

# IllumiNations

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## From California To Ukraine Rabbi Yechiel Shlomo Levitansky

*Years ago, my wife and I were set to go on shlichus to Sumy, Ukraine, a small city near the Russian border. When we arrived, my family stayed by the shluchim in Kharkov while I went to Sumy to search for an apartment. One night, I walked to my hotel room feeling very down. I had been there for two weeks already, but I had not yet found a suitable place for us to live. Was this all one big mistake?*

The town square was mostly deserted. Over and over again, I replayed the events of the past two weeks in my mind. Packing up our apartment in California and shipping everything away. Flying with my wife and three children across the ocean. Spending weeks looking for a suitable home to live in; half of the buildings didn't even have running water or a bathroom.

Heavy footsteps interrupted my thoughts. I looked up to find a Ukrainian man walking straight towards me. It was dark, and this man was staring at me. I got a little nervous. "Good evening," I called out in Russian.

"Good evening," he replied. "Are you Chabad Lubavitch?"

I blinked. This was not what I expected to hear! "Yes," I stammered. "Who are you?"

"I'm also Chabad Lubavitch!"

I looked the heavysset Ukrainian up and down. Him, a Lubavitcher? "Are you Jewish?" I asked.

"No."

"So... how does that work?" I asked delicately. "You're not Jewish, but you're Chabad Lubavitch?"

"I work for the Lubavicher Rebbe!" He said proudly.

The Rebbe? I knew that in Ukraine, people refer to their Rabbis as 'Rebbe'. Maybe he works for a shliach in a neighboring city?

"No, no, no!" he said. "I work for Rabbi Shneerson himself!"

My eyes opened wide.

"A few years ago, I won a lottery for an American green card," he explained. "When

I went to live in Brooklyn, I worked for the Rebbe! For three years, I was the janitor at the Ohel in Queens! I know all the rabbi's there... Rabbi Refson, Rabbi Krinsky... if you want, you can ask them about me!"

I was stunned. What were the odds? Just moments before, I was doubting my decision to go on shlichus in such a remote location. And right then, in the "remote" town of Sumy, Ukraine, The Rebbe had shown me that he knew exactly where I was and that he was with me! How else could I explain my encounter with the Ukrainian man who so proudly called himself a Lubavitcher?

And if this Ukrainian, who was the janitor at the Ohel, could walk around proudly, saying that he works for the Lubavitcher Rebbe, where was my own pride? I was a shliach of the Rebbe!

All my doubts disappeared. I straightened my shoulders and continued walking to my hotel room, ready to build my future in this city no matter what it took. The next day, I found an apartment.

Little did the Jews of Sumy, Ukraine know, but their lives were about to be changed forever.

My connection to the Jews of Ukraine had really begun years before. After I finished studying in yeshiva, I went to help the shluchim in Kharkov, Ukraine. It was in 1995, just a few years after communism fell, and Ukraine was still struggling to gain its independence and shake off communism. People were desperate for a new start.

When I first arrived, the contrast to my home back in California was overwhelming. The people in Ukraine had nothing. Electricity didn't always run and the water would randomly shut off. When kids came to the Chabad overnight camp, they didn't come with two pillows and a duffel bag filled with goodies. They came with just one change of clothing, stuffed into a shopping bag. They had absolutely nothing, but



they were happy. They had no money, but they didn't feel poor.

The simple Jews of Ukraine inspired me. Whenever we made an event, they just showed up. We didn't have to convince them to come; they had a thirst to learn more about Yiddishkeit. They wanted to hear. They wanted to learn. People came knowing nothing about their faith, not even the Alef Beis. Watching them have a bris, put on tefillin, start keeping Shabbos and kashrus, and then go learn in Israel—all in the span of a year or two—was mind boggling. The fire in their eyes when they learned Torah and their devotion to their faith was incredible to see.

The Jews of Ukraine, so eager to do more mitzvos and so hungry to learn about Yiddishkeit, made a lasting impression on me. After two years, I returned to my home in California, but the Jews of Ukraine remained in my heart. I knew that someday, I would return.

Let me tell you a story that will give you a laugh.

For the first few years of our shlichus, we had to renew our visa very often. The rules constantly changed, and it was a big headache. I hired a lawyer to figure it out for me, and eventually, he told me that I should try applying for residency.

Two weeks after I submitted my application, I was called to the immigration office. I was told that while my application was denied, the head of immigration wanted to speak with me. "I'll be honest with you," she told me. "I'm not convinced by your story. You brought your entire family from California to live in the small town of Sumy, Ukraine. The only logical reason I can see for you to do that is either because you're a spy, or because you're not normal! And we don't need spies nor crazy people here. So I have to deny your application."

I couldn't believe my ears! There I had it: an official government stamp that my going on shlichus to Ukraine was crazy. And that's exactly what the Rebbe wanted from us! Not to go on shlichus because it makes sense, but because of a shtus d'kedusha, an unexplainable desire to brighten up the world for the better!

I left the office on a high, ready to conquer the world.

In the end, we got our residency. My wife gave birth to our two younger daughters in Ukraine, which gave us an official legitimate reason for permanent residency. But I will never forget the lesson I learned in that little government office: logic and reason cannot stand in the way of making the world a better place and bringing Moshiach.

Each month, I go to the farm to watch the cows being milked so I can bring home fresh cholov yisroel milk for my family. When we first arrived here, though, it wasn't so simple. I needed fresh milk for my baby, so I went around asking the nearby farmers if I could watch them milk their cows.

To my dismay, they all refused! Apparently, they had this tradition that if a stranger watches a cow being milked, the cow will die! I offered to pay a lot of money, but they didn't budge. Finally, I found an old couple who once had Jewish neighbors, so they were familiar with the concept.

I would come at 5am, watch them milk their one and only cow for an hour, and return home with three liters of milk. One week, they told me that their cow was pregnant and would stop giving milk, so I should come every day to stock up.

When the cow finally gave birth, it had twins! The couple was ecstatic—they could sell one of the calves for a half a year's salary! It was the talk of the town that "the rab-

bi blessed the cow". From then on, all the farmers were eager to let me watch them milk their cows in the hopes that their cows might be blessed as well!

One of the main programs we run, and I helped develop, is our Kollel Torah, which is an hour-long Torah class following davening. Each morning, Yidden come to daven and learn Torah, and in return, we give them a stipend. For these Yidden, it makes a big difference. Not only are they growing in their Yiddishkeit, but we are literally helping them put bread on their table! Once a week, we have a Torah class for women as well. The program has spread and currently around 7,000 men and 3,000 women participate in this program across the FSU and Europe, and it changes their lives.

Who would have ever imagined that a little city in Ukraine would have a shul with a minyan and daily kollel learning for men, weekly classes for women and a beautiful mikvah?

The Rebbe sent shluchim all over the world to ignite neshamos and bring Yiddishkeit to even the furthest of places. When people ask me how I keep going in such a small town, I tell them that in matters of kedusha, there is no big or small. Very few Yidden live here, but a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and Hashem treasures each one. If I helped even one Yid put on tefillin, that's why I'm here.

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