

# THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

DESPITE INSULAR JEWISH COMMUNITIES, DESPITE ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS WHO SPURNED THEM, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THEY LIVED IN AN APARTMENT WITHOUT FURNITURE, AND EVEN BEFORE THEY WERE ACCUSTOMED TO THE CHOKING MEXICAN AIR, RABBI AND MRS. MEIZLICH STARTED A REVOLUTION. \* THE STORY OF A SHLUCHIM-FAMILY WHO MANAGED TO ACCOMPLISH, IN ONLY A YEAR AND A HALF, WHAT OTHERS DIDN'T DO IN A DECADE. \*  
PART ONE OF TWO ARTICLES

This year, Purim came out on a Friday. After the exhausting preparations were completed, about 100 Jews gathered at the Meizlich home for the Shabbos meal and a Chassidische *farbrengen*. At a certain point the participants opened up, and one after another they got up and shared inspiring moments that led them to connect with the Rebbe MH"M.

When Sylvia, a Jewish woman in her thirties, left the Meizlich home late that night, she firmly resolved to keep Shabbos. She began walking home to a distant neighborhood and her friend tried to convince her to get into her car. Sylvia remained strong and insisted, "I decided to keep Shabbos from now on!"

For two hours Sylvia walked while her friend traveled alongside her, pleading with her, honking, nearly in despair.

## MEXICO

Both from a cultural and political vantage point, as well as because of its language, Mexico is associated with the South American countries. Geographically, however, it is closer to North America, having a common border with four states: California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

About 110 million people live in Mexico. Although the country is blessed with many natural resources like oil, minerals, and an abundance of agricultural products, most of the population suffers from grinding poverty, a result of a failing economy and one of the highest national debts in the world. Mexico has yet to





Rabbi Meizlich putting up a *mezuzah* in the home of a *mekurav*

the characteristic that had been most clearly missing in Jewish Mexico until now, was open Jewish pride.

### THE SHLICHUS HAS BEEN “RIPENING” SINCE 5717 (1957)

Until the Meizlich family came to Mexico one and a half years ago, there was only a partial Chabad presence there. Over the last 40 or so years, Merkaz L'Inyonei Chinuch has been sending people to Mexico, particularly during the summer, for the purpose of encouraging the Jewish community, helping its religious development, and serving as a fresh reminder that another form of Judaism exists. The Lubavitchers organized day camps, helped build *mikvos*, did *sh'chita*, etc. These activities were vital, especially at first when the Jewish community in Mexico was not yet organized and hadn't yet established these institutions.

In addition to *shluchim* who went to Mexico City for short periods of time, a number of Chabad families live there, who disseminate Judaism and Chassidus (see box). Chabad's influence in Mexico also came through some of the leaders and *rabbanim* of the Mexican community who emigrated from Argentina, Morocco, Eretz Yisroel, and the United States, and who had been educated in Chabad schools.

Notwithstanding all of the above, until recently, Mexico did not have its own *shliach* or its own Chabad *mosdos*.

Rabbi Leibel Groner, the Rebbe's secretary, relates that in 5717 the Rebbe suggested that he take a rabbinic position in Mexico, but for various reasons it didn't work out. Later on, a few more suggestions were made along these lines, but the

modernize its manufacturing system, and a significant percentage of its population is concentrated in the poor suburbs of the big cities.

### A SOUGHT AFTER COMMODITY – JEWISH PRIDE

In the midst of all this live about 50,000 Jews concentrated in four or five neighborhoods. Jews began establishing themselves in Mexico City about 80 years ago and are divided into two communities: the Ashkenazi community, with Jews from Poland, Hungary, Russia, as well as the Sephardic community, which is primarily Syrian, divided into three sub-communities, each with its own organizations: the Syrians and *mosdos* Magen Dovid; the Semites and *mosdos* Monte Sinai; and a group from Turkey, who also support their own communal organizations.

In all, there are actually four

communities, each one insulated and completely closed off to those Jews who are not members, while providing for the religious needs of their members. In Mexico City alone there are about thirty *shuls*, most of them *Nusach S'fard*; about ten daytime *kollels* and a few other evening *kollels*; four schools which are considered religious, and nine Jewish secular schools. Sadly, this ratio does not accurately reflect the separation between the non-religious sector and the religious-traditional sector (who comprise only ten percent of the entire Jewish population). There are also Conservative and Reform organizations, as well as huge Jewish sports centers.

