

NEWS

LIVING WITH MOSHIACH AROUND THE WORLD

BLESSED TO WALK BETWEEN BULLETS

BY CHANA KATZ

CHEVRON, Eretz Yisroel—Seven young Brooklyn women escaped a potentially deadly hailstorm of Arab sniper fire last week, seconds

after they changed location so male soldiers wouldn't hear them singing.

After the shooting, the Israel Defense Forces put up an army outpost at the site, a victory which Chevron residents said had eluded them for three years, yet now came "overnight" from the steely determination and self-sacrifice of the women who had come to help out the embattled Jewish community.

The women, aged between 17 and 29, all from Crown Heights, had just finished their second week of scrubbing, bleaching, and removing "mounds of disgusting, disgusting, garbage" from the gravesite of Rebbetzin Menucha

Rachel in Chevron which had been horrendously desecrated for the 17th time.

Crown Heights residents Meir and Miriam Rhodes, now in the process of making *aliya* to Eretz Yisroel, arranged the *shidduch* between the

Brooklyn-based Youth Action Movement (YAM) volunteers and Chevron residents through their organization, Friends of Families of Chevron. The program has a two-fold purpose of offering support and assistance to the Chevron community, while giving Crown Heights youth the opportunity to live side-by-side with the great heroes of our time, according to Meir Rhodes.

"I told them beforehand there's no guarantee of life or limb, that they're going to walk through fire, but they'll get more than they give," said Rhodes. "It's dangerous," he added, "but they are well protected."

Rhodes said the 600-member Jewish community in Chevron—surrounded by more than 100,000 Arabs, is one of the greatest centers of resistance in Jewish history. "These people have



Photo from Rabbi Leibel Groner's visit to the kever of Rebbetzin Menucha Rachel in Chevron

been holding on there for years,” said Rhodes. “*Am Yisroel* lives from this fight. They need support. The more people that come, the stronger we become. We need more people.”

Before coming to Eretz Yisroel, the young women had sought a blessing from the Rebbe by inserting a letter into the *Igros Kodesh*. “The answer talked about *mesirus nefesh* without taking into consideration the hidden or revealed enemy,” said Devorah Esther Kaplan, 20.

The volunteers actually didn’t know what task awaited them in Chevron, said YAM leader Orah Chaya Bitton, 23. The group set out during Parshas Pinchas, in which the five daughters of Tz’lafchad pleaded with Moshe Rabbeinu after their father’s death to inherit their father’s portion of the land, she said. “We didn’t know that we would literally be reclaiming our part, becoming a living expression of the ancient saga.”

The group was overjoyed when they were told that in addition to meeting the Chevron residents and organizing youth summer programs that they were desperately needed to work on the gravesite of Rebbetzin Menucha Rachel Slonim as well as other nearby gravesites of her family members. The land they were reclaiming belongs to Chabad.

“We saw a direct correlation between this meritorious opportunity and the fact that some of us had been intently learning the Mittlerer Rebbe (Menucha Rachel’s) father’s Chassidus this year,” said Bitton. “This study is inspired by the Rebbe’s impetus that we pursue this knowledge as a direct means of conquering our own internal Eretz Yisroel—the ten soul powers of a Jew. We are promised that this effort is how we acquire the physical land of all ten nations, including Keini, Knizi, and Kadmoni, as promised to our father Avrohom.”

Menucha Rachel Slonim and her family had settled in Chevron in the

early 1800s, after she received a special blessing to come to Eretz Yisroel. Descendants of Slonim, now living in Tzfas in the northern Galilee, recalled that Rebbetzin Slonim received a special blessing to be able to “walk in between the raindrops” in order to be able to carry out her mission in Eretz Yisroel with minimal interference, and it is said that she never once was rained upon. Men and women from the Chevron community—and even Arab leaders at the time—had come to seek advice and blessings from Rebbetzin Slonim.

Although the title to the entire property of the gravesite (some four

“Just like Menucha Rachel received a blessing to walk between the raindrops, we’ve been blessed to walk between the bullets,” said Bitton.

dunums) had been titled to the Schneerson family for close to 200 years, a clause in the Oslo agreement sliced the property in two, allowing half to remain in Jewish hands and half turned over to the Arabs. In 1997, the entire area was declared a closed military zone and Chevron residents were only allowed to enter on special occasions.

After the 1929 massacre of the Jews in Chevron, including surviving members of the Slonim family, the ancient cemetery had fallen into a state of disrepair. Since the Jewish community again started rebuilding itself in Chevron after 1967, the

cemetery had been savagely desecrated 17 times. Each time it had been fixed up, and in 1998, a celebration marked its most recent reconstruction sponsored by Australian businessman Yosef Gutnick.

The young women tackled the latest desecration with “bleach, gloves, and a limited amount of water.”

Esther Malka Rosen, 29, said she cleaned through three inches of ashes. “My entire body was black. We were sweating buckets,” she said. “I found frustration in seeing such deliberate effort to desecrate and destroy. The notion of rock throwing and shooting is not a threat, but more of an inconvenience.”

The girls saw it as no small factor that they arrived in Chevron on the fast day of the seventeenth of Tammuz, marking the beginning of the three-week period ending with the destruction of the first and second holy temples. “The Rebbe taught that especially now so close to the *Geula shleima*, the destruction should be seen in light of the ultimate rebuilding,” said Bitton. “So what’s exciting is not just restoring the cemetery but initiating a learning program in the adjacent Beit HaTahara.”

