah l'matah* and put an end to the *galus*. The objective was a world that is *kulo zakai*, and that every *Yid* should be brought close to Torah rather than the other way around, bringing the Torah to them. There was no compromise. Above all, the Rebbe was a very strict *Shulchan Aruch Yid*. In fact, the Rebbe told a number of *shluchim* who went out in the early years that one of the first things they

had to take along with them was a *Shulchan Aruch*.

I once asked Reb Yoel Kahn what he considered to be one of the Rebbe's *chiddushim*. He replied that the Rebbe treated every *minhag Yisrael* as Torah. For example, the Rebbe could say an entire *sichah* discussing whether during the weeks when the *minhag* is to say two *perakim* of *Pirkei Avos*, one should say *Kol Yisrael* before each one. *Minhagei Yisrael* played a very important role.

We heard from the Rebbe hundreds of times at *farbrengens*, "*Minhag Yisrael Torah hi*." It was an expression he used constantly. It's very hard to talk about the Rebbe because there was *geonus* in every part of Torah: *Nigleh*, *chasidus*, Kabbalah, *pshat*, *remez*, *drush* and *sod*. Hundreds of

volumes of the Rebbe's *Torahs* have been printed. And when the *gedolim* would visit, you could see how [their conversation] encompassed everything.

One of the distinguishing things about the Rebbe was that he was capable of going from one complicated topic to the next. He would speak to a general in the IDF about what was happening in Eretz Yisrael—on a level of knowledge that blew him away—and two minutes later he was having an intense *Torahdike* discussion with a *gadol*. I remember one time the Rebbe stopped the line for 25 minutes in the middle of *kos shel brachah* to talk to a *rav* who had written a *sefer* on the Rogatchover Gaon because the Rebbe wanted to clarify some of the things he'd written. The Rebbe could answer a medical question, then address a *chinuch* problem, then a minute later a *shalom bayis* problem, and right afterwards he could

sit and talk to a *rebbe* about spreading the wellsprings of *chasidus*. I was present when the Belzer Rebbe visited the Rebbe. The Rebbe strongly encouraged him to publish the Belzer *chasidus*.

And the *shluchim* were to be his emissaries.

The Rebbe frequently referred to the concept of *shlichus* as *shlucho shel adam kemoso mamash*. He empowered the *shluchim* to reach each and every Jew. It's hard to imagine how difficult this was in the beginning, because the world has changed so much since then. It wasn't long after the Holocaust, when so many *frum kehillos* were totally destroyed. And the pool of young *chasidim* was very small, especially because many of the survivors didn't want their children to move away from them. Many homes didn't even have telephones, not to mention how difficult it was to travel in those days.

There was resistance.

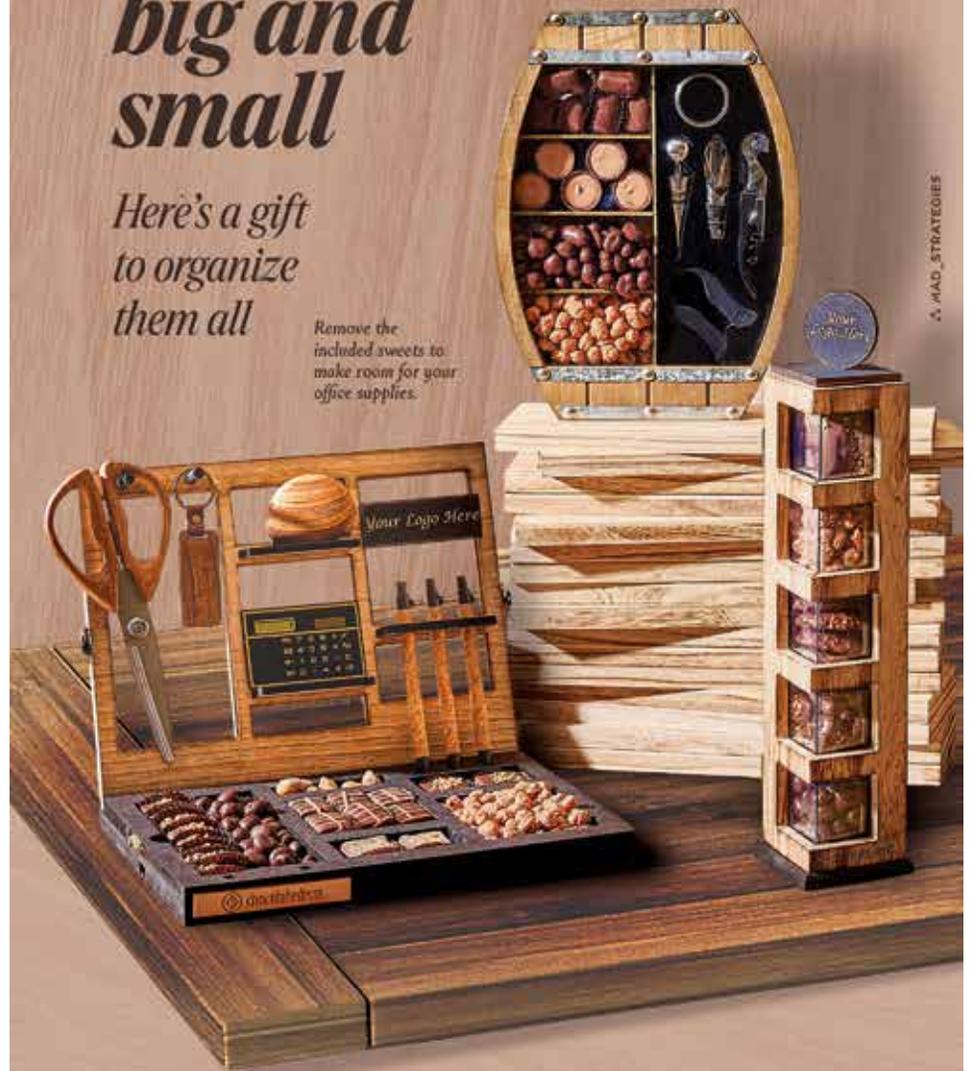
I wouldn't use the word "resistance," but they were also not volunteering to go. It wasn't easy. When the Friediker Rebbe first came to America, he declared, "*America iz nisht andersh*," and then he sent out the first *shluchim* to open day schools all over the country. These young American *rabbanim* were the pioneers. Just to illustrate their *mesiras nefesh*, the Friediker Rebbe once summoned Rabbi Dovid Edelman on a Friday and asked him to open a day school in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Rabbi Edelman, who was still a *bachur*, asked him, "Before Shabbos?" The Friediker Rebbe smiled and said, "Yes. Before Shabbos." By two in the afternoon, Rabbi Edelman was already on the road.

