

A VISITOR'S VIEW OF CHEVRON

By Aliza Karp

*The police asked where I was going. When I said 'Chevron,' the soldier smiled, lifted his thumbs and said, "Yes, Chevron!" * There are soldiers guarding the path from Kiryat Arba to Maaras HaMachpella. As you leave the line of vision of one soldier, you enter the line of vision of the next one. Without exception they smile and say Shabbat Shalom as you pass.*

If you follow the media coverage of Eretz Yisroel it paints a very negative picture. Jews who have not yet found their spiritual roots are inciting Arabs against the Jews of Yitzhar in the Shomron, and the political system is trying to oust Jews from their homes in Chevron. In contrast, I would like to shed some positive light on what is happening in Eretz Yisroel, especially Chevron, where we are surrounded by the Rebbe's activists and their activities.

Parshas Chayei Sara begins with the purchase of Maaras HaMachpella by Avrohom Avinu. Nowadays, tens of thousands for Jews, many in their late teens and early twenties, congregate in Chevron on this Shabbos to hear the

reading of this historical real estate transaction being read and proclaimed on the very same spot where it transpired.

I have heard many stories about this Shabbos in Chevron. Chevron pioneer Sara Nachshon has shown me her enormous cholent pot and described the potato peeling process to fill it. She always thinks she has made too much... but once the serving starts it takes very little time until there is not a drop of cholent left. That's how many guests, expected and unexpected, show up for Shabbos day Kiddush on Parshas Chayei Sara.

I have heard from Chabad Shliach Rabbi Danny Cohen how the Lubavitchers who come to

Chevron on Parshas Chayei Sara sing Niggunim in the hours well past midnight as they walk up the hill between Arab houses to reach the ancient Chabad cemetery, the resting place of the matriarch of the Chabad community in Chevron, Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel, and the legendary Reb Moshe Meisels.

I, personally, have never been in Chevron for Parshas Chayei Sara, so I cannot give an account of what it is like from a firsthand experience. But I have been in Chevron for other Shabbosim and I believe that every Shabbos in Chevron is special. I was in Chevron on Shabbos Parshas VaYishlach of last year (5768), just a few weeks following Parshas Chayei Sara. The following is what I wrote in my diary about my experience that Shabbos.

On Friday morning my hostess, Meryl Dalven, in the Shomron town of Emanuel, had some work to do. In addition, she still wanted to bake a cake for a friend who had just given birth that week, make Challa dough for her married daughters who live in Emanuel, and bake Pitot with an extra portion of dough she prepares. To save her time, I made the Pitot while she was out working. I baked them in her stove top contraption. It was so much fun, and the Pitot came out delicious!

I had talked Meryl into coming to Chevron for Shabbos. We were finally ready, with about two and

