



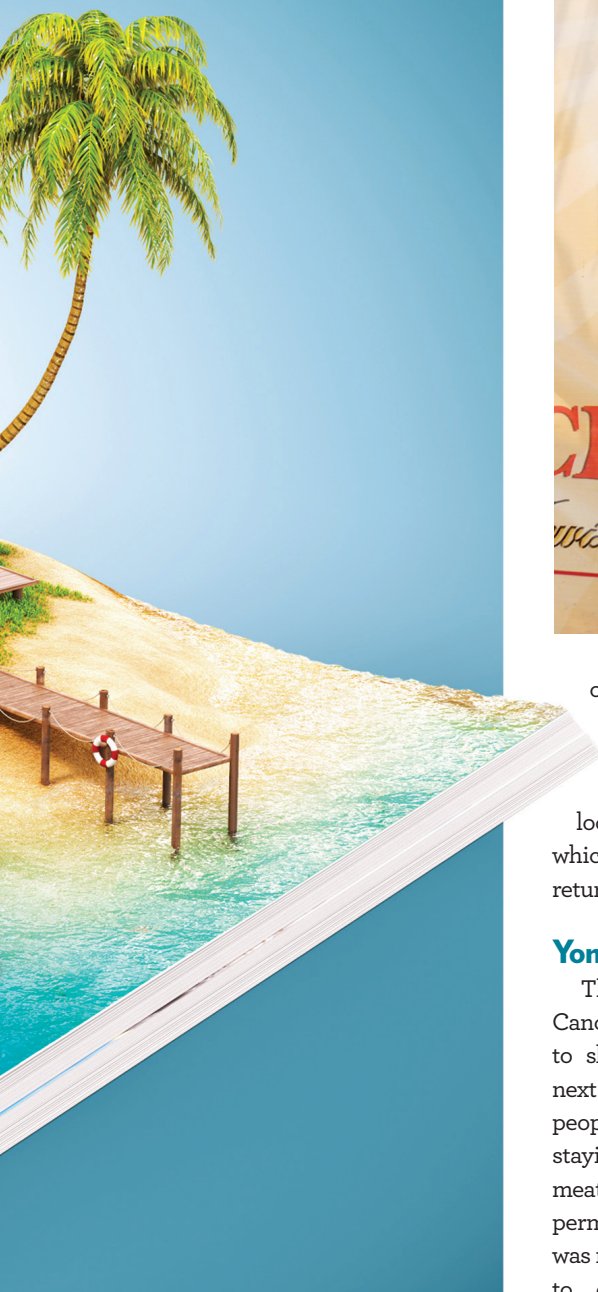
*"In Cancun there are fewer distractions, so it's easier to see the neshamah of every Jew," says Rabbi Mendel Druk, Chabad emissary in Cancun, Mexico. "I've gained new insights into the beauty of Yidden," he adds. Whether it's Mexico, Thailand or many other exotic locations, you'll find emissaries willing to live in out-of-the-ordinary areas in order to draw out this otherwise undercover beauty in different ways. One of the ways is by making and "sharing" Yom Tov, sometimes on an enormous scale.*

### Cancun

"Rabbi, I may not have fasted on Tishah B'Av, but I didn't go for my daily swim," said one Cancun resident to Rabbi Druk after the fast.

"By not doing something he enjoys, this man acknowledged some of the laws of mourning," says Rabbi Druk. "It's one step forward."

Cancun, on Mexico's southeastern coast, wasn't always a popular tourist destination. In fact, until 1970 Cancun had only three residents — all caretakers of the nearby coconut plantation. Since then, however, the fisherman's island has become one of Mexico's best-known resorts. In 2006, when Rabbi Mendel and Mrs. Rachel Druk drove from the airport directly to a mall to begin connecting with the local Jews,



Rabbi Druk and a tourist in Cancun.

outside his boxed environment, the boundaries disappear.” This is why the daily classes he gives in the recreation areas of the many local malls inevitably draw passersby, which has proven to be the first step to returning Jewish souls to their roots.

### Yom Tov

The first day of Rosh Hashanah in Cancun usually draws about 100 people to shul, with numbers dwindling the next day. Yom Kippur draws about 150 people, with many of the resident Jews staying home to fast. Since importing meat from even within Mexico requires permits, at the start of the Druks’ stay it was not only complicated but also costly to organize, especially considering the number of guests the Druks were already hosting and their limited budget. As a result, the family didn’t eat meat or chicken for the first 18 months they lived in Cancun.

