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*Rabbi Moshe and Chana Thaler,
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Rebuilding From Destruction

By Chaya Chazan

I'd been to Zhitomir on Merkos Shlichus - a program where bochorim are sent to help shluchim during the summer months. I also worked under Rabbi Plotkin in Berdichev for half a year or so. After we got married, a shlichus opportunity in Ukraine came up, and we were happy to take it.

In many ways, the Berdichev of today is very like the Berdichev of the shtetl. The city has always been a bastion of Chassidus, and was the hometown of such renowned tzaddikim as Reb Levi Yitzchak. The Berdichever is famous for explaining the meaning of "Shabbos Chazon," the Shabbos before Tisha Ba'av, when every Jew receives a vision of the 3rd Beis Hamikdash that will be rebuilt speedily in our days.

Even during the Communist regime, Yiddishkeit in Berdichev persisted. Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim continued operating under the nose of the NKVD. The matzah bakery moved underground and secretly churned out a few, precious matzos. People attended shul, surreptitiously arriving at staggered intervals. A shochet provided kosher meat for all its inhabitants until the late 80's.

By the time we arrived in the early 2000's, much of the Jewish fire had unfortunately died down. All the elderly residents spoke Yiddish, and many had beards, but most of their Jewish knowledge was relegated to memories of their childhood and their grandparents. The younger generation knew even less. We had our work cut out for us.

It's been our great privilege and zechus to care for Reb Levi Yitzchak's kever, which is visited by thousands every year. Unfortunately, the building and the shul need a lot of renovation. We plan to expand the kever, and to make the shul the most beautiful in all of Ukraine. Of course, such a huge venture requires lots of funding, and careful planning. As our city rebuilds itself from the destruction of the war, we look to the future and envision a Jewish Berdichev as strong and famous as it was in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Rumors of a Russian invasion were spreading, but we didn't believe it - or didn't want to believe it. The night before, we were in Kiev. We debated whether to stay in the city overnight, or to drive home. In the end, we decided on the latter. The next morning, we found out that Kiev had been bombed. It was shocking; too unbelievable to be true.

As shluchim and leaders of the community, we had no time for hysterics. We tried to remain calm and collected. We immediately began stocking up on pantry items, beddings,

and medications, keeping in mind that Pesach was fast approaching. We prepared the basement of our shul as temporary housing, in case people needed to evacuate their homes.

It was only a couple of weeks before our city wound up in Russia's crosshairs. We tried to evacuate as many people as we could, especially the elderly and infirm. Many of them were entrenched in the homes they'd known since childhood, and refused to leave.

My wife's nephew was getting married in Israel in the last week of February 2022. It was her first wedding as an aunt, and the entire family was excited. Before we'd left our families and moved on shlichus, I'd promised my wife she'd be at every wedding; she wouldn't miss out on these major milestones just because we lived in Ukraine. How could I keep my promise in wartime? I promised her we'd find a way. We drove across Europe, via Moldova, Romania, and from there, onto Eretz Yisrael. We made it just before the wedding.

I kept in constant contact with my community, fielding one call after another. I longed to return to them; to comfort and help them in person, but every time I wrote to the Rebbe via the Igros Kodesh, a collection of his letters, I received a clear answer to remain in Eretz Yisrael.

My son returned to Berdichev just before Shavuot, and looked after the community in my absence. At that point, much of the unrest had settled. Finally, a few months later, my letter to the Rebbe was answered with permission to return to Berdichev.

I had just crossed the border into Ukraine when I received a call from the community leader.

"Michael* just passed away. It's good you're coming back today, so you can officiate at his levaya tomorrow."

While I'd been in Eretz Yisrael for months, no one in the community had passed away. Michael's neshama had waited until I had permission to return, so he could receive a proper Jewish burial.

Up until recently, kosher food was still hard to find in western Ukraine. I knew I always had to be ready to serve any amount of people at any time. So, it was no surprise when, one day, my husband asked if a couple could come by for dinner. Of course, I agreed and started multiplying my recipes so there would be enough for our guests.

That day was also my son's sixth birthday. Despite our reservations, we'd finally given in to his many requests for a Nerf gun.

He was so excited when he opened his present, he immediately started racing around the house, aiming for (and sometimes even hitting!) any target he spotted. Meanwhile, I finished preparing the meal and setting the table. My son was playing in the foyer, shooting towards the door, when suddenly it sprung open. A foam pellet flew across the room and hit our guest squarely between the eyebrows.

My heart dropped. I raced across the room and took the gun from my son while my husband made sure our guest was okay. A small bruise was already forming on his forehead. We continued to apologize, gave him an ice pack, and quickly



served the meal. I took the kids upstairs while my husband sat with Solomon* and Paulina*.

"We're Ukrainian and Russian originally," Solomon said. "But now we live in San Francisco."

My husband spoke with the couple for hours, listening to their stories and ideas.

"I don't think they'll be coming back," he told me after they'd left. "I told them, very strongly, to take their daughter out of the Christian school she attends now."

