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## Rebbetzin Henny Machlis A”H - Epitomizing Hachnosas Orchim

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By C. B. Weinfeld

Some realities simply defy logic. As much as we try to comprehend them, we cannot wrap our minds around the facts. But since they are facts and not conjecture, we are forced to admit that there is a Higher Power Who makes the impossible happen, as long as we do our share.

The life of Rebbetzin Henny Machlis, who was niftar last Friday at the age of 58, is one such example. Like the famed Rav Meir Shuster, who picked up thousands of lost souls at the Western Wall, Henny was a legend.

For many years, I have been hearing and reading about the famous Machlis family where over 100 people, and often many more, are welcomed each week for the Shabbos meals. The Machlis home in Maalot Dafna is modest by American standards, with a tiny kitchen that doesn't have room for a table, but somehow their home stretched to accommodate everyone who needed a hot meal and a place to belong.

“It was like going to the circus, where you see two clowns coming out of a small box, and you think that's it, there's no more room, but then another sixteen clowns somehow march out,” recalled a relative. “That was the Machlis oven (which had to be replaced every few years, due to its heavy-duty use). No matter how many people showed up unexpectedly, there were always more trays of chicken, more side dishes, more food.”

Feeding the hungry, the tired, the impoverished and the broken-hearted, as well as seminary students, tourists, backpackers, and those looking for an authentic chavayah, isn't cheap. In fact, the Machlis family, whose sole income is Rabbi Mordechai Machlis' teaching positions, spends over \$2500 a week on food! Over the years they spent their wedding money, mortgaged their home, and went deeply into debt to pay for this. Later, a fund was established for those who want a part of this incredible mitzvah. However, the bulk of the finances remained on their shoulders.

“Rabbi Mordechai and Henny had a clear vision since they were married in 1979,” said a family member. “They wanted to bring the joy of Shabbos to as many people as they could. They felt that we are experiencing a spiritual Holocaust, that we are bleeding souls, and that every Yid should have a taste of true Shabbos.

“They entered a partnership with Hashem: we will cook and serve the food, and You will help us with the money part. Though it was always a struggle, somehow, with Hashem's help, they pulled through.”

And what an operation it is! Watching the Machlis family prepare for Shabbos is akin to observing the goings on in a huge catering kitchen, minus the space and equipment. There might be the worry of finances, the issue of how to squeeze so many people into such a tiny space, but Henny never lost her cool. “I don't know how she pulled it off, but she was always so incredibly relaxed,” the relative recalled. “Even if the meal was supposed to start at six, and by a quarter to six the food wasn't ready, Henny would be calm and smiling. She knew it will work out somehow, and it always did.”

Every week, like clockwork, the food order arrives on Thursday morning. It is quite a sight; cases of chickens, all manner of vegetables, and other staples are delivered to the front door. After the delivery men leave, the Machlis children and a group of dedicated volunteers roll up their sleeves and get to work. As Rebbetzin Machlis once shared in an interview, it took her and three of her children, working together, about eight or nine hours to cook all the food! While they chop, dice and stir, they daven that the food taste good and that their guests be inspired.

As Henny explained, “Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said when you cook, the energy that you use goes into the food. If you cook with anger, you can poison people, but if you cook with joy, you can give them good health.”

These massive meals are prepared 51 weeks a year, except for the week of Pesach, when the Machlis family goes away to have a private family seder and fulfill the mitzvah of vehigaditah levinchah. Even during a week of simchos, such as a family sheva brochos, the food is still cooked and prepared, while a volunteer is found to lead the meals. After all, leaving the regulars without a place to eat is unthinkable.

Though the Machlis Shabbos experience is a joint effort, the heart and soul of the Machlis home was undoubtedly Henny, the akeres habayis. Though one might expect someone who spends endless hours in the kitchen doing heavy-duty work to appear harried and careworn, Henny’s face was always lit up with a joyous smile. The more she gave, the more she blossomed.

Most remarkable of all, not only didn’t her children resent the money, time and attention that this Shabbos project usurped, they were felt proud and privileged to be a part of it. Unlike normal teenagers whose outlets are going to the mall or spending time with friends, the Machlis children looked forward to Thursdays in the kitchen, which were spent singing, chopping and dicing. Even a five year old Machlis girl would bake an incredible chocolate cake, from scratch!

### **First Things First**

The fourteen Machlis children, ten daughters and four sons, grew up in an open home where the door was never locked. Yet they never felt like second-class citizens, shunted aside due to the often-overwhelming needs of others. Henny was a full-time mother since her sixth child was born. All week she was dedicated to her children, raising them with softness and love.

During one interview with Henny, noted author Sara Yoheved Rigler observed an interaction between Henny and her then-young son, who threw an expensive tape recorder onto the floor. “We have to treat our appliances with respect, or they will break,” Henny serenely explained.

