

SHOLOM LIPSKAR

by OREN BARUCH STIER



“We’re all *shluchim* (emissaries) of the *Aibishter* – we are all emissaries of God,” says Rabbi Sholom Lipskar, the dynamic founder and spiritual leader of Miami’s Shul of Bal Harbour. “Each one of us is an emissary of God [created] to fulfill a unique purpose of creation. We each have a fundamental, monumental mission that is incredible and that touches on the core of our being, and that gives us the single most important reason for existence, and which gives us passion for existence.”

One of the rabbi’s many missions is to “touch every single Jew” in his Bal Harbour congregation’s zip code “in a way that is not aggressive and is neighbor-to-neighbor” and thereby make the shul the center for the entire community. His ongoing Project 33154 designates “block *shluchim*,” a representative on each block. Six times a year, each *shliach* goes to all his Jewish neighbors and makes sure

they know about the coming Jewish holiday. There are about forty block shluchim, and the shul has identified close to a thousand Jews in the area who have “never participated in Jewishness,” says Lipskar, who launched the program in 1998.

It’s necessary to understand the context in order to grasp the magnitude of the goal. Lipskar founded the Shul of Bal Harbour in 1981. In its early years, the shul met in the card room of a hotel, and later moved into a storefront. The Bal Harbour community was less than welcoming – the local Homeowner’s Association did not allow owners to sell their property to people of “Jewish and Syrian descent.” Today the Chabad synagogue is housed in a nine-million-dollar structure, offers a myriad of programs and educational opportunities for all ages, and is known for its pluralistic, welcoming nature.

How did this change occur? How did Lipskar move from a storefront to a multi-million dollar building that can accommodate the thousand people who attend weekly classes in multiple languages in any given week?

Lipskar is always counseling, reaching out, bringing in. He “works harder and longer than anyone I’ve ever met,” says Mitch Feldman, a congregant and member of the shul’s executive committee. “And it isn’t for business – his whole purpose is to bring Jews back to Judaism.”

Lipskar pays particular attention to three areas of outreach. There’s the Shul of Bal Harbour itself, home to a congregation of five hundred families. The shul hosts a dazzling array of Jewish activities – daily minyanim (including a Sephardic minyan), a community *kollel* (study group), men’s and women’s mikvehs, the Chaim Yakov Shlomo College of Jewish Studies, a Montessori-style preschool, singles’ activities, and over fifty weekly adult education classes taught by Lipskar and others, including Spanish language classes for the shul’s Latin contingent, which comprises a third of the congregation.

Then there’s his outreach among South Florida’s elderly and underserved. Lipskar’s program for the elderly, essentially a yeshiva for the elderly, meets twice weekly for learning and lunch. Finally,

there's the focus he puts on reaching out to Jews who are in prison and in the military through the Aleph Institute.

Despite the broad scope of his outreach, Lipskar is intensely focused on people as individuals. "He has a certain penetrating look, almost into your soul," Feldman says. "He'll even ask, 'How's your soul?' And it stops you for a moment – How *is* my soul?"

"Lipskar knows what's going on with every person he relates to, and he keeps track of every single event in a person's life – rich or poor, it doesn't matter," says Arturo Colodner, another congregant.

Mitch Feldman shares a story that underscores this point: "Whenever Lipskar visits the Rebbe's *ohel* (the Lubavitcher Rebbe's gravesite), he brings the entire shul membership list along and reads through it, picturing every single person and family member as he does so."

That passionate involvement characterizes Lipskar's role as a shliach. In addition to being a *chasid* (follower) of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the late Menachem Schneerson, as a shliach Lipskar is one of the Rebbe's personal emissaries to the Jewish world, and, in many respects, the non-Jewish world as well. Being a shliach means caring for every individual Jew, and not letting anyone fall "through the cracks," Lipskar explains. "Being a shliach of the Rebbe is almost a professional sounding term, because you have a job to do, to wake up all the other shluchim of *Hashem* (the Name, a respectful title for God) to make sure that they get it done. Being a shliach is like being in the army."

He continues, "*Shlichus* is dealing with an extended family." Lipskar gets calls from all sorts of people in all sorts of situations at all sorts of times. Sometimes it's a person who just needs to hear a friendly voice; sometimes it's someone calling from jail, or someone who's gravely ill. Friends have told him to get an unlisted number. Lipskar replies, "So who should I give it to? My family? My closest friends? Who do you think calls me in the middle of the night? I get a call from a brother or sister who's lost."

. . .

