

# IllumiNations

Issue 118 | Pesach 5784

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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

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## Rocket Rainfall: Chabad in Sderot Part II

By Chaya Chazan

**Every shlichus is attended by a certain amount of mesiras nefesh, and for us, it's a literal sacrifice.**

Although we've been physically spared any fatalities from the constant rocket barrage, we've suffered in other ways. One grandson is deeply traumatized, and after intense therapy, is just starting to come out of his shell. My brother and sister-in-law's home was hit, and they lost almost all their worldly possessions. At night, the city shakes from the airstrikes in Gaza. We can barely hear our own thoughts over the bombardment's constant cacophony.

Thirty years ago, I'd never heard of the tiny city of Sderot. My father-in-law, Rabbi Avraham Dunin, was asked to move south to help piece back together a school in desperate need of a strong hand. Although he was only asked to come for one year, he ended up staying for seven. To



strengthen the school, my father-in-law recruited children from neighboring cities - including Sderot.

After our marriage, my father-in-law suggested Sderot as our permanent shlichus post. After receiving the Rebbe's bracha, we moved. I knew absolutely nothing about the town. I remember seeing a road sign for Gaza and idly thinking, "Oh wow! We're pretty close!"

For years, while Gaza and Israel were at war on paper, a tacit peace existed. We often shopped in Gaza, and Arabs often came shopped at our stores as well. Then they signed a peace treaty on paper, and war erected walls no machine could tear down.

My parents were sent here by the Rebbe almost 40 years ago. Back then, Sderot was a very small and quiet place. It was a nice place. Our shlichus was nothing out of the ordinary. My parents opened a shul and ran holidays and events and charities - just like any other Chabad shliach.

My parents were alone at the beginning. They did everything they could with their own two hands and made do with whatever the reality was. I remember before they even had a shul building, my parents would frequently host at our family home - davening, meals, Chagim, and events. I remember being constantly surrounded by people from the day I was born.

Of course, there were tough times. We faced financial, social, and many other types of hardships. My siblings and I were the only Chabad kids in Sderot, and that came with its own host of challenges. But then, when I was 11, the day after Pesach, my brother and I were walking, and we heard three explosions in the sky. At the time, we didn't

understand what it was. It was 6:55 PM, and at 7:00 PM, we tuned into the radio to hear the news broadcaster reporting that three rockets had been fired towards Sderot.

As a kid, at that moment, there was a small spark of happiness at hearing Sderot mentioned on the news - not because I was happy about the rockets, but because for the first time, I felt like we were on the map. But in hindsight, of course, the only reason I wasn't scared was because nothing bad had happened.

But as the years went on, the reality became more and more grave. Sderot is a mere 800 meters from the Gaza border, so when a rocket is fired, it reaches Sderot within 12 seconds. That's the amount of time you have to find safety. At first, the rockets would fall without sirens - you could quite literally be walking in the street and watch a rocket fall. But then, horribly, people started getting hurt and even killed, so the sirens began. And soon after that, safe rooms started popping up, and eventually, over the years, the bus stops became bomb shelters and protected spaces. Then the ganim, the schools, and finally, today, there's a safe room in every home. It almost feels like some sort of horrible evolution. Over the years, 20,000 rockets have fallen in Sderot. That's 20,000 moments sensing your life is in danger; 20,000 times sprinting for the closest shelter and praying for safety! It consumes your life - a siren can go off at 2:00 AM or 2:00 PM, while you're sleeping, showering, or eating. You never know.

This week, my daughter, who has been sleeping in the safe room for the past five months, asked me to return her to her room. I agreed since there had been a few nights of silence. That night at midnight, a siren went off and I had to grab her from her room. I have five kids, and only twelve seconds. Horrible thoughts run through your mind about who you think needs you most, who can make it on their own, or who you'll have to hope wakes up.

I never wear a seat belt when I'm driving in Sderot, because the two seconds it takes me to unbuckle could be my life, or, G-d forbid, the lives of one of my children.

You need to be ready at any second. In the shower, in the bathroom, in the store; when you're awake or when you're asleep. Unsurprisingly, this causes a lot of issues and trauma for children. My children are shocked when we travel outside of Israel to find that other children don't have safe rooms in their houses. They don't understand that most children are so lucky they don't need to live under the constant threat of rockets.

Of course, the ever-present threat affects our shlichus as well. We spend a lot of time giving support to people who were hurt, lost loved ones, or simply need emotional support. An entire generation grew up in Sderot with this constant fear embedded deep in their psyche. It's not something that will ever just go away.

