

IllumiNations

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

Rabbi Menachem Kutner, Chabad Terror Victims Project, Israel

From Tragedy to Hope, Part II

By Chaya Chazan

My shlichus is a continuation of the organization the Rebbe started after a widow of the Six Day War asked for guidance on how to carry on.

The Rebbe encouraged her to help others in her situation, and thus, the Terror Victims Project began. We're there for every wounded soldier, terror attack victim, and their families, to help them with anything we can. Once you're part of our family, you aren't getting away too quickly! We maintain connections with each and every member for many years.

On March 5, 2003, a devastating suicide bombing took place in the city of Haifa. A bomber from Hebron, concealing explosives beneath his clothing, targeted a crowded public bus, Haifa bus number 37, which was carrying children and teenagers returning from school. The explosion resulted in the tragic loss of 17 lives, while 53 others sustained injuries.

I went to the shiva of the victims to personally offer my condolences and help.



When I visited the Golani* family, they gave me polite, tight smiles as they asked me who I was and how I knew them.

"I'm from Chabad. I'm here to help in any way I can," I answered.

"Oh, that's nice," they answered, blandly. "Thank you very much for coming. Have a nice day!"

I could see they felt uncomfortable with a rabbi in their home, and clearly wanted nothing to do with me. Nevertheless, when I got back home, I entered their information into my database.

Every Purim, I send shluchim all over the country a list of names and addresses from my database so they can deliver mishloach manos to them. Since the Golani family was on my list, the shliach in Haifa received their information and brought a basket to their home. They didn't answer his knock, so he left it on their doorstep with a cheery card attached, wishing them a "Purim Sameach from Chabad!"

Every year, the same scenario repeated itself. Some years, someone *would* answer the door, and eventually, the shliach was able to go inside and chat for a bit.

About twenty years later, I decided to host a public menorah lighting in Haifa. The menorah would stand in the exact spot where the terrorist attack had taken place. It would send a clear message that we fight darkness with light! Given the great significance behind the location, I asked the shliach to invite the family members of the victims of that terror attack.

Baruch Hashem, the event was very successful, and a large crowd was gathered. Towards the end of the festivities, a woman asked if she could address the audience. It was an unusual request, but I saw how earnestly she wanted to speak, so I handed her the mic.

"My name is Mrs. Golani," she began. "I first met Chabad 20 years ago, right after the terrorist attack. Back then, my husband and I were very wary of rabbis. I'm pretty sure we even kicked Rabbi Menachem out of shiva. See, at the beginning, we had so much help and support, we didn't need - or even want - Chabad. But then, after a few weeks, everyone resumed their regular lives. It was like everyone disappeared! A

few years later, when my husband passed, I was really on my own. I sat, day after day, alone in my house, with no one to talk to. No one seemed to remember or care about me.

"Except Chabad. I couldn't believe it when I opened my door and saw the mishloach manos package, wrapped up so beautifully. We'd been so rude! And yet, Chabad didn't forget us. I figured they, too, would soon drop us as everyone else had. But they didn't. They came year after year, bringing me happy Purim greetings, and taking time to sit with me and talk. Thank you, Chabad, for not forgetting about me."

Ziv was on guard duty by the Gaza border. His shift had already ended, but he went back to get something he'd forgotten. Seeing a Jewish soldier alone, the terrorists shot at him. His left arm was blown off completely, and his right arm sustained major damage as well. The doctors did everything they could, but it seemed like nothing would help.

"Your arm is too far gone to save," they told Ziv. "You have no function, so it's becoming a risk of infection. We need to amputate it."

Ziv already had a hard enough time accepting the loss of his left arm. He couldn't imagine life with no arms at all. He asked the doctors for some time to consider, but it didn't seem like there was any other choice.

When I came to visit him in the hospital, Ziv was deeply depressed. The impending loss of his arm preyed on his mind constantly. I wanted to cheer him up and give him something to distract himself from the terrible decision he had to make, so I invited him to join a trip to New York I was organizing for a small group of wounded soldiers. I described all the attractions we'd see, and how much fun we'd have. In the end, Ziv agreed to join.

Of course, we toured Manhattan and all the major sites in New York, but we also made sure to stop in the Rebbe's Ohel in Queens. Before entering, I explained to the group how to write a pan, and how to proceed once we entered. I advised them all to say the kapitel corresponding to their ages, and helped them find the right page.

"How old are you, Ziv?" I asked.

"I'm 25," he answered.

"Great! That means you'll be saying kapitel chof vav," I said, flipping to the right page.

A few minutes later, Ziv approached me. "Uh, I'm not really 25," he said. "My birthday is next week, so I already consider myself 25, but technically speaking, I'm actually 24."

"Okay, no problem," I replied. "Here is kapitel chof hey."

When we left the Ohel, I could see Ziv was deeply upset and disturbed. I asked him what had happened.

"It was the Tehillim!" he blurted out, bitterly. "When you told us that we'd each say the chapter corresponding to our ages, I decided to ask for a sign. If my kapitel mentioned the word 'hand,' I'd take it as a bracha that I should refuse the surgery and my arm will recover. When I read kapitel chof hey, I didn't see a single mention of any word relating to hand. So that



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means my bracha has been denied. When I get back to Israel, I'm going to have to tell the doctors to go ahead with the amputation. What quality of life will I have now?"

The bitterness and despair in his voice made tears spring to my eyes. I desperately wanted to help him, but I didn't know what to say. Suddenly, I had an idea.