Then in the 1950s, there were a dozen or so pioneers who really built up entire countries, like Rabbi Garelik in Italy, Rabbi Sudak in London, Rabbi Groner in Australia, and the *shluchim* in Morocco, which was

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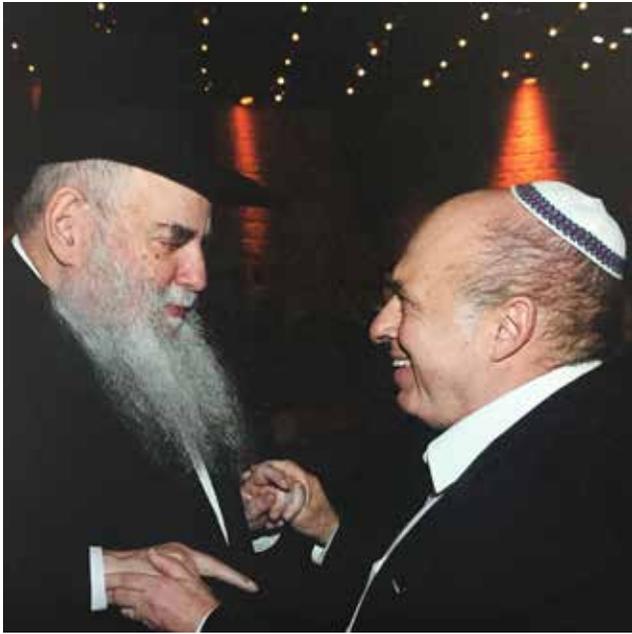
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Rabbi Kotlarsky dancing with Nattan Sharansky at the Kinus Hashluchim

The fact that we are there to be able to help a frum Yid when he needs something is undoubtedly a big zechus. When a Yid walks in and needs anything from a cup of coffee to a mikvah, we try to take care of it to the best of our ability. But that's only the icing on the cake.

the first country to which the Rebbe sent *shluchim*. There was Rabbi Leibel Raskin, who built an empire of a school and a *shul*; Rabbi Matusof, who built schools; and Rabbi Eidelman was the halachic authority, and he built *mikvaos* around the country. Then one of these *shluchim* to Morocco, Rabbi Pinson, moved to Tunis. But the first *shliach* to Morocco was Rabbi Michael Lipsker. Right after the *shivah* for the Friediker Rebbe, the Rebbe told him that the Friediker Rebbe had discussed sending him to Morocco, and he went there a few weeks later. These people weren't only in the large cities; they were in *every* city, even traveling by donkey to far-flung places when necessary. And sadly, when the famous earthquake hit Agadir in 1962, they lost people there as well.

How involved was the Rebbe with the individual *shluchim*?

In the early years, the Rebbe was extremely involved with each and every *shliach*. Then, as things expanded, the Rebbe introduced the idea of *shliach oseh shliach*, and he set up a system through Merkos whereby head *shluchim* were appointed by the Rebbe. The Rebbe was still in touch with every *shliach* through written reports, as well as through Rabbi Hodakov and those of us in Merkos. A large part of my travels to visit *shluchim* was for this reason.

Were there any conditions as to where a *shliach* should be sent?

The Rebbe wanted to reach every Jew everywhere. Therefore, once a location in need was identified, there were many things that had to be taken into consideration. For example, the Rebbe once wrote to me that there are four rules when it comes to establishing a new branch. The first was not to enter into *machlokes*; the second was to have a proper infrastructure for at least the first year; the third was to have a kosher *mikvah*; and the fourth was that the government

in that place had to be stable. There shouldn't be a concern about a revolution breaking out. For many years I traveled around the world, meeting with community leaders and rabbis to prepare the ground.

I know that for a lot of *shluchim* a *mikvah* can be a long car ride or even a flight away. Is this something that is being addressed?

Baruch Hashem, Chabad has already built well over 1,000 *mikvaos*. Keren Hashluchim also launched a fund last year in honor of the Rebbe's 120th birthday that is assisting in the construction of 120 new *mikvaos*, and there are another 140 applications pending.

Being involved in all this is an indescribable *zechus*.