When questioned how she could be so calm even though she could not afford to buy another one, Henny described how important it is to raise children in a calm environment.

“Of course, we all lose it sometimes, and we all have our struggles. In our home, we try not to yell or hit. Rabbi Hirsh wrote that if you have a choice between being rigid and educating your children in all the values and behaviors that you cherish, or being loving and educating them without anger and not getting everything you want, it’s preferable to educate without anger. I always had a dream that I would have a peaceful home. Then it was just a matter of attaining it, with Hashem’s help and tefillah.”

Henny’s youngest child, twelve year old Efrat, was born with Down Syndrome. She is a beautiful, happy child who fits right into the dynamics of this wonderful family. She was raised by her mother and nine older sisters, and happily joined in the weekly Machlis Shabbos cooking project.

Many people making a simcha stress over the details such as exactly how many people are being served and how many portions they will need. When one’s Shabbos table can host anywhere between 80-150 people, how can one know how much to prepare?

“They prepared for about 100 people, give or take, and somehow the food stretched,” extended family members recalled.

What if there were less people? The Machlis relatives laughed. “There were almost never less than expected. If anything, the crowds grew over the years.”

For most of Thursday and all of Friday, the Machlis kitchen resembled a well-oiled soup kitchen, with the most delectable dishes prepared one after another. Then came the moment of candle-lighting, when peace descended upon the humble apartment. Rabbi Machlis would daven at an early minyan and come home from shul before the guests in order to host the family meal, dedicated to the Machlis children. This meal, instituted several years ago, was exclusive family time, a cherished ritual that spoke louder than words. The children knew that they were the most important members of the home.

Rabbi Machlis reviewed the parshah with the children and they sang zemiros and shmoozed. After the meal was up, that section of the dining room was cleared, the tables were reset, and the guests began flocking in.

One never knew what to expect. The weekly guests ranged from the regulars, unfortunates who considered themselves Henny’s children, to curious tourists and university students to lonely widows and singles to drunks and mentally ill people. In fact, some of those who had nowhere to go would remain at the Machlis home for weeks at a time, eating at their table, showering, and sleeping in the Machlis home. Those who were emotionally unstable and were deemed a danger to the children were allowed to sleep in the Machlis car! In the morning, when Rabbi Machlis went to his car, he could tell how many people slept in it by how many shoes were piled up on the windshield.

### **Strong Roots**

Rebbetzin Henny Machlis was a regular Brooklyn girl, born in 1958, raised on Avenue K and Coney Island, where her mother, Mrs. Edith Lustig, still lives. Her father, Rabbi Murray Lustig, was niftar over thirty years ago. Henny was a lively girl with a soft and warm side, always taking care of the underdog and giving to others. She had seen the same chesed in the home of her parents, whose acts of chesed to the less fortunate were legendary.

As Henny once stated in an interview, “I always noticed my mother’s chesed and compassion, the way she treated the cleaning lady, the carpenter and fix-it man with such kindness and respect.” Her father once showed up at the hospital where a friend’s child was in a coma with a signed blank check, and told the distraught parents to fill in the amount; he would cover the medical expenses.

Mordechai and Henny married 36 years ago on Rosh Chodesh Nissan of 1979. For the first few months of their marriage, they lived in a small Flatbush apartment. Henny, who had a degree in education and another in nutrition, wanted to teach and inspire others, but she shared an even more powerful dream with her husband: to combat what she called a “spiritual Holocaust” and share the joy of Shabbos and Yiddishkeit with others.

Already on the first week after their marriage, Rabbi Mordechai Machlis put their shared plan into action. He brought home a mentally disabled couple who slept in their spare bedroom and ate with them on Shabbos for weeks! Until they moved to Eretz Yisroel that summer, the Machlis newlyweds invited dozens of guests to their Brooklyn Shabbos table every week. That was just a practice run. Almost as soon as they moved to Eretz Yisroel, their Shabbos vision became a reality.

The stories of the Machlis table remind me of the famous book “All for the Boss” written by Rebbetzin Ruchama Shain about her unforgettable father, Rav Yaakov Yosef Herman, who cornered the market on hachnosas orchim back in the early 1900s in the Lower East Side.

In her book, stories abound, such as the story of the mentally disturbed man who poured his cholent over his host’s new kapote and fled, only to have Rav Yaakov Yosef bring him back to the table, speaking softly, saying, “I will bring you a plate of cholent that you will like.”

So too, Rabbi and Rebbetzin Machlis willingly tolerated a wide range of unusual and challenging guests, many of whom drained their time and resources, with a smile.