Today, the situation is easier. Hundreds of pounds of meat and chicken arrive monthly from Mexico City, a two-hour flight away. Many products, including cheese, are available in the local Costco branches. In her kitchen, Rebbetzin Druk whips

up all the Jewish traditional foods. The culinary experience is a means to connect people to their Jewish heritage, as it has always been. “This is exactly what my grandmother used to make,” is a refrain often heard in the dining hall. And it’s what prompted a writer from the *New York Times* to reminisce about the good old days in a column he wrote after spending time with the Druks.

### Kidnapped

Living in an exotic location means that the Rabbi sometimes has to deal with scenarios that belong in a thriller. When, after an ongoing relationship of several years, Rabbi Druk finally managed to get Ricky’s mother to agree to celebrate her son’s bar mitzvah, Ricky was 16 years old. A lavish Friday night celebration was planned, but Ricky’s mother (a Jewish woman who had undergone baptism years earlier) refused to attend. Instead, she dropped off Ricky and his brother at the Chabad house, lit candles and drove to her hotel room to wait for her sons to return after the meal. The next morning, Rabbi Druk waited in vain for Ricky to arrive in shul for his first *aliyah*.

“When he didn’t turn up, I was sure

they weren’t sure if they’d have enough *kiruv* opportunities to keep them there for long. Invited to the island by a small group of Canadian families, their week-long visit soon became permanent, with both local residents and tourists benefiting.

“Being so removed from anything Jewish makes people long for a connection,” explains Rabbi Druk. “I’m no expert, but once a person is

Shul in  
Cancun



Rabbi Druk  
and Ricky.



become involved with Chabad. And Ricky? “Great things will come from him,” Rabbi Druk says. “Although he is studying in San Jose, we learn Torah weekly by phone. This summer he received a scholarship to the Chabad Cteenextreme summer camp because of how much he has been learning.”

Looking back at the Friday night bar mitzvah celebration, even though it led to his kidnapping, Ricky says, “That day changed my life for the better. It was one of the best days of my life.”

Stories like these, where over a space of years a young teen is moved to strengthen his commitment to *Yiddishkeit*, prove that the Druks have their work cut out for them in Cancun.

## Thailand

“Rabbi, will you blow the *shofar* for me? My flight to Nepal leaves in few hours,” a backpacker asked Rabbi Nechemia Wilhelm of Chabad Bangkok, Thailand, on the first morning of Rosh Hashanah. “Why rush? Stay here with us,” Rabbi Wilhelm suggested. After being assured that the Rabbi would cover any penalties he incurred by canceling his flight, the backpacker stayed on for Yom Tov and Shabbos.

A month later, Rabbi Wilhelm received an email from the backpacker, who did make it to Nepal in the end. “I thought you’d like to know that I’ve

been keeping Shabbos since I left. It’d be a pity to ruin a year that started so well,” he wrote.

“Had I admonished him for flying on Rosh Hashanah, I’d have lost him,” says Rabbi Wilhelm. “By gently drawing him closer, the Jewish people gained.” Turnabouts like these abound in Bangkok; they are the reason that the Wilhelms are here.

In 1995, Rabbi Nechemia Wilhelm and his wife Nechami left Israel and flew to Bangkok to join the chief Rabbi of Thailand, Rabbi Yosef Kantor and his wife Nechama.

“When we arrived, about 30,000 Israeli tourists were passing through Bangkok annually. Today it’s more like 220,000,” Rabbi Wilhelm says. The single Chabad house in Bangkok became two. In addition, four more Chabad houses in the surrounding areas of Chiang Mai, Koh Samui, Phuket and Laos opened up.

The main Chabad house in Bangkok runs a subsidized restaurant where 400 kosher meals are served daily, and at a typical Shabbos meal, the Wilhelms host between 300 to 400 guests. So while there’s no time to rest, the thrill of helping Jews connect with their heritage is magnetic.

“Four of my children are now in Israel for schooling,” says Rabbi Wilhelm. “Aside from missing home, they miss Shabbos at our table with our many guests.”

that I had pushed too far,” says Rabbi Druk. Then, on Sunday morning, he got a call from kidnappers who claimed to be Los Zetas, the most violent criminal syndicate in Mexico. The contact screamed that unless \$20,000 was wired to them, Ricky, his brother and his mother were done for. Instinct kicked in and Rabbi Druk demanded to speak to Ricky in order to know that he was okay. Then Rabbi Druk called his local contacts, who warned him not to involve the police. The police, however, were already on the case.

While Rabbi Druk was trying to put together the ransom, Ricky called to tell him that a relative had already paid up and that they were being released. After that nightmare, Ricky’s mother moved to Argentina, where she has



## Yom Tov

Months before Yom Tov, tourists are already booking their spot and planning their travels so that they'll be in a Chabad house for Yom Tov. Last year, over 4,000 Jewish tourists filled the Chabad houses, and nearby hotels were *kashered* to accommodate them. Yom Kippur drew over 2,000 people.