Yes, but it's all about the Rebbe. People sometimes ask me, "How many *shluchim* do you have?" The answer is that I don't have a single *shliach*. Anyone who would be willing to give his life away for me to go somewhere on the other side of the world should see a good psychiatrist. People went for the Rebbe, and today they go because the Rebbe's philosophy and way of life are a *dugma chayah* that they want to emulate, and they want to do what the Rebbe wants.

When I meet with the 600 or 700 *bachurim* who are ready to go to different communities for Pesach to make *Sedarim*, I ask them why they want to go. Ninety-five percent of them will answer, "Because that's what the Rebbe wants." Instead of having their mother's gefilte fish, they either bring along some vacuum-packed food, or in some places they can get food from the central Chabad House in the area. Why do they go? Because that's what the Rebbe's teachings inspired them to do for a fellow *Yid*. People still come to the office and beg for a community with even only 100 Jews. They're ready to go.

What was your own personal trajectory like?

I got married in Kislev, and the first *yechidus* we had after that was for my birthday in Sivan. We had written to the Rebbe that we were ready to go wherever the Rebbe would send us; distance and location were no issue. But in those days, if you wanted to go on *shlichus*, you had to make a suggestion to the Rebbe.

Before I got married, the Rebbe had told me to learn in *kollel* for a year. At this *yechidus*, the Rebbe said, "When the time comes for you to leave *kollel*, you're going to have options. You should go to Rabbi Hodakov, and he will also make suggestions. At that point, you should come back to me and we'll discuss it." So I knew that I would be receiving an offer directly from the Rebbe, which was very rare.

My year in *kollel* was scheduled to end on 15 Teves, so in Cheshvan I went to Rabbi Hodakov. When I walked in, I noticed that the phone was off the hook. "We have three suggestions for you," he said. "Texas, Washington, DC, or to stay here." He asked me which one I wanted, and I replied, "Whatever the Rebbe wants is good for me." "No," he said. "The Rebbe isn't going to choose for you." "But I am hoping that the Rebbe will choose," I said. "And what if he doesn't?" he asked. "Why should I think about the no if I can think that he will?" I persisted. "Nevertheless," he said, "what if the Rebbe doesn't choose?" "Then *you'll* choose," I replied, "and whatever you choose is good enough for me too." He smiled and said that he'd get back to me.

The next day, he called me in and told me that the Rebbe said I should start working in Crown Heights, and we should revisit it in the summer. I went to the Rebbe for *yechidus* again for my birthday in Sivan. During the time until that *yechidus*, Rabbi Hodakov gave me a list of nine things to do for Merkos, and the Rebbe prioritized them by giving them numbers.

Before the *yechidus*, I asked Rabbi Hodakov what to write to the Rebbe. He said, "Write like this: If you have no choice *mitzad* Merkos whether to go somewhere or stay here, then you have no choice. But if you do have a choice, you want to know which place to choose." I asked Rabbi Hodakov to write this down for me, and then I rewrote it in my own handwriting. I went in for *yechidus* and gave the Rebbe my *tzetzl*, but he put it on the table and said, "Today, we have to have a conversation." I couldn't speak, so I just pointed to the *tzetzl*.

The way it worked was that the Rebbe would make comments on the *tzetzl*, but this time he read the first part without writing anything and then became very pensive; he was deep in thought. This was very frightening to me. It might have lasted only a minute, but it felt like an hour. I was standing there shivering. Finally, the Rebbe turned to me and said, "My opinion is that this is where the Rebbe the Shver was during the last ten years of his life in *olam hazeh*. It was from here that he disseminated *Toras Havayah* and

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Toras chasidus throughout the world. You will stay here, and from here you will be able to spread out to the entire world.” I was 22 years old, and it was beyond my capacity to imagine what it would evolve into.

I was *zocheh* to travel throughout America. Then the Rebbe told me to “take over” South America and then the Far East and Europe. I would bring a loaf or two of bread, a salami, and a few cans of tuna. One time I flew from Tulsa to New Orleans, and as soon as I boarded the plane I asked to be served my kosher meal, as I hadn’t eaten anything all day. The flight attendant brought it out, and it was probably the best airline meal I’d ever seen, but there was nothing I could trust the *kashrus* with except for a candy. So I mixed everything up a bit with a fork and sent it back. Another time, I arrived in Mountain Brook, Alabama, at one in the morning and I was starving. I went to the Holiday Inn and asked if they had any kosher food. “Rabbi, we don’t have *anything*,” they told me. “The cafeteria is closed for the night.” I said, “Please do me a favor and open the cafeteria and let me find something.” I found a box of Rice Krispies. Have you ever eaten Rice Krispies with Sprite? I don’t recommend it. That was the *matzav* in those days.

There were no Chabad Houses in those places yet.

Right, and even if you visited the local *rav* in a lot of these com-

munities, you had to be careful about what you ate. I continued to travel for the next five decades, usually for a minimum of eight months a year.

What exactly did you do?

Open new places, visit existing ones, help *shluchim*. I used to try to come home for *Shabbosim* if possible. There was a time when a typical route involved leaving for Tokyo on Motzaei Shabbos, arriving there on Sunday night, flying to Hong Kong on Monday night, and from there to Bangkok and then Singapore, then arriving back home right before Shabbos.

I would imagine that there are a lot of issues when you’re dealing with communities that run the gamut of *klal Yisrael*. And there’s probably a lot of troubleshooting that has to be done between *shluchim* and *kehillos*. How involved was the Rebbe in these types of things?