"Wait, Ziv! When you said your birthday is next week, did you mean your Jewish birthday, or your secular birthday?"

"My secular birthday, of course," Ziv answered.

"Well, when we're talking about the neshama, we go according to the Jewish calendar. Do you know your Jewish birthday?"

"Yes," Ziv replied. "It's Chof Alef Iyar."

I grabbed him in a giant bear hug.

"Ziv! Ziv!" I cried joyfully. "Do you know what today is? It's Chof Alef Iyar! Happy birthday! You were zoche to visit the Rebbe's Ohel on your birthday, so I'm sure everything will turn out fine. You're actually 25 today! Let's say kapitel chof vav, your new kapitel."

As we read the Psalm together, Ziv's mouth dropped open and tears ran down his cheeks. The kapitel mentions hands three times, including a specific mention of the right arm.

"I got my bracha," Ziv whispered to himself, over and over. "I got my bracha!"

Later that day, Ziv called me over urgently. "Look, Rabbi!" He showed me how he was able to wiggle his arm back and forth. "I have movement in my arm! I can't believe it!"

When we returned to Israel, Ziv went to his doctor.

"Nu?" the doctor asked. "What did you decide about the amputation?"

In answer, Ziv showed off the movement he'd regained in his arm. The doctor sat up straight in his chair and stared in utter disbelief.

"Which specialist did you see when you went to New York?" he demanded, angrily.

"Ah! The most important specialist in the world!" Ziv replied, laughing. "I got a bracha from the Lubavitcher Rebbe!"

Needless to say, Ziv did *not* need an amputation. He soon regained full control of his arm.

Aharon* lost his eyesight and right arm during a recent skirmish in Gaza. When I visited him in the hospital, I asked if there was anything I could do for him.

"I do have one request," he said, his eyes roaming sightlessly behind me. "During the war, I put tefillin on with other soldiers, but I've never owned my own pair. I think if I had a set of my own, I'd continue putting them on every day."

I was touched by Aharon's simple request. He'd lost so much, but all he wanted was a chance to do more mitzvos.

A few days later, I returned with a set of tefillin.

"These are a gift to you from Tzach," I told him. Aharon was visibly moved as he put on his very own pair of tefillin for the first time.

"I've been undergoing eye treatment over the last few days," he told me. "My left eye is hopeless, but I've started to see shadows with my right eye! It's possible that I'll regain full sight in that eye!"

I couldn't help but think of the pasuk written in the tefillin he'd just removed - "*and you shall bind them on your arm, and they shall be as a sign between your eyes.*" Aharon, who'd lost his arm and eye, wanted to do this mitzvah so desperately. May it be a zechus for his complete refuah, and an end to the suffering of all of Am Yisrael.

Shortly after the harrowing events of October 7th, Chabad of Israel chartered a flight for the families of the hostages to travel to the United States.

My seatmate for the flight was Ohad Weiss from Kibbutz Be'eri. His father, Shmulik, ran into the safe room when he heard the terrorists. They rammed down the door and murdered him right there. His mother, Yehudit, was missing. Ohad had no idea whether she'd also been killed, or, in a fate almost worse than death, taken hostage to Gaza.

We greeted each other politely and introduced ourselves. A short while into the flight, I turned to Ohad.

"Let me offer you a deal," I said. "There are a lot of Chabad rabbis on this flight. That means you'll definitely be putting on tefillin at some point. If you put them on with me right now, we can sit in peace for the rest of the flight instead of being asked every five minutes from another rabbi. What do you say?"

Ohad chuckled. "Sure. Let's do it. Maybe it will serve as a zechus to help find my mother."

We put on tefillin and said a tefillah for his mother.

Our first stop when we landed in New York was the Rebbe's Ohel. Everyone wrote letters and read them over the Rebbe's gravesite, their tears soaking the pages in their hands. It was an incredibly meaningful and uplifting experience.

We then went to Washington DC and visited Congress before returning home.

Just two weeks after the Ohel visit, an IDF patrol in Gaza came upon the remains of an Israeli woman near Shifa Hospital. She was identified as Yehudit Weiss. With deep reverence, they were able to bring her back to Israel, where her family could honor her memory and lay her to rest with the dignity she deserved.

Captain Yisrael Yudkin, HY"D, was a promising young man from Kfar Chabad. I knew him and his family well. Yisrael was called up to the army and was shipped off to Gaza. A true Chabad chassid, Yisrael adhered strictly to halachah and tried to influence his fellow soldiers.

Tragically, a well aimed bullet claimed Yisrael's life far too early. That same bullet hit the soldier directly behind Yisrael in line, wounding his hand.

When I went to visit the wounded soldier, Aharon, in the rehabilitation home, we commiserated over the terrible loss of our friend, Yisrael.

"Yisrael was a good friend," Aharon shared. "I owe my life to him! I want to do something special to thank Hashem for saving me, and something that will honor Yisrael."

We both thought for a while, until Aharon perked up. "I know! I'll start wearing the second pair of tefillin every day, just like Yisrael did!"

"Excellent idea!" I replied. "I'm sure it will give his neshama great joy."

The next week, when I visited the hospital again, I brought along a new pair of Rabbeinu Tam tefillin - a gift for Aharon. He accepted them with tears in his eyes, vowing to always honor Yisrael's legacy.

**Names changed to protect privacy.*

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