

Magical Shabbos in Hebron

Translation of article by Yair Borochoy

*A passionate prayer uttered at Ma'aras HaMachpela; a powerful Shabbos meal with seventy soldiers on a single balcony, a never-ending "Lechaim"; five sons full of a sense of mission, and a medley of niggunim by four Chassidim and a company commander * The Editor of Shturm, Yair Borochoy, spent last Shabbos with the sheluchim, Rabbi Danny and Bat Sheva Cohen, in Chevron, and came back with a comprehensive, touching diary.*

"It's not frightening here?" we cautiously ask Rabbi Danny Cohen, the Hebron Shaliach. When all is said and done, the sights we are seeing here are usually associated with Arab riots and terror attacks: a guard post with two heavily-armed soldiers, abandoned buildings with Arabic graffiti, the notorious Abu Sneineh Hills, gazing out upon us from above, and especially, a lot of tension in the air – controlled tension.

"Frightening?..." asks Rabbi Cohen, immediately continuing, "Menny, take the guests to Ma'aras HaMachpela... They're afraid to go by themselves..."

Menny is none other than Menachem Mendel Cohen, the nine-year-old son of the Hebron Shaliach. "They", (the frightened people) are two families, the oldest of which are twenty years older than the child escorting them.

After several hours on the scene we become acclimated to the place. We understand that the only population afraid in any way is the local Arabs, who, while enjoying reinforcements from the outside due to the Ramadan Fast are still considered marginal here.

The invitation to spend Shabbos in Hebron came from my friend Rabbi Cohen a number of months ago. The matter kept getting pushed off until we harnessed the strength to pack our bags into the car and to head south in the direction of Jewish Hebron.

Our first encounter with the Jewish neighborhood in the heart of Hebron is a silent monument memorializing Shalhevet Pass, HY"D, the infant cruelly murdered a number of years ago by a Palestinian sharpshooter from the adjacent hill.

Every several meters stands is another marker memorializing another murder victim. These stones are true indicators of how volatile the entire region is, such that any second, a fatal terror attack could take place.

The way to Ma'aras HaMachpela passes along a pathway bisected and delineated lengthwise by iron barriers. One side belongs to the Jews, the other side to the Arabs. That's how it is during Ramadan, when the Ma'ara is likewise closed off to Jews for Friday Night davening.

The Spirit of Faith which Strengthened our Ancestors

While the Arabs were profaning Ma'aras HaMachpela during our prayers (on Friday Night Arab worshippers left a Hamas flag by the Avraham Avinu marker and dirtied another section in a disgraceful manner), an emotional service was held by a large throng in the Ma'ara courtyard. Jews of all stripes, Chassidim, Lithuanians, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, knitted yarmulkes alongside hats and shtreimels, united together for a passion-filled dance.

“Toch Emuni Am Segulah” [Lecha Dodi]

The ear-shattering blast of the Muezzin bursts forth from loudspeakers, broadcasting what is occurring inside the Ma'ara. It is exasperating to see holiness profaned, and the voices of the Jewish worshippers increase to a genuine cry.

“Those who pillaged you shall be pillaged.”

The worshippers cry out, “All who would devour you shall be far away.” How relevant are these words at this moment. The heart fills with entreaty. “Your G-d will rejoice over you, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.”

“In these moments when we are standing before Ma'aras HaMachpela, we must unite with the longing of our ancestors down through the generations, over 700 years' time, who could not enter the Ma'ara, yet they never for a moment stopped hoping, praying, believing. Today, thank G-d, we have the possibility of praying at Ma'aras HaMachpela, yet this evening, when we cannot enter it, we recall the spirit and the faith that characterized our ancestors, through whose merit we have arrived at this day.” These words were spoken by Noam Arnon, spokesman of the Jewish Community of Hebron, as he gazed longingly upwards towards Ma'aras HaMachpela.

Sabbath Meal with Seventy Solders

For our Shabbos meal with Rabbi Cohen (“I never know how many people will be with me on Friday Night”), we arrive after a weekly Kiddush that he makes in the Ma'ara for Jews who have no where else to eat.

On the balcony of Rabbi Cohen's home almost seventy Golani and Nachshon-battalion soldiers have already gathered for a mass Shabbos meal. The tables are arranged in rows, and Rabbi Cohen, like a highly experience commander, enters the balcony and runs the proceedings like a real pro. The soldiers can no longer restrain themselves, and break out in song: “Fear not, Israel. Fear not! A young lion you are!...” More on that song later.

