

FARBRENGEN MARKS THE 120TH YAHRTZAIT OF REBBETZIN MENUCHA ROCHEL ON 24 SHVAT

By Aliza Karp

Wednesday evening, Ohr L'Chaf-Daled Shvat, Mrs. Miriam Rhodes, co-founder and director of the Woman's Kollel at the Chabad cemetery in Chevron, led a Farbrengen in honor of the Yahrzeit of Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel. The Farbrengen was hosted by Mrs. Chana Rosen in Crown Heights.

Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel is the legendary daughter of the Mittlerer Rebbe who was the Matriarch of the Chabad community in Chevron during the 1800's. In addition to leading her community, rabbis and scholars from Yerushalayim would seek her advice and brachos.

Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel's Kever is in the Chabad cemetery together with other venerable Chassidim, including Reb Moshe Meisles. The cemetery is located on a strategic hilltop overlooking the metropolis of Chevron, separated from other segments of the contemporary Jewish community.

The Farbrengen in Crown Heights brought together supporters and friends of Kollel Eliezer Elimelech (an organization founded and directed by Meir and Miriam Rhodes), young women who have visited the Rhodes's Beis Lubavitch Bat Ayin (located half way between Yerushalayim and Chevron), girls who were pioneers in the process of re-opening the Chabad cemetery as a place for davening and learning, and other interested parties who heard about the event through word of mouth.

In honor of the Yahrzeit the women spoke about Bubby Marthas' Woman's Kollel at Menucha Rochel

which meets every other Tuesday. Most women are picked up by a van at designated spots along the way from Bat Ayin to Chevron. A car comes from Yerushalayim. Local women join and women from abroad make it one of the 'musts' on their agenda. The seder begins with individual davening and meditation. The location lends itself to spiritual



expression. Women of various ages at the Farbrengen agreed that there is an encompassing feeling of Menucha, inner peace, at this location. It is a wondrous sensation to be near Menucha Rochel – with the open sky above and Chevron just below. But it is more than then material setting. This is also a location surrounded by hostile

Arabs. And yet it is the Menucha that permeates the location.

The women discussed fear. Miriam told her own story of the first time she toured Chevron twenty two years ago with Boruch Nachshon and Yehudis Goldstein. In those days the streets were teeming with Arabs. Today the streets of the Jewish areas of Chevron have very few Arabs and they don't linger, they hurry to their destination. But twenty-two years ago it was different. Miriam admitted her heart palpitating and her sheer wonder at how her guides were so relaxed. "When you are with brave people, it rubs off," said Miriam. The others agreed.

Someone made a joke about Miriam's years teaching in Beis Rivkah High School as being more frightening than being in Chevron.

One young woman asked how it would be possible to "Mach Da Eretz Yisroel" and bring that feeling of Menucha to Crown Heights.

As per Farbrengen style, one story led to another. One story told of a girl who felt fear and was comforted by singing HaMalach HaGoel. Another story was told about a woman saying a Pasuk and actually being saved because the perpetrator perceived her as having escorts. From across the table another woman knew the sister of the women who was saved and added that the Pasuk that she had said was also HaMalach HaGoel – and that the Lelover Rebbe said regarding HaMalach HaGoel, "The words of Torah are alive. Use them and they will protect you."



The women then joined in singing HaMalach HaGoel. (It was beautiful.)

In attendance at the Farbrengen were three of the six girls who rescued the cemetery from neglect and danger in the summer of 2001. Although many previous efforts to restore the site were valiant and valuable, its separation from the community made it difficult to guard and maintain.

Meir and Miriam Rhodes, acting as directors of Kollel Eliezer Elimelech, brought the group of six girls to Chevron at a time when tourists had stopped visiting the holy city. The Intifada which began in the fall of 2000 was targeting Chevron in the summer of 2001 as Arabs shot into the Jewish community from the surrounding hills. The local Jewish residents were not running away. Their Mesirus Nefesh during that time has allowed for the crowds of Jews to return to M'aras HaMachpella. Had the Chevron community run, it would have meant the end of Jewish visitation to the patriarchs and matriarchs of our nation. During that summer, the absence of support from Jews living elsewhere was very discouraging for the local Jews. Having the girls from Crown Heights come and stay for a few weeks was inspiring for the community and greatly appreciated.

While in Chevron the girls took

upon themselves to clean up the cemetery near Menucha Rochel, to scrub down the gravestone which was black from the soot of Arab vandalism and to clean and straighten up the small building, known as Beit Tahara, on the higher level of the cemetery. There was no running water available at that time. It was hard work.

The girls recalled their last day in Chevron. They were proud of their work to bring the holy resting place of Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel to a respectful condition, but they were not satisfied. This was the location a unique Rebbetzin in Jewish history and Chabad history in particular. They wanted to do more. It seemed unrealistic, but they dreamed of establishing an international learning institute for women at this site. Although they would be leaving the next day, they decided to hold the first day of classes.

On that last day, from the mosque nearby came gunshots. It was in close range. Two of the girls at the Farbrengen joked about how they had stood there discussing if the flying bullets were from the soldiers or the terrorists. From their experience the loud gunshots were the soldiers shooting back and the distant shots were the enemy. This time the enemy was so close, it was enemy gunshots that were frighteningly loud. As the girls stood outside trying to decide whether the bullets were 'ours' or 'theirs,' a soldier insisted they get inside the Beit Tahara and figure it out behind stone walls.

One of the teachers who had joined the girls, Miriam Wolfson from Bat Ayin, was saved by a millimeter as shrapnel grazed her forehead.

The girls recalled the excitement and then the let down. The girls thought they would not be allowed back to the location. But sadness turned to joy when they learned that

because of their experience a guard post was being established at Kever Menucha Rochel.

Today the woman's Kollel at Menucha Rochel meets once in two weeks. It has taken root and it is growing.

The Farbrengen ended as everyone joined in singing the Niggun "When you go out with Simcha, you will come back with peace..."

NEWS FLASH FROM KEVER MENUCHA ROCHEL SENT BY ELCHONON HELLINGER:

At the Kever today I was busy Davening and dodging snowballs from Danny's kids and trying not to freeze... See summary below:

On the 22nd of Shevat, thousands traveled to NY to Daven at the Rebbetzin's Kever on her Yahrtzait. The 24th of Shvat (today) marks the 120th Yahrtzait of the mother of Chevron, the holy Tzadeikes, miracle worker, daughter of the Mittlerer Rebbe and granddaughter of the Alter Rebbe. She is buried in the Chabad burial plot in Chevron, also known as "Chevron Heights," as it is the highest point in Chevron.

Due to the forecast of snow, the Aliya (ascent) to the Kever and the Farbrengen were postponed until next week. But we faithful, we Jews of Chevron will not forget our mother!

Despite a foot of snow, dozens of us trekked out to the Kever of Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel.. getting there was a challenge, we had to go from Beit Hadassah to the Tziyon by 4 wheel drive jeep. At the end of the road we plowed by foot thru knee high snow from the gate to the Kever, we said T'hilim, drank L'chaim, and danced in the snow.

It is my firm belief, that the Rebbetzin and our holy Rebbeim guard and protect those of us who Daven and maintain the Tziyon.