Generally speaking, Mexican Jews conduct themselves like most South American Jews and are wary about publicly announcing their religiosity. In Mexico they do not hang signs to identify *shuls* and men do not wear a *tallis* in the street on Shabbos. There's no question that

### “NACHSHON” FAMILIES

The following is a list of a few Chabad families in Mexico City who spread *Yiddishkeit* and Chassidus in Mexico before the Meizlich's arrived. These families supported the work of Merkaz L'Inyonei Chinuch, and they maintained temporary *shluchim* who came, laying the groundwork for the permanent *shluchim*:

**The family of Rabbi Meir Gavra, especially R' Meir, a'h**, who worked independently and with *mesirus nefesh* to spread *Yiddishkeit* and Chassidus. He regularly translated the *L'Chaim* publication, printed hundreds of copies, and distributed them. He used his free time to go out and put *t'fillin* on people and to put up *mezuzos*, etc. His son, Shlomo, follows in his footsteps and is a teacher in the Kesser Torah girls school.

**Rabbi Sholom Shabbat** used every event and opportunity to spread *Yiddishkeit* and Chassidus, and his home was always open to *shluchim* from Merkaz, a family tradition that continues today with his sons, R' Yaakov and R' Hershele.

**The brothers Rabbi Chaim and Rabbi Refael Savoud** – R' Chaim's work was the direct result of the Rebbe's directives. He did his work quietly and on his own. Over the years he was *mekarev* many families to Judaism and Chassidus. Today, many of those families have important public positions in the religious community. At the same time, he served as an intermediary between the Rebbe and the community. Hundreds of miracles came about through him by way of the Rebbe's *brachos* to families of the community. When *mosdos* began to be established, he was the head of the founders. All of his work has seen tremendous results over the years.

R' Refael took the *Z'vulun* (i.e., financial) role and had a share in establishing a number of the local *mosdos*, with direct support from the Rebbe. Today, as Chabad's work in Mexico has begun to develop since the arrival of the Meizlich's, R' Refael and his son, Eli, are firm supporters of their work.

Another outstanding Lubavitcher is the *shochet* **Rabbi Yehuda Mugarbi**, who works modestly and quietly and uses every opportunity to disseminate *Yiddishkeit* and the study of Chassidus.

**Rabbi Zalman Lieberson** opened his house to both local and foreign Chabad workers. A number of outreach projects began from his home. Today he serves as director of *kashrus* for the Ashkenazi community, until recently the only *kashrus* organization in all of Mexico.

**Mrs. Brilka, the wife of R' Leibel Brilka**, established the Kesser Torah girls school and served as principal for twelve years. R' Leibel was the spirit behind the Chabad community until he moved to Panama a year ago. He gave classes, organized *farbrengens*, etc., and many people are grateful for his direct influence in bringing them to a life of Torah and Chassidus.

**Mrs. Devora Markowitz**, wife of the outstanding philanthropist Rabbi Dovid Markowitz, was one of the first teachers in the city, and the spirit behind the establishment of the religious schools in the area. Today their son, **Shlomo Markowitz**, continues their work.

**The Pintel – Chavir family** puts out the Lubavitch publications in the city, and **Mrs. Chaya Pintel** serves as editor.

Last but not least, **Rabbi Avrohom Mordechai Hershberg, z'l**, who served – with the Rebbe's *bracha* – as chief rabbi of the Ashkenazi community of Mexico for 25 years, until his death in 5745 (see separate box).

Rebbe did not give his consent.

The turning point was Shvat 5752, when Mordechai Marshalli asked the Rebbe whether he could open a Chabad House in Mexico, and the Rebbe gave him a dollar and blessed him with success. Rabbi Groner, who was present, immediately asked the Rebbe whether the *bracha* was for the immediate opening of a Chabad House in Mexico, and the Rebbe said it was.

A number of attempts to open a Chabad House in Mexico failed, and things remained as they had always been.

When Rabbi Shlomo Markowitz (see box) saw that things were not working out, he resolved not to rest until a Chabad House was firmly established. Since then, he has spent his time amassing all the resources and devoting every free minute to this task, with the help of the *shliach* in S. Diego, Rabbi Yona Fradkin.