The Greyhound bus company has 11,000% more accidents a year than DeCamp Bus Lines. Do you know why? Because they have 11,000% more buses. We have people who are trained in conflict resolution and there is a *beis din* if there is a need for a *din Torah*. The Rebbe was aware of the issues. Many of them were sent to me to handle. When the Rebbe got involved in something, which

wasn't often, it was until the very end. The Rebbe was very hands-on with many things. Overall, there was a system in place to deal with whatever might come up.

Yet he also knew how to delegate tasks.

Yes. Depending on what and where the problem was, he would delegate matters to Agudas Chasidei Chabad, Merkos, *rabbanim* and others. My daily responsibilities and travels were in large part to deal with some of these issues.

What *nekudah* did you learn from the Rebbe with regard to issue resolution?

That's a very hard question to answer, but I'll give you an example of something I learned very early on. When I first started out, there was someone who complained that his head *shliach* wasn't treating him nicely. The Rebbe sent a letter to the *mazkirus* with my initials on it. Rabbi Hodakov gave me the letter and told me to clarify what was going on. I was very young. I came back about an hour later and reported to Rabbi Hodakov—with the Rebbe on the other end of the line—that I had looked into it. "That fast?" Rabbi Hodakov asked. "Yes," I said. "I spoke to the *yungerman* in question, and he told me the details about how he is being mistreated." Then I heard the Rebbe saying in the background, "And did you speak to the other side as well?" I kept quiet. Rabbi Hodakov said, "Nu, you were asked a question." Obviously, I didn't have anything to answer, so I finally had to say no. The Rebbe then quoted *Pirkei Avos* and *Shulchan Aruch* about listening to both sides before making any decisions. The Rebbe was very much for there being



With the late Israeli President Shimon Peres

The Rebbe once wrote to me that there are four rules when it comes to establishing a new Chabad House. The first was not to enter into machlokes.

a fair resolution, but he was also very *promashmais*—obeying those who are further up the chain of command. He wanted it to be clear that there has to be a *baal habayis*.

I know that sometimes there were issues of an existing *rav* being in the city to which a *shliach* was sent. Was this something that was negotiated, or did the Rebbe say that unless that

***rav* gave permission there wouldn't be a *shliach* there?**

There were places where the Rebbe took the *rav* or community situation into consideration, and there were other places where it wasn't an issue. Part of my job was to meet with the local Orthodox rabbi before the *shliach* arrived in order to smooth things over and make sure he would be okay with it and even supportive.

Perhaps this is a *shailas am haaretz*, but would you say that *shlichus* was the central feature of the Rebbe's activities, or was it only a part of it? How did it fit into the bigger picture?

That's another very hard question to answer, because if you live till 1,000 you'll never be able to be *yoreid lsof dato hakadosh* of the Rebbe on anything. Every single day, the Rebbe handled thousands of inquiries from individuals, communities, Eretz Yisrael—things that came to him from the government. Then there was the Rebbe's *limmud haTorah* and his encouraging people to do *mitzvos*, so *shlichus* was definitely a main focus. In 5726 (1966), the Rebbe said in a play on the words of the *Megillah*, "I am extending my *sharvit hazahav* to those who go on *shlichus*." The Rebbe was involved in every aspect of what was going on. There were *shluchim* who faced many hardships to whom the Rebbe gave beautiful answers about what they had accomplished.

At the same time, the Rebbe was taking certain elements of *Yiddishkeit* and promoting them directly to *klal Yisrael*.



Rabbi Frankfurter receiving a dollar from the Rebbe

People sometimes ask me, “How many shluchim do you have?” The answer is that I don’t have a single shliach. People went for the Rebbe, and today they go because the Rebbe’s philosophy and way of life are a *dugma chayah* that they want to emulate.

The Rebbe took each of these aspects and turned them into *mitzva'im*, mitzvah campaigns. It started with *ahavas Yisrael* followed by *limmud haTorah*, *tefillin*, *mezuzah* and *kashrus*. Then the Rebbe put Chanukah on the world map. Chanukah was always a *gevaldige* Yom Tov, but who ever thought of putting up large menorahs *al pesach beiso mibachutz* in a way that is truly *bachutz*—in the center of every city? The Rebbe fought for that. Then there was Purim.

When I was a boy of 11, I remember spending all of Erev Purim and Purim giving out *mishloach manos* and *matanos laevyonim* to people so they could give them to each other and fulfill the *mitzvos*. We went from school to school and from place to place. I must have given out 2,000 or 3,000 packages over the two days. Then the Rebbe took *shmurah matzah* and turned it into something that every Jew had to have. There is nothing in the Jewish world that the Rebbe didn’t emphasize. The Rebbe took things and turned them into common things that everyone should know about. *Yiddishkeit* was being watered down and forgotten, and the Rebbe brought back the *geon Yaakov*.

This year is a *shnas Hakhel*. The Rebbe took *Hakhel* and made it into not just a day but a year of “*l’maan yishmeu ule’maan yilmedu v’yaru es Hashem*.” There are *Hakhel* events all over the world. This year’s Kinus Hashluchim will be a *Hakhel* of *klal Yisrael*: 6,500 participants, including 4,500-5,000 *shluchim*. Till today, when you walk into 770 or most Chabad *shuls* on Simchas Torah they’re empty, because everyone goes to other *shuls* to be *mesameiach* the people there, and they’ll only have their own *Hakafos* at 10:00, 11:00 or 12:00 at night. A few thousand people walk from 770 to *shuls* in the surrounding neighborhoods, and even as far as Brighton Beach, Queens and the Bronx. When the Rebbe would come down for *Maariv* there was barely a *minyán*. People wanted to come from all over the world to *daven* with the Rebbe, but the Rebbe said no, they had to go on *tahaluchah*.

