

ILLUMINATING THE DARKNESS

BY: LEAH NUSBACHER

Michlalah Jerusalem College, located in Bayit Vegan, has been educating young ladies from overseas since 1969. When the war began, the school administration immediately set out to see how their beautiful campus and their dedicated seminary students could help.

The Yeshiva in Sderot, has a famous menorah on its roof made out of the shells of rockets fired at Sderot from Gaza. Why would it be appropriate to build a Menorah, such a holy vessel, from rockets that were used for such evil intent? One explanation is that this is symbolic; a way to fight evil and darkness by spreading chesed and light. This in fact, is how Klal Yisrael responded since the outbreak of the war. The sheer magnitude of chesed being done is unbelievable. The enemy might try and destroy us by firing rockets and spreading evil and destruction, but the Jewish nation responds by increasing its chesed and bringing light to the world. Being involved in chesed is one of our most

potent weapons.

When the war broke out on October 7th, life in Israel changed dramatically. Everyone at the Michlalah seminary, including staff, students, and parents, wanted to know what they could do to help. In the weeks since, Michlalah has been spearheading many important chesed projects to help the war effort. This idea, of illuminating the darkness, has been at the forefront of every chesed initiative that Michlalah has run this year. The goal - to bring joy and cheer and assistance to those who need it most.

Following the massacre on that black day in October, tens of thousands of Israeli citizens had to deal

with their new existence of homelessness. Dr. Devorah Rosenwasser, Rector of Michlalah, and the head of the American program, generously invited an entire midrasha - seminary for Israelis - from Sderot; a city located just minutes away from Gaza. Fifty-six students plus staff members shared classrooms, food, and dormitories on the Michlalah campus. Additional displaced families from Sderot that needed housing were also invited on campus by Dr. Rosenwasser.

The students from the Midrasha in Sderot ate lunch in Michlalah's dining room daily. Over the weeks that they lived on campus, the Michlalah students became close with their "sisters from Sderot." They joined together

for four separate evenings of song, tefilla, and solidarity. Together they heard divrei chizuk from Rav and Rabbanit Fendel, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Sderot; did a chesed project together, making candy platters and baking homemade goodies for soldiers and families with relatives in the army; celebrated an inspirational Chanuka Chagiga together with spirited singing and dancing. The unity between these young ladies was felt by all and it was hard to tell which group gave the other more chizuk and encouragement. Esther Franklin, a student from California, said, "Through our effort, I think we can all agree that our connection with Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael has never been stronger, as we try to do our part for the nation."

When another occasion to help presented itself, Michlalah not only seized the opportunity, but went above and beyond. You cannot imagine how delighted Tamar, Avigail, Yasmin, Orelle, and their families were when Michlalah offered to host a bas mitzvah celebration for them. Three of the families are from Sderot and they have been living in hotel rooms since October 7, with no end date in sight. One relative who attended said it was the first time she left the hotel, because she has three children under the age of three, with no day care, and her husband is on reserve duty in the army. The fourth girl lives on the Michlalah campus, as her father is a security guard, but her bas mitzvah was cancelled when he was called up for reserve duty.

The photographer, balloon artist, professional cake and cookie designers, and the DJ all donated their goods

and services. A few staff members posted on their neighborhood chats, and they were inundated with mousse cups, frosted cupcakes, cake pops, lemon cups, and more. Four hairdressers volunteered their services and went to each bat mitzvah girl's room to make sure they looked and felt their best before the big party.

The Michlalah girls and staff worked tirelessly- borrowing tablecloths, centerpieces, dancing "shtick," and setting up the dining room, the food, and the dessert table. They designed beautiful invitations and custom bentchers for each of the bas mitzvah girls. They enjoyed a delicious dairy meal complete with cotton candy, iced coffee, fresh popcorn, and a delectable dessert buffet. The Michlalah girls transformed the dining hall into a gorgeous bas mitzvah venue that looked like a fancy wedding hall. At the party, Chanuka cookies were decorated and then given out to hundreds of chayalim. The families of the bas mitzvah girls were thrilled to be on the giving end, and to do a project to benefit others.

Dr. Rosenwasser welcomed everyone and presented each of the bas mitzvah girls with beautiful and meaningful gifts – personalized leather siddurim and sefer tehillim. Every girl also received a beautiful card filled with inspiring divrei bracha. The father of one of the seminary students was visiting, and personally delivered each bas mitzvah girl a beautiful piece of jewelry as well as age-appropriate gifts for the rest of the family. The girls and their families were all so happy to dance the night away, and the Michlalah girls had enough energy to keep that room rocking for hours.

Rebbetzin Dr. Adina Shmidman, Director of the OU Women's Initiative was visiting a niece at Michlalah the night of the bas mitzvah, "I am still captivated by the energy and excitement of the Michlalah young women, dedicating their talents and time into creating an unforgettable joyous experience for four girls and their families." The bas mitzvah girls and their families were overcome with appreciation and joy that, despite the war, they were each a princess for the night.

The Michlalah students didn't stop there. Being blessed with a child with special needs can come with all sorts of daily challenges. When the war first broke out and families from the North and South became displaced, not only did these families lose their homes but they also lost the special educational settings for their children and all sense of consistency and stability in their lives. For neurotypical children this is daunting enough, but for a child with special needs this can be especially harrowing.

The Shalva National Center was helping these families and Michlalah approached them to see if they could run a carnival for these displaced children with special needs. After consulting with professionals, Michlalah students worked tirelessly preparing booths that would be especially appropriate for them. Decorating cupcakes, balloon making, and face painting, were just some of the wonderful activities that were at the carnival. Spirited music played the whole time and Michlalah students each adopted a "buddy" with special needs to interact with throughout the



Bas Mitzvah- Tamar, Yasmin, and Avigail





Erev Shira V'Achdut with our Sisters from Sderot



Shalva Carnival- Mindi Weiss and child from Shalva



Ariella Mosak and child from Shalva

carnival. Additionally, there were two huge bouncy castles for the children to jump on, as well as slush and cotton candy machines for everyone to enjoy. Over one hundred children with special needs participated in the carnival. The Michlalah students brought so much spirit, joy and positive energy to this especially hard-hit population. The bright smiles and delight that the carnival brought to these children's faces will not quickly be forgotten by anyone in attendance.

Michlalah also hosted a Chanukah concert for displaced families and for families with loved ones serving in the army. The excitement and Chanuka spirit were palpable and pulsed throughout the room as the audience was treated to a meaningful perfor-

mance from the popular Israeli singer, Shmuel. The mothers and sisters of the students were also invited to attend. One of the student's mother personally distributed Chanukah gelt to our Israeli guest families. The families in attendance were so touched and appreciative of this wonderful Chanuka event.

Other chesed activities at Michlalah included: preparing one thousand pairs of tzitzis for chaylim; volunteering in the children's ward of Shaare Tzedek hospital; crocheting blankets; supermarket shopping; toy drives; and more for displaced families. These activities are having a deep impact on the Michlalah students, like Ilana Dassa Greenfield, who said, "So when people question why I don't go back

to New York and why am I staying in Israel if I'm not fighting in the war? I answer with confidence that even though I'm not on the frontlines in the battlefield I am in the frontlines when it comes to tefillah, learning Torah from the most inspirational teachers, and doing chesed for those in need at these difficult and challenging times."

While this seminary gap year is not going exactly as expected, the students could not have had better lessons in chesed, emunah, achdus, and kol Yisrael areyvim zeh la'zeh – all Jews are responsible for each other.

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