The women entered a note into a volume of *Igros Kodesh* again seeking a blessing for their plan to open a continual women’s learning center at the gravesite. This time, Bitton said, the letter said that especially at a time when there is a decree and the enemy wants to seize our holy places—specifically the houses of learning and prayer, because it knows this is the key to eradicating the Jewish people—especially at such a time, a Jew receives the power from Above to overcome every obstacle. This is exactly what happened.”

Their work completed, the women embarked upon a special day of

learning at the gravesite of Rebbetzin Menucha Rachel Slonim, the daughter of the Mittlerer Rebbe. Hearing about the dedicated group, a resident of the nearby settlement of Bat Ayin, Miriam Wolfson, had come just to teach them a special song.

They had a discussion about whether it was appropriate to sing in front of the two soldiers who had been assigned to guard them, and decided, for reasons of modesty, to move to a nearby building, the ancient Beit HaTahara.

"Sixty seconds later, there was a rainstorm of bullets exactly where we had been sitting," said Bitton.

Wolfson, who had lingered at the gravesite to say *T'hillim* before joining the girls, was lightly injured when a bullet hit a stone arch—which miraculously protected her from more serious harm—and a chip catapulted into her face.

The girls recalled with awe how their Chevron hosts, Efraim and Chaya Rosenstein and Anat Cohen, hearing on their beepers of an emergency, raced to the scene in their unarmored vehicles "like we were the skin on their hands," said Bitton. "The core Jewish identity was so revealed. All they cared about was that we were OK."

Determined not to let the Jewish presence at the gravesite lapse—and by this time, feeling a deep spiritual and physical connection to the Chevron residents and their project—the young women wanted to return to the area the next morning but feared the soldiers would bar their entry.

"This is the miracle," said Bitton. "Not only did they let us go back, but they put up an army base. (Chevron Jewish community leader) Baruch Marzel told us: "For over three years the Chevron community had been lobbying to receive military protection at this exact location, and you girls came here for only two

"The main thing is I never before felt like this was my land, this is my people, and this is worth fighting for."

weeks and look what you accomplished."

Volunteer Michelle Gelker, 17, said she not only had no fear of returning to the scene of the shooting, but planned to continue her work and maybe someday move to the Chevron community.

"We don't scare off easily," said Gelker, who was on her first visit to Eretz Yisroel. "When you live in Chevron, you realize how G-d protects you. I guess the main thing is I never before felt like this was my

land, this is my people, and this is worth fighting for."

Now that the army outpost has been established at the site, the Brooklyn girls said they have already embarked on an ambitious project to establish a women's learning center at the site, keeping the presence there just as a continually lit *menora* is never extinguished.

Bitton said they had been told they'd never be able to cut through the red tape to establish such a learning center, yet in one night, with the opening of the army outpost, it became a possibility.

Although the program is officially over, some of the girls are planning to stay in Eretz Yisroel longer and return to Chevron this week to launch the new women's learning center. "Just like Menucha Rachel received a blessing to walk between the raindrops, we've been blessed to walk between the bullets," said Biton.



Aviv
Rent A Car

(323) 930-9660

Los Angeles • Hollywood • Beverly Hills

5021-A
San Vicente Blvd.
LA, CA 90019
www.avivrentacar.com

Owner:
Yoram Cohen

Fleet includes:
Subcompact to full size and our specialty "minivans".

Get Shabbos for free when you rent for a week.

Also, free airport pick-up when you rent for a week.

Centrally located in Los Angeles,
Close to Freeways, Hollywood and Beverly Hills

Service, Value, Convenience.

יחי אדונונו פורנו ורבינו פלג הפשיח לעולם ועד

MILLIONS HEARD SIYUM ON WCBS & WINS RADIO

It is customary during the Nine Days to make *siyumin*. The Rebbe MH"M always encouraged this custom and asked for the *siyumin* to reach as many Jews as possible.

It is in this spirit that the Lubavitch Youth Organization arranged for *siyumin* to be aired on public radio.

In the broadcasts on New York's most popular stations, WCBS and WINS Radio, Rabbi Shmuel M. Butman, Director of Lubavitch Youth Organization, quotes from the *siyum* of the Talmud, "G-d gives his people strength; G-d blesses his people with peace."

Rabbi Butman concluded: "This message is as fresh and relevant today as ever. Peace, real peace, is the key to all of G-d's blessings, including the blessing of the ultimate Redemption, as the prophet Yishayahu says, "Tziyon will be redeemed with justice, and her captivity with charity."

These *siyumin* are broadcast several times each day over



both radio stations throughout the Nine Days and from the day after Tisha B'Av until the 15th of Av, according to the Rebbe's instruction to continue the *siyumin* until the 15th of Av.

SIYUM IN GOLDERS GREEN

On Wednesday night at the Sara Felsenstein Hall in Golders Green, there was a *siyum Maseches K'suvos*. The *masechte* was completed by the students of the Lubavitch Yeshiva Gedola in Hampstead's garden suburb, who have dedicated most of their daytime as well as nighttime hours to be able to complete the *masechte* before the end of the *zman*.



(Left to right) Rabbi Nachman Wilhelm, Magid Shiur in the Yeshiva. Rabbi Feivish Vogel, Director of Lubavitch foundation UK. Rabbi M.M. Gordon, Menahel Ruchni of the Yeshiva. Reb Chune Halperin, Moroh Diasroh, Golders Green. Rabbi Yitzchok Meir Hertz, Rosh HaYeshiva. and Rabbi Lieberman, Chief Rabbi of Antwerp, Belgium. addressing the crowd.



In the bottom photo, Rabbi Padwe Av Beis Din of London is addressing the crowd.