

# IllumiNations

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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

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## Rocket Rainfall: Chabad in Sderot Part I

By Chaya Chazan

**The entire world is looking towards Israel now, as it prepares to fight a battle on three fronts.**

While multiple nations aim their weapons at our tiny strip of land, we're as assured of victory as we were during the Six Day War, when the Rebbe insisted that Eretz Yisrael, Hashem's special land from which He never removes His eyes, was the safest place on earth. As we will soon recite over victoriously raised cups of wine, "*B'chol dor vador omdim aleinu lechaloseinu*," "In every generation they rise up to destroy us," "*VeHakadosh Baruch Hu matzilenu miyadam*," "But Hashem delivers us from their hands."

Sderot is a small city located less than a mile from Gaza. Our "convenient" location has made us a prime target for rocketfire, and it's rare to enjoy a day of total and utter peace. Hundreds of thousands of Israeli families are living in

constant fear, going about their daily tasks with an ear out for an imminent siren, warning them of an incoming rocket attack. For us here in Sderot, that's just Tuesday.

On Simchas Torah night, we hosted a lively hakafos in our Chabad house. Over 200 people joined us for davening, followed by a spirited farbrengen, and an even more energetic hakafos. We stumbled home at 2:00 AM, looking forward to another day of joyous celebration.

The sirens began at 6:30 AM. They usually stop after a while, like an annoying alarm clock you can't snooze. But these sirens continued without end. We knew something was wrong. My phone began ringing, and when I saw my son-in-law's name - Mendy - light up the screen, I immediately snatched up my phone, despite the fact it was Shabbos.

"Terrorists have entered Israel," Mendy explained, tersely. "Be careful!"

The incessant sirens on that fateful morning warned me that something wasn't right. I turned on my phone to call my commander, but noticed I had dozens of unread notifications and messages. One message, seen for just one second, froze me with its sinister implication: *Terrorists have infiltrated the country.*

Our daily challenges had lulled us into a false sense of "security" that fateful morning. Sirens ringing? That's nothing! Business as usual! Not knowing we were being bombarded with 150-200 rockets all at once, I remember remarking to

my wife, in a voice of annoyance, that our Yom Tov plans were now ruined, since barely anyone would be coming to shul.

It was early in the morning, but I was up already, so I decided to get an early start to my day. Blissfully unaware of the terrorists roaming the streets, I got dressed to go to the mikvah, and, from there, to the Chabad house. I knew it would be a tiny turnout, but I wanted to be there for those who *did* show up.

I left my home at 7:15 and headed towards the mikvah.

"Wait!" my father-in-law yelled out the window. "Your brother-in-law is calling!"

I knew my brother-in-law, Mendy, served in the reserves, but why would he be calling on Yom Tov? Maybe the worst had happened, and a rocket had hit his home.

"I've called you over and over!" Mendy practically screamed into the phone.

"Baruch Hashem I remembered your in-laws were staying with you for Yom Tov, so I could finally reach you!" he continued. "Asher, don't leave the house!"

I scoffed. "For some rockets? Are you crazy? If we stopped our lives every time there were rockets, we'd spend all day inside!"

"You don't understand," Mendy argued, a note of desperation in his voice. "There are terrorists roaming the streets!"

I laughed. "Mendy, did you take your lechaims a little early today? What's going on with you?"

"Please, Asher," he begged. "Do you think I'd call on Shabbos if it wasn't this serious? There was a breach from Gaza. You can't leave your house!"

His voice's grim tone finally penetrated. A moment later, we heard gunshots. They were loud, and sounded close. I'd been walking directly towards the terrorists. Had Mendy not called exactly when he did, I wouldn't be alive today.

We found out later that terrorists surrounded the Chabad house at 7:15 that morning. They'd prepared a list of places where many people would be gathered, and they knew we'd be holding a minyan. The joke's on them - we never daven that early! When they saw no one was coming, they fanned out down the street and began shooting indiscriminately.

The terrorists continued their crazed search for victims. My wife and I were home alone, but we knew our next door neighbors had a full house. They'd invited a bunch of guests for the chag. We cautiously peered through the curtains and could see the terrorists approaching our home, armed to the teeth. We fervently whispered Tehillim. To our great relief, they didn't come any closer than a few hundred feet away. They just stood there, silent angels of death. Eventually, they left, only to return a short while later to - tragically - murder a young neighbor of ours.



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The sirens drove us to our safe room. I didn't let on that this was any different than any other air raid siren, not even to my wife. However, almost an hour later, when I started receiving information about kidnapped hostages, I realized this was a planned and calculated terror attack.

I pulled my wife aside and informed her of the dire situation. We felt exposed, living in a single family home rather than a building, especially with our window shades open. Although it frightened us to lose visibility to the street outside, we knew drawing the shades was better than letting any passing terrorist know exactly who was home and where we were.