The *shluchim* are independent, yet there’s a central office to report to. It’s unclear to many people exactly how that works.

The Friediker Rebbe established Merkos L’Inyonei Chinuch and put the Rebbe in charge. Through this organization, the Rebbe ran many *chinuch* projects, of which *shlichus* was a main component. The Rebbe then established that there should be head *shluchim* in countries and states. The office would send out the head *shluchim*, who would then bring in the people who were under them. The system of *shlichus* is still overseen by the board of Merkos.

However, there are large numbers of *shluchim*, especially since Gimmel Tammuz but even before, who received grants when they started out from the Rohr family, the Meromim Foundation, and other key visionary partners who were involved in the opening of Chabad Houses, especially on campuses. They get a nice stipend for the first three or four years. Today, there are *shluchim* whose salaries are being paid by the Rohr family.

The Rohrs don’t enjoy publicity, but it all started with a *Yid* a *tzaddik* by the name of Reb Shmuel [Sami] Rohr, ז”ל, along with his son George and son-in-law Moshe Tabacnic. Their philanthropy is truly unparalleled. Not only have they built countless Chabad Houses and other buildings but they are responsible for much of the infrastructure that exists today, including Chabad on Campus, JLI and other projects. They are also giving stipends to almost 200 *shluchim* in the former Soviet Union, and they continue to give to the *shluchim* in Ukraine.

Has Ukraine been taking up a lot of your time?

For the last quarter of a century, it has been incredible to watch the *shluchim* restore Jewish life in a place with such a rich history. To give you some perspective, Chabad has 24 full-time communities of *shuls* and schools, and our Pesach and summer visiting

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programs are in touch with over 180 smaller communities. I visited Dnepropetrovsk a week before the war broke out. While everybody in the Jewish world has been pitching in to help, the efforts of the Vaad Hashluchim of Ukraine and its Jewish Relief Network have been tireless, evacuating people and feeding those who remain, especially as winter nears. This requires vast amounts of money to be fundraised. There are parts of Ukraine to which people have returned, but there's a lot of devastation everywhere, and it's going to take a long time to rebuild. For many evacuees who fled to other countries, the local Chabad Houses and communities have been the natural place for them to turn.

Is there any place in the world that you can say has generally had the most activity?

We are living in a time when there are *shluchim* in almost every country in the world; right now we're opening a Chabad House in Zambia. We've also expanded a lot demographically. A number of years ago we convened a thinktank of *shluchim* because we realized that each demographic speaks its own language and needs its own network, branding and support. We now have programs that are geared for different ages and stages.

CKids has *shluchim* who are there specifically for children. New *talmud Torahs* are being started that are open not just one day a week but every day. Then there's CTeen, the highlight of which is when 3,000 teenagers come for a *Shabbaton in Crown Heights* and a *Havdalah* event in Times Square. They go back home with a new appreciation for *Yiddishkeit*. We have CTeen groups in 50 countries, and we could have another 5,000 kids joining if we only had where to put them. This past Shabbos there was a *Pe-gisha* in Crown Heights. We had to stop the registration at 1,500 college kids because there wasn't enough room. Then there's Chabad Young Professionals, which is for young people who have already graduated from college and are going out to work. We offer *shiurim*, *Shabbatons* and various get-togethers. We also started something called Met at Chabad, a *shidduchim* database with tens of thousands of names, and we do a *birur hayuchsin* to make sure they're Jewish before we add them. It's been in operation for about a year and a half, and there have already been quite a number of *shidduchim*. Then there's JLI, under the leadership of Rabbi Efraim Mintz, which has revolutionized Jewish adult education in 1,000 communities.

Can you explain what JLI is in a nutshell?

JLI is the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute, which provides *shluchim* with ready-made curricula for adult education courses that are geared for *balebatim* and laymen around the world. These tools include textbooks, workbooks and PowerPoint presentations so that every student can understand.

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L-R: Mr. George Rohr, Rabbi Kotlarsky and Mr. Moti Zisser, z"l, founder of Ezer Mizion

Is it only for beginners?

There are tracks for beginners, and there are also tracks for those who are more advanced. There are three sessions a year, each of which lasts for six or seven weeks. The *shluchim* take it very seriously and put a lot of time and effort into their preparation, because this is the *ikar shlichus* of being *mekareiv Yidden* through learning Torah and doing *mitzvos*, and there are countless *baalei teshuvah* as a result.

You haven't touched upon learning *chasidus*.

You can't start with *chasidus*. You have to start with teaching *alef beis* according to *chasidus*. What is *chasidus*? Aside from everything else, it means *ahavas Yisrael*. When you approach someone on the street and you want him to do *mitzvos maasiyos*, the idea is that *mitzvah goreres mitzvah*. One of the things it says on the *matzeivos* of the *Rebbeim* is "*Vrabbim heishiv mei'avon.*" What was the Rebbe busy with all day? Learning Torah, spreading *Yiddishkeit* and helping people.

You mentioned earlier that the Rebbe was appointed by the Friediker Rebbe to run Merkos, as the educational branch of Chabad.

