

The World of Kiruv

“The Talmid of Avraham Avinu”

By Braha Bender

They received the letter three months later. “If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t be keeping Torah and *mitzvos* today.” The letter went on to explain that the writer, a young woman from America, had been a student at a well-known seminary for *baalos teshuvah* for several weeks, but had somehow come to the conclusion that, despite all she had learned, Torah Judaism wasn’t for her. “One Shabbos more,” wrote the young woman, “and I was going to leave Israel, go home to the city I grew up in and completely return to my secular way of life.”

But something changed for that young woman during what was to be her final Shabbos. Her Friday night meal took her to the home of Rabbi Mordechai and Rebbetzin Henny Machlis.

Rebbetzin Machlis remembers that Shabbos well. It had been the Shabbos before Pesach and the *Seder* night was going to be on Motzaei Shabbos. The entire house had been cleaned for Pesach and the food for the *Seder* had all been carefully prepared and stored away. “That Shabbos, we only had enough food for a certain number of guests,” the Rebbetzin explains.

However, when over six dozen more unexpected visitors arrived for the meal that Friday night, the Machlis family sprang into action. Borrowing extra food from neighbors and emptying their own kitchen, serving every last morsel they had planned to eat for their own *Seder* the following night, Rabbi and Rebbetzin Machlis greeted every one of the newcomers with sincere smiles, warm words of welcome and a good meal.

“I was one of those unexpected guests,” wrote the young woman months later. “Thanks to you, I decided to stay in seminary and continue to change my life.”

This wasn’t the first and surely won’t be the last of letters like this received by Rabbi and Rebbetzin Machlis. From their modest home in the Maalot Dafna neighborhood of Yerushalayim, this dynamic couple hosts Shabbos meals for over 100 guests, for each Shabbos meal, all year long. Since their marriage in 1979, their commitment to the *mitzvah* of *kiruv* and the size of their Shabbos table has only grown.

“We feel limited that we can only fit in about 150 people each meal,” the Rabbi tells me, pulling *maseches Brachos* (58b) from a nearby bookshelf. “Rabi Chana bar Chanilai had 60 baking by day and 60 baking by night for anyone in need. With millions of people in *Klal Yisrael*, we’ve only had the *zechus* of sharing Shabbos with a few tens of thousands.”



Tables prepared for hundreds of Shabbos guests at the Machlis home.

The Machlises really don’t think they’re anything special. “We’d like to be able to share Shabbos with every single Jew in the world.”

Besides running Shabbos tables filled with *zemiros* and *divrei Torah* for hundreds, Rabbi Machlis also teaches at both Yeshivas Lev HaTorah in Ramat Bet Shemesh and at Bar Ilan

This dynamic couple hosts Shabbos meals for over one hundred guests all year long.

University in Tel Aviv. The famously joyful Machlis *minyan* takes place at the Kosel every Shabbos morning. Torah classes are taught by Rabbi Machlis throughout Yerushalayim several evenings a week.

Rebbetzin Machlis’ unique ability to empathize and understand every Jewish woman brings women of all ages and stages to call her when they need advice, insight and a listening ear. The Rebbetzin, who has a B.S. in education as well as degrees in Hebrew teaching and dietetics, works full-time caring for the Machlises’ 14 children.

“I once spoke with one of the *Gedolim* about whether big *Shabbosos* get in the way of raising our children properly,” adds the Rebbetzin.

“You have from Motzaei Shabbos to Friday afternoon,” the *Gadol* had replied.

Every day, at least one of the meals is spent with the entire family alone, including Shabbos. After bringing in an early Shabbos, the doors are

locked for an early family meal before the guests arrive. The *Seder* night is also spent without guests, in order to best practice the *mitzvah* of “*v’higadeta l’vincha*.”

“There’s a *passuk* in *Tehillim* (37:3) that says, ‘Trust in Hashem and do good,’ Rebbetzin Machlis says. “Once you trust in Hashem and commit to doing what He wants you to do, a special *siyatta diShmaya* comes into your life to make it possible, in a way you never could have imagined before. What looks impossible suddenly becomes possible. But you first have to decide to do it.”

Rabbi Machlis tells me that he decided to live his life this way before he was married. Three months after their *chasunah*, the couple made *aliyah* from Brooklyn, where both were raised. “We came from homes with tremendous role-models and wanted to do *kiruv* by sharing Shabbos with everyone we could. After all, *Klal Yisrael* is like a *sefer Torah*. Every *neshamah* is a letter. If something is wrong with one letter, the entire *sefer Torah* is *pasul*.”

With guests from around the globe, the Machlises sometimes welcome members of *Klal Yisrael* from surprising places. Guests at a Machlis Shabbos meal a few years ago were shocked to see a fellow visitor stand up to introduce herself and break down crying. “I’m a practicing Mormon, but my mother is Jewish,” the woman told the crowd. “This is the first Jewish experience I have ever had in my whole life.”

“Usually guests leave after the third meal, but one Shabbos a few years ago, a young man was still in our living room long after *Havdalah*,” shares Rabbi Machlis. “He had spent all three

meals with us, but as Shabbos ended, I approached the young man, hoping to find a way to say goodnight. Suddenly, during the course of our conversation together, the young man burst into tears. He confessed to me that, although both of his parents were Jewish, he had come to Israel with a group of missionaries from Long Island, intending to convert as many Jews as he could.”