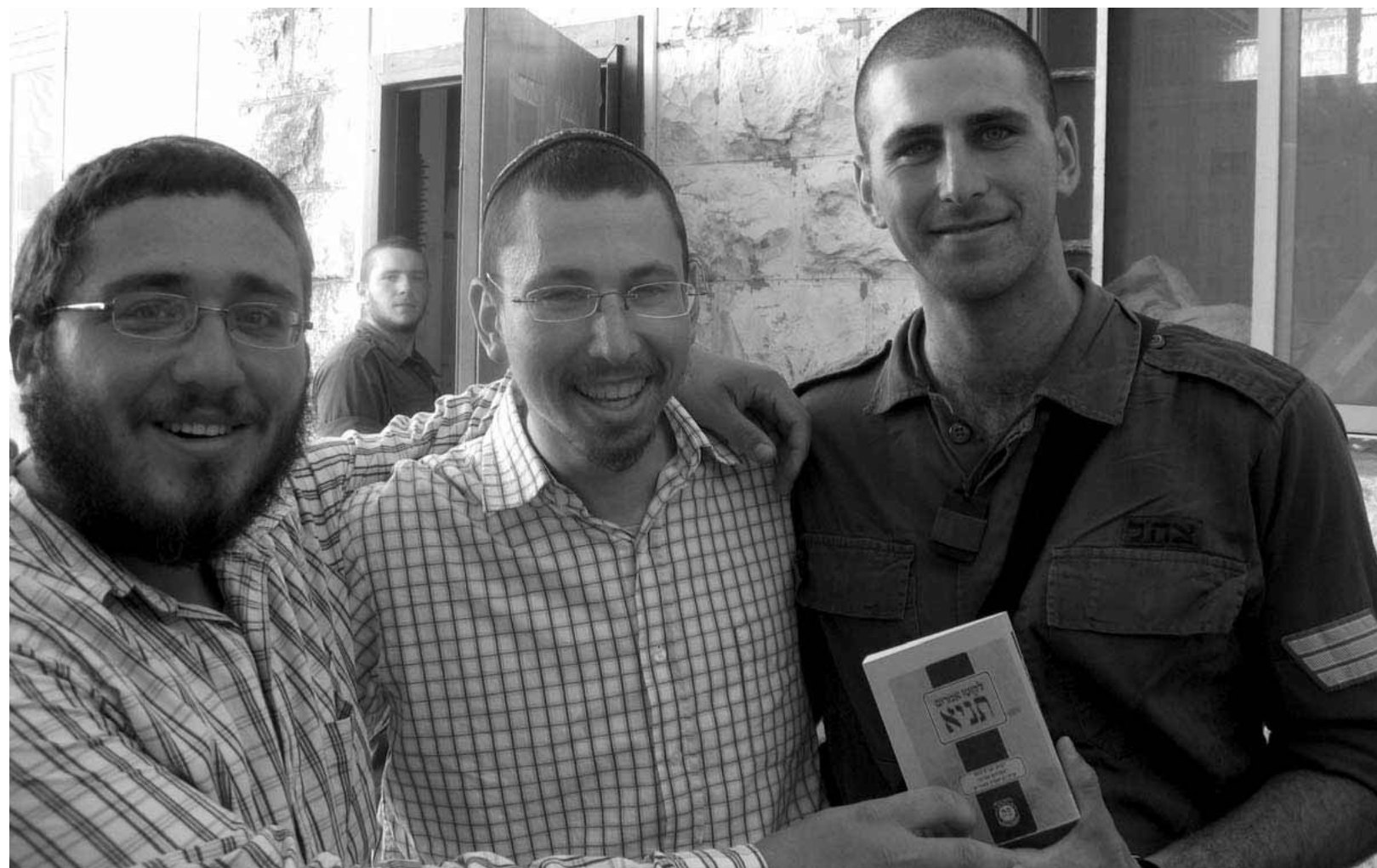
half hours until Shabbos. If everything went smoothly it would be no problem getting there on time; though I don't remember exactly, I think it takes about an hour and half. We took highway 6, which runs North/South and has a generous speed limit. It was not yet completed all the way to Kiryat Gat, so we took some slower roads before we turned eastward on route 35. I love Route 35. The scenery looks to me like the land is untouched since the days of Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov. About half way to Chevron there was a checkpoint that looked like a major border crossing. It was spooky because we just drove straight through. There was no one there in either direction. Another time when I passed this checkpoint I did have

to stop. There were a police man and an army man at the post. The police wanted me to stop. I could tell the soldier would have waved me through. The police asked where I was going. When I said 'Chevron,' the soldier smiled, lifted his thumbs and said, "Yes, Chevron!"

The Torah portion for the week was Parshas VaYishlach. This is a special Parsha for me. It mentions the word Chitas. The Rebbe repeatedly stressed the importance of learning the daily portion of Chumash with Rashi, the daily portion of T'hilim as it is divided so that it is completed monthly, and the daily portion of Tanya. Tanya may once have been considered a book studied by a small circle of scholars, but now it is taught in all serious

Jewish schools of higher learning. I find that when I say Chitas in the morning after davening, my day goes smoothly. The Rebbe has done so much for me personally that I feel good about fulfilling his request about saying Chitas – even if it is a request for my benefit. (Everything the Rebbe asks for is for our benefit – if we would only listen...)

Not only does Parshas VaYishlach mention Chitas, it talks about Yaakov spending time in the Shomron, the area where Emanuel, Ariel, Kedumim and Yitzhar – all the places I visited during the week – are located. And in the portion for Friday, it spoke about Yaakov traveling to Chevron. When I planned my trip I had not been aware that I was going to be



Eli and Saadia give a Tanya to Harel on his birthday.

following Yaakov's footsteps the entire week, but as the week unfolded and I read about Yaakov each day, it felt good.

Meryl and I had arranged to spend Shabbos with artist Boruch Nachshon and his wife Sara in Kiryat Arba. Once inside Kiryat Arba it took me awhile to find their building. I wonder if they are on the only one way street in town. I got mixed up circling around to find it. When we finally pulled into the correct parking lot, I called Danny

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right away. I had brought a piece of luggage for him. I knew he wanted it before Shabbos, because it contained 80 Benchers which he was anxious to have for the crowd of soldiers who join him at the Friday night meal.