Through Merkos, the Rebbe was involved in the girls' schools

and the various publications, which was a major part of the Rebbe's undertaking through Kehos. Printing *sifrei chasidus* was very important to the Rebbe. There is no aspect of *Yiddishkeit* or even things that have to do with human feelings that escaped the Rebbe's involvement. The Rebbe was a big proponent of "preventive" education, teaching children values. He once told a group of UJA leaders that they should make sure that everyone receives a Jewish education so they won't have to deal with issues like drug addiction and delinquency. The Rebbe also promoted the idea of a Moment of Silence in public schools so that every child should know that there is an *Eibershter*.

Is there training for *shluchim*?

A lot of training.

Is there something like a college, *Thavdil*, from which they have to graduate?

The UJA used to have something called the Hineni Givers, and they invited me to speak at one of their gatherings. During the Q&A session, someone asked what kind of a degree the *shluchim* have to earn before they are sent out. I replied, "DD." They were impressed and said, "Wow! A doctor of divinity?" "No," I explained, "dedication and devotion." That being said, Merkos has a full department that

includes the Beis Midrash Lishluchim, Machon Lishlichus, and multiple courses and seminars on the fundamentals. There are also numerous workshops during the Kinus Hashluchim on everything from fundraising to mental health. Aside from the annual Kinus there are also regional Kinusim, which is something that the Rebbe instituted. The world is divided into regions, and each region has its own convention during the year, as well.

That's very interesting, because aside from the general issues, I would imagine that the challenges are different for a *shliach* in Turkey and one in Bogota.

Correct.

If someone approaches you and says that he wants to be a *shliach*, is there a process he has to go through? Are there tests and the like?

By and large, it's done on the local level. But it's really like making a *shidduch* when you want to place someone under a head *shliach*. And it's not just the head *shliach* of the state; there may also be cities in that state that have a head *shliach*.

Have you always lived in Crown Heights?

Yes. I was born here. We grew up with the Rebbe as a loving grandfather. He would send us to put on our coats if he caught us outside in the cold without one.

We knew that if you held the door open for the Rebbe, he would say "*yasher koach*." Once, when I was six or seven years old, I figured out that the best time to hold the door was when the Rebbe came back from *Kiddush Levanah*, because it meant a triple *brachah*: "*yasher koach*," "*a gutte voch*" and "*a gutten chodesh*."



Rabbi Kotlarsky at the Ohel with Mr. Moise Safra

In order to get that, I held the door from when the Rebbe came from the house. There were about 15 or 20 boys there, but I had to watch the door. I wasn't that big, and there were bullies who were trying to take it from me. The Rebbe went out for *Minchah*, and I held onto the door. The Rebbe went out for *Maariv*, and I still held the door. Then the Rebbe went outside to be *mekadeish levanah*, and I just stood there waiting for my moment of glory when the Rebbe would give me the *brachah*. But instead, the Rebbe stopped



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Rebbe stopped and said, “Were you *mekadeish* the *levanah* or were you busy holding the door the whole time?” My bubble burst. The Rebbe then said, “Take a *siddur*, be *mekadeish* the *levanah*, and then you can come knock on my door.” As soon as I was done I went back and said something like, “I did it.” The Rebbe gave me a big smile and said, “*A yasher koach, a gutte voch un a gutten chodesh.*” That was the type of relationship we were able to have then.



Rabbi Kotlarsky with Mr. George Rohr at the Kinus Hashluchim

The Rebbe was teaching you.

The *chinuch* lesson I learned from this stayed with me forever. The Rebbe could have rebuked me for holding the door instead of going out for *Kiddush Levanah*, but he said it in a positive way. Then he told me to go do it, after which I could receive my reward.

The Rebbe demanded that if you are a *shliach*, you’re a *shliach* 24/7. You have to know that as the Rebbe wrote in *Hayom Yom*—and we once had an entire Kinus on this theme—“*Sgeit a chasid, sest a chasid, sshluft a chasid.*” And the same goes for *shluchim*. When people see you, they must be able to say, “A *shliach* is walking. A *shliach* is eating. A *shliach* is sleeping.”

Your father grew up as a Lubavitcher chasid?

My father learned in Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim in Warsaw and Otvoek. A lot of Lubavitchers came from different places. Even the Alter Rebbe was referred to by the other *talmidei haMaggid* as “the *Litvak*.”

My father was originally from Kotzk. My father went with his father to the Pill-over Rav, who had a *yeshivah* that his wife supported from a *yerushah*, but her broth-

We try to fulfill the Rebbe's ratzon that this be a dor shekulo zakai. We don't want there to be even one Jew in the world who isn't doing a mitzvah. This will hasten the geulah shleimah.

ers took her to a *din Torah* saying that she wasn't a *yoresh* and they won. By the time my father arrived, there was already no money, so he told my father to go to Lubavitch. Rav Dovid Taiblum, who was a Kotzker, was the *rosh yeshivah* there at the time. My father's brother had already

come to Lubavitch earlier, in 5687 (1927), so he was at the Rebbe's *chasunah*, which took place two years later.

My father said that the first time he applied to Tomchei Temimim there were about 200 applicants. Only 14 were accepted, including him. After the first year, he was upset that they had only learned 40 or 50 *blatt*, which for a *Poilshe bachur* was nothing. His father was a *shochet* near Lublin, so during the summer my father went home for a

visit. While he was there, he wanted to see the famous model of the *Beis Hamikdash* in Chachmei Lublin. He rang the bell, and Rav Meir Shapiro himself answered the door. He asked my father what he wanted, and my father explained that he wanted to see the *Beis Hamikdash*. Rav Meir took him by the hand and spent the next two hours showing it to him.