First Rabbi Markowitz brought groups of *bachurim* to Mexico City for long periods of time. When he saw that they were unsuccessful in establishing what he had in mind, he began searching for a permanent *shliach* who would live there.

In Cheshvan 5760, Rabbi Markowitz suggested to Rabbi Y.Y. Meizlich and his wife, Tova, that they take on the *shlichus* in Mexico City. The idea was particularly intriguing because Tova is a granddaughter of Rabbi Avrohom Mordechai Hershberg, z'l (see box). Tova had prior knowledge of Jewish life in Mexico and its problems, and felt a certain family obligation to get involved.

Rabbi Y.Y. Meizlich had been looking for a *shlichus* position, and Mexico was an exciting challenge for him. The couple accepted Rabbi



Feverish preparations for Pesach – preparing *matzos* for the Jewish children

Markowitz's suggestion, and the "shidduch" between the Meizlich family and the Jewish community in Mexico was forged.

The Meizlich couple quickly learned about life in Mexico, particularly about the nature of the local Jewish population, and after two visits they arrived in Mexico on a permanent basis on Rosh Chodesh Shvat 5760 and immediately began their work.

## THE BEGINNING

It often happens that new *shluchim* spend the first week or two of their new *shlichus* settling into their new home. The Meizlich couple, however, didn't even wait for their furniture to arrive. While most of their possessions made their way to Mexico by boat, the couple moved into the apartment that had been prepared for them and immediately opened their Chabad House. From the very first day it became a hub of activity.

The first days were devoted to visiting the local *mosdos* and meeting with *rabbanim* and communal figures, both to get to know them and to listen to them describe the communal structure and hear their suggestions. At the same time, these meetings were used to report the new *shliach's* readiness to immediately establish a Chabad House in Mexico City.

Some of the local leaders greeted the young couple happily. Others viewed them suspiciously. It was daring to open a Chabad House knowing that existing religious groups would oppose them.

Rabbi Meizlich relates: "The brief research we did showed that only ten percent of the Jewish population in Mexico City is affiliated with religious *kehillos*. The religious communities are beautiful and



Rabbi Meizlich with friends of Chabad

impressive, but most of them deal with their own people, while most Jews in the area, especially among the Ashkenazim, are religiously unaffiliated. We wanted to focus on this group.

“It’s important for Chabad to reach out, search for, and locate Jews who did not take to religious life on their own. Some of them deliberately avoid Jewish life. Assimilation is a threat for tens of thousands of Jews. We also began working at the universities and among thousands of Jewish tourists, among them many young people who come to tour Mexico City before heading out to the rest of the country.”

### AFTER TEN DAYS OF SHLICHUS – ESTABLISHING THE FOUNDATION

The key was organization. After their initial meetings with the leaders of the community and deciding on the direction they would be taking, the Meizlich’s decided that the first thing they had to do was to officially establish Chabad *mosdos*.

**Rabbi Meizlich:** “The night of Yud Shvat, our tenth day in Mexico City, we held a *farbrengen* for 30 people. We announced the establishment of a Chabad community and the founding of a local branch of the Lubavitch Youth Organization, and we chose a board whose job it is to implement the decisions we make.

“The next day my wife held a *farbrengen* for women, and she founded a branch of N’shei U’bnos Chabad and chose its official administrators. Once we established *mosdos* and defined their responsibilities, we began our work.

“It was nearly Chamisha-Asar

B’Shvat, which was a great opportunity to use my wife’s talents for our first project. On Chamisha-Asar B’Shvat the members of the new N’shei U’bnos Chabad visited hospitals, senior centers, etc., in order to cheer up the sick and bring each one a gift, a young plant to

symbolize the new Chabad House in Mexico. We included our name, address, and phone number.”

On this very first day of outreach, Mrs. Meizlich found herself at the bedside of a dying Jewish woman and she said “*Shma*

#### RABBI AVROHOM MORDECHAI HERSHBERG, Z'L

R' Avrohom Mordechai Hershberg was born in Poland in 5676. His father died before he was born and he was named after his father. He was accepted in the prestigious Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin and was counted among its outstanding students.

