

Massacre in Mumbai: personal reflections

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In the beginning, Reb Gavriel and Rivki had a choice between Melbourne and Mumbai. They chose Mumbai. Hashem planned that our paths would cross one-way or another.

Parshas Toldos in Melbourne, Australia has just concluded. It is a cool and quiet evening. After two days of frantic searching, the information I was dreading reached me via SMS on that morning. One of my colleagues in Mumbai had been sending me updates, as were my past students who had travelled to the Chabad House, at my request. I saw the words “we now pray for their souls, I am sorry” flash up momentarily on my phone only to quickly disappear. It was Shabbat and I couldn’t touch my cell phone. Frankly, I didn’t even want to. Instinctively, I knew what had happened—a **nightmare on Hormusji Street**.

On Thursday evening, I had been singing at a Simcha. It was difficult, to say the least. My band, Schnapps, is well known in Melbourne. In between dance sets, I had been ringing Reb Gavriel. Fellow band members were trying to provide me with support. Gavriel had been silent for nearly 2 days. I feared the worst. We now know what transpired. I feel compelled to write. Silence is not always golden.

On this same evening, “winter” is upon Mumbai. Picture the scene. It is a cool 30 degrees centigrade—noisy, humid, odour-laden and basically offensive to our western sensibilities. An old classical Baghdadi inspired Shule in the heart of Colaba is nestled in a winding alley. There are 10–15 people sitting around Reb Gavriel, may *Hashem* avenge his blood. Reb Gavriel is speaking about the Parsha. The participants are a mixture of native Bene Israel Jews, elderly Iraqis of a bygone era, orthodox businessmen and the odd Israeli backpacker or tourist. It is the period between Mincha and Ma’ariv (or *Arbit* as they call it). Binyamin the 4 Dec. 08

beadle (shamash) sits in a corner. He is a quiet and devoted elderly man descended from the Bene Israel, who is belittled by two remaining Baghdadi Jews because he had the “temerity” to *defect* to Chabad by attending Friday night meals at Reb Gavriel and Rivki’s Chabad House. Binyamin is resolute and withstood the pressure. Freddy Sopher, is arguably the most balanced Iraqi Jew remaining. He appreciates what Reb Gavriel and Rivki are doing. He is now very weak and barely able to walk, but his ears crane to hear every word that Reb Gavriel is saying. Freddy is a devoted Jew. The prohibition of intermarriage has meant that he never married. He remains faithful to his people and religion.



Pictured: Freddy Sopher, Motzei Shabbat, Parshas Noach

Before the original Chabad house was established, Freddy’s home was **the** address for any businessman or tourist who found themselves “stuck in Mumbai” over Shabbat.

More recently a new home was established. It was a magnificent permanent five-storey edifice paid for by the magnanimous Baal Tzedoko, Mr George Rohr and his wife Pamela. This was the Chabad House of Mumbai. Reb Gavriel used to call it “Mombai” because he feared that the eponym “Mumbai” is the name of a Hindu *getchke* and, therefore, forbidden to be uttered.

My connection with India

As a Professor at RMIT, I have been a frequent visitor to India over many years. I interview and examine aspiring postgraduate students, especially those eligible for scholarships who wish to study at RMIT’s prestigious School of Computer Science and IT.

India is not a holiday on the beach. I generally carry enough food in my suitcase to last the

12 days that I traverse this vast country. I have never “seen the sites” nor explored the country. I perform my academic role and return home to Melbourne. There is no time, and to be candid, I have never wanted to venture far from hotels and airports.

Shabbat used to be a difficult day—cooped up inside a hotel room, reading and waiting for Shabbat to end. I knew there were some Jews in far-flung areas of India, but my schedule meant that I was on a flight each day, and had little time or inclination for romantic visits to communities in remote fringes of a vast country.

Mumbai is large. It is claimed to be the second most populous city proper in the world. I used to stay in an area, which was relatively close to the airport. One year, local colleagues advised me to stay somewhere a little more central. Coincidentally, I had heard that a Chabad house had opened up. This was the old Chabad house, a precursor to the newer Nariman House mentioned above.

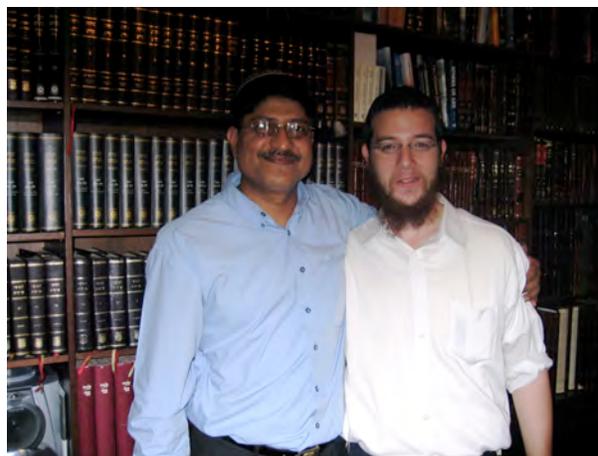
I landed in Mumbai late on a Thursday afternoon. On my way to the Taj Hotel from the airport, having arrived in India on the Sunday prior, I asked my driver if the Chabad House was “on the way”. He didn’t recognise the “Hotel” where the Chabad House was then located but after a few calls he advised me that it was indeed near the Taj and that he’d be happy to stop there.

The car stopped. I was sure we were at the wrong address. This was surely a dilapidated hotel (3 stars in India parlance). Walking up to the top floor, because the lifts were not reliable, I found myself sweating profusely, as one does in Mumbai. I approached a door with a Mezuzah and a little sign that read “Chabad House”. I knocked, but there was no answer. I knocked again, and still there was no answer. The door was slightly ajar, and I tentatively pushed. In front of me a line of Seforim materialised. You can’t imagine how foreign, a set of Sifrei Kodesh seemed in India. I backed off, continuing to knock. Eventually, Rivki HY”D came and invited me to sit down and wait because Reb Gavriel was just returning from the fish market with fish for Shabbat. Menachem Mendel A”H, their elder son, was playing nearby.

I was thunderstruck by the scene. In this part of the world I naively imagined there was not much more than a billion Indians, humidity, a

cornucopia of exotic smells, and me. Suddenly I found myself in the presence of Jews and Torah. I felt the need to **give** something. What did I have? Running downstairs to the cab, I opened returning with some chewing gum, wafers and assorted Nosh. Rivki smiled, and gently noted that her son was too young for these things. She but thanked me nonetheless. Rivki insisted that the guests would enjoy them.

At that point, Reb Gavriel arrived. We spoke and he insisted that I come for Shabbat meals. I don’t like to impose myself at the best of times, but “relented”. I was told to be at the lobby of the Taj at 6:05 p.m., on the next day, Erev Shabbat. Reb Gavriel asked me to see if I recognised any other Jews and to bring them as well. This was the first time I wasn’t cooped up in a hotel room. I waited in the lobby and, eventually, a battered ancient black cab swung by the front and I could see Reb Gavriel waving. I climbed into the tiny cab. There was barely space. One western person sat in the front, and in the rear were two Israelis, Reb Gavriel and I. For some inexplicable reason, we started to speak Yiddish. I discovered that one of the Israelis was an ex-Aussie, a son of Mord’che Rich, one of the pioneers of the Melbourne Jewish Community. It is a small world. Everything occurs through the prism of Hashgocho Protis. Prior to that we had spoken in Ivrit with a drop of English. We now spoke Yiddish until the last time I saw him. It was the language wherein we could speak privately, because almost nobody understood what we were saying.



Picture: Reb Gavriel (right) with Mr Kandlekar in