

ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Moshe and Bracha Peles, Chabad of Ashkelon, Israel

An Open Fridge Door Policy; Chabad of Ashkelon Part I

By Chaya Chazan

At Chabad of Ashkelon, we're truly one family. When we first joined Rabbi Leiberman's team 18 years ago, there were just eight of us serving the community.

Now, there are over 40 families assisting in college programs, community outreach, educational development, and meal deliveries!

Under Rabbi Leiberman's leadership, we all work together as one entity. Like other shluchim in the area, I have a Chabad house in my neighborhood, Afridar, but instead of each of us focusing just on our own little slice of the pie, we form an unstoppable force as a united front, working in tandem for the same goal.

This grants us far greater reach and a larger pool of resources. We focus on education for all ages. A child can enroll in our gan at 3 years old, continue to our

preschool, elementary school, high school, and attend Chabad programming while in college, so their affiliation stretches over twenty-two formative years!

The impact of learning and teaching Torah can never be understated. In fact, it's what drew us to Ashkelon in the first place. My wife and I grew up dreaming of a life of shlichus, so, shortly after our marriage, we began searching the country for an appropriate post. We'd already climbed the mountainous streets of the north and navigated the teeming humanity at the center, when Rabbi Leiberman called to ask if we'd like to join his team in Ashkelon as shluchi Torah.

For a few years, that was my sole concentration. It was exhilarating to spend so much time giving shiurim and learning and teaching Torah. Every mishna I'd learned about the transformative power of Torah was playing out before my eyes. Not only were my listeners gaining insight into new Torah ideas, the hours of research and preparation made their mark on me, too.

Although I eventually moved onto other roles within the shlichus, I'll forever be grateful for those years for making me who I am today.

The Hayom Yom says that caring for a Jew's physical needs is just as significant and important as caring for their spiritual health. We strive to make sure not a single person in Ashkelon goes hungry.

We have a community refrigerator that's open to all, no questions asked. Anyone is welcome, at any time, to donate ingredients, or to help themselves to anything on the shelves. Since it's open 24/7, those who feel uncomfortable asking for help can come in the early morning and retain their anonymity.

We also send out hundreds of meals before every Yom Tov, serving tens of thousands of plates over the course of a year.

Before Purim, we turn mishloach manos into an opportunity to get everyone involved in the mitzvah and help as many people as possible. After an evening of fun and inspiration, everyone is invited to package a gift basket for the needy in our community. Each person receives the name of a Holocaust survivor, war widow, or struggling family and their address. They fulfill the mitzvah of Purim by delivering the mishloach manos, and, often, they fulfill matanos le'evyonim at the same time, since there are envelopes of cash hidden within the baskets. This unobtrusive delivery ensures everyone receives the help they need without embarrassing anyone.

Being so close to the border with Gaza means we have the opportunity to help many soldiers and reservists as well. One of our community members heads to the army base every week with a pot of steaming cholent, bringing the unique warmth of home and Shabbos food to our brave defenders.

When a soldier called, asking for help to get home to meet his newborn son, we jumped into action, getting him a set of clean clothes, food, and supplies, so he could get home quickly and easily.

Every citizen in Israel was traumatized by the tragic events on October 7th, but for us in Ashkelon, so close to the border, the terror and panic were inescapable.

We'd spent the previous night dancing joyously with the Torah, and celebrating the bris of our newborn son, which we'd held just that morning. With two such joyful occasions to mark, the spirited dancing lasted late into the night, and we finally collapsed into bed in the wee hours of the morning.

Just a few hours later, at 6 A.M., the screech of the air raid siren woke us up. The sirens continued coming in quick succession and unrelenting regularity for the next 7-8 hours, not giving us a moment's respite from the dread, anxiety, and fear of the unknown. Our shul is also a public bomb shelter, so I ran out to unlock the door and helped our elderly neighbors reach it safely.

We were under attack - the nonstop sirens made that clear, but there was little else we knew. Rumors abounded, and whispers ran through the shelter, bringing wide eyes, shudders, and tears in their wake.

Terrorists are freely roaming the streets, searching for victims, the chilling rumors spread. Phone after phone lit up with calls to report for duty, and the men quickly departed, sending lingering glances at their wives and children, still huddled together, clinging to each other for comfort.

The tension and fear hovered thickly, and I knew simcha was the only way to wade through it. It was still Simchas Torah, after all!

"We need to do whatever we can to help our family on the frontlines," I announced. "We need to be happy! We don't have guns or weapons, but we have a power far greater! We need to do hakafos; we need to be happy and dance!"

The strain and anxiety weighed down their feet and thickened their voices, but I refused to give up, singing



joyful Simchas Torah tunes until my voice was hoarse. Slowly, the men joined, and, for a few brief moments, they forgot the horror outside and lifted their voices in celebratory song.

After Yom Tov, electrical workers trying to restore downed lines called, asking for help.

“We haven’t eaten in hours, and there isn’t a store open anywhere in the city,” they said. “Do you have anything we could eat?”

I stared at our fridge, stocked to the brim with Yom Tov food we hadn’t had a chance to serve, and smiled. “Of course! Come right over!” I told them.

As terrifying as those hours jumbled in the miklat had been, I realized the aftermath would demand just as much fortitude and courage. Stores remained shuttered, leaving many without food or necessities. Buses weren’t running, stranding Ashkelonites in a city they desperately wanted to escape and denying entry to those outside, wanting to return and reunite with their loved ones.

