

IllumiNations

Issue 133 | Parshas Pinchas 5784

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



DollarDaily.org

Dedicated in Meomory of Harav Moshe Kotlarsky - Pioneering A Generation of The Rebbe's Shluchim

Rabbi Shneur and Tova Kenig, Chabad of Ofakim, Israel

Soup for the Soul

By Chaya Chazan

I was raised in Kfar Chabad, and it was the farbrengens in 770 that made me want to be a shliach. I was just a bochur, so I didn't know exactly where or how; I just knew I wanted to go on shlichus.

In this way, like every other, my wife is the perfect match for me. She grew up on shlichus in Ofakim, where her parents, Rabbi Yisrael and Sara Hershkowitz, run the main Chabad House. She wanted to join them and become part of their team. Although I wasn't sure if Ofakim was in the north or the south, it was shlichus! And that was enough for me.

Although starting out was difficult, as all beginnings are, the community's friendly and welcoming atmosphere made it much easier to settle in.

At first, there was the question of what my wife and I would focus on. Baruch Hashem, there is a great team of shluchim in Ofakim, and we wanted to dedicate ourselves to a specific area or demographic. It was no more than two months after moving that our shlichus found us.

It was weeks before the Chagim, and I was making my first food delivery to needy families in the city. I, like most others, always knew poverty existed; that many people struggled to sustain their families. The reality I faced when the door opened was beyond anything I'd ever imagined.

It struck me how *ordinary* they looked. There was nothing visibly differentiating them from anyone else, or calling attention to their financial struggles. They could have been my siblings, cousins, friends. They could have been anyone.

It took me a long time to recover from that first shocking exposure to the true face of poverty. I paced the city streets



after leaving the dingy apartment, every moment of the encounter burned in my memory. Tears rolled down my face as I remembered the abject despair and suffering. Soon, the tears dried up, and that saddened me even more. I *wanted* to continue feeling the pain. I never wanted to become inured to their suffering, to take their misery for granted.

Very soon after that, I began to run Chabad of Ofakim's soup kitchen, which provides fresh, hot meals to anyone in need. Every time someone stretches out a bowl to be filled, I picture them as a beloved family member, and imagine their plight is my own.

For many children, the food they get in school is their only balanced meal. So over the summer, we have a special program where we distribute food to underprivileged kids.

One summer, a man told me the following story:

"A few months ago I took my son to get some tests. The results were bad. His blood work told a scary story of poor health. The doctors gave us a plan and advised we monitor his condition with more tests in the months to come.

"When we went back a few months later, it was miraculous. Suddenly, my son's blood work was perfect. The doctor was surprised at the extreme change, and asked if I could think of anything that had changed. I knew exactly what it was, but I was too embarrassed to tell him.

"The truth is Rabbi, it was *you* that changed my son's health. During the year, I struggled to put food on the table. He doesn't get much elsewhere and was most certainly malnourished during those first rounds of tests.

"The second round of tests happened over the summer, when *you* were giving him nutritious meals everyday. That food you sent in the summer changed his life. Suddenly, he was getting the protein and nutrients I couldn't afford to give him."

Seeing how much difference a few meals could make on someone's life strengthened my resolve to keep going. For that child, our soup kitchen was the one thing standing between malnourishment and health, happiness, and opportunity.

We've always had a great relationship with the Ofakim police force. For years, officers have come to volunteer before chagim, when we're at our busiest. Tragically, some of these kind heroes gave the ultimate sacrifice in fighting for Am Yisrael in the wake of the October 7th attacks.

Molly* stood out as an especially kind and giving person. She was always ready to help distribute boxes before holidays. Last Pesach, she single-handedly made sure all the packages were shipped out and reached their destinations on time.

Ari* was another one of our regulars. He often came with his father, Chaim*. On Simchas Torah, when we heard gunshots, Ari acted like a true hero - grabbing his gun and running *towards* the shooting instead of away to safety.

Ari was killed in that encounter, fighting for the city he loved. His absence is a tremendous loss for all those of us who knew and loved him. Although we miss his cheery presence in our kitchen, his father, Chaim, continues to volunteer, perpetuating his son's legacy of kindness.

Molly's funeral followed one day after Ari's, and we all sobbed at their gravesites. We continue our work in their honor and memories.

Molly's brother told me recently that the last time he put on tefillin was his bar mitzvah. But after the horrific attacks, he asked me to teach him how.

After a few years of running the organization, we developed a system. Before chagim, we deliver packages to 600 families. Every week, we serve hundreds of meals, and deliver food packages and countless pounds of produce.

In the aftermath of the attacks, we were receiving an unusually high volume of requests for assistance. And no wonder! Mothers were home alone with their children, their husbands called up to the army. Ofakim is very close to Gaza, so playing outside was too dangerous, and supermarkets were closed.

In that first month alone, we gave out 1,000 boxes of food, and between 800-1,000 hot meals a day - that's over 20,000 meals in a month! Additionally, we gave out hundreds of children's games and toys over the month, hoping to give the children something to look forward to until they could go back outside.

With the uncertainty and constant danger of terrorist presence, I only allowed volunteers with a license to carry. Although it made it harder to find the manpower we needed to meet the increased need, I didn't want to take any chances.

Although I sent my wife and children away for their safety, I remained in Ofakim, knowing I couldn't leave my community hungry. Even when I join my family for the night, I make sure to return to Ofakim early, so those counting on me will not be let down.

