

IllumiNations

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Rocket Rainfall: Chabad in Sderot Part III

By Chaya Chazan

In the aftermath of October 7th, most of Sderot's 33,000 citizens evacuated. We stayed to continue our shlichus – not only for the few hundred that remained, but also for all the soldiers.

In the unexpected invasion's ensuing chaos, Tzahal was in disarray. Thousands of reserve soldiers were flooding in from across the country, and the army wasn't prepared with proper provisions.

For the first few days, until the army found its footing, we picked up the slack.



We ordered food from anywhere in driving distance that was still accepting orders, piling pans precariously atop hot plates.

My son eyed me nervously, as I placed yet another call to another restaurant.

"Abba, how are we paying for all this?" he asked, not unreasonably.

"I don't know," I answered, honestly. "We'll order now, and worry about payment later."

The bills were adding up, the debts growing into thousands of shekel, and I still had no plan. I just knew we had to feed our brave soldiers, about to risk their lives for our security.

One silver lining of this very dark cloud was the incredible support that poured in, especially from overseas. Everyone wanted to help, and were happy to chip in. I barely even had to fundraise!

Chaos reigned for days. The electricity turned on and off at unpredictable times, water power was erratic, stores were closed, and people were still trying to trace missing loved ones. We received a flood of phone calls asking for food, water, medicine, supplies, and everything in between.

We could use the Chabad house as a logistical center, but we didn't have volunteers or supplies. No one was willing to risk driving a large truck to Sderot while terrorists were still at large. We finally convinced them to meet us at the city's entrance, where we'd transfer everything to our own cars. Now we had the supplies, but no way to distribute them! People were stuck at home, since it was too dangerous to walk the

streets. There were only a few of us. How could we deliver supplies to a whole city?

However, despite these challenges, we were eventually able to open a fully-stocked, free supermarket. We had meat and fruit and frozen foods and snacks. We had tzizis, talleisim, kipot, and siddurim. We brought 600 tons of food into the city, and delivered 120,000 meals to people trapped at home, soldiers, and police officers.

When the funerals started, we were faced with a new set of heartbreaking challenges. People were too afraid to come out, and the funerals of these kedoshim remained tragically empty. It was a struggle to find people to bury the bodies. To add insult to injury, Hamas continued to send a barrage of rockets, which disturbed the mourners trying to honor their murdered relatives.

Feeding the steady stream of soldiers kept us busy for months. Every day, hundreds of soldiers would report for duty. The army was wholly unequipped to deal with the sudden swell in ranks. They relied on us, not only for food, but for other important supplies as well - batteries, flashlights, portable chargers, etc.

Our family in America really came through for us. Communities across the country donated boxes and boxes of anything and everything we'd need. With your help, we were able to deliver life-saving packages of rations and badly needed supplies to soldiers on the frontlines.

While taking care of the soldiers, we couldn't forget about the rest of our community, many of whom had all fled Sderot. Displaced, living temporarily in hotels throughout the country, and still trying to heal from their recent wounds, they needed us, too. We arranged activities and group events to bring them all together and give them a taste of joy in these challenging times.

For the upcoming yom tov of Pesach, we're giving out 12,000 packages of matzah to everyone in Sderot and the surrounding kibbutzim. Each will be accompanied by a gift card, so they can buy food for the chag.

All in all, we worked around the clock. The exhaustion and constant work gave us no time to feel sadness, anxiety, or depression. We had to remain strong for our families and community. Despite the challenges and hardships, we feel lucky to be the Rebbe's shluchim, and have the zechus to help so many of Hashem's children.

That evening, after Yom Tov had ended, I received a call from the Chabad house. A few people had ventured to shul, and had been stuck there all day. They were worried, not only about their own safety, but for the welfare of their family and friends. I drove to shul to rescue and bring them home.

The full impact of that terrible day hit me with nauseating force as I drove down familiar roads. The victims of the barbaric murder spree lay sprawled all over the streets. It was a sight I'll never be able to forget, as long as I live.

Over the next few days, we lived a bewildering reality. We learned that Hamas terrorists had taken over the police sta-

tion, and every city exit. Anyone who tried running for help or escaping the city was mercilessly gunned down. The IDF soon got the city back under their control, but the days were still fraught with tension, as they conducted house-to-house searches to ascertain whether any terrorists remained in hiding.

Phone calls crisscrossed the city with endless lists of names: who was dead, who had survived, and who needed urgent medical care. The death toll was staggering. It was too hard to accept that so many of our friends were gone - just like that.

Amidst the tragedy and lost lives were countless miracle stories.

Lior* was watching his security cameras, and saw a group of terrorists stand, confused, in his yard, facing his front door. He heard them ask each other where the front door was, and complain about the confusing layout of the house that made it so unclear how to enter. They circled around the house a few times before giving up and moving on. They didn't attempt to shoot, or peek into any windows. They simply left.