He makes the Kiddush with his five children and his wife Bat Sheva. It's doubtful whether there is another shelicha like Bat Sheva anywhere on earth, who insists on cooking the unfathomable amounts of food with her own hands for all of those guests, not knowing until the last moment how many they will be. A true shelicha, who together with taking care of the home and her tasks as shelicha, finds the time and energy to make such Shabbos meals in her home each week.

The powerful cry of A-m-e-n!! that bursts forth from the lips of dozens of soldiers shakes the rafters of the entire neighborhood, which is used to such sights. The meal has already become a neighborhood attraction. A group of professors visiting Hebron arrives with its host, R' Baruch Marzel, to see the wonder. “Amazing. Simply amazing,” they utter with astonishment.

The meal, itself, is conducted in military fashion. It is well-organized, fast and to the point. There's just a lot more to eat. The soldiers sing a number of niggunim that have become the semi-official anthems of the Hebron company: “We are believers, the sons of believers”; “Don't fear, Israel. Don't fear!” (and with the words “If a lion roars”, the soldiers likewise choose to spell out a lion's roar – as much as humanly possible...); “Am Yisrael Chai” and others.

Rabbi Cohen shares with those present experiences from the army, interweaving comments from the Rebbe's talks on the weekly sidra in a pleasant and clear manner. The soldiers enjoy it. You can see this on their faces. They ask questions about Judaism, show an interest and take a very active part in the entire meal and in the surrounding environment.

The Jewish Soul is Crying Out for G-dliness.

"It's a shame you can't video this," I say to Rabbi Cohen.

"I thought about that too. It could have been Chabad-Hebron's greatest fundraising event," he responds.

It's true. No Jewish donor on earth could remain unmoved by the touching sight of seventy soldiers roaring from within their Jewish souls, on the balcony of the Chabad shaliach, two hundred meters from Ma'aras HaMachpela, and twenty meters from the Avraham Avinue Synagogue, with the dangerous hills can be seen from the window, and everything is so tense and holy.

And altogether, it seems as though the word "tension" accompanies life in Hebron, even if not openly, then at least in a veiled manner. Arab Hebron exists in twilight, with citizens who may be potential terrorists or just calm residents seeking to live out their lives. Most of the Arab homes here were abandoned and the feeling is that the city's present status, taking all components into account, is presently static. One way or the other, the situation, so it seems, will change here in the future.

One thing is clear: A normal city this certainly is not.

"Chevra, I'd like to tell you something," proclaims Rabbi Cohen to the soldiers, after a healthy dose of "Lechaim's" (the procedure is that the soldiers toast on Cola and Rabbi Cohen toasts on "Smirnoff", until the soldiers inevitably succeed in secretly transferring the Smirnoff to their side). "Not far from here, in one of the guard posts, one of the soldiers sprayed graffiti on the wall. The graffiti said, 'In a single moment of sanity, I saw angels in the skies of this city.'" That sentence takes off and becomes the motto of the Shabbos table. "If you would just ponder and try to understand for one moment where you are, you would recognize the importance and the holiness of this place, and you would be entirely changed," Rabbi Cohen promises the soldiers.

Alongside Rabbi Cohen in running the meal is a fine young bochur named Itzik Neimrock, whose name is synonymous with Hebron. Neimrock's terminology is perfectly military. If you close your eyes for a moment you can imagine that before you is standing a rank-and-file soldier (or perhaps an officer). When you open your eyes you discover before you an energetic, talented and indefatigable young Chabadnik who has forged a connection with the soldiers with his charm, pleasantness and unique charisma. The soldiers, for their part, love him in return.

A ritual which has become de rigueur takes place towards the end of the meal, when the mood has grown warm and the entire group (including the Nachshon company, who have succeeded in making friends with the Golani soldiers) have cohered as one. Every soldier stands in his place and states his name and the name of the city he comes from. Everyone takes advantage of the opportunity to offer passionate thanks to Rabbi Danny and to his wife for the marvelous hospitality and the moving, uniting atmosphere.

Increased Resolve

The goal of this marvelous Shabbos meal is, first and foremost, to provide Jewish content and a special atmosphere to the soldiers and fighters who guard the

city. The cost of such a meal reaches over eight hundred dollars each week, and it is covered by resources that Rabbi Cohen attains during the year's activities.

