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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

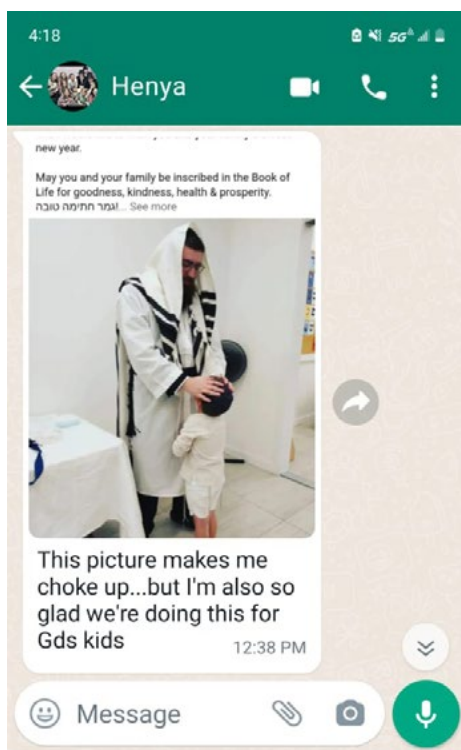
*Rabbi Asher and Henya A"H Federman,
Chabad of the U.S. Virgin Islands*

Henya's Everlasting Legacy (Part 2)

By Chaya Chazan

In 2017, two Category 5 hurricanes devastated the island. We went without power for months, and it took a long time for the island to recover. Our first priority was to ensure our community's safety, especially our elderly members.

We helped them board up their windows, and tie down anything loose. We did the same to our house, and hunkered down for what promised to be the storm of the century.



We learned our house's roof had blown clean off during the last hurricane, over twenty years earlier. Clearly, we needed a safer shelter.

We were close to a group of Jewish doctors, who all had offices in the same building. It was newly constructed, and was built like a bomb shelter. We knew they, and some other friends, were sheltering there.

"Hey Jeff," I said, nervously, over the phone. "Would it be okay if I brought my family to your building to ride out the storm?"

I knew I was asking a lot. Ten children in a confined space, for an unspecified amount of time, under tense conditions, was no small request.

"Sure! Come on over, Rabbi!" Jeff answered. "I gotta warn ya' - we don't have a kosher kitchen."

We quickly packed pillows, blankets, and the essentials for Shabbos. In a strange way, it was every shliach's dream! We'd be locked up with a group of Jews, who'd have no excuses, nowhere to go, and nothing better to do when we'd ask them to put on tefillin...

It was the strangest 24 hours of our lives. The radiology waiting room became our family suite, with kids camped out on every available chair, couch, and inch of carpet. The way they davened, shared, and played together made an incredible kiddush Hashem, and despite the winds howling outside, we passed the time in friendly camaraderie.

The next morning, utter devastation was everywhere. It was impossible to walk the streets without a chainsaw to hack away the trees and electrical poles that had fallen every which way. We accompanied one of the doctors in his emergency medical vehicle to our neighborhood on the other side of the island, to check on our neighbors and make sure everyone was okay.

We were blessed to have a satellite phone, and the survivors' eyes lit up when they saw it. "Please," they begged us, with tear-filled eyes. "Please call our families and let them know we're okay!"

We organized boats to evacuate survivors to Puerto Rico, the nearest island that had been spared the ravages of the storm. After Shabbos, I accompanied my wife and children to the boat that would take them to safety.

"Should Tatty come with you?" I asked my 7-year-old, fondly ruffling his hair.

"But Tatty, how could you come with us?" he asked. "Rosh Hashanah is next week! If you're gone, who will blow shofar for everyone else? If you don't stay, I will!"

As they sailed away to safety, I waved goodbye through misty eyes and then turned determinedly back to the havoc, to be there for those still trapped on the island.

That Rosh Hashanah, emotions ran high as we prayed for a good, sweet new year. Many cried, thinking of the homes they'd lost, wondering what their future would bring. Never had the words of Unesaneh Tokef felt so relevant and impactful, as we realized the fragility of life and our complete dependence on Hashem's mercy.

In the afternoon, I walked around, looking for those who hadn't yet heard shofar. I headed for the Ritz Carlton, whose decadent elegance lay shattered in broken glass and rubble. A Marine squad had been sent for search and rescue, and I asked if there were any Jews amongst them. They led me to a tent where there was one Jewish soldier. As I entered through the flap in the tent, the soldier stared at me, with wide, unblinking eyes.

"I can't believe it," he whispered, his eyes slowly filling with tears. "G-d hasn't forgotten about me! Just last night, I was telling everyone it was the Jewish New Year. And now, you're here! I can't believe it!"

I blew the shofar, and explained how the sounds represent that G-d remembers every Jew on this day, and records them for good.

The second hurricane struck the day before Rosh Hashanah. I was so thankful that my family was safe, and grateful to be the Rebbe's representative on the island, carrying on important work despite the upheaval and challenges. My presence meant a lot to the community, who saw that I was there for them, no matter what.

It was a lonely Tishrei without my family. In a way, it reminded me of the first Tishrei on the island, when we didn't yet have a Sefer Torah. When it was time to dance hakafos, I lifted my infant daughter in my arms, and danced with her around the table.

Our sukkah was built from debris that liberally littered the island - a literal representation of our prayer to "re-build the fallen sukkah of Dovid."

For many years, we had a daily minyan for Shacharis, attended by visiting businessmen and tourists. I'd wake up

my kids at 6 AM every morning, and we'd load the "Minyan Mobile." We traveled from hotel to hotel, picking up our minyan, one man at a time.