Gad* was worried that his ground floor home wouldn't provide sufficient protection. He ran wildly out the back door, trying to find a taller building in which to take refuge. As he left, a group of terrorists entered his house. Miraculously, they didn't see him, and he escaped just in the nick of time.

Chanani* walked to shul as usual on Simchas Torah. By some miracle, he just happened to avoid the terrorists. He didn't notice anything unusual, and only found out what he'd escaped once he reached the safety of the Chabad house.

Rabbi Hertzell Sharubi is a good friend, and the rav of another shul in Sderot. On Simchas Torah morning, he decided to carry on as usual. The non-stop sirens didn't worry him too much - it's just a side effect of living in Sderot. He murmured Tehillim as he walked, praying that everyone would be spared the rockets and shells. It never occurred to him that there could be worse danger lurking.

Rabbi Sharubi's shul is directly across from a police station. So when he heard lots of shooting in the distance, he crossed the street to inform the police, thinking it was a gunfight between Bedouin tribes. He noticed some suspicious activity in the police station, and his eyes opened wide in horror as he realized it had been taken over by deadly terrorists. He pivoted and ran back towards the shul. He couldn't have known about the sniper on the roof, only too happy to pull his trigger at any moving targets.

As Rabbi Sharubi ran, he was shot in the back. The bullet made a clean exit, missing his heart by only centimeters.

Adrenaline kept his feet pumping until he was ensconced safely in his office. Barely conscious, he dialed MDA, but no one answered.

He collapsed in his chair, blood leaking from the gaping wound in his chest. He knew the end was near. Tears trickled from his eyes, barely noticed, as he whispered the age-old words of Viduy. He begged Hashem for mercy - for a life-saving miracle - so he could continue helping people and doing mitzvos.

In answer to his prayer, Ehud* walked through the door. Ehud was a long-time member of Rabbi Sharubi's shul, but the rav found him a frustrating case. While everyone kept their tallis and tefillin in their assigned cubbies, Ehud used his storage for something far more precious to him - a bottle of arak. Ehud would take vigorous swigs from the bottle during davening, getting quite drunk. Rabbi Sharubi was disgusted with such behavior, but he refrained from comment, as long as Ehud didn't disturb the tefillos.

That morning, Ehud had been awoken by the sirens, much like everyone else, but decided to celebrate the special chag with a nice drink. The arak quickly worked its magic, and Ehud soon lost all perspective of reality. He remembered it was Yom Tov, and headed to shul. He noticed nothing - not the eerie quiet, nor the murderous terrorists trying to shoot him. Singing merrily, he walked into shul - only to stop dead in his tracks at the sight of the rabbi, covered in blood.

Suddenly sober, Ehud tried calling MDA - with the same unsuccessful conclusion.

"I'll drive you to the hospital myself!" he declared. He loaded the barely conscious rabbi into his car and careened wildly down the street. Hashem surely protected them, as they were shot at multiple times, but dodged every bullet.

Despite suffering major blood loss and various internal injuries, Rabbi Sharubi made a miraculous recovery. At his son's recent wedding, the rav was even able to dance!

"Ehud and his arak frustrated me for so long!" he reflected. "But now I know they saved my life!"

It was deep in the middle of the night during those nightmarish days following the tragedy. I received a call from a woman I'd never met before, who cried that her husband had left for reservist duty, and she'd run out of baby formula. The streets were still dangerous, and stores were closed, so she had no way to feed her hungry child. I searched through our cabinets until I found a container of formula, and got my car keys.

"Where are you going?" my wife asked, frightened. "It's not safe out there!"

"I know, but I have to deliver this formula," I responded. "I can't leave a little baby without food!"

As I approached the woman's building, police officers ran out, their weapons drawn, and surrounded me.

"Stop! Hands up!" they shouted, in Arabic.

I quickly complied. I explained who I was and why I was out. When they were satisfied that I was telling the truth, they allowed me to complete my mission of mercy.

Shabbos was fast approaching, and I was just about ready to lock up the shul and head home to complete my final preparations. Just then, I received a call from a young man in Eilat. He told me his elderly mother was alone at home. With the city deserted, most stores were closed. She had no food, and no one to help her.

Of course, I immediately packed up a generous helping of every dish, and drove it over to her house. She was waiting for me on the sidewalk, and thanked me over and over. We both looked at the box, up to her third-story apartment window, and back down at the heavy box. She obviously couldn't carry it, and I'd thrown my back out. Neither of us could handle that much weight.

Just then, a group of soldiers exited a neighboring house. I knew Hashem had sent them there, at that exact moment, for a reason.

"Chevra! I need help!" I called. They immediately came over and began schlepping the box upstairs.

"I just saw you coming out of my brother's house," I said to them. "What brought you there?"

"We just got out of Gaza. We were told to go to Chabad for food," they answered. "They didn't tell us exactly where Chabad is, but we saw a sign on that door that said 'Chabad' so we tried our luck."

"I knew Hashem brought you here for a reason!" I exclaimed. "Follow me! I have plenty of food to share!"

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