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Israel At War: The Rebbe's Superheros

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Chabad of Ashkelon: Rabbi Moishy Peles

Simchas Torah started beautifully. Delicious food filled our bellies, drinks flowed freely, and our community's voices sang proudly throughout the night. Hakafof were lively, happy, and inspirational, and we went home dreaming of another day rejoicing with the Torah and our community.

We woke up Shabbos morning to thunder and fire. Explosions - close ones, too. The sirens hadn't gone off yet, but the ground was literally shaking beneath our feet. Our very foundations rattled.

We were luckier than most. Our Chabad house doubles as a bomb shelter, so not only were we equipped to share a bit of safety and security with our community, but we were also able to celebrate Yom Tov to some extent. In a time of such tragedy and pain, every miracle, no matter how small, should be acknowledged and celebrated.

We're doing everything we can to help. Whether it be sending mothers formula, feeding soldiers, or tracking down insulin, the requests just keep pouring in.

With so many reservists leaving their young families, and so many people trapped inside under the threat of rockets, the least we can do is try and make them a little more comfortable. Toys, snacks, treats, and games are just as important as the more basic necessities - especially for those cooped up inside bomb shelters 24 hours a day.

A young soldier reached out, asking for tefillin.

"I was called up in the middle of chag," he explained. "So I didn't think to take mine."



"No problem," I assured him. "I have an extra pair."

I could hear the relief in his voice. This young chaya, about to face the unspeakable, was only worried about his tefillin.

"But you need to promise me one thing," I added.

"Anything!" he agreed.

"You need to return them to me personally," I said. "After the war. So make sure to take care of them, and make sure to take care of yourself."

The silence pulsed through the phone while I waited for him to respond. Then, finally, I heard a shaky breath and received a quiet promise.

Just a short while ago, Israel was ripped apart by political debates. It shouldn't take a tragedy of this scale to remind us that our differences don't matter. We are all limbs of one united body; am Yisrael chai!

Chabad of Sderot: Rabbi Pizam

I was born and bred in Sderot. My father was the first Chabad shliach here, and I've been honored to carry on his legacy. The wail of the siren warning impending rockets has been a part of my life since I was eleven years old. Back then, the sharp sound of the siren filled me with an excitement that only a child could misconstrue.

"People are going to know we exist!" I announced. "Sderot will be on the news!"

It didn't take long for that excitement to evolve into fear, and fear to evolve into terror. But nothing compares to the heartbreak of watching my children learn that same terror.

Although war has become our "normal," we were just as surprised and devastated as the rest of the country on Simchas Torah. Instead of the joyful dancing we'd anticipated, our family was woken by sirens at 6 AM.

We already knew then that something was different. Instead of the usual one or two booms, dozens of thunderous blasts reverberated throughout the house. While we huddled in the bomb shelter, I planned the rest of the day.

"I know we won't have as large of a crowd," I told my wife. "But I'm scheduled to meet your father later at the

Chabad house for the meal we planned."

Once the sirens died down, I prepared to leave for shul. I was almost ready, when my phone rang. It was unusual enough to get a call on Yom Tov, but I was shocked to see my father-in-law's name lighting up the screen.

"Why would my father call on chag?" my wife asked.

I knew he wouldn't be calling if it wasn't an absolute emergency, so I quickly picked up.

"Where are you?" my father-in-law's voice roared from the phone.

"About to leave for mikvah," I responded.

"DON'T!" he screamed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

My father-in-law breathed deeply on the other end of the phone.

"Terrorists are roaming the streets and breaking into homes, killing every Jew they find," he explained, his voice quiet and serious. "You need to hide. Now."

I looked at my wife, my eyes wide with fear. We gathered our kids into the bomb shelter, locked ourselves in, and started calling anyone we could. We knew most people had turned their phones off, but we still kept trying. My father-in-law's call saved my life, and I hoped my call could save another.

Once we were eventually released and returned to our shul, accompanied by soldiers, our real work began. I learned over 100 of our friends and neighbors had been killed in a few bloody hours. Dozens of families needed support, soldiers needed chizuk and supplies, and many needed help escaping the south for the relative safety of northern Israel. Every shlichus requires mesiras nefesh of one kind or another. We're here to provide whatever aid we can.

Chabad Russian Center, Ashkelon: Rabbi Daniel and Chaya Ira Stoller

For days, we'd prepared for a huge Simchas Torah for our local community, two communal foster homes with the staff and families who care for the children, and some American volunteers.

We rented out a small, but beautiful, hall, overlooking the ocean, and enjoyed a Friday night celebration filled with simcha. We wanted nothing more than to carry this joy to the next day. But instead, we started the morning on edge, with nearly one hundred rockets fired in the span of a few minutes.

My wife and I gathered our children in the bomb shelter, listened for the booms indicating the Iron Dome's interception, and then waited ten minutes. Once we knew we were safe.

I ran to check on the foster children. It was supposed to be a quick walk, but between sirens and running for shelter, it took me triple the time. When I finally made it, the staff and I decided to take the kids over to Rav Moshe Peles's Chabad house. It wasn't too far, and doubled as a bomb shelter. We spent the rest of the hour hiding in stairwells, all while trying to keep the children calm and organized.