During World War II Rabbi Hershberg fled to Vilna, and from there to Japan and Shanghai. In 1942 he arrived in Canada and then went to the U.S. He had *yechidus* with the Rebbe Rayatz in Nissan 1944 in which the Rebbe asked him to meet his son-in-law, the RaMaSH, and discuss Torah subject with him. The connection was kept up for the next 40 years. The Rebbe directed him to take a rabbinic position in Chicago, and in 1945 he established a Chabad *yeshiva* there.

In 5720 (1960), at the Rebbe’s initiative, Rabbi Hershberg moved to Mexico to serve as the chief Ashkenazi rabbi. He founded an organization called the Merkaz HaRabbanim Shel America HaLatinis (Rabbis of Latin America), which he headed.

Rabbi Hershberg founded the main Ashkenazi *shul* in Polenko, Beis Yitzchok, and served as its *rav*. The *shul* often had live broadcasts of the Rebbe’s *farbrengens* and it was host to large Chassidic *farbrengens* on Yud-Tes Kislev, etc.

Among Rabbi Hershberg’s important accomplishments was the founding of the first *yeshiva* in Mexico City. It can be said, without exaggeration, that he was the first to inspire Mexican Jews to study Torah in the proper spirit and in the proper manner.

Rabbi Hershberg personally participated in numerous *farbrengens* of the Rebbe, and had long *yechiduyos*. He was loyal to the Rebbe and carried out various secret missions for the Rebbe around the world, some of which have come to light. He went to Iran after the revolution and met Khoumeini. This meeting made it possible for Rabbi Hershberg to contact the Jews among the American embassy staff who were imprisoned at the beginning of the revolution, enabling them to light the Chanuka *menora*. He was also able to rescue the *rav* of Iran, Rabbi Cohen-Tzedek. However, many other missions he carried out in Third World countries have yet to be publicized.

All the Jews of Mexico accorded Rabbi Hershberg great honor and esteemed him highly. Rabbi Hershberg passed away on 25 Elul 5745 and was buried in Eretz Yisroel.





A *farbrengen* at the Meizlich home

*Yisroel*" with the woman as she breathed her last.

## DEVELOPING STRATEGIES

In the next phase, Rabbi Meizlich convened the first meeting of the board, and after discussing various possibilities they made a number of resolutions that defined the general nature of Chabad's work in Mexico.

First they decided that the Chabad *mosdos* would offer its services to any Jew, regardless of background or affiliation, "in order to unite the various groups as much as possible."

Secondly, the main work would be done with children and young people through connecting with the Jewish (non-religious) schools, as well as with public schools with a high percentage of Jewish students. There are about 7,000 Jewish children from nursery through high school.

The third goal was to organize and firmly establish the existing Chabad community.

As for the fourth and most important goal, Rabbi Meizlich says: "We instill in all of our work the main mission of our times, which is, as the Rebbe told us at the *Kinus HaShluchim* of 5752, to publicize that the time of our Redemption has arrived and all that remains for us to do is to greet Moshiach through learning Torah and *inyanei Moshiach* and *Geula*, and through arousing our longing for the true and complete Redemption."

All programs, projects, and activities are carried out in a way that "makes waves," i.e., producing long-range effects. A terrific example of this is the calendar the Meizlich's produced before Rosh HaShana. Mrs. Meizlich used her experience as a teacher as well as her creative abilities to design a unique calendar. It is large (about one and a half feet by one and a half feet), colorful, and distinctive. Each monthly page has laws, customs, and Jewish events depicted with vivid photographs, surrounded by pictures of Chabad activities and special events.

Possibly the best idea of all was the inclusion of a monthly insert for children in the calendar. It has fun activities involving Jewish knowledge, and a puzzle, which helps them review Jewish material. The child can tear out the insert and send it to the Chabad House. This enables the child to enroll in *Tzivos Hashem* and to receive his military rank, which rises from month to month, by filling out the questions in the insert correctly. There is also a raffle for prizes. The calendar includes information about the *Beis HaMikdash* and its vessels as a preparation for *Geula*.

**How many children receive this calendar?**

The calendar was sent to 10,000 Jewish children who attend Jewish and non-Jewish schools.

**What kind of reactions have you received?**

The results were fantastic, beyond all expectations. According to the responses we got, we realized we were on to something good. We forged a connection with children, and through them, with their parents, and the circle continues to expand. Recently, parents of children in non-Jewish schools asked us to lead classes on Judaism in their home!