At airport security when El Al scanned my luggage, I was asked if I had packed that particular bag. When Danny brought it to me a few weeks before, when he was in New York for the Kinus HaShluchim, I

had opened it and taken a look at the contents so I could say I packed it and would know what was in it. But when they started to ask me questions all I could remember was some dirty laundry. Then they asked me about all the books. The security guys were Jewish, so I decided it would be good for them to hear about the Benchers. I told them the whole story: That the Chabad House in Thailand had printed them, and that they included songs that post-army kids like to sing – because after the army a lot of Jewish soldiers head to Thailand to search for exotic spirituality and what they find is Chabad – and that the Shliach in Chevron knew these specific Benchers, because they included the extra songs, would be perfect for the dozens of soldiers who are his guests on Friday nights, so he bought... By that time the luggage screeners had heard enough. They gave me my bag and told me to move on.

Upon receiving my call, Danny was in Kiryat Arba in a jiffy. He took the luggage containing the Benchers and sped back to Chevron. In addition to the usual dozens of army guests at the Friday night Shabbos table, Chabad of Chevron was hosting a few hundred Bachurim for a special pre-Yud Tes Kislev Shabbos of preparation for the Rosh HaShana of Chassidus.

Meryl and I prepared for Shabbos and lit candles in the Nachshon “art gallery salon” (living room/dining room) surrounded by Boruch Nachshon's colorful paintings of nature and the supernatural.

It's about a ten minute walk along Psir Mispallalim (Worshippers Path, in English) to get to the Maara. It was a chilly night. The path was filled with animated youth and some ‘old-timers’ like Meryl and me. We got there in time to take front row seats – even though I

spend most of the time standing. I like to peek through the Mechitza and watch the dancing. I love Friday night davening at the Maara. Here is what I emailed home about Shabbos in Chevron:

I spent Shabbos in Chevron, so you can assume that I was in heaven. Everything was just right – the weather, the people, the davening, the food, the feeling. Nothing could be wrong.

I brought Meryl with me to Chevron for Shabbos. We stayed with the Nachshons in Kiryat Arba and walked back and forth to the Maara. As usual, Friday night davening at the Maara was amazing. I think that singing the davening Friday night is a way to release the weekday tension so you can really unwind and make the most of Shabbos. At the Maara, the joyous singing is accompanied by lively dancing.

The place was packed. The girls are so pretty in their Yesha styles. A few of them formed a circle and danced to the singing.

For those of you who know Simcha Hochbaum, he masterfully led the davening and gave a few short Divrei Torah in between. One time he spoke about Yud Tes Kislev, the release of the Baal HaTanya, the Yahrtzait of the Maggid and the birthday of Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel, who was born on the very day her grandfather was released from prison. Simcha connected Chevron, where Menucha Rochel was the head of the Chabad community, to Yud Tes Kislev. Pretty cool for a Minyan that is not Chabad.

The meal with the Nachshons was very nice. The Nachshons are the personification of Hachnasas Orchim. If someone were looking for a project, I would suggest writing a set of books on the Hachnasas Orchim of the Nachshons. There was a woman at

the table with us and after she left, Sara Nachshon told us her story. This particular woman had a married son in Netzarim in Gush Katif, who she would visit from time to time with her husband. Early one morning, during one of those visits, her husband was murdered by terrorists while studying Torah in the shul with a friend. Her son became so distraught over the loss that his health problems became severely aggravated and he died as a result. The poor woman!

I will now finish the story that was unfinished in the email. The woman guest was living in Tel Aviv. She no longer had a husband and was mourning the loss of her son. Her daughter lives in a Kiryat Arba, on a hill that requires going up a lot

of steep steps. The daughter convinced her mother to move to Kiryat Arba. Shabbos Day the woman walks up the steps, but not Friday nights. Sara Nachshon knew the woman was very sad on Friday nights, and asked the woman to become part of her family. Sara said when the woman first came, she was quiet and gloomy, but as time passed her guest has become full of life and light. The Nachshon's Hachnasas Orchim is out of this world. They started to tell stories about funny situations they have had with guests. At least in hindsight they are funny, at the time I am sure they are dramatic. Because they were speaking in Ivrit I could only understand a bit, but I understood they have hosted people under the

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Dancing in Maaras HaMachpela on a regular weekday.



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strangest of circumstances.

Meryl blended in with the Nachshons beautifully. In the morning she was happy to stay and Daven with the Minyan in the Nachshon's apartment. I bundled up so I would be warm even in the Maara, which has no heating system, and headed to Chevron. I walked together with one of Sara's granddaughters, a very pretty girl from Rehovot. I was not sure when I would be back. As it turned out, I came back after Shabbos was over.

During the times that the main Minyanim Daven at the Maara, there are soldiers guarding the path from Kiryat Arba to Maaras HaMachpella. At any given time you can see at least two – as you leave the line of vision of one soldier, you enter the line of vision of the next one. Without exception they smile and

say Shabbat Shalom as you pass.