As we drove, it gave me some time to develop a rapport with these men, many of whom I'd rarely see again. The audio shiurim playing, and the conversations we shared in the car, helped establish a connection and show them the beauty of Yiddishkeit.

One day, as I was walking back to the car with our minyan, getting ready to drop them back off at their hotels, I was stopped by a woman.

"Excuse me, Rabbi," she said. "Is there a mohel on the island?"

"Not on the island, no," I answered. "We fly one out whenever we need one."

"My name is Leah*," she said. "I'm expecting a boy, and I want him to have a bris!" After a moment, she explained. "I moved here recently. I grew up in a religious home, but I just wanted to run away from it all. I chose the Virgin Islands, thinking it was as far from Judaism as any place can be. I married a non-Jew, and got a job in the diamond industry. My office is just above your shul.

"Every morning, as I sat at my desk, I was haunted by the sounds of prayer I'd grown up with. Ashrei, shema, aleinu - I could hear every word! I sat on the steps so I could hear the davening more clearly. I thought I was finished with all that, but I can't ignore this sign. G-d is clearly telling me to give my child a bris."

When her son was born, we helped her arrange the bris. She named the baby Yosef, after her uncle, the one truly religious member of her family who'd had such a strong influence on her youth.

Erev Sukkos of 2008 was typically busy, with Henya and I each rushing to get ready for Yom Tov, ensuring the sukkah was built, making food for our guests, and all the other hectic preparations that come with the territory of shlichus on a tropical island.

On the first night of Yom Tov, we welcomed guests into our sukkah, and shared a beautiful meal, filled with singing, laughing, and inspiration. When people drifted into shul the next morning, there were quiet murmurs and worried looks, but I was focused on the davening, and infusing the tense atmosphere with the joy of Yom Tov. Of course, we hadn't listened to the radio, but there was a Category 3 storm headed directly in our direction.

On the second day of Yom Tov, with the threat of the hurricane now imminent, the entire island went into lock-

down. For us, however, it was business as usual. We ate in the sukkah, and even had some brave guests join us in the flimsy wooden hut we temporarily called home.

As I made kiddush, I overheard a passerby comment, "Wow! That rabbi is *really* out of touch with reality!"

On motzei Yom Tov, we tuned into the news reports. It was worrisome. I faxed a letter to the Ohel, asking for someone to read it there on our behalf.

Miraculously, the storm suddenly veered south, sparing St. Thomas completely. There were some strong winds, but even our sukkah was able to withstand them!

The entire community joined us for a memorable simchas beis hashoeva, where our joy emulated the legendary joy of simchas beis hashoeva in the Beis Hamikdash!

We'd just moved to St. Thomas, and were relying on the list of Jewish residents compiled by Merkos bochurim who'd visited the island over the years. We were standing in line at a grocery store, when a native-looking man standing just in front of us startled us with a hearty "Mah shlomcha?"

"B'seder, baruch Hashem!" I responded. "How do you know Hebrew?"

"What do you mean? I'm Jewish!" he answered. I was a bit doubtful, so I asked him to tell me about his Jewish upbringing.

"My Bubbe was from Ragachov!" he boasted. "I went to Hebrew school as a kid, but this is the first time I've seen a yarmulke and tzitzis in over 20 years!"

"Asher Federman," I said, shaking his hand.

"Andy Ellis*," he said, returning the gesture.

"What's your Jewish name?" I asked.

Tears ran down his face. "Berel Dovid," he answered, in an unsteady voice. He gave me his number, and we parted ways.

Berel Dovid was the first Jew we'd met on the island. I tried contacting him many times, but he never answered. I didn't see him again for 18 years.

I recently returned to the island for the first time since Henya and Shterna passed away. As I sat on the plane for my return flight, I scrolled through my Facebook notifications. A suggested friend popped up - a name I hadn't seen in 18 years: "Andy Ellis." Although I hadn't managed to get in touch with him when we'd first met, we were now able to connect, after 18 years of silence.

The nostalgia of meeting the first unlisted Jew we'd met as we began our shlichus now, as I began the painful process of restarting, brought our journey full circle.

Last Tishrei, Henya was in the States with the kids, while I flew back to the island to lead the davening for the community. On Erev Yom Kippur, Henya texted me a picture of a fellow shliach, dressed in kittel and tallis, bending over his child and bestowing the age-old fatherly blessing on her head, something the geographical distance prevented me from doing myself.

This picture makes me choke up, she captioned it. But I'm so glad we're doing this for G-d's children.

This is Henya's legacy. To her last moment, she was *moser nefesh* for her children, and for G-d's children. She passed away shortly before the kinus hashluchos, and it was a most fitting tribute that thousands of her sister shluchos accompanied her on her final journey.

Of course, I know Hashem has a master plan, one far beyond our human understanding. I cannot, and will not, understand why Hashem chose to take Henya away. As I approach the upcoming yom tov, I am left with these questions, and yet, I remain firm in my emunah. I will not stand in shul on Rosh Hashanah, wondering with dread what more upheavals this year will bring. Instead, I will focus on what I *do* have, and treasure every moment with my family. I will choose to focus on the eternity of the neshama, and how in that way, Henya remains with us as much today as before.

As the new year approaches, every person should take stock of their lives, treasure each and every moment with their loved ones, and commit to see each person as more than their external appearances, but for the neshama shining brightly within.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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