

IllumiNations

Issue 98 | Parshas Vayeshev 5784
Chanukah Edition

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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

*Rabbi Mordechai and Nechama Dina
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Bayamim Haheim Bizman HazeH

By Chaya Chazan

When I first stepped off the Chevron-bound bus as a young, inexperienced American yeshiva bochur, it felt like coming home. I spent the month of Tishrei assisting Rabbi Danny Cohen, helping all the soldiers stationed in Chevron put on tefillin, hear the shofar, and shake the lulav and esrog.

The inexplicable pull I felt towards this city, so steeped in holiness and history, compelled me to return as often as I could. A few years later, when Rabbi Cohen offered me a more permanent position, I was eager to accept.

My position was rather unconventional - but then again, Chevron teaches you to expect the unexpected. For over a year, I functioned as the "Chabad runner." Every night, I loaded my backpack with cookies and a thermos of steaming coffee, and visited soldiers throughout the city while they were on guard duty. I found that providing a hot drink on a cold, rainy night at 3 in the morning creates a bond that makes any and all topics up for discussion. Between bites of cookies and camaraderie, I spoke to the soldiers about Torah, Hashem, and Yiddishkeit.

After a year of a mostly nocturnal existence, I took a "break," joining Tzahal as a sergeant in the Golani Brigade. After completing my army service, I returned to Chevron.



I was standing outside Me'aras Hamachpela when a group of American students, led by an Arab tour guide, passed by. I struck up a conversation, and asked if they'd like a tour of the Jewish side of Chevron. Although their tour guide protested, the group leader enthusiastically agreed.

As I turned around to begin my impromptu tour, I was shocked to see an entire busload of people following me. I'd never been the confident public speaker type, but I pushed myself out of my comfort zone, and proceeded to show them around the Jewish quarter. Every stone and alleyway in Chevron is alive with Jewish history, so it was no surprise that they were deeply impressed by this alternate perspective.

The next Shabbos, I was once again outside Me'aras Hamachpela when a group of ladies disembarked from a bus. Seeing their shirts, emblazoned with "Bethesda Jewish Congregation," I approached with a friendly wave.

"My mom grew up in Bethesda!" I said, to break the ice. Since it was Shabbos, I got a bottle of wine and made kiddush for them as well. After chatting for a while, I offered them a tour of Chevron - from the Jewish perspective. Although I felt nervous doing it, I couldn't ignore the prescient timing. I had just about finished my army service. I was being shown, quite clearly, that *this* was my mission.

Since then, I've been privileged to be the visitor liaison in Chevron, leading groups from every demographic through this majestic city, trying my best to impart some understanding of its timeless power.

After meeting my wife (in Chevron, of course!), we moved to Chevron permanently and officially joined the Cohens on the Chabad of Chevron team. When we're not busy greeting tourists, there's plenty to do for the soldiers.

Chevron has been a "hot spot" for many years, so there's always a strong military presence here. Although the soldiers are only stationed here for a few months at a time, we try to inspire them as much as we can, packing years' worth of impact into a few short weeks.

It was erev Rosh Hashanah, and I was sitting in the trailer that functions as Chabad of Chevron's office space, composing new year well wishes to our friends and supporters, when an uproar from outside caught my attention.

It was the familiar voice of a guide from a radical group, who hoped that complete Jewish withdrawal from contested areas would result in lasting peace with our Arab neighbors. He was spinning his usual diatribe against the "illegal settlers," leveling one accusation after another against us.

Really? I thought to myself. *Is this really what he's choosing to do on erev Rosh Hashanah?* Then I took myself in hand. *This is an opportunity. Use it!*

As I stepped out, the leader paused his chants to warily size me up.

"Thank you so much for bringing Jews into Chevron," I said warmly. I could tell he was taken aback, and, pleased, I went on. "It's so important for Jews to visit this special city." I circulated among the group, greeting everyone warmly and wishing them a "shana tova umetuka." The leader tried to keep the group moving, but they lingered, wanting to learn more.

"We were told you guys were all crazy fanatics, who would chase us with stones!" they told me. "We're glad to see that's not true!"

It was a great reminder of the impact we can have, even during short encounters.

The annual Kinus Hashluchim is an event shluchim the world over look forward to all year. For me, attending has never really been an option. It almost always coincides with Parshas Chayei Sara, when hundreds flock to Chevron to relive the events of the parsha and visit Me'aras Hamachpela.

The only year I was able to "attend" was 2020, when the kinus was held virtually, via Zoom. With so many shluchim in so many time zones, the farbrengen continued for almost a week straight! Whenever I logged on, I heard shluchim sharing stories of inspiration, culled from their own experiences.

What about you? I berated myself. *Would you have anything to share? Would you have anything to show for all your years of shlichus?* I knew self-abasement wasn't productive, but it was hard not to compare myself to these hundreds of inspiring rabbis.

The farbrengen finally concluded late Thursday night, when many shluchim had to log off to prepare for Shab-



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bos. The next morning, Rabbi Cohen told me he'd received a surprising phone call, just after he'd spoken on the Zoom farbrengen.

"Remember Nate?" he asked me.

