

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Rabbi Ari Drelich

May, 2021

We were chosen, we were asked to serve as Chabad emissaries back in 1991. We were first spoken to in September or late August, we came for a visit in October and fell in love with Edmonton. We returned late November and it's been 30 years since, just about. Okay so first I have to preface by saying that, contrary to popular misconception, Chabad is not a synagogue. We like to joke around that in a regular synagogue you have a group, a membership that chooses a rabbi, and by Chabad you have a rabbi that chooses membership. So we have chosen the five thousand or so Jews in Edmonton all to be members of Chabad, whether they like it or not. Be that as it may, Chabad is a worldwide outreach organization which is dedicated to strengthening Jewish continuity through innovative programming. So when Chabad comes to a community, it's the responsibility of the Chabad couple to get a sense of what the community needs in order to service the community from a Judaic standpoint. In many, many cases amongst the many programs that Chabad will do is to open up a synagogue, to have synagogue services which is what Chabad Edmonton has as well. So pretty much almost from day one we felt it was a need. Certainly as we came out to the West End there really was nothing here in the West End at that time, so we decided to open up a *shul* as well to have services. What initially started out to be on a weekly basis, *Baruch Hashem* grew to be on a daily basis.

So the idea that we say that the Chabad has 5 000 members is because the responsibility of a pulpit rabbi is to serve the congregants that have hired the rabbis. So overseeing life cycle events, services, study programs, et cetera et cetera. Generally speaking, the responsibility of the pulpit rabbis is not meant to go, at least officially, beyond the synagogue walls. Whereas by Chabad, it's a synagogue without walls. We make it our business, certainly pre-COVID and please G-d when this whole thing is behind us, to visit the hospitals on a regular basis. Certainly if we find out that someone is in the hospital it doesn't matter who they are, whether they're affiliated or not, we visit them. We visit all senior centers a number of times a year, we visit the prisons on a regular basis, we produce the community calendar, we have the community *Purim* program, the

community *Lag B'omer* program, the summer camp (which is the only summer day camp in northern Alberta) et cetera et cetera. So these are programs and projects which are done for the entire community. In addition, we also have synagogue services. As far as location is concerned, we had humble beginnings: we began our synagogue services in our basement actually. We used to live in Lessard and we started synagogue services in our basement for the first couple of years. *Baruch Hashem* we outgrew that and we took a place in Lessard Mall. Thereafter we outgrew that we took a place here in Westridge. We outgrew that and we now are in our present location which we hope will outgrow soon as well.

Edmonton is a nice place. It has friendly people and we enjoy interacting with all members of the community and beyond. I can't say that I can pinpoint any one particular place. I mean obviously there are places in which we have a very strong relationship and a strong connection such as Talmud Torah and Menorah Academy. We used to do many and we still do many, many programs at Talmud Torah and have interacted with many of the kids and the staff there. Menorah Academy, which is where my children went to, so we also have a very strong connection with them. Beth Israel, being a neighbor down the block, we don't have evening services during the week, so we would go there. So those are just to name a few places that we've had strong interactions with and built up a very strong relationship with. But as we speak, the Ghermezian family has announced that they're no longer in the position to fund both the *Kollel* and the school, the Menorah Academy. Both organizations have been a very very integral part of the community whether you participated or interacted with them directly as immaterial because there's always a spin-off when you have any Jewish organization, any Jewish institution. So those are -- and we're still hoping and praying that G-d will help them turn things around and they'll once again be able to do what they've been doing in the past, which is to support these types of institutions. But those are certainly two very, very important institutions that we will definitely miss.

Generally speaking, I mean you touch upon a very sensitive idea, because the traditions and the sensitivities to *Yiddishkeit* that the previous generation brought over with them from the old country slowly but surely has waned. The appreciation and the dedication to the community from the younger generation is not what it was on the part of the older generation. One of the

examples that we like to use to highlight this idea is that between 1952 and 1964, in that 12-13 year period there were four major institutions that were built or renovated. I'm talking about the Beth Israel, the Beth Shalom, the Chevra Kadisha building, and the building and a refurbishing of the Talmud Torah. You're talking at a time when the size of the community was a fraction of what it is and the financial strength of the community was certainly a fraction of what it was today. So despite the fact that we have grown both in numbers and in monetary strength, unfortunately the type of involvement, if you will, is not there. It's to no one's fault in particular, it's part of the challenge of being successful, if you will, in the new world. People's interests change and so forth, which is why Chabad feels that much more responsibility to imbue and inject as many in the community with a sense of pride and belonging and involvement in *Yiddishkeit*.

