

SHABBOS IN HEVRON

BY ALIZA KARP

I got back to Hevron an hour before Shabbos. Although I had been a guest in the Hachnasas Orchim building during the week, for Shabbos I vacated to make room for the seminary girls from the Chabad seminary in Ramat Shlomo, Yerushalaim, who were spending Shabbos in Hevron. I moved into the office-turned-guest-room, in the home of the Chabad Shluchim, Danny and Batsheva and their adorable, rambunctious children.

It was Erev Shabbos Mevarchim, the Shabbos when we bless the new month which will start in the coming week. Four o'clock Hevron time made it nine in the morning in New York. Danny has a phone that works over the internet. It has a 718 area code and operates as if it is in New York. With an hour to go, I quickly made calls from this phone to remind my T'hillim group members back home that it was Shabbos Mevarchim. It was fun to hear the reactions when I told my friends I was calling from Hevron.

I lit candles with Batsheva and sunk onto the sofa to rest after an exciting afternoon. But then I remembered... the reason I always like to spend Shabbos in Hevron, above visiting other interesting

people and places, is because of the Friday night service in M'aras HaMachpela.

By the time I got there, the woman's section was almost full. The seats that is. The isles were still empty. I knew that in time even the isles would fill up with girls, some draped in white, others draped in colors, but all the girls would have the distinct hilltop look that characterizes the residents of Yesha.



Kever Yishai and Rus

Even the out of town guests blended into the dress code. There were virtually no high heels, tight clothes, and heavy make up.

I went straight up to the Mechitza. I like to move aside the curtain and watch the dancing. The Mechitza is solid wood almost five feet high, above which is an open weave design of thin metal strips, so

you can only see the other side if you are up close, and of course if you lift the curtain that covers the metal design.

If I tell you the singing and dancing of Kabbalas Shabbos at the Maara are a manifestation of the magic of Hevron, where material and spiritual combine... Don't believe me; go see for yourself.

There was an interesting mix of men: the Hevron residents, Chassidim, and clean shaven Yeshiva students. Add to the mix some soldiers, yes, even after the tragedy of Gush Katif, they are welcomed to join the Davening. Now subtract from the mix all the externalities, because Friday night at the Maara there is only brotherhood, unity and Simcha.

Which reminds me, I should mention that the Davening is led by Simcha Hochbaum. He is very sincere, soft spoken, and at the same time powerful. Although at this point the Friday night Davening at the Maara is able to surge, flow and elevate without him... when he is there, he is the maestro.

A girl in the front row offered me her seat. (I guess I don't look so young after all.) But I declined. There is no chance to peek through

the Mechitza when seated.

Following the Davening I went to the dining room of the Hachnasas Orchim building. The Cohens and I would be eating with the seminary and taking part in their program. I opted to sit with the girls instead of at the head table. I enjoyed them.

The feature speaker for the evening was Mrs. Miriam Levinger, one of the leaders of the Nashim Tzidaknios, whom the Rebbe referred to as righteous women, who established the modern Jewish community in Hevron through Mesiras Nefesh MAMOSH, complete self-sacrifice, by breaking into and living in the Beit Hadassah building. Miriam's story is one I have heard many times and have written about, but I had never heard her tell the entire story start to finish. It was fascinating. Of course, her Mesiras Nefesh for Hevron did not end at Beit Hadassah; it continued for many years before the community became what it is today.

Then Batsheva spoke to the girls and answered their many questions until it was getting late and we decided to head home to get some sleep before Shabbos Mevarchim T'hillim in the morning.

As I mentioned in the original story of Givot Olam, there had been a new Seifer Torah brought to Hevron the week before. This Seifer Torah had been used in Gush Katif and is now housed in the Mittler Rebbe's until it can return to Gush Katif. (It has an interesting story which I will tell at the end of this Shabbos report.) This was the first Shabbos that the Mittler Rebbe's Shul had a Seifer Torah of its own (in recent times) so I joined the Minyan there on Shabbos morning.

The Mittler Rebbe's Shul is modest in size, with no designated place for women. Miriam Rhodes from the nearby village of Bat Ayin was visiting Hevron for Shabbos.

Together we transformed the small area that serves as an entrance way, into a woman's section.

Following the davening, Miriam and I climbed up the hill to Tel Rumeida, where we were having Kiddush with Ephraim and Anya Rosenstein and family in their caravan home. The Rosenstein's had a full table of a variety of guests. There were four young men from Boro Park. I think they were Bobov Chassidim. They sat near Ephraim and did not interact with the women, and we sat near Anya and did not interact with them. Everyone was happy. Ephraim brought us all

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into the conversation when he spoke about the Parsha interactively with his children.

It was a delightful lunch. Just before Anya served desert a neighbor came in and asked the men to come to Mincha at nearby Kever Ruth and Yishai. What happened next was interesting. Now that the men were gone the women sang a few songs and chatted a little, but before long the atmosphere became tranquil. One by one each of us picked up a seifer to continue our Shabbos Mevarchim T'hillim. I looked up for a moment and took a mental picture of the girls and women from

teenager to grandmother (that's me) all saying T'hillim. The younger women were comfortably positioned on the living room furniture and we oldies were by the table a bit more formal... but we were all saying T'hillim.