A short time later, my father took his brother home from Tomchei Temimim, and they decided that they were going to finish *Shas* in one year. They got up to *Eiruvin*, but then they got stuck, so he decided that he was going to learn in Chachmei Lublin. When he arrived, he was immediately recognized by Rav Meir Shapiro. “How many *blatt* do you know?” Rav Meir asked him. “One thousand two hundred,” he replied. Rav Meir sent two older *bachurim* to test him, and then they took him over to Rav Shimale, who tested him as well. Then Rav Shimale brought him over to Rav Meir and said, “*Er kun, er kun*—he can [learn].” Rav Meir sat him down, brought him a Gemara and told him he'd give him a *chavrusa* the following day. But Rav Meir passed away a short time later, so my father went back to Lubavitch.

Again there were 180 applicants, but the Friediker Rebbe told the *hanhalah* to accept him. And that is how we came to Lubavitch.

My father later went to Shanghai on a Sugihara visa. After the war, Count Potocki got 300 visas for Canada, 29 of which he gave to Jews. Rav Hirschprung and Rav Elya Chazan were among those who received visas along with my father. Nine were given to Lubavitch, and the Friediker Rebbe chose the nine people who started the *yeshivah* in Montreal. Sometime later, the Friediker Rebbe sent him papers to come to New York.

What did your father do in New York?

He worked in the *yeshivah*. He was a great *talmid chacham* and finished *Shas* a number of times.

I assume you got married straight out of *yeshivah*.

I left *yeshivah* on a Wednesday night after asking *reshus*. I went to the Rebbe for *yeichidus* on Thursday night, and got married on Monday.

The Kinus Hashluchim is coming up this week. Are they always different?

The Thursday night, Friday night and Motzaei Shabbos sessions, which are the three times we get together for a general session, are always different. But the one thing that remains consistent, and I would say is the main part of the Kinus, is not the banquet or the sessions; it's on Friday morning, when all of the *shluchim* go to the Ohel together and a *pidyon klali* is read aloud. That's the high point of the Kinus, being by the Rebbe and everyone asking for whatever he needs. The *shluchim* come with bundles of *pidyonos* from their *balebatim* as well.

When was the first Kinus held?

The first Kinus was in 5744 (1983) and was attended by about 50 or 60 *shluchim* from America. Then in 5748 (1987), it be-

came an international Kinus.

How involved was the Rebbe in the event?

The Rebbe was very involved; it was his personal *simchah*. In fact, the Rebbe once said that it was a *zechus* for him to address the Kinus. He reviewed the program three or four times, and he spoke to the *shluchim*. The whole atmosphere was like Yom Tov. The Shabbos *farbrengen* was usually dedicated to the Kinus, and the Rebbe would speak to the *shluchim* on Sunday afternoon. There was also a time when the Rebbe spoke to the women at the Kinus Hashluchos, which began after the Rebbetzin passed away.

The Kinus was always held on *Shabbos Mevarchim Kislev*, because that was the first time all of the *shluchim* were able to come. *Shabbos Mevarchim Cheshvan* is on *Shabbos Bereishis*, which is often too close to Simchas Torah or even the day after Simchas Torah, so it's hard for some *shluchim* to get away. The Kinus would begin on Wednesday or Thursday with workshops, but the official start was the *farbrengen* with the Rebbe on Shabbos afternoon.

The only part of the Kinus the world gets to see is the banquet.

Over the years, the banquet grew as it became an opportunity for people to salute and celebrate the impact of the *shluchim* on the world.

Do the *shluchim* have to pay to participate?

The Rebbe said there should be a nominal payment, which was set at \$36 and was never changed.

I'm sure that the Kinus is a major financial undertaking.

Obviously, catering breakfast, lunch and supper as well as Shabbos meals, not to mention arranging workshops, seminars and sessions for five days is going to be an

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Speaking at the banquet of the Kinus Hashluchim

undertaking. The Vaad Hakinus and the Kinus office staff spend thousands of hours working on it. But we have other financial undertakings as well.

I understand that a number of *sifrei Torah* are going to be completed.

Yes. Thirty-six new *sifrei Torah* will be finished at the banquet. It's going to be historic. There will be 36 *hagbahos* and *geliolos* along with 36 people placing the *keser* on each one. The *keser* and *mantel* are all replicas of the ones used for the small *sefer Torah* the Rebbe would dance with during *Hakafos*. I undertook to finish all these projects before the Rebbe's next birthday.

Is there going to be a *hachnasas sefer Torah* at the banquet?

No. The *hachnasas* will take place in the various cities to where the *sifrei Torah* are being sent, but the *siyumim* will be here.

At the banquet, we're only going to write the last drop of the last letter of each *sefer Torah*.

How did you decide which *shluchim* would receive them?

It was determined by *goral*. We have a *gemach* of *sifrei Torah* with about 190 scrolls, but these are a gift.

You asked me before about the assistance *shluchim* get from the central office. This past year, I reinstated the Simchah Fund through which every *shliach* who makes a *chasunah* is given \$3,600; each *shliach* who makes a bar mitzvah is given \$1,300, and \$770 is given for each child who is born. My brother told me that this past week there were actually two sets of twins, one set of triplets and one set of quadruplets born—and those families got \$770 for each baby. There's also the Yom Tov Fund, through which we give a minimum

of \$770 to every *shliach* who requests it.

I've heard you at the Kinus Hashluchim many times, and you are a very powerful and gifted speaker. The roll call of *shluchim* who are stationed all over the world is a particularly emotional and inspirational thing to witness.