"What we are talking about here, army commanders allowing such large numbers of soldiers to come on a regular basis and to be guests in the homes of civilians, is unprecedented," explains Rabbi Cohen. "You have to remember that once every four months there is a changing of the guard here, with new soldiers and officers arriving, and each time you have to develop the relationship afresh. Generally, once the commander, himself, experiences the power of the meal, he is convinced..."

"Beyond the fact that we want to say thank you to the soldiers and to provide them with a Jewish experience, you've got something here that improves the combat soldier's functioning in Hebron," states Rabbi Cohen, divulging the secret of what it is that convinces the commanders to allow the initiative. "Soldiers are positioned at their posts and they work very hard, doing long hours of intensive guard duty, carrying out patrols through the streets, etc. That soldier doesn't always understand what he is doing here, hence his alertness and motivation are low. The moment he becomes attached to this place, the moment he sees the people and this energy, it augments his functioning, his connection to this place and increases the security of the residents."

A Night on the Sixth Rebbe's Property

We spend Friday Night in a trailer home situated in an army base, about two hundred meters from the Jewish neighborhood. The compound, divided in two, a military part and a civilian part, was built on property listed in the Israel Land Registry as being the property of Rebbes Rabbi Shalom Ber and Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, who purchased the lands with their own money, like many others properties within Hebron, acquired by Chabad through authentic land purchases.

Shacharit in the Chabad Minyan of Ma'aras HaMachpela starts at 10 AM after immersion in the Chabad mikva in the Jewish neighborhood and following study of Chassidus. Here, for the first time, we encounter Rabbi Victor Atiya, the local shaliach of Kiryat Arba, who came from his home especially in order to participate in the service, together with Rabbi Menachem Porter, one of the Beit Chabad activists.

At the end of the service, there is a weekly Chassidic hisva'adus. Over time this hisva'adus has likewise become a Kiddush partaken of by guests and various other elements who make use of it as a Shabbos meal, for want of any other option. This Shabbos the hisva'adus is dedicated to the increased merit of Reb Shalom Mordechai Rubashkin, sheyichye, for the success of his endeavors, and especially his Kosher Slaughter operation in Pottsville, Iowa, which recently has suffered some serious blows.

"Mendy is a Shaliach's Son."

Our Shabbos morning meal is used by the Cohen family to strengthen the family bond. The children, who have recently returned from "Young Shaliach's Camp" at Kfar Galim, proudly hum a song called "Mendy is a Shaliach's Son", which recounts the loneliness suffered by shaluchim in the places they serve.

Rabbi Cohen takes advantage of the opportunity to elucidate for his children the essence of the shaliach's loneliness ("Some have no Jewish friends. You are fortunate that you have Jewish friends, but you have no Chabadnik friends near your home. That is also a sort of loneliness...")

Rabbi Cohen's children learn in a Talmud Torah in Beitar Ilit (an hour's travel each morning and afternoon), and one of them learns in the local Talmud Torah in Kiryat Arba ("Yossi is the Chabad Shaliach in the Zilberman Talmud Torah...") This is also the time for the children to demonstrate their mastery of what they have learned.

Happy with drink, Rabbi Cohen encourages those present to join him in reciting a "lechayim". "We've got a saying around here," he points out, "that whoever does not make a 'lechayim' in Hebron is suspected of being a Muslim... Come on Chevra!"

Four Chassidim and a Company Commander

Late Shabbos Afternoon is spent on a series of niggunim with four Chassidim who have joined together in the "Menucha Rachel" Synagogue, built on property purchased by the Middle Rebbe as part of the Avraham Avinue Synagogue. Into this modest synagogue, renovated with the generous assistance of the philanthropist Yossi Davidson, who performed real holy work here, arrives the company commander Motti, a charismatic, religious fellow, whom some people predict will reach no less than the position of Chief Commander of the Armed Forces...

After Ma'ariv and Havdala, but not before a short prayer at the gravesite of the Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel and a visit to the new Kollel Compound renovated with extraordinary artistry, Rabbi Cohen sets out to take the new week by storm. It is a week that he (hardly) knows how to begin, and he certainly does not know how it will end. Rabbi Danny Cohen can certainly be described by the Torah's own description of Calev, to whom G-d gave Hebron: "He possessed a different spirit..." (Bamidbar 14:24).