

Good Shabbos Everyone. The verse in this week's portion Acharei states "You shall observe My decrees and My laws... and become alive through them -- I am Hashem." (Vayikra 18:5) Mitzvahs are spiritual oxygen for a Jew. In order to survive the rough and tumble life on this earth, we Jews were given mitzvahs. The following inspirational true story illustrates the power of mitzvahs to bring life to Jews.

Mrs. Raizel Astulin came out of the Rebbe's office with tears of excitement. It was more than a dream come true. Just a few years ago she was behind the iron curtain with no avenue of escape other than prayer. Russia was closed... forever!

Or so it seemed. Every year she applied anew for a visa to move to Israel to her family. But every year she, like millions of others, was rejected. But what pained her most of all was that she would never see more than just a picture of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

But miraculously it happened! One day she looked in her mailbox to see a letter from the government. It was permission to leave to Israel! It was truly a miracle! And to make it complete, shortly after she got settled in Israel her family bought her a plane ticket to the Rebbe. When she entered the Rebbe's office he asked about her family, about her health, about the situation in Russia asked how she was acclimating to Israel, and then told her that when she returns there she should devote time to teach Jewish women and girls to light Shabbos Candles.

But Mrs. Astulin feebly protested that she didn't really even know how to speak Hebrew to which the Rebbe answered. "You do what you have to and if any one makes trouble tell them that you are doing it at my request." Mrs. Astulin, a true Chassid of the Rebbe, wasted no time.

The first Friday after her return to Israel she took a bus to the nearest nursing home and bravely entered with the plan of going from room to room distributing candles together with a folder explaining why, how and when to light them. She was full of optimism but there definitely was more than a trace of anxiety. After all, she really couldn't speak the language properly and had never really approached total strangers before to ask them to do commandments. And sure enough, the first room she entered It was war! It was a sixty year old woman who, as soon as Mrs. Astulin entered the room with a smile and outreached candles, opened fire: "What are you doing here?! What? Candles for Shabbos? Mitzvahs? GET OUT!! All you religious people are parasites! Do you hear me? Parasites! OUT OF MY ROOM!!"

Mrs. Astulin flinched and wanted to just apologize and leave but suddenly she remembered what the Rebbe said and blurted out. "Listen, the Lubavitcher Rebbe told me to do this and.... " but her limited Hebrew and the shouts of the woman still ringing in her ears tied her tongue. Then something happened. The woman calmed down! "Ehh? You said the Rebbe of Lubavitch sent you?" "Yes." Mrs. Astulin answered and asked incredulously, "Do you know the Rebbe?" The woman's eyes filled with tears and she answered in Russian. First apologizing for yelling and then she explained.

"When I was young my parents passed away leaving me and my brother to fend for ourselves. He went to Medical School and graduated with high honors while I turned to other interests. But we were very close because all we had in the world was each other. "But things weren't good in Russia and after a while we decided to leave. My brother, although he was head of a department in a large hospital, was making almost no money and for me Russia was only bad memories.

"To our joy we got permission to leave but, for the first time, we parted ways. I moved to Israel to settle down but my brother wanted to move to New York where he could make the money he deserved. But, of course, we agreed to write regularly and eventually reunite. "But things didn't work out as we thought. I managed to get a job and a place to live but my brother couldn't get work. It seems that he overestimated the value of his Russian degrees.

For months he went from hospital to hospital with the same results; they all told him he needed at least another year of medical school! But he had almost no money; the little he brought went for the first month's rent and now the landlord was hounding him for the two following months that he owed. "I got one last terrible letter from him and then they stopped coming. He wrote that he was totally depressed and trapped. He had no money, no job, no hope and no energy. He couldn't even return to Russia or come to Israel... he had nothing and his debts were piling up.

I was really worried. I had no way of contacting him and so it went for over a month. NOTHING. But then I got a letter. It was the happiest day in my life! He said he was fine and optimistic. And he told the following story. "After he wrote the previous letter he decided that he would (G-d forbid) end his own life. He stayed up the entire night thinking about it and became more and more depressed until the sun rose. It was a cool Friday morning when he walked out of his apartment onto the sidewalk. He walked in a daze for several hours until he found himself walking to a local bridge. He had nothing to live for anymore. No one cared. He had no future. Everything was black all around him. He decided he would (G-d forbid) jump off into oblivion. But then someone called out to him 'Excuse me sir, are you Jewish?' He tried to just ignore it but such a question coming from nowhere almost made him laugh. Jewish? Where did that come from? He stopped for a moment and that was enough. The young man began to hound him saying 'Nu, if you're Jewish come put on Tefillin.'

My brother had never put on Tefillin in his life. We were atheists from Communist Russia where only a few people we knew put on Tefillin. But the fellow got my brother talking until he convinced him to do it. He put on Tefillin and then told him what he was about to do and the young man almost fainted. "What?" he said "Why do such a crazy thing? You're a human being! And you're a Jew! It's forbidden to give up."

Anyway he convinced my brother to put on Tefillin and to come with him to Shabbos in Crown Heights and then somehow arranged him a meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. "Well, I don't know what the Rebbe said there to my brother but he came out of the Rebbe's room a different man. Maybe they even gave him some money or found him a job or something but my brother didn't tell me that. He just said that he spoke to the Lubavitcher Rebbe and everything will be all right. "And he ended the letter saying 'My dear sister, if you have a living brother today it is only in the merit of the Lubavitcher Rebbe'" The woman turned to Mrs. Astulin with tears in her eyes and said. "Now please tell me more about these Shabbos Candles." **Good Shabbos Everyone.**