Being able to project and give over a message is a *matnas Elokim*; it's not something I take credit for. If it is true that I inspire someone, it's because there's a *brachah* involved. In general—in *shlichus* as in life—you have to believe in your product. We "sell" the *Eibershter*, Torah and *mitzvos* and *chasidus*. If it's packaged correctly, it's a marketable commodity. The world is yearning for it. You can see it in the numbers. If the Pew Report can come out and say that 38% of American Jewry's interaction with *Yiddishkeit* is through Chabad,

this tells you that those who predicted the demise of Orthodox Judaism 30 years ago were very wrong. There are places where the OU and Young Israel have wonderful *shuls*, but there are still large swaths of America where the only thing Jewish is Chabad, especially in the South.

Sometimes you have to have a gimmick, but getting someone to put on *tefillin* isn't a gimmick. A practical mitzvah has the power to evoke something inside. When you invite someone to a Shabbos table, you're inspiring him to eventually have one of his own.

We have readers who are *shluchim*, and we also have many readers who aren't Lubavitch, so we need a dual message. What do you think *khal Yisrael* should know about *shlichus*?

Shlichus is not a partisan thing. You would be shocked to know how many *frum Yidden* turn to *shluchim* when they need help with bringing back a family member who left. I don't see any division. We were taught to look at every Jew as a Jew.

The Rebbe once sent me on a mission to one of the Caribbean islands. I made an appointment to meet with the local government, but I didn't really know why I was going other than to print a *Tanya* there. On the way out of the meeting, I met a Jew who had a serious problem. His son had been bullied by his school into attending church services. When the boy refused to go, the headmaster tried to push him inside, and in the tussle the headmaster was knocked to the ground. The boy was expelled. The father then told me that back in the 1940s, when he first arrived in the country as a young kid, his grandmother had called him aside and said, "I want you to remember that you're Jewish, and I want you to marry Jewish." She then added, "If you ever have a problem, turn to the Lubavitcher Rebbe [meaning the Frierdiker Rebbe, who had just moved to America]."

The night before we met, his grandmoth-

er had come to him in a dream and said, "I told you that if you ever have a problem you should turn to the Lubavitcher Rebbe." Before he even had a chance to do that, he met me. After he told me the story, I realized why I was there. We arranged for the kid to come and learn in Crown Heights. But before that came Purim, and he flew to New York to see the Rebbe.

When he got home, he wrote to me asking how to write a letter to the Rebbe, because he wanted to tell him that "he had touched the heart of a small Jew living on a small island in the Caribbean." In answer, the Rebbe wrote back—and I have the *ksav yad* of the original: "*Kol echad v'echad mibnei Yisrael yesh lo nefesh Elokis, cheilek Elokah mimaal mamash. V'lachein ein bimetzius 'a small Jew,' kemo shekorei es atzmo b'michtavo*—Every single Jew has a *nefesh Elokis*, which is an actual part of Hashem. Therefore, there is no such thing as 'a small Jew,' as he refers to himself in his letter."

We grew up knowing that there are no divisions. Every *Yid* has a *neshamah* that is a *cheilek Elokah mimaal mamash*, which means that any Jew who turns to us for help, whether it's *bgashmiyus* or *ruchniyus*, is going to receive it. Myriads of *heimishe Yidden* come to Chabad Houses for help, and it doesn't matter who they are. The only thing we care about is if someone's mother was Jewish or there was a *giyur al pi halachah*. If not, we will still treat that person with respect, but we have to know.

We were taught to treat every Jew like a gem. This was the Rebbe's philosophy, and it's a perspective for everyone, *shluchim* and non-*shluchim* alike. Every *Yid* you meet in any capacity is your personal responsibility. In fact, we just finished creating a platform, onemitzvah.org, where people can start their own campaign to challenge those in their network to do *mitzvos*, similar to a crowdfunded financial campaign.

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Speaking before the iconic Kinus Hashluchim photo in front of 770

the *shluchim*, but if you had one for them, what would it be?

I'm not one to send messages to *shluchim*. Many years ago, at the first meeting for Chabad on Campus, someone asked George Rohr what his mission statement was. He got visibly upset and replied, "The mission is what the Alter Rebbe wrote, what the Mittlerer Rebbe wrote, as well as the Tzemach Tzedek, the Rebbe Maharash, the Rebbe Rashab, the Frierdiker Rebbe and above all the Rebbe, who determines the mission statement for what a *shliach* is."

They aren't my *shluchim*, they're *shluchim* of the Rebbe. The

Rebbe's *maamarim*, *sichos* and *igros* contain the answers to every question a *shliach* might have. The Rebbe's message is that our generation is the *dor hashvii*, and the *dor hashvii* is going to bring the *Shechinah l'matah* and bring the *geulah*. There won't be a *dor hashmini*. The Rebbe said, "I'm giving it over to you." We have to prepare the world for the coming of Moshiach.

The Rebbe didn't give jobs as much as he gave opportunities. If you did what he asked, he gave you more opportunities. How did you know if the Rebbe was happy with you? If he gave you more to do.



So I guess the Rebbe was very happy with you.

The *Eibershter* helped that I am surrounded by very good people. I have a tremendously good staff. My son Mendy, together with the hundreds of people working for Merkos and our kind donors, have enabled us to create innovative programming. Together, we try to fulfill the Rebbe's *ratzon* that this be a *dor shekulo zakai*. We don't want there to be even one Jew in the world who isn't doing a mitzvah. This will hasten the *geulah shleimah*. ●

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