

"They're Not My Guests"

An interview with Henny Machlis;
serving selfless sublimity



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Sometimes, readers of *Holy Woman* phone me and ask plaintively, "I'm so disappointed that I never met Rebbetzin Chaya Sara Kramer, a"h. Do you know any *tzidkanios* alive today?"

I send them to Rebbetzin Henny Machlis. But I add a caveat: "If you're looking for a *tzaddekes* to emulate and become inspired by, go to Rebbetzin Machlis. But if you're looking for a miracle worker, I don't know any."

After interviewing Rebbetzin Machlis for this article, however, I now realize that she is, indeed, a miracle worker. Here are just a few of her miracles:

- From a dilapidated kitchen one-third the size of a normal American kitchen, she produces a delicious assortment of food sufficient to feed 300 guests every Shabbos.
- Into the living room of the Machlises' modest Yerushalayim apartment, they manage to squeeze 150 guests for each of the two main meals of Shabbos. Once seated, no one can get out, so they pass around cups and basins for *netilas yadayim*.
- Many of the secular guests have started on the path to *teshuvah* after just one Shabbos meal in the Machlis home.
- Rebbetzin Henny has raised (and is still raising) fourteen children, ka"h, all of whom exhibit sterling *middos* and who are totally devoted to Torah and *mitzvos*.
- Rebbetzin Henny's face is itself a wonder. It is always lit up with a wide smile, and her smooth, youthful complexion belies her fifty years of age.

Henny (Lustig) Machlis was born and raised in Brooklyn. Her father was an Orthodox rabbi. She has a B.S. in education, plus a Hebrew teaching degree from Stern College. In 1979, three months after marrying Rabbi Mordechai Machlis, a son of renowned *mechanchim*, Rabbi Eliyahu and Rebbetzin Sara Machlis, zt"l, also from Brooklyn, she and her husband moved to Yerushalayim. Since the birth of her sixth child, Rebbetzin Henny has been a full-time mother and homemaker.



For how many years have you been hosting huge Shabbos tables?

Henny Machlis: We started 29 years ago. Within a few months of getting married, we were having 30-35 guests per meal. From there, it just grew, with Hashem's help and blessings.

What is your motive in having so many Shabbos guests?

When we got married, we decided we wanted to share Shabbos with the whole world. We figured that many Jews aren't *frum* because they think that religion is negative, oppressive, and heavy, but if we show them the beauty and the joy of Shabbos, they will want to become more directly connected to Torah and *mitzvos*. As it says, "Taste and see that Hashem is good" (*Tehillim* 34:9). The *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* teaches: "Great is the power of food because it brings people ever so closer."

You host huge Shabbos meals 51 weeks a year, every Shabbos except for Pesach, when you go away. Were there periods (during pregnancy, after birth, etc.) when you took a break?

Yes. Until about 15 years ago,

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whenever I had a baby, *baruch Hashem*, we took off several weeks. For the last 15 years, however, we try to host every Shabbos except Pesach.

Do you ever feel like taking a break?

Yes, of course! But since I feel that it's such an important *mitzvah* to have a house open for *chessed* and for *kiruv*, I try to work around it. I sometimes have my children and other people fill in by cooking or serving.

How do you find time to take care of yourself?

I don't find time; I make time. I find my personal prayer time absolutely essential in order to remember that everything is from Hashem. When I encounter various situations, I view them as from Hashem, Divine

messages flowing in my direction all day. And I have to pray to be in touch with those messages. For example, if someone speaks to me angrily, I have to recognize that it's from Hashem, and I make a deliberate attempt to grow spiritually from the experience.

Do you ever feel overburdened?

When I'm not connected to the fact that Hashem is running the world, I feel very overburdened. But when I feel connected, and I know that Hashem is running the world with Divine Providence, purpose, mercy, and kindness, then I don't feel overwhelmed. We think that we're doing the *chessed*, but it's not our *chessed*. It's Hashem's *chessed*! We want to be the conduit for Hashem's goodness to the world. The guests are not my guests; they're His guests.



If a person is viewed as the embodiment of the entire world, our attitude toward him or her is different.

For example, a large family was coming to sleep over for Shabbos. To find them a place to sleep, we had to rely on the goodwill of my neighbors. When I'm not connected, I'd feel very nervous about this, but this time I said, "*Ribbono shel Olam*, these are not my guests, they're Your guests, and I'm not going to worry. I'm sure You'll find them a place to stay."

It was already midday on Friday. A few minutes later, an Israeli neighbor came to our door and said, "I notice that your car doors are open. Is there a reason?" I never ask these people if they're going away, but the words came out of my mouth. I said, "Maybe you know someone going away for Shabbos?" He replied, "Yes, us, and we're leaving soon." They gave us their big, beautiful apartment.

The next week, I had a different family coming. We made a few phone calls during the week, but no success. I said, "Hashem, they're Your children, I'm sure You'll find them a place to stay." Friday afternoon, I sent my eight-year-old Dovid to ask two neighbors if they were going away for Shabbos. The first neighbor wasn't home. When the second neighbor answered the door and heard my son's request, he said: "You don't know what *hashgachah pratis* this is. We had already left to go away for Shabbos. We were already in the car. But my two-year-old needed to use the bathroom, so I came back with him. Here's the key."

Some of your guests are mentally ill or alcoholic. How do you treat them like honored guests?

The Mishnah teaches: "Anyone who sustains one soul in Israel, it's as if he sustains the entire world." If a person is viewed as the embodiment of the entire world, our attitude toward him or her is different. According to the Zohar, a person standing at your door is a special gift from Hashem. "When G-d wants to reward a person, He sends a poor person to his door." Viewed this way, every guest is a Divine gift.