I can't even count the number of times we spend weeks preparing for something, laying out thousands of shekels

to put it together, just for Hamas to fire some rockets and ruin the entire event, or prevent people from coming. For example, last Lag B'Omer, they killed a Hamas leader around 2:00 AM. We were battered with constant rockets the rest of the day. No one could come to the event we'd so painstakingly planned.

For erev Yom Kippur of this year, we planned an elaborate event, investing thousands of shekel to book performers, a venue, food, decor, and security. That morning, Hamas fired five rockets into Sderot. Instead of the 500 guests we were expecting, only 20 came in the end.

A few days later, on the 10th, the sirens began to ring again, as a new shower of rockets rained down on our beleaguered town. Many of the rockets hit homes of families that had fled for safer areas, causing thousands of dollars of damage.

While the sirens are scary and give you only a moment's warning to seek safety, sometimes, you can hear the rocket's whine before the siren ever rings. When that happens, you have no more than 20 seconds to find shelter.

I was almost at the Chabad house when I heard a rocket descending. I sprinted to the nearest building - which was a miracle in and of itself - just in time. I felt the earth shudder and heard the loudest boom I've ever heard in my life as the rocket buried itself in the ground close by. I waited a few beats until the silence assured me it was safe to come out.

The rocket had embedded itself right in front of the Chabad house, where I'd been standing only a few seconds before. The shrapnel had flown into the bathroom and destroyed it.

I thanked Hashem for so miraculously saving me from this brush with death.

My brother, Chananel, was torn. He has young children for whom it was incredibly dangerous to stay, but, on the other hand, he felt his place was at my side, helping the community that needed us so desperately.

Unsure of what to do, he wrote a letter to the Rebbe, placing it in a random volume of the *Igros*, a collection of letters from the Rebbe. The letter to which he opened advised him to "consult with the rav of your city, as is your custom."

Chananel approached me with his dilemma, and asked for my advice.

"Your wife and children need to leave. It's dangerous! If they have a chance to leave this Gehenom, let them take it! But as for you - I need you to stay and help me!"

Chananel returned home and told his wife, Tzivia, what I had said.

"The Rebbe told us to listen to the advice of the city's rav. He said to leave - we're leaving. Now," she stated, firmly.

"But it's already getting dark!" Chananel protested. "Why don't you leave tomorrow morning?"

Tzivia insisted. She quickly packed a few bags, gathered the children, and left.

The next morning, Chananel left his house early in the morning. Minutes later, a rocket made a direct hit, decimating the entire building.

It does not bear thinking of what could've happened had Tzivia not had such strong emunas tzaddikim...

One of the highlights of this year's annual kinus hashluchim was the moving speech my 9-year-old son made. He spoke about the challenges of living in Sderot, and how the Rebbe inspires us with the strength to carry on.

A fellow shliach approached me after the banquet. "I recently made the decision to leave shlichus. The pressures, hardships, and challenges were all becoming too much to handle, and I thought it would be easier to just find a regular job. Your son's speech changed everything. If a young boy can shoulder such challenges and still stand strong, then so can I!"

His brow furrowed for a moment. "Now I just need to get my wife on board, too."

As it turned out, she'd been watching the kinus live, and had also been inspired by my son's speech. She called her husband, determined to convince him to carry on with their shlichus. Together, they resolved not only to continue, but to expend even more effort to grow and expand their shlichus.

Years ago, we would hold a communal seder in a sports center here in Sderot. Cleaning up the arena in preparation was always a full-family event.

One time, we were walking to the sports center when a man stopped my father and asked where we were going. "We're going to clean the sports center!" my father answered.

The man offered to come help, but my father told him not to worry.

"What?" the man asked my father. "You don't want me to be Chabad?"

My father shrugged. "If washing the floors will make you Chabad, then come along!"

"I was here as a kid," the man told us, after we arrived. "At one of your events. But the truth is, I never really related to anything you were saying. The only thing that stuck with me was Shema.

"Years later, I went on a trip to India. I got caught up by everything going on there, visiting different places and experiencing different cultures and eventually, I started considering changing my religion. I was so serious about it, I set up a time to meet with the religious leader to start the process. But when I got there, the Shema Yisrael from when I was a kid started playing in my head. It played until I couldn't go through with it, and I turned around and left."

Today, this man is a religious Jew, married and raising children in the path of Torah and mitzvos.

One day, a katzin, a combat officer, entered our Chabad house, finding a hive of activity. A young boy was helping pack food for soldiers and survivors. The officer stared at him for a moment, nonplussed to see an unfazed child working so close to the frontlines.

"What are you doing here?" he asked the boy.

"What are *you* doing here?" the boy countered, with typical Israeli chutzpah.

"Well, I'm a soldier," the katzin explained, confused.

"Me too!" the boy responded, proudly. "I'm a soldier in Tzivos Hashem - Hashem's army!"

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