Perhaps Lipskar's drive arises from his family's suffering and sense

of purpose during and after World War II's nine-hundred-day siege of Leningrad. His father's father was killed, and his grandfather and father arrested for *Yiddishkeit*, for practicing Judaism. His family realized they had to flee their home to sustain their Jewishness.

Lipskar was born in the Uzbekistan capital of Tashkent, in 1946. When he was only weeks old, his grandfather smuggled him across the border into Czechoslovakia in a suitcase to avoid the per-person charge for crossing the border.

Until he was four years old, he lived with his family in three separate displaced persons camps in Germany, where he started *cheder*, traditional Jewish religious school. Early memories of people "really damaged" from the events of the Holocaust are mixed with fond reminiscences of accompanying his grandmother to a nearby farm to milk cows so they could have *Cholov Yisrael*, milk supervised by observant Jews, and of course Shabbos, which always felt like a feast even if they didn't have much to eat.

The family moved to Canada in 1951 and settled in Toronto. Lipskar continued learning, tagging along with his older brother to his advanced *Gemara* (Talmud) class in the evenings. One of his teachers, upon finding out that Lipskar intended to be a rabbi or a teacher, advised his parents that Lipskar shouldn't waste his life studying to become a rabbi but should instead become an accountant, since he was so good at math. Lipskar didn't heed that advice. "The selflessness of numerous family members on behalf of *Yiddishkeit*, along with a long rabbinic lineage, implanted a desire to be effective in the public domain," he says.

In 1961, after he turned fifteen, he left home to attend the Lubavitch yeshiva in Crown Heights, where he stayed until his marriage in 1968. A year later, he moved to Miami as a shliach.

The rabbi took what he describes as a "running start" when he went on shlichus, going into it "full time" as a twenty-two year-old. At twenty-three he was already the principal of a Jewish school. He says he quickly mastered the "technical questions" of his job, such as "where was God in the Holocaust," replicating the classic rabbinical responses, describing God as responsible for everything

in the universe. Although we are allowed free choice, we see only a small piece of the picture, and the issue of the Holocaust is an unanswerable question, beyond our intellectual capacity.

Lipskar developed successful relationships with donors: one gave the “single largest gift Chabad had ever received” in 1974. However, after eleven years in Miami, a number of issues were troubling him, particularly those related to the theological perspective on the Holocaust. He felt challenged in his ability to internalize these religious responses and thereby represent them authentically. Other areas of concern were Jewish attrition, inertia and attraction to cults. His search for answers initiated a period of radical change.

With the help of a philanthropist and the support of the Rebbe, Lipskar took a year’s sabbatical. During his 1980 sabbatical, he had no obligations. He kept notes and traveled widely. When the year ended, he requested and received another six months. Throughout that year and a half, every Friday, wherever he was, he would fly back to New York to spend Shabbos in Crown Heights with the Rebbe. Each week he also would question the Rebbe on various issues, and the Rebbe would respond, speaking about it then or the following week, often in his public *fabrengen* (bringing people together). During that time, the Rebbe was no longer meeting with people privately as a rule, but in 1981, after *Pesach*, the Rebbe’s secretary called to schedule a meeting with Lipskar.

The custom for *yechidus* (private meeting) with the Rebbe was to write one’s questions on a piece of paper and submit them. Lipskar explains that at that point he had seen the Rebbe more than forty times and would usually submit long reports in his position as shliach. But this time was different. He wanted the Rebbe to see him in a different way. He thought, “What am I going to ask the Rebbe? Where is God? Whatever I ask him, five years later I’m going to have another question, so I said to myself, ‘This is the Rebbe, his soul knows my soul, so I’m not going to ask him anything.’ The only thing I put on that note was my name.”

The Rebbe looked at the piece of paper for a long time, and then he spoke to Lipskar for an unheard-of forty-six minutes

(someone outside timed it). The Rebbe emphasized the significance of every single positive act done with sincerity, and reminded Lipskar that one's expectation of oneself should not exceed what God expects.

“That meeting changed my life, changed my perspective, changed my thinking,” says Lipskar, using his hands for emphasis. “There was nobody in the room, just he and I, and just to be in the presence of that extraordinary energy, my whole experience of Jewishness took a dimensional leap. It was much more internalized, every aspect of my prayers, my outreach. It was not any longer an intellectual commitment that I understood and I had to convey; it was something that came from my inner being that used my intellect in order to express it.”

Lipskar says this experience was not so different from that of a *ba'al teshuvah*, one who “returns” to Judaism, rediscovering his connection to God. He thinks of this meeting as a “great gift from the Rebbe. It felt transformational – a dimensional change, not a linear change – it was a different perspective.”