### **A Special Aura**

The attendees at the Machlis Shabbos meals describe an intensely spiritual experience. “The meals were noisy and spirited, with lots of spirited conversation, singing, and most of all, listening.

“No matter how many people were at the table, everyone had a chance to speak and be heard,” said one participant. “Rabbi Machlis went around the table, asking each of us to share words of wisdom or something interesting they observed. They listened to everyone with such respect, even awe, making each of their guests feel special.”

“Rabbi and Rebbetzin Machlis had the uncanny ability of listening carefully, of making you feel that you were the most important person in the room,” another friend echoed. In fact, once someone was a guest at the Machlis home, Rebbetzin Machlis never forgot them. “You could come back, even years later, and Henny would say, ‘How’s your daughter?’ or, ‘Did this-and-this issue resolve itself?’ She genuinely cared about everyone and shared their struggles.”

Over the years, there were some unfortunates who may have taken advantage of the Machlis’ generosity, draining their time and resources, but the Machlis’ took it all in stride.

As their eldest son, Moshe, tearfully related at the levayah, “When I got married, my mother took me aside and said, ‘If you ever feel the need to leave kollel because of financial concerns, come to me and I will sell my jewelry.’ Moshe began to cry, ‘Ima, you forgot that you didn’t have any jewelry! You lent someone your diamond ring many years ago, and never got it back.’”

The Machlis door was often wide open, and they were not afraid of thieves. Aside for trays of food on Thursday night and two couches in the living room, which were moved for Shabbos, there was nothing to steal!

Rabbi Mordechai Machlis related one moving story at the levayah: there was an impoverished, lonely man who used to frequent the Kosel and was invited by Rabbi Machlis for dinner. That night, Henny served her homemade whole-wheat pizza, which the guest especially enjoyed. He began coming by frequently, asking for a slice of pizza. Eventually, Rebbetzin Machlis gave him the recipe, carefully repeating it numerous times, and showing him how to make it himself.

A few days passed. Late one night, at 3:00 a.m., there was a knock on their bedroom door. Rabbi Machlis opened the door, still half-asleep, and was surprised to find their guest standing there, saying he had forgotten the recipe and wanted the rebbetzin to show him how to make her famous pizza. Rabbi Machlis, who had infinite patience for every Yid, was just a bit frustrated. “At 3:00 a.m. you want my wife to make pizza?” But Henny was unfazed. “This is a test from Heaven,” she told her husband, and calmly got dressed, went to the kitchen, and showed him how to make the pizza. Dozens of other stories happened on a weekly basis in the Machlis home.

Mrs. Sarah Shapiro recalled meeting Henny Machlis and her daughter walking to the Kosel one Shabbos. Ahead of them walked an unkempt beggar who frequented the Machlis home, pushing two of the Machlis grandchildren in a stroller! Henny had given him that privilege to make him feel like a mentch.

As Sara Yoheved Rigler wrote, in an Aish article about Henny, with whom she had a close relationship, “One Shabbos a young American student wearing a nose ring and an eyebrow ring was determined to undermine every word of Torah Rabbi Machlis tried to share with his guests. Every time Rabbi Machlis spoke, the student would yell out, ‘That’s stupid!’ or he would laugh out loud. Exasperated, Rabbi Machlis said to his wife, ‘That’s it. He’s just too disruptive,’ and sat down.

“Henny encouraged her husband to ignore what he said. ‘Don’t speak to him; speak to his neshomah.’ One of the small Machlis children asked, ‘Why do you have that dumb thing in your nose?’ The student retorted, ‘Why do you have that dumb thing on your head?’ To which the little boy replied, ‘Because I always have to know that there’s Someone above me and higher than me and better than me. Now why do you have that dumb thing in your nose?’

“The student returned to his dorm room and wrote in his diary, ‘Just imagine, that little kid knows why he’s wearing a kippah, but I have no idea why I’m wearing a nose ring.’ Three days later he returned to the Machlis’ apartment and announced, ‘I want to learn more about what it means to be a Jew.’

“Once, an American man in his early twenties ate the Shabbos meals at the Machlis home. At the end of Shabbos, he approached Rabbi Machlis and admitted that he was confused. He was raised in a secular Jewish home and had become a born-again Christian, coming to Israel with an Evangelical group in order to missionize the Jews. After a long conversation, he and Rabbi Machlis agreed that he would return with his whole Evangelical group the next day for lunch, and Rabbi Machlis would engage in a debate with the head of the group, who had a master’s degree in theology.

“If Rabbi Machlis’ arguments prevailed, the young man would enroll in a yeshiva to study Judaism; if his group leader won the debate, he would continue with his missionary activities.