It says: "*Hachnasas orchim* is greater than greeting the *Shechinah*." Every act of *hachnasas orchim* is a way of bringing the *Shechinah* into your home. The main example in the Torah about *hachnasas orchim* is about Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imeinu performing *hachnasas orchim* for three beings who didn't really need it because they were angels. One should view one's guests as angels of G-d. They don't need the *hachnasas orchim* as much as you need to give it. The Midrash on Megillas Rus says: "More than the rich person does for the poor person, the poor person does for the rich person."

What would you advise women who feel overburdened at the prospect of having guests?

Unquestionably, every person is entitled to rest, privacy, and relaxation, but millions of Jews don't have a real connection to Torah and *mitzvos*. Each *frum* person can make an unbelievable impact on these souls. For women who feel they don't have the *koach* to host guests, I would advise reading books about *emunah*, *bitachon*, and *chessed*. As the Torah teaches in

Parashas Ekev, it is Hashem Who gives you *koach*.

In the merit of the righteous women, *Am Yisrael* was redeemed from *Mitzrayim*, and will similarly be redeemed in the future. It's the women who must intensify their *emunah* that Hashem is running the world, and He's the only address to turn to Who can fulfill all their needs. Women can talk to Hashem, in their own words, all day long, asking Him to help them open their hearts and their homes. Coupled with *emunah* and *tefillah*, they will feel less overwhelmed. This is how we can bring the *geulah*.

It costs you about \$2,500 for every Shabbos. You have already mortgaged your apartment to the hilt, and have taken out many loans. How do you keep the financial burden from making you worried and depressed? What happens when there is no money to pay the expenses of another huge Shabbos?

I say to Hashem, "This is Your project, so please help us through." There are generous, benevolent Jews who want to be part of this *mitzvah* and send donations to our U.S. tax-exempt organization (American Friends of Chesed L'orchim, 552 E. 5th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11218). We are constantly seeking donors and sponsors, but unquestionably, it is a struggle.

What does your yetzer hara say to you regarding guests?

When you're trying to do a *mitzvah*, the *yetzer hara* comes with all kinds of

complaints. But when you persevere, the *yetzer hara* quiets down. In the *Tanya* it says that Hashem doesn't give you the strength to do a *mitzvah* when you're deciding whether or not to do it. Only when you've decided to do it does Hashem give you the strength and wherewithal. Also, I try to attend two or three Torah classes each week. Learning Torah helps me combat my *yetzer hara*.

Are all women cut out to have Shabbos guests?

All women can have Shabbos guests. Maybe not a lot, maybe not every week, maybe for just *seudah shelishis*, but every woman can and should have some guests sometimes. Even if a woman is



involved in other forms of *chessed*, she should realize that *hachnasas orchim* is a unique *mitzvah* that everyone should be involved in on some level. All *chessed mitzvos* hasten the *Geulah* and bring blessing to the world. But *hachnasas orchim* is singular in its ability to bring people closer to Hashem.

If a woman really feels that she is not currently capable of *hachnasas orchim*, I would humbly recommend that she become *indirectly* involved in *hachnasas orchim*. Directing people to homes and programs that provide *hachnasas orchim*, helping to cook and serve, contributing financially, and praying for the success of *hachnasas orchim* programs are on some level tantamount to *hachnasas orchim* itself.

Are all women cut out to do kiruv rechokim? What if their husbands can't sing or give inspiring divrei Torah?

Even given these circumstances, there's still a great need for hospitality for those who are already religiously observant and inspired. Many singles, divorcees, widows and widowers, travelers, newcomers, students, and converts are in constant need of a warm and loving family Shabbos atmosphere.

For example, there was a divorced, religious man in his mid-forties who was alone every Shabbos for many months after his divorce. Then someone directed him to our home. He started coming for all three meals, every single Shabbos. He is one of many who have told us that if not for

immediately after *Maariv* in order to have a private family Shabbos dinner before the public one. Every weekday, they have either a family dinner or lunch together.

Now I turn to the girls and ask Leah, the fourth-eldest daughter, "Did you enjoy growing up in this house?"

Her response is enthusiastic. "Are you kidding? It was full-time, free entertainment. Seriously, because my parents took care of the whole world, Hashem took care of us. For example, one summer, when I was fifteen, I applied for a job as a counselor, and didn't get it. My father said, 'Don't worry, you'll have a good summer.' There was an expensive summer program for girls from the U.S. It cost \$5000 per camper. They had six weeks

Maybe not a lot, maybe not every week, but every woman can and should have guests. It's a unique mitzvah.

finding this loving, warm, and accepting atmosphere, it would have been the end of his life. Shabbos with us gave him joy, strength, love, and inspiration. According to him, Shabbos with us makes his life worth living.

During the interview, five of the Machlis daughters, two married and three younger ones, gravitate to the nearby couches to listen. I look at them and consider what is for many a major deterrent to having Shabbos guests — the concern that one's children will suffer from lack of attention. The Machlises deal with this by scheduling their public Shabbos dinner late, giving time for people to walk in from all over Yerushalayim, and locking the door

of excursions and the best speakers. My father called the director of the program, and the director said, 'You do so much for *Am Yisrael*. Your twin daughters can come for free.' We went for two summers. Seven years later, two of my sisters also went for free for two years. That's how Hashem takes care of us."

Henny ends off with the following message: "People should be in touch with the incredible blessing that comes to them and their families from hosting guests. At every meal, I say to the guests, 'I want to thank you all for coming, because we know that the *Shechinah* rests on the head of every individual. Thank you for bringing so much of G-d's presence into our home.' **B**