"The Rebbe sent us to inspire Yidden," I answered. "As long as we do our part, the rest is in Hashem's hands."

It was two years before we heard from them again. Paulina reached out and asked if she could stop by. She and Solomon were back in town - this time with their children. Of course, I immediately agreed and invited them for lunch. I'd just put the finishing touches on the table, when Paulina knocked on the door. Beside her stood a young girl, wearing a Bais Yaakov uniform.

"Who's this?" I asked.

Paulina put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "This is my daughter, Elana*."

I was confused. Paulina was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. What had inspired her daughter to dress tzniyusly?

"Last time we were here, my husband was shot in the head," Paulina laughed. I laughed along, remembering the incident well.

"It felt like a wake-up call," she continued "Like G-d came down and whacked us. That was when we started considering religion for the first time."

I smiled secretly to myself, remembering how my husband had despaired of inspiring them.

"We started sending Elana to a religious school and keeping kosher. Solomon and I even got remarried under a chuppah!"

"Wow," I said, giving Paulina a hug. "That's amazing!"

"Do you want to hear something even more amazing?" she said. "Our youngest was born exactly nine months after our chuppah!"

Tears pricked my eyes, and, as we hugged goodbye, we promised to keep in touch. A few months later, the couple came again, and introduced us to their miracle baby. Their older son was learning Yiddish, and Paulina was wearing a head covering. Ever since Solomon had stopped working on Shabbos, they were proud to consider themselves a fully frum family.

Years later, we would get the great pleasure of watching Elana walk to her chuppah, ready to marry a religious, God-fearing man!

I will never forget when a young woman innocently brought a chicken parm to shul. I decided to start with the basics of kashrus, seeing how little many of them knew about kosher. I wanted to give each woman a pot and ask them to dedicate it to either dairy or meat. This, I hoped, would teach them to differentiate between the two.

"Whoa," my husband said. "That's going to cost a pretty penny. Where do you expect to find pots from?"

I laughed. "Don't worry! Hashem is good, and He always finds a way!"

Later that week, we experienced Yad Hashem in a very real way. My husband got a call from an old friend he hadn't spoken to in a while.

"What are you up to these days?" my husband asked him.

"I import kitchen goods to Ukraine," he answered. "How's the Chabad house? I'd love to help in any way I can. Any chance you need some kitchen goods?"

Later that week, three huge boxes of pots were delivered to my doorstep.

"Chana, what do you think about organizing a Shabbaton for women?" my husband asked.

"I like the idea," I said, slowly, thinking it over. "They'd absolutely love it! But-" I hesitated for a moment.

"What's the matter?" my husband asked.

"It's such a huge, overwhelming job. I'm getting stressed just thinking about it! I don't think I'd be able to pull it off."

My husband tried to encourage me, but I still felt hesitant.

We were in New York at the time, and made sure to visit 770 often. Every Motzei Shabbos, a Rebbe video is shown. That week, the video showed the Rebbe handing a dollar to someone in honor of their upcoming Shabbaton in Singapore.

My husband smiled. "See?" he said. "This is a sign. You're supposed to do this Shabbaton!"

A few weeks later, I had pulled off what I previously had thought impossible. 165 women from all over Ukraine came and spent a beautiful, inspiring, and, of course, tasty Shabbos together!

We offer medications, food, and many other resources to members of our community. There are many in need, but we try to concentrate on our community and make sure they're well cared for. We get many requests for aid, and we always direct them to the community center, where they are welcome to present their documents proving their Jewish lineage and thereby join the community.

We were performing a series of brissim on adults in the community, so when Alexi* asked to join the bris roster, I gave him my standard answer: "No problem! Just present your documents."

"My mother has all the papers, and she's in Israel," he said.

Although transatlantic calls were prohibitively expensive in those days, I placed the call for him. His sister picked up.

"I need documents proving we're Jewish," he told her.

"I can give you Mama's teudat zehut," she offered. "But Mama isn't Jewish; Papa was!"

"I'm sorry," I told Alexi after he hung up. "If you're not Jewish, I can't give you a bris."

I thought that was the end of the story, but Alexi wouldn't give up. He kept coming to shul and trying to insinuate himself into every event and program we made for the community. He continued to insist he was Jewish, despite the fact that I'd heard the facts directly from his sister.

Two years ago, on the last day of Pesach, Alexi passed away. His wife told us he'd requested a Jewish burial in his will. I couldn't believe his determination, even posthumously.

"Maybe I should check one more time," I thought to myself. Using my wife's connections in the Rabbanut, I asked for a status check on the mother's teudat zehut.

"Yes, I see she's Jewish," he told me. "We were able to confirm their Jewish lineage recently through a cousin."

I hung up the phone with mixed emotions. I was appalled and ashamed that I'd pushed him away so many times over the years. I wished I'd found out earlier and helped this thirsting neshama connect to Hashem. I was also thankful that now, Alexi would be able to be laid to rest as a Jew - as he'd always insisted he was.

When we started the taharah on his body, we found that Alexi had been circumcised from birth.

**Names changed to protect identity*

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