“Apparently Rabbi Machlis won, for the former missionary enrolled in yeshiva. Several weeks later the young man’s mother flew to Israel. She stormed into the Machlis home and accused them of kidnapping her son into a cult. He had written that he would not eat in her home unless she made her kitchen kosher! Rabbi Machlis calmed her down and brokered a deal between her. Her son would return to America and study at a yeshiva close to home, on condition that she make her kitchen kosher. Several years later, while attending a Torah class in New York, Henny met the young man, now sporting a beard. He told her that he was married, with two children, and that his mother also had become an observant Jew!

“One day an American man, disheveled and emotionally distraught, came to their house. He told them he had no money, no place to live, and no food. So, as usual, they invited him to stay with them. He claimed that he was a prominent attorney, a graduate of a prestigious law school, and was being pursued in the United States by certain people who had grievances against him.

“Henny and Mordechai gave him the benefit of the doubt. They asked friends in America to check out his story. It turned out that it was all true - including that he owned a house in New Jersey. These friends, granted power of attorney, managed to sell the house, pack up all of its contents, and send them to him in Israel. Today the attorney is successfully practicing law in Israel. He is happily married and owns a large apartment in Yerushalayim.”

One longtime Machlis guest recalled a memorable Friday night meal where the lights, and the newly installed air conditioner, gave out. Suddenly, the dining room was plunged into darkness. Some of the guests began to feel claustrophobic and uncomfortable, but Rabbi Machlis signaled for silence. He addressed his guests, speaking lovingly about how wonderful it was that the lights were out, and that we can focus on the serenity and beauty of the Shabbos candles. An inner peace descended upon the dining room, as the conversation muted, and everyone focused inward. Though the lights went on a few minutes later, many of the guests secretly wished they hadn’t.

Over the years, many of the Machlis regulars, who had been going through hard times, got their lives back on track, got married, and raised their own families, yet continued going to the Machlis home for Shabbos meals. Henny spent endless hours counseling, advising, giving chizuk to suffering Jews, or simply listening. Her heart was big enough to encompass all that pain, and her smile never faltered. Everyone felt that they were her best friend, her favorite relative, her closest confidante.

### **Sunset**

When Henny was first diagnosed several years ago, the Machlis family took their new reality in stride, keeping the news private, continuing to host their ever-growing Shabbos meals. Later, when Henny was being treated at Memorial Sloan Kettering, her children and other volunteers took over in the kitchen, cooking and serving the guests. Shutting down the Shabbos Machlis experience was unthinkable. Their guests were relying on them.

Henny spent the last two years of her life going back and forth from Eretz Yisroel and her family to Brooklyn, where she underwent painful and grueling treatments. She was determined to recover, to go back to her family and continue taking care of her guests. Giving to others, and going to kivrei tzaddikim to daven gave her strength.

“During one of her visits, I broached the idea of perhaps cutting back on her schedule, going on vacation, (in her 36 years of marriage, I don’t recall any) or limiting the amounts of guests she served. She looked at me like I was off the wall,” said a family friend. “The thought of disappointing those who depended on her was unthinkable.

When asked once, “Don’t you ever need a break?” Henny replied, “Not really. This is our raison d’etre. This is holiness. This is happiness. In my former years, maybe I would have wanted more time off, but as time goes on, and I get into a system, and I get more dedicated to the idea, I think God has withdrawn some of the pitfalls, and it runs more smoothly.

“They say that in Jerusalem of old, when people would eat, they would hang a tablecloth outside their door. If anyone would see the tablecloth, they would know they could come in and eat. So I’m hoping for the day when everyone will hang out a tablecloth so that people can just come in.”

During those long and painful hours undergoing chemotherapy, Henny davened, talking to Hashem from the depths of her heart like a child to her father. She had such a vibrant, living connection to Him. Even in the midst of her weakness and pain, she remained smiling, enthusiastic, interested in the lives of those around her.

As Henny’s illness progressed, she was determined to go back home and spend her remaining time with her loved ones. She went back to Eretz Yisroel for Rosh Hashanah, and spent Yomim Tovim at home, surrounded by her devoted husband, children, grandchildren, and dozens of guests.

Henny was niftar on erev Shabbos parshas Noach, and was laid to rest in Eretz Yisroel. A few hours after her levayah, the family gathered, this time for a simcha - the bar mitzvah of her eldest grandson. This focus on life and joy personifies Henny’s essence.

The Machlis family is determined to perpetuate their mother’s legacy, her lifetime of chesed, and will continue serving the hungry, the lonely, those looking for meaning and courage in a difficult world.

Rebbetzin Henny Machlis is survived by her mother, four siblings, her husband Reb Mordechai, their fourteen children, seven of whom are married, and numerous grandchildren. May her memory be a blessing.

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53 Olympia Lane  
Monsey, NY 10952  
t. 845.369.1600  
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