One of the things that made us, so to speak, fall in love with Edmonton was that despite the fact that the weather was cold, the people are very warm and welcoming. Certainly coming from a place like New York, which is a rough and tumble city, to be exposed to a group of people who are friendly, outgoing, have a very strong spirit of volunteerism, coupled with the fact that, like every other Chabad, we are basically funded and supported by the community. We are a “by the people, for the community” organization. Baruch Hashem we've grown. We have three full-time rabbis and we have a budget which is over six hundred thousand dollars a year and that's all homegrown. So those are one of the things which I feel very, very humbled and blessed that we have such a caring and loving community. When stroked properly they will respond. They have been helpful to Chabad on many many fronts in enabling us to accomplish all that we do.

One of the really particularly memorable moments though now that you ask, of Chabad was our very first public candle lighting ceremony at the Legislature. It was actually just over a year after we came, because we came a few days before Chanukah. The first year, even though we only arrived four days before Hanukkah, we managed to put together a Hanukkah program at the old JCC on 156th Street. We had 40 people with just a couple of days notice and very limited advertising, pre-internet. The following year, with G-d's help and the involvement of the Schayer family who were catalysts in helping us build Alberta's largest menorah, we attracted over 400 people. We were featured on the front page of the Edmonton Journal, Premier Klein, who was

recently elected Premier, came out and spoke amongst other dignitaries. It was a jam-packed crowd and I think that that helped put Chabad on the map in Edmonton, certainly in people's minds as to what this organization is all about. So that was a really very very special moment, if you will, in the annals of Chabad of Edmonton.

One of the things which is not unique to Edmonton but very acute to Edmonton is what is happening now, and this is just part of the entire socio-economic changes that are taking place in our world. The fact that we're becoming more and more of a global village, and that is that people who are becoming more involved in *Yiddishkeit* are choosing to move from the smaller and medium-sized communities to the bigger communities, and you can't blame them. That's nature. That's also highlighted but that's also coupled with the fact that most university students will choose to study outside of Edmonton. They'll end up in Toronto or Ottawa, what have you and in 90% of the cases they will remain there and they will choose to build their lives there. So in that regard, we're ending up with, to a certain extent, an aging community and a community with very different needs. So our focus is constantly shifting. So we still have the basic programs in place, but the focus is changing. We are more involved in seniors visitation, more involved in life cycle events, if you will, end of life events because of that and it's something which, to a great extent, I don't think it's stoppable. I think it's just a natural course of things and that in the broader picture I think Hashem is calling all his children home. We're eventually all going to end up back in Israel, so Toronto is one step closer. That is and especially because of the internet and so forth we don't have to, like years ago, be in a particular location in order to do what we have to do. Many people can work from their homes, as we're learning from the pandemic, people, so long as you have a computer depending on the type of job you have, you can work from anywhere in the world. Whereas years ago, a short couple of decades ago, people were married to the city that they worked in and where their income was, that has radically changed. That has afforded the people the ability to pick themselves up and enjoy more choices; more choices for schools, more choices of places to eat and to be involved in Jewish life, so it's not a trend that we can buck, but it's definitely something that we have to ride the wave.

I think that we all have a responsibility and we have to recognize that we have a mission in this world. We have a destiny, we come from somewhere as Jews. We are G-d's ambassadors to the

world. We're the chosen people, we were chosen and we were given the Torah. We say that -- every child says when they get called to the Torah, "You chose us from amongst the nations and gave us the Torah". We're meant to be a light unto the nations regardless of where we are. If we want to ensure that there is Jewish continuity, that begins with us. It's not something that we could relegate to somebody else and say well, the rabbi, the scholar, the teacher, whoever will take care of it for me. Yes, it may be their field of expertise to guide people and to teach people, but every single Jew, without exception man, woman, and child has to ask themselves "What can I do in my own small way to strengthen *Yiddishkeit* and ensure Jewish continuity in our community?" By everybody doing their little part, their little part, we will make a very big difference, and we can be ensured that there will be a Jewish tomorrow here in Edmonton.