“But now I’m confused,” the young man told Rabbi Machlis. “The warmth, the joy and the depth I’ve experienced here in your home isn’t at all what I thought Judaism was like!” As the conversation continued, Rabbi Machlis and the young man came to an agreement together. The very next morning, the young man would bring his entire missionary group to the Machlis home where the group’s leader and Rabbi

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Machlis would debate the authenticity of Torah Judaism. If Rabbi Machlis won the debate, the young man would enroll in yeshiva.

A few weeks later, the Machlises received a surprising visit from the young man’s mother, angrily accusing them of involving her son in a cult.

“He says he won’t eat in my kitchen any more!” With the help of Rabbi Machlis, the newly-observant young man agreed to return to America and study in a yeshiva closer to home, while his mother agreed to *kasher* her kitchen.

Rebbetzin Machlis tells me about a young man from Brazil who became a regular guest.

“He used to have long hair and wear jeans. When he saw the framed picture on the wall quoting the commandment to serve Hashem with joy, this young man exclaimed, ‘That’s the *mitzvah* for me! I do that! I’ve always made sure to have a good time on Shabbat...’”

This young man had never been exposed to Torah before, but since he had grown up knowing that Friday night and Shabbos were special times for the Jews, he had made sure to “celebrate” every week by going out with his friends for entertainment. With the Machlis family’s help, he slowly but surely learned new, better ways of celebrating Shabbos, continuing on to Yeshivas Binyan Olam, and inspiring his entire family to become religious. “We were sorry when he had to stop coming. We danced at his wedding a few years later,” the Rebbetzin says with a smile.

The Machlises’ hopes for the future include a full-service Hospitality Center, but financial limitations make that impossible for now, since the expense of each Shabbos alone exceeds \$2,000. The Machlis family has covered costs independently with the help of loans and the recent opening of a U.S. tax-deductible fund called American Friends of Chesed L’Orchim.

Despite financial constraints, however, the *siyatta diShmaya* Rebbetzin Machlis describes makes its way into the Machlis home every week. For one thing, the Machlis children of all ages are the kind of secure, content, productive children one might not expect from a home so dynamically focused on taking care of other people. “*Tehillim* 37:26 says, ‘All day having compassion and lending to others and his children are for a blessing,’” Rabbi Machlis tells me. “A person who is involved with giving to others sees blessing for his own children, *b’ezras Hashem*.”

Rabbi and Rebbetzin Machlis’ caring, patient parenting certainly goes a long way towards ensuring their children’s good *middos*, as well. Rebbetzin Machlis relates this story. “Years ago, when the children were much younger, a Shabbos came along when they all seemed to be having fits. They were all running around fighting, and I told my husband that this was going to be the last of our big Shabbos meals. I

thought that no one would get a good impression of *Yiddishkeit* with my children behaving like this! When the meal was over, though, a secular couple approached me to offer thanks for the Shabbos dinner and tell me how impressed they were that I had handled my children's behavior so calmly!"

"In another home, this situation would have had parents screaming and hitting their children, but you stayed patient and loving the entire night! We want our home to be like this," the young couple exclaimed eagerly.

"People always seem to show up at the right time," Rebbetzin Machlis continues. "Sometimes I'm unable to begin cooking for Shabbos until Friday afternoon. A group of seminary girls wanting to do *chessed* arrive right then. One Shabbos, when my older children were going away from Thursday evening until after Shabbos, I really didn't know how I would get everything together. Just then, the phone rang with a call from a group of eight American tourists who wanted to participate in preparing Shabbos with me that very week. Hashem always makes sure it all gets

done."

Later, one of Rebbetzin Machlis' long-time students asks whether I had noticed the oven. "They had been preparing Shabbos for hundreds of people with a regular-sized oven and just four burners for years. Eventually, they called a friend in America who owned an electronics store to inquire about the price of a new oven. He was so impressed by their *chessed* activity that he offered them an expensive, industrial-sized oven at half-price!

"Then, at his own initiative, the store owner called the oven's manufacturers, told them all about the Machlises, and they decided to cover the additional cost! Someone who was arranging a lift to Israel from America decided to donate some free space for the oven to be imported overseas, and the Machlises ended up getting a brand new industrial-sized oven for free. They're looking for a new one now, since, after a decade of use, the oven hasn't been working lately. But have you seen their kitchen? Two small Israeli sinks and a few inches of counter space is where they prepare Shabbos for hundreds of people!"

The truth is, though, that the most striking thing about Rabbi and Rebbetzin Machlis is neither the number of guests they welcome each week, nor the astounding stories of Jewish *neshamos* brought back into the fold thanks to their warmth, positive outlook and sincere caring for every Jew.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, how striking these facts are, they do not inspire as much as the Machlises' own humility. They simply take no credit for the great deeds they do. Their entire focus is on caring for anyone who enters their home. I had never spoken with them before, but they treated me like family. It's easy to understand why Rabbi Machlis' unofficial title at weddings, *simchahs*, and events around the world is "the *talmid* of Avraham Avinu."

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