Of course I remembered Nate. He'd accompanied his uncle on a visit to Chevron. His uncle had a substantial inheritance to donate, and wanted to research the institutions he'd be endowing personally. I'd shown them around the city, and helped Nate put on tefillin for the first time in Me'aras Hamachpelah.

"I'll forward you his message," Rabbi Cohen told me. "He sent it literally just moments after I finished speaking! I can't help but see the hashgacha pratis!"

In his note, Nate told us of his uncle's passing. "We were both very impressed with your work in Chevron," he wrote, "although ultimately my uncle decided to bequeath the entire sum to the lifesaving work of Mada. Still, the visit made such an impression, I'll make sure some of the medical equipment is sent to Chevron. The most powerful moment of my visit was putting on tefillin for the first time."

I, too, could not help but see the hashgacha pratis. When I needed it most, I'd received a reminder that my efforts weren't in vain.

I was walking to shul with my kids on Simchas Torah morning, when a friend screeched to a halt beside me in his military jeep.

"Yalla! Mordechai! What are you doing? You need to report to the commander! It's war!"

I froze for a moment, as millions of emotions swirled through me. Then my army training kicked in and my reactions became instinctive. I remembered telling my mashpia, after joining the army, that I finally understood the concept of serving Hashem with *kabbalah ol*, pure obedience. As calmly as I could, I directed my children back home, explained the situation to my wife, changed into my uniform, and grabbed my gear.

Chevron, always volatile, is especially prone to secondary outbursts during any action in other parts of the country. My commander posted me to guard duty, to make a strong show of military strength and discourage would-be copycats.

News was slow at first, but it came trickling in, horrifying bit by horrifying bit. A soldier that arrived a couple of hours later had been avidly following the news. He had

family in the south, and friends who'd attended the festival. He was wild with anxiety and anguish. I tried to calm him down.

"It's Simchas Torah today," I reminded him. "Have you heard kiddush yet?"

"Kiddush?" he repeated, staring at me blindly.

"I have some grape juice and challah with me. Come on, let's make kiddush," I gently encouraged him.

Although he wasn't religious, the act of focusing on a higher calling brought him comfort and peace.

It was our first Chanukah on shlichus, and, as happens more often than not, Chevron was in a state of heightened security in response to terrorist threats. We visited one army base, bringing along menorahs, music, and plenty of sufguniyot and barbecue. We celebrated with the soldiers, and began packing up for the next party at the next army base.

"Would you be able to wait a little while longer?" the commander asked me. "We have a group due to arrive soon. There are a few religious guys in the unit who will light the chanukiah, but I know how much they'll appreciate seeing you here, waiting for them."

"No problem!" I assured him. We continued singing and chatting with the soldiers until the reserve unit arrived. They were so touched we'd waited for them, and the celebrations lasted a while longer. We were still expected at the next army base, so we finally *had* to pack up and say goodbye.

As we drove down a side road to our destination, we noticed an increased military presence on the side of the road. I pulled over and asked what had happened.

"A few terrorists threw Molotov cocktails at a passing bus," they told us. "No damage was done though, since the bus was bulletproof."

"Baruch Hashem!" I breathed. "Were they waiting in ambush, or was it just bad timing?"

"They were waiting for a while, for a visibly Jewish target," they answered.

We continued on our way, deep in thought. When we reached the army camp, I asked to see their log of that night's events. A very simple calculation froze my blood in my veins. Had we not waited to light the menorah for that second group of soldiers, our non-bulletproof car, with its

brightly lit menorah on top, would've passed that intersection and the ambush lying in wait.

Michal* is a great friend and supporter of Chabad of Chevron. When I heard her mother was gravely, unresponsively ill, I wanted to do something special for her. We were hosting a challah bake for the chayalot that evening, so I made an announcement, asking the soldiers to keep Michal's mother in mind for a complete refuah shleima.

I sent Michal a video of the chayalot davening for her mother. A couple of minutes later, Michal called me in tears.

"Thank you, Rabbi! My mother just got out of bed, as if nothing was wrong at all!"

As the Baal Shem Tov explained, taking care of a Jew's physical needs is just as important as taking care of their spiritual ones. So when we send our bochurim out with tefillin, we make sure to equip them with cold cans of soda as well. It takes painstaking effort, but every can is labeled with a sticker that reads, *With love, from Chabad of Chevron. Make sure to make a bracha before enjoying!*

Hundreds of cans are given out every day, and the soldiers are always appreciative. One soldier told me that seeing that sticker day after day influenced him to such an extent that he now makes a bracha before eating or drinking anything at all!

Often, our small efforts go unnoticed. When we're lucky enough, we see how much every little action can impact another.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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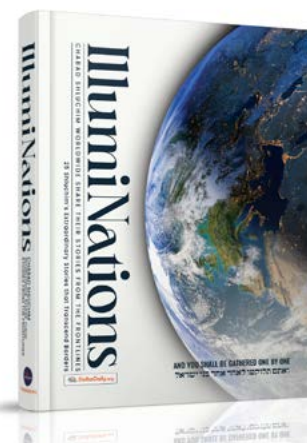
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