I knew my wife would be worried about me, so as soon as I could, I ran home. Minutes before reaching my front door, a strong gust of air pushed me from behind, making me stumble onto the grass. Suddenly, a rocket flew over me. I felt like I could see the streaks in the sky. I covered my head and waited for the crash before getting up.

When I finally got home, heart still pounding, I found the power cut, and my panicked family sitting in darkness.

"Let's go to the preschool," my wife said. "We'll have Simchas Torah there!"

My son and I ran ahead, hoping to find the building lit up. Since it doubled as a bomb shelter, we figured it'd be occupied. A local rabbi was welcoming people in, and happily accepted my crew. The lights shone extra brightly, the only ones working for kilometers; I knew it was a gift from Hashem. My family and I spent the rest of chag enjoying hakafo, appreciating the light, and acknowledging the occasional siren from the safety of our shelter.

The next day, we quickly shipped the foster children off to Kfar Chabad and got to work servicing the rest of our community. We gathered food and supplies and anything else we could to help out soldiers.

Chabad Youth of Netivot: Rabbi Menachem Yidgar

Simchas Torah morning was hard. My wife didn't want me to go to shul, but I was insistent. I knew I needed to be there. The rockets fell like rain, and the sirens howled continuously.

The night before, our teens enjoyed a lively meal and davening with hakafo, candy, singing, and dancing. I'd promised them more in the morning. So I got dressed to head out, trying to ignore the shrieking alarms. I was lacing up my shoes when a car pulled up outside my house. This car would ultimately save my life.

Five twenty-somethings piled out of the car. They were dirty, their eyes puffy, and their words blended into a chaotic cacophony.

"What happened?" I finally asked. "I don't understand what you're saying!"

"Terrorists have invaded the country," they cried. "Please keep us safe! Our friends were killed and kidnapped. Please!"

I ushered them into my home and locked the doors. There we stayed until the end of chag, until we were told it was safe to come out again; until we could read the news and text our friends and learn of the atrocities ourselves - and also, to hear about miracles.

Zacky* was one of those miracles. He was patrolling with four other soldiers. They were aware of the situation, and were on the lookout for terrorists. But no one knew the terrorists' exact locations, and no one could have warned Zacky not to take the road he did.

By the time the boys noticed the danger, it was too late. Guns were pointed and bullets were flying. Zacky and his friends channeled every ounce of training they'd ever received and focused on defeating their enemy. The boys shot and fought and dodged and prayed. Zacky whispered Shema, focusing on each word while he struggled to defend himself. Against all odds, Zacky watched the final enemy fall.

"Zacky - you've been hit!" one of his men shouted.

Zacky looked down at his stomach, where a small pool of red was spreading. The soldiers were well trained, and rushed Zacky to the hospital. He called me from his hospital bed.

"Do you know where I can get tefillin?" he asked me. "Mine were destroyed!"

"Of course!" I responded.

Today, we're focused on gathering supplies, handing out snacks, and replenishing stocks for any army bases we can. These boys are the reason we can live freely, and we'll do anything to make sure they're taken care of.

Chabad of Chevron: Rabbi Mordechai Hellinger

Simchas Torah evening was a beautiful affair, and when I got my children ready for Simchas Torah morning, I hoped to replicate the kedusha we'd felt the night before. We walked from Kiryat Arba to Maaras Hamachpela, prepared to enjoy hakafo there, when we were stopped by a friend of mine in a security vehicle.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Get your uniform on! The country is at war!"

Quickly, I turned my kids around and headed back home with the bags of kiddush food heavy in my hands. My wife watched us walk in, confused.

"Why are you back?" she asked.

"I need to turn on my phone," I explained, calmly. "Something's happening."

I grabbed my phone and my radio, changed into my uniform, and read up on the atrocities that were happening in the south. I packed a bag with some food, and headed out. My commander sent me to a guard post, where I got to speak with some worried soldiers. Knowing you're headed to war is terrifying. I was fortunate enough to provide some of these young men with chizuk.

We watched over the Jewish communities in Chevron and Kiryat Arba for the next few hours, while I spoke to them about spirituality. Whether or not my words made an impact remains to be seen, but I made kiddush loudly enough for them to hear.

Later, when I finished my duty and went home, I gathered my children for hakafo. Despite it being hours later, not having a minyan, and taking place around our dining room table with a child-sized toy Torah, I needed to show my children the importance of standing bright in a dark time. We were not going to let the terrorists win.

My messy Simchas Torah was very different from the way I'd imagined. I found that there is beauty in uncertainty and strength in chaos. Being able to fulfill the mitzvot of this holiday while serving my country and inspiring my children will always be an unforgettable experience.

It's no surprise that the supportive messages from Chutz L'Aretz keep pouring in. The financial aid, emotional strength, and spiritual messaging continues to give the people in Eretz Yisrael the strength to push and fight for the homeland that is rightly ours!

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