## HEAVENLY SUCCESS THANKS TO THE KO'ACH OF THE MESHLEIACH

The new Chabad House began to operate on the basis of the principles it had established for itself. Today, after 18 months of work, there has clearly been tremendous success. An old-time *shliach* who visited Mexico City last Pesach put it this way: "The Meizlich's accomplished in fifteen months what a typical Chabad

House takes years to accomplish.”

Rabbi Meizlich said, “We had barely been in Mexico a month. We weren’t used to the choking air, we didn’t know the language or the neighbors, our furniture and most of our personal possessions hadn’t arrived yet from New York, but there was such a great demand for Chabad’s activities that we had to bring ten *bachurim* from 770 to help for Purim and Pesach! The *Tmimim* worked with us day and night, and we had to work hard to help all those in need.”

All of the Meizlich’s work was done in the manner set forth at the board meeting. The results were immediately apparent with Jews from all segments of the population calling about anything and everything Jewish, whether about checking their *mezuzos* or having the *shofar* blown for a friend in the hospital; reading the *Megilla* for a family sitting *Shiva*; the special Chabad touch to influence a friend or relative to get more involved in *Yiddishkeit*; to organize activities; give *halachic* responsa; provide *Judaica* and *s’farim* and much more.

**Rabbi Meizlich:** “The administration of one of the large *shuls* in the city asked us to send someone to take the place of the *rav* for a few months. We did so, and the congregation was very happy. The Chabad House organized all the *davening* and learning in that *shul*. Then we got requests from other congregations for us to send them somebody to run the *minyanim* on Shabbasos and Yomim Tovim. They know that Chabad is always happy to accommodate and does things well. We helped everyone. It didn’t take too long for Mexico to see that there’s an address not only for locals but for young tourists, as well.

“We began to see Jews stopping at the *yeshiva* we established or near



Students of the Chabad yeshiva in Mexico dancing with local Jews



A class at the Chabad House

the Chabad House, going inside and writing to the Rebbe. The phone was ringing non-stop. Jews called Chabad for help arranging *hechsherim* in different communities. They really began to rely on us! Residents of Mexico City who travel abroad for any reason call us to get the address of the local Chabad

House of the place they are traveling to. In a very short time, the Jews of Mexico learned to appreciate us.”

Rabbi Meizlich even contacted Jewish inmates in prisons. “There was no precedent in Mexico City for a rabbi to receive permission to visit inmates. When Rabbi Meizlich

received permission, the inmates with whom he put on *t'fillin* were quite emotional about it. Thus far, one inmate was granted permission to have a weekly class in Judaism via telephone with Rabbi Meizlich.

## CHILDREN SHLUCHIM

The Meizlich children were involved in *shlichus* life from day one. They don't merely cooperate; they actually have their own work to

do. The Shabbos experience at the Meizlich home has become a byword. The children know that Friday night they have to happily give their beds to guests.

On Shavuos the Meizlich children had an intimidating incident that their parents used as a learning experience. The Meizlich's walked with their children the two-hour distance from their home to one of the *shuls* for the reading of the *Aseres HaDibros* and the

children's gathering there. Along the way they were drenched by a storm. The winds, thunder and lightning frightened the Meizlich children, whose parents said, "Apparently Hashem wants you to experience the thunder and lightning of Har Sinai, and the fear that the Jewish people felt."

They talked as they walked, battling the winds, and they finally reached the *shul*, which was packed with children waiting for them. The adults had left, so they gathered a *minyan* with difficulty. The children put on a skit about *kabbalas ha'Torah* and then the Torah and the *Eseres HaDibros* were read.

There was another occurrence that Rabbi Meizlich used to teach his children about the *hashgacha pratis* in all occurrences; the children found out how a small incident can turn into a major event. This happened when one of the children needed stitches, and Rabbi Meizlich noticed some Jewish doctors at the hospital. The doctors willingly put on *t'fillin* and even took an interest in further contact with the Chabad House. The child learned a lesson in *hashgacha pratis* from his father, who told him, "You see, Mendel, this whole thing may well have happened just so we could reach out to more *Yidden*."

(To be continued.)



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