As the dangerous reality finally set in, I began racing all around the house, locking every door and window. The final door was the one that opened into the street. I was just about to close the electric shade that would shield our home from the street view when the power went out, and the house went dark. Our home was perfectly visible from the street - the same street upon which the terrorists were advancing.

"Run upstairs to the safe room!" I urged my wife and children. "And make sure to close the window!"

My wife quickly hustled our children out of the room, trying to keep calm despite rising hysteria. My son immediately returned downstairs.

"Abba, there's a car of terrorists right down the street."

"Run back upstairs and shut the door and windows!" I told him. I shut my eyes, took a deep breath, and returned to the living room. *The terrorists are only meters away*, the thought arose unwittingly to mind. *If they come in, hopefully they'll just see me and assume I'm home alone. Even if they kill me, my wife and children will be safe.*

The sirens and booms of rockets continued, a horrific soundtrack to this tragic day. I telephoned the police station, not knowing it had been overtaken by the terrorists. Obviously, there was no answer. I tried calling MDA and Hatzala as well, but the phone continued to ring uselessly. I turned on my computer to check the news, and was shocked to see video clips of terrorists roaming streets I recognized at once. *This isn't an isolated group of terrorists, I realized. This is a full-on attack!*

I tried to reassure my children, promising them someone would rescue us very soon. The hours ticked by, and we remained holed up in our safe room without reprieve.

I figured not everyone would have known to check their phones, so we started calling family, beginning with my brother-in-law. He lives in a kibbutz with the dubious distinction of being the country's closest kibbutz to the border - only 800 meters from Gaza. When he saw my name on the screen, he knew it was an emergency. I urged him to come to us, where he'd be a little safer. He dithered a little, unsure if it was really necessary to break Shabbos for that. When his wife agreed with us, he caved. They packed their children into the car, still in their pajamas, and headed towards Sderot.

"Maybe we should just go to my brothers in Kiryat Malachi?" he suggested, once they were in the car.

His wife refused - a prescient decision that saved their lives. Had they driven to Kiryat Malachi, they would've been greeted by terrorists guarding the gates, spewing automatic gunfire at anyone who dared approach.

Shortly after my brother-in-law reached the safety of our home, he received a video from his neighbor's security camera. The timestamps were chilling. AT 8:01:58, the entire family drove off in their car. At 8:03:20, just a minute and a half later, three terrorists surrounded their home. They'd escaped just in the nick of time.

*No one is coming, I thought to myself. The army, police, and emergency patrols are helpless. It's just you and Hashem.*

I brought a chair up to the safe room and placed it in the middle of the floor.

"Today is Simchas Torah," I told my family. "Let's celebrate! Pretend this chair is the holy Torah, and we'll dance hakafof around it!"

I shared a story about my grandfather, imprisoned in Communist Russia for the crime of spreading Yiddishkeit. It was Simchas Torah, and he desperately wanted to sing and dance. He was sure there was no chance the guards would allow that to happen.

"Sing for me, Jew!" a guard barked at him. "I'm bored!"

My grandfather jumped up with alacrity, and began singing the joyous songs of Simchas Torah.

"Although it's hard to sing about being happy and free when we're trapped and scared, we should try our best to be happy on this special day," I told my children.

So we danced and sang, and tried not to feel the contradiction. We davened with kavana, saying each word with great meaning and concentration.

At 1:00 PM, we heard violent banging on our front door. My heart started racing, and we sprinted for the safe room. A shouted "Good Yom Tov!" from the front gate assured me it wasn't the terrorists returning for us, and I opened the gate with a heart still threatening to leap from my chest. It was my brother, Chananel, and his wife, Tzivia.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him, wide eyed and short of breath.

He shot me a strange look. "Moshe Zeev, can you come to shul, please? We have nine men, and we need you for a minyan."

It seems mad now that anyone would ignore the obvious peril and go to shul that fateful day, but citizens of Sderot are accustomed to sirens. Those that didn't turn on their phones because of the Chag had no idea that anything unusual was afoot. They simply waited until the sirens quietened, and then blithely made their way to shul.

"I don't know what to do!" I told my brother. "It's not safe to walk even a couple of blocks!" I quickly caught him up on the drama of the morning.

Chananel insisted I come to shul to complete the minyan, and tried his best to urge me out the door. When I saw a group of Israeli soldiers patrolling the streets, I felt safer, but I still wasn't sure going to shul was the best idea.

I asked my brother to open a volume of *Igros Kodesh*, a collection of the Rebbe's letters. He randomly opened a page, and we all read the first line in utter amazement. "*Hakol bi'asarah Shechinta sharya*," the Rebbe quoted. "The Shechina rests wherever ten Jews are present."

"Wow!" my wife breathed. "Go! Go!"

As we walked to shul, we received concerned looks from the troops of soldiers walking past us, but we made it there safely.

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