The war taught us many hard-earned lessons. When Uri*, a reservist, comes with his family to volunteer every month,



DollarDaily.org

we are united in our desire to help others. It doesn't matter that we have very different political points of view - in the soup kitchen, we are brothers. Anyone who asks is given food, without any regard to their history, opinions, or actions. We are one family, and that's all that really matters.

Ezra*, a member of our community, was home on Simchas Torah. The sirens roared above him, sending him racing for the front door and towards the shelter that was mere seconds from his house. He reached the underground bunker and closed the heavy door behind him. Still, the scary sound ricocheted around him. Different from rocket fire, Ezra recognized the sound of the guns being fired. It wasn't long until he realized there were terrorists in the city.

"I need to get home," Ezra said to himself. "The first place they'll look will be here."

In a snap decision, Ezra decided to risk the rockets and race back to his apartment. He ran quickly, without looking back, trying to block out the approaching sound of gunfire. Ezra made it to safety with only seconds to spare.

He watched from a small window as armed terrorists pushed into the shelter Ezra had just been in. Gunfire rang loudly and Ezra, barely breathing, thanked G-d he was no longer there. In the next moment, as the disappointed terrorists turned in search of a new target, Ezra's breath caught once again. They walked directly towards his house and crossed his yard. They were so close, he could hear their footsteps. Ezra laid on the ground, his hands over his head as he waited with shallow breath. He tried to come up with a plan, but found his panic taking over his thoughts. For hours, Ezra didn't move.

Eventually, he realized he'd been saved. The terrorists had moved past his house without a second thought. Both in the shelter and in his home, Hashem had kept Ezra from being killed.

Unfortunately, Ezra's neighbor, famously known as Rachel, wasn't as lucky, and ended up having the terrorists in her home for 20 ungodly hours feeding them cookies.

On Simchas Torah, we finished Hakafof deep into the night. I don't remember the time anymore but it was something like 1am before we were done dancing. I remember we went home happy - it felt like every other year.

Then, at 6:30 the next morning, we were woken by the sirens. I remember my wife and kids running to the hallway - our closest thing to a private shelter. Of course, it's scary - but at the same time, living so far south, the sirens aren't a rare occurrence. So, in the midst of the blaring sound, I

turned to my wife and told her I was going to head to the Chabad house to open up the shelter there.

I planned to go a few minutes after the sirens ended - with a little buffer time for falling shrapnel. But the strident ringing was never-ending. Eventually, my wife suggested I wait a bit for things to calm down.

In hindsight, this is what saved my life. Terrorists were walking around that area at 7am, shooting and killing without mercy. If I had gone to the Chabad house as I planned, I likely wouldn't have made it there alive.

It's a true miracle, and to this day, I don't understand how I was so easily convinced to stay home. I've gone between sirens in the middle of the night before, so staying home that morning was completely out of character.

An hour later, when I thought about going again, my wife and I noticed our phones were ringing incessantly. This, combined with the sirens, made my wife nervous. She went to peek at the phone and when she saw that it was her family, we knew something was wrong.

"It must be an emergency. They wouldn't be calling otherwise," we reasoned.

"Don't leave your house," her sister-in-law said over the call. "Don't leave and don't open the Chabad house. There are terrorists roaming the streets."

This was the first time we'd heard about what was going on. But the news must have spread, because for hours that Shabbos morning, the streets were silent. That whole day, my family and I stayed huddled in that little hallway, away from windows and safe from the sirens.

Although we couldn't have the loud, joyful hakafof we were used to, it was still Yom Tov, and we were still going to celebrate. We swayed in our places with a toy Torah, singing in a whisper.

On Sunday afternoon, I went to open the soup kitchen. The streets were dead silent, but I knew our services were required. Those next two weeks were the quietest I've ever seen in Ofakim. Everyone in the city was traumatized. No one felt safe. My volunteers and I were the only ones on the roads - and that was only because we were giving out food. But in those weeks, our work became even more important.

Women were stuck at home with children while their husbands were called up for reserves. Parents were left with empty cupboards and closed supermarkets. Banks were closed and kept some people from being able to access any funds. For many, we were their only access to food at that time.

There was one woman, Leah*, who called the soup kitchen and told me she was stuck at home, alone with her young children. Her husband was called up for reserves.

"Can you please bring me food...?" she asked. "And can you please deliver it personally? I'm scared to open the door for people I don't recognize."

"Sure," I agreed.

"Thank you," the woman replied. "Can I ask one more thing? Can you call me when you're outside? I'll quickly open the door to grab the food. I'm nervous about the door being left open too long."

I understood her fears, and congratulated her for being brave enough to reach out for help. Of course, I was happy to accommodate her in any way I could.

I always worry that my work takes me away from my children. I wonder if I spend enough time with them or give them enough attention. But sometimes it only takes a moment to remind me that they're okay.

I remember one day, a short while ago, when my children were playing together while I watched.

"Okay," my son announced. "Everyone, say what you want to be when you get older!"

My daughter smiled. "I'm going to be a bus driver, so I can let the people who can't afford the bus fare ride for free."

"Well I'm going to be a cop," my younger son declared. "That way I can forgive fines for the people who don't have enough money to pay them."

I realized then that I had done more for my kids than I originally realized. I had taught them an important lesson - to always look for ways to help the less fortunate.

**Names changed to protect identity*

DollarDaily.org

a Project of

**YadLShliach.org
and COLive.com**

COLIVE

**UNITE WITH US,
FIGHT WITH US**

SPREAD YOUR LOVE
FOR JEWS WORLDWIDE
WITH JUST

\$1 a day at

 **DollarDaily.org**