As we walked by one of the many soldiers stationed on the way, we stopped to listen to a conversation that was going on in English. An international observer was speaking with a soldier. I did not like the conversation but did not interrupt. The observer was explaining how he was not on anyone's side; he considered himself neutral. He was just there to report what he sees to the 'authorities.' As he was Italian, I felt like asking him why he was not observing how the Italian police treat people and report *that* to 'authorities.' What is he doing here? We have an army with the highest moral standards in the world and we have our own system to enforce those standards. He is simply a foreign spy. But I kept my mouth shut. No point in starting up – when these people are around, the video cameras are never far away, together with the video editors to make the Jewish settlers look bad. That was the low part of Shabbos. Soon we turned the corner, and the plaza in front of the Maara came into view.

The participants of the Shabbaton that Chabad of Chevron was hosting were davening on the plaza. Later, when the first Minyan in the main hall of the Maara had finished, they would move into the main hall to hear Kriya and finish their davening.

In this Shabbaton, no one was a newcomer to Judaism. These young men were serious scholars, interested in Chassidus. The participants were from both Hesder and Chassidische Yeshivos, with a sprinkling of Litvishers. This is probably the only event, other than maybe an MBD concert, where these groups come together – and, remarkably, they came together to learn Chassidus!

Walking up the stairs, I stopped to chat with Saadia, one of the young men spending the year in

Chevron doing Mivtzaim. Saadia and Eli and a few others did an amazing job of working with the soldiers in the area. They also reach out to the children of Chevron with Tzivos Hashem events.

After davening, I ran up the hill to Tel Rumeida to hear kiddush with Boruch Marzel. As usual he had a long table full of guests. Boruch has accomplished amazing things for Chevron, and for all of Eretz Yisroel and Am Yisroel. Once there was a kernel of a Jewish presence in Chevron, it was Boruch who set out to visit Rabbis and community leaders to encourage, and sometimes to pressure them, to visit Chevron. His reasoning was that if the leaders will come, so will the followers. Now there are days when tens of thousands of Jews come to Chevron, and it was started with Boruch's effort. He helps the poor, assists in settlements, oversees the Hachnasas Orchim guest house in Chevron, and established a Cheider that takes in all boys who want to attend.

The conversation this Shabbos was about Chomesh. It was recently resettled, so Boruch was busy again, taking as many people to Chomesh as would fit 'under the radar.' He doesn't want to get caught by the government, which wants to stop the influx of people and supplies.

After the fish course with the Marzels, I went to the Beitar guest house and spoke with some of the rabbis who came for the Shabbaton with their families. The Bachurim were having their program in the Gutnick Center. One of the main speakers was a Rabbi Deutsch from Yerushalayim. I spoke to his wife, who looked familiar. Later I realized I had known her more than twenty years ago when I lived in Yerushalayim for a few years. She had been my daughter's second grade teacher in Beis Chana. Just as she was twenty four years ago, Rebbetzin Deutsch remains a

magnificent woman in her simplicity and refinement.

I also spoke with the Boaz family at their table, and this time it was the wife who recognized me. It took me a while to recall that she had been active in the English programs for N'shei Chabad of Yerushalayim and I had been to one of her Shiurim on a previous trip to Eretz Yisroel. I sat next to her teenage son. His name is Michoel and he has Down Syndrome.

Later, at the Seuda Shlishit program, I noticed Michoel sitting quietly right next to Rabbi Deutsch and listening to every word. When there was a break in the talking and

everyone began to sing, Michoel stood up and started dancing... and then the whole audience stood up and held hands and danced. I was amazed at how the beauty of a Neshama can be seen through special people like Michoel. I was also amazed at how the Shabbaton had unified all the different types of religious men through the teachings of Chabad Chassidus – not surprised, but amazed.

After Shabbos I drove back to the Nachshon's home in a new Mitzvah Tank that Chabad of Chevron had dedicated a few weeks before, on Erev Shabbos Parshas Chayei Sara. Amongst others, Boruch Nachshon

was on board. He had come for the Seuda Shlishit. He pointed out how marvelous it was to be riding in a Mitzvah Tank with Jewish pictures on the outside, and a video of the Rebbe speaking about the Beis HaMikdash on the inside, while traveling through Arab occupied territory. Boruch said it was like a ship on a stormy sea. He told me I should write about it... I told him he should paint it.

That trip in the Mitzvah Tank through hostile territory is very significant. The Rebbe's Peulos enrich our lives, they surround us and protect us... even in Chevron.

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