We jumped into feverish activity, arranging rides and accommodations for people all over the country. We prepared packages of food and basic toiletries, but terrified homeowners often refused to open their doors - until we managed to convince them we weren’t blood-thirsty terrorists, but fellow Jews, who wanted to help.

Shluchim from other parts of the country quickly stepped in, sending pallets and pallets of food and supplies. They were also instrumental in helping us find safer havens for our stupefied citizens, so they could finally leave their safe rooms and feel the sun once more.

Suddenly, location, political affiliation, religiousness, and demographics didn’t matter. We were all one; united; solidified. Hamas didn’t discriminate in their hatred and terror, and we didn’t discriminate in our love and support.

Through the incredible generosity of our community, we established a comprehensive volunteer center, allowing us to extend a helping hand to our brave soldiers, struggling families, and the wives and children of reservists who were left to manage on their own.

I remember one call from a new mother who’d just made aliyah, given birth, and then had her husband snatched away to fight a brutal war, all in the course of a few weeks!

“I need formula for my baby,” she cried. “I need food; I need toiletries. But I can’t leave my house! I’m terrified I’ll get stuck outside in a siren. I can’t run with a newborn!”

Our volunteers were able to deliver everything she needed right to her door. They did the same - and more - for many others like her.

In many ways, October 7th was a wakeup call that pushed many to reconnect with their Yiddishkeit. Our school registration swelled from 30 students in a grade to over 80, and attendance at shiurim surged.

The ongoing tension, long hours at home cooped up in small rooms, and weeks of separation for army duty left their toll as well. Fissions that had been easy to ignore before suddenly became yawning chasms, and too many couples called for advice on how to navigate their marriage.

“Don’t let Hamas have this, too,” I begged each couple, guiding them towards counseling and reconciliation. “Let’s focus on what unites us and makes us stronger. That’s the best way to fight back.”

“I love being part of Chabad,” one of our long-time members, Shmuel, told me one afternoon.

“Me too!” I agreed with a laugh. “But what brought this up specifically now?”

“Last Shabbos, I met a guy in the park. When I told him I was on my way to Chabad, he grabbed my arm and insisted on telling me his story.

“He was working in a restaurant when Covid made eating out, amongst many other extraneous enjoyments, completely obsolete. The restaurant closed, and he was left without a job. He admitted he’d never been particularly financially stable; the sudden loss of income was a devastating blow. He was struggling to buy food for himself, and he was desperate enough to put aside his pride and ask for help from any gemachim, shuls, or chessed organizations he could find. Unfortunately, many of them had shut down due to Covid as well, and he didn’t know how he’d survive.

“Then, he heard about Chabad of Ashkelon’s community refrigerator. He suspected it, too, would be empty and shut, so he was overjoyed to find it fully stocked with everything he could possibly need.

“Then he saw the sign.”

“What sign?” I asked. “The one on top of the fridge that says it was established in honor of the Lubavitcher Rebbe...?”

“Exactly!” Shmuel concurred, his head bobbing with excitement. “It really struck a chord within him. It reminded him of his childhood, when he’d spent some time in a Chabad school. He remembered how his teacher told him, ‘Once a student of the Rebbe, always a student of the Rebbe. The Rebbe is now, and forevermore will be, a part of you. Whenever you need help, you can count on the Rebbe to guide you and pray for you.’”

“The realization that this promise had come true in his darkest, weakest moments made him break down sobbing. For the next few weeks, the refrigerator became his literal lifeline, and, each time, he thanked the Rebbe and his shluchim for proving they would always be there for him.

“Baruch Hashem, he eventually found another job and was able to get back on his feet. He may not need the refrigerator anymore, but he’s never forgotten that he can always count on the Rebbe and his shluchim.”

War and tragedy have an ironic way of bringing us closer.

One morning, I got a call from Yonatan*, a young soldier stationed near Gaza. He desperately needed a refill of his medication, but his parents were elderly and too nervous to make the drive down south, to the center of the conflict.

I flipped through my contacts, wondering who I could ask to assist. On impulse, I dialed Chava* and explained the predicament.

“Ein be’ayah!” she answered, almost before I’d finished explaining what had to be done. “I’ll do anything for our chayaalim!”

She was able to swing by the pharmacy and pick up the prescription, but I still had to find someone to deliver it to the army base. Again, Gila*, the second woman I called, immediately agreed to help. She delivered the medication to Yonatan, who thanked her over and over.

“Please call me more often,” she said, when she returned. “I want to do more; to help and volunteer!”

I introduced Gila to our volunteer center, and she was excited to get to work! Unfortunately, there was no end of people who needed help, so she kept very busy. As time went on, Gila began coming to Chabad for more than just volunteer work. She slowly started keeping Shabbos, kashrus, and tzniyus. We recently celebrated her wedding to a wonderful young man. The new couple is busy setting up their new home, based on a solid foundation of Torah-true Yiddishkeit, and, of course, chessed!

*Names changed to protect privacy



JUNE 2026 DAILY DONATIONS

June 10 25 Sivan 5786	June 11 26 Sivan 5786	June 12 27 Sivan 5786	June 13 28 Sivan 5786	June 14 29 Sivan 5786	June 15 30 Sivan 5786	June 16 1 Tamuz 5786
\$387	\$194	\$290	\$290	\$129	\$419	\$226
Donating to: Chabad of Bristol	Donating to: Chabad Lubavitch of Frederick	Donating to: Chabad of NE Coral Springs	Donating to: Neshama	Donating to: Chabad Jewish Centre of Woodbridge	Donating to: Chabad of Charlotte	Donating to: Chabad of South bay