Lipskar then asked the Rebbe what he should do, and the Rebbe said, “Hashem will give you a good thought.” That Shabbos in his public talk, the Rebbe said, “There are thousands of Jews who are waiting for someone to come and to teach them Torah, to change their lives, and to elevate them...and nobody is paying attention...I'm addressing Jews in jail and their families, and nobody cares about them.”

. . .

Here was the “good thought” Lipskar had been waiting for. He launched three programs in 1981 for Jews in three overlooked areas – those in prison, the elderly and in the assimilated community of Bal Harbour. He thought of it as an experiment, to see if the “language of Jewishness” with an updated communication system would be effective. This focus helped resolve his internal struggle and repair the “disconnect between the intellect and the emotion” that he had experienced. He returned to work more effectively, more driven towards outreach than ever before.

A donor helped start the prison program, now known as the Aleph Institute. It operates in five hundred prisons and military facilities and has served ten thousand Jews, plus their families, according to Rabbi Menachem Katz, director of Prison and Military Programs. The organization runs a host of programs designed to provide moral and ethical education, rehabilitate inmates, and give those in isolated environments the opportunity to learn and to pray.

“It’s wild, because we’re sitting here in Miami and serving the needs of people who, without us, really can’t get it done. I’m putting two guys on a base in Iraq together right now, neither of whom knows the other, and hooking them up with a Friday night minyan, all via e-mail,” says Katz. “The main idea of Aleph is serving Jews separated from their communities – we become their resource, their base.”

“I will never forget that the Aleph Institute helped me during the only time in my adult life when I felt helpless,” a former inmate wrote. “You helped me to find my real self – reassess my values, what is really important.”

Lipskar’s education program for the elderly program currently exists as the Senior Torah Academy. In addition to its concentration on education, the program focuses on combating serious illnesses through Torah and studying the results through research projects Lipskar has initiated.

When Lipskar started the Shul of Bal Harbour, he would often have to “schlep people in from the street” to make a minyan, according to Sami Rohr, one of the shul’s original members and a key benefactor instrumental in establishing the shul’s permanent home.

While those early years were challenging, ultimately the shul exceeded even Lipskar’s expectations. “The thirst for spirituality and Jewishness was so enormous, so palpable, and people were so eager to absorb anything that you would give them that had authentic Jewish content, that was not dressed in pageantry and formality,” he recalls. Lipskar strives to have the shul embody what Chabad-Lubavitch stands for. “Non-compromising, yet non-judgmental,

inclusive, Torah-based, filled with Jewish love,” says Lipskar, whose sense of inclusiveness extends to the women of the congregation. Women actively participate on the board and in the shul itself. They participate in special women’s services, and during regular services they benefit from better sight lines in the second-story gallery than the men have below.

The congregation is eclectic and well-rounded, ranging from black-hatted scholars to assimilated Jews with little background in Halacha and observance. “We don’t perceive any Jew as marginalized,” says the rabbi. Indeed, Lipskar has served as a tireless spiritual guide for many of the community’s ba’alei teshuvah.

More recent endeavors include the ongoing Project 33154 to reach out to Jews in the Bal Harbour community and the geographically more far-flung Million Mitzvah Campaign launched in 2004, “to get people to do acts of goodness and kindness in order to make the world a better place.”

Rabbi Mendy Levy, the shul’s outreach director and campaign coordinator for the Million Mitzvah Campaign, explains the project involves almost thirty institutions, not all of them Chabad-affiliated, in twenty-five states and ten countries. With over eight hundred thousand mitzvahs to date, it’s well on its way to meeting Lipskar’s goal. Another, unrelated initiative is Lipskar’s personal goal for the Bal Harbour community to raise over a million dollars so that every Jewish child can get a Jewish education, free if necessary. Once happy to support ten scholarships a year, now Lipskar aims for a hundred.

“From my perspective, as much as I’ve done, there’s much more that I haven’t – much, much more,” says Lipskar.

“I sometimes feel that Hashem has really given me a gift, because the fact of the matter is that each of us can have some improvement. I watch some of these people make radical changes in their lives and I think to myself, look, they...change their lives,” Lipskar says. “Watching intelligent people make changes in their Jewishness validates it for me. It works. Jewishness works. We’re so lucky to be Jewish, can you imagine? It’s better than winning the lottery.”

The goal for Jews today, he believes, is to keep focused. “Living outside of history, in history, influencing it, but not being influenced by it. When we get influenced by it, it’s our downfall. When we influence it, the world moves tremendous strides.”