"For some of them, it was the first time they fasted," says Rabbi Wilhelm. Not a moment of the holy days is lost. "On Rosh Hashanah, we go into the tourist areas to blow the *shofar* for those who didn't make it to shul. And after *Kol Nidrei* on Yom Kippur there are *shiurim*, and we recite the entire *Sefer Tehillim*," says Rabbi Wilhelm.

## Ripple Effects

When Rabbi Wilhelm received a call from an emissary in a town in southern Israel thanking him for helping Chabad gain permission to go into local schools, he had no idea how he'd helped. Then the emissary told him: "In the past, when we approached the Town Hall, the woman in charge of education absolutely refused to grant us permission. Then her daughter, who had been touring in Thailand, lost all her possessions and her fellow backpackers directed her to the Chabad house. By putting her in touch with her family and giving her some money, you changed her mother's attitude toward religious people. She phoned to tell us the story and added, 'If this is how you behave, I want you to educate the children in all of our schools.'"

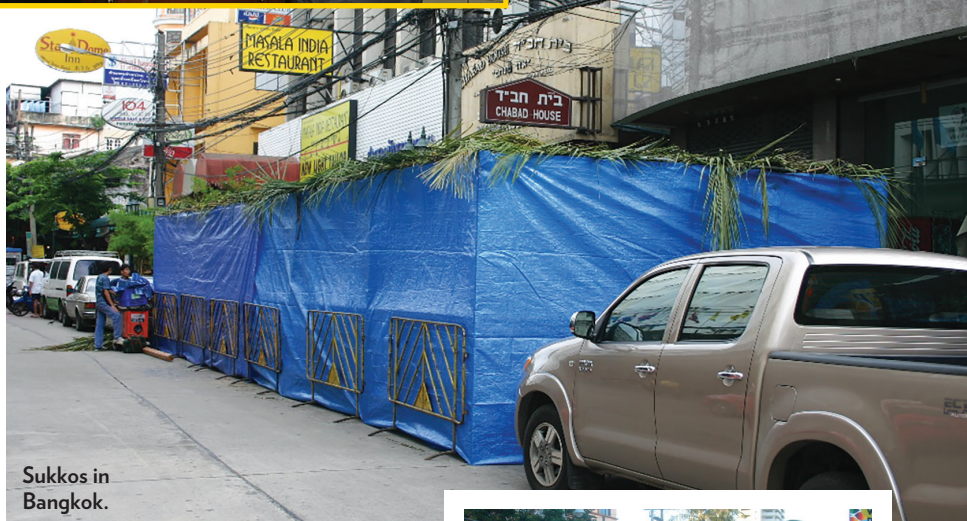
The same ripple effect happened with a businessman who lives in Japan and makes regular trips to Bangkok. Sure that he'd be cajoled into doing something spiritual that would change his entire lifestyle, he refused to step into the Chabad house. But one day, the kosher restaurant in the Chabad house drew him. Rabbi Wilhelm caught sight



Rabbi Wilhelm  
in Bangkok.

cross the street. But now that I've seen them *davening*, I've changed my view. Not even during *Ne'ilah* have I been so uplifted."

One day, shortly after Rabbi Wilhelm arrived in Bangkok, he was standing in the street trying to gather a *minyan*. "I saw an Israeli with long hair and tattoos. Sure that this wasn't my man, I



Sukkos in  
Bangkok.

of him, and although he usually doesn't approach people in the restaurant, something pushed him to ask the man to join the *minyan* — no strings attached.

"I was embarrassed to refuse you," the man later told him. "That was the first time I opened a *siddur*, and I haven't shut it since," he added. The man didn't suffice with his own spiritual odyssey. Today he is one of the main supporters in one of the other communities in the Far East.

## Jewish Beauty

Rabbi Wilhelm shares another story to show that Jewish beauty shines strongly when you're not distracted by daily pressures. "When I was asked to host a Gerrer Chassid, a businessman, for Shabbos, I had my reservations. After all, Chabad Bangkok isn't your usual *shteibel*," he says. "After the Friday night service, I found the man crying. He said to me, 'If I met these people in Israel, I'd



Sukkos in Bangkok.

turned away from him. Then I felt a pat on my shoulder. 'Chabadnik, you looking for a *minyan*?' the Israeli asked me. Within minutes, the Israeli had gathered a *minyan* and we went to *daven* in Beit Chabad. Afterwards he said to me, 'Here, you mustn't look at the outside. Just call us and we'll come.'"

Perhaps this *mussar* lesson delivered in Bangkok is something for all of us to remember as we prepare for Yom Kippur and beyond. ■