Later I was planning to join the Seminary girls for their tour of the neighborhood. I rushed back to the Cohen's to take a short nap. I found their dining room full of Chabad bachurim. These were the boys who made up the Minyan in the Mittler Rebbe's Shul in the morning. I realized that one of the boys was Elchonan Hellinger, the one who was largely responsible for the Seifer Torah in the Mittler Rebbe's Shul. I made a mental note to speak to him later to get the story from the source.

Simcha gave the tour to the seminary girls. He mixes in many interesting stories and Biblical references so that even places familiar to me, took on more depth. Our tour finished at Beit Hadassah. As we were walking back to Avraham Avinu neighborhood, where the girls were staying and which is closer to the Maara where the girls were going for Mincha, I noticed Miriam Levinger was walking the opposite direction. I walked over to say Good Shabbos and to thank her for the stories she had told us the night before. She mentioned she was walking up to Kever Ruth and Yishai to say T'hillim. I decided to join her.

As we were walking up the hill an Arab boy was walking down. He was probably about 10 or 12 years old. As he was about to pass us, he said something. Immediately Miriam responded in Arabic, a harsh tone in her voice. I asked her what she said. She told me that she had told him he should go to sleep and never wake up!

I asked her if she spoke Arabic. "No," she answered calmly, "I only

course in Arabic.”

The Arab boy had said something to us, but neither of us knew what he said. I questioned whether or not her tough response would reinforce feelings of hostility in the youth. Miriam pointed out that had it been the other way around, a Jewish boy saying something to an Arab woman, that the Jewish boy might not live to tell the tale. She explained to me that this is their culture, this is what they understand and therefore, this is how we need to speak to them. We gain their respect by showing self-confidence and intolerance of social infractions such as we encountered. Gaining their disrespect can mean death.

Miriam then told me how it was when her children grew up in Hevron. Now we walk through streets that few Arabs pass through, but when she first settled in Hevron these same streets were teeming with Arabs. And her family has survived to tell the tale.

I understood that Miriam and her husband have dedicated their lives – totally – to preserve the physical connection of Am Yisroel to M'aras HaMachpella and Hevron. Because of them, and others like them, tens of thousands of Jews visit Hevron and the Maara every year. The Rebbe was very supportive of the Levingers, in person and by mail. After all, Hashem promised us a physical connection, not just a spiritual one. The Levingers, together with a small group of families, have preserved

our connection to the heritage that Hashem promised us. Their influence is not restricted to Hevron. Far and near they have served as an example to others, giving encouragement through example that it can be done. Because of their perseverance, many have been inspired to live in and protect other parts of our Holy Land.

We reached the Kever of Ruth and Yishai, the father and grandmother of Dovid HaMelech, the author of the T'hillim. A perfect place to say more Shabbos Mevarchim T'hillim.

On our way down, we stopped to visit Rebbetzin Raanan, a close friend of Miriam's whose husband was murdered by a terrorist seven years ago in their home in Tel Rumeida, which at the time was a flimsy caravan. Rabbi Raanan was a well respected and loved leader. His Rebbetzin is now living in Beit Menachem, the new apartment building in Tel Rumeida. I was thrilled to meet Rebbetzin Raanan, another incredible woman of Hevron.

When Shabbos was over, I quickly checked my email on Danny's computer and then headed for Yerushalayim for a Melaveh Malka with Shaena, who is originally from Winnipeg, Canada, as I am, but has been living for more than thirty years as part of the Toldos Aron Chassidim in Meia Sh'arim. If you remember from the Givot Olam story, I was buying the present for

her when I saw the pictures of the Rebbe. I was now on my way to give her the present, which, it turned out, she liked very much.

Every week some of her children and grandchildren join her for Melaveh Malka. She is the queen as her daughters come to help clean up from Shabbos and serve the food. Everyone is dressed traditionally, Meia Sh'arim style, and is refreshed after a restful Shabbos. There were plenty of infants to go on the laps of the adults. Everyone there was clearly experienced at dealing with children of all ages.

What a difference. A few hours ago I was with Miriam Levinger who continues to dedicate her life for her nation. And now I am sitting in a community that cares for themselves exclusively. This is not my lifestyle, but I can see it also has its strengths, mainly, it has strength! These communities were here before the state, and I don't know how to say this, but as the state is in a phase of self-destruction, these communities are not fazed.

I love and respect the different lifestyles that make up the mosaic of Am Yisroel, but I must admit, the more I learn about the lives and philosophies of the various ways Toras Yisroel is observed by Am Yisroel, I thank G-d for the Rebbe's guidance and Chabad Chassidus with its unique blend of perceiving the material and physical and its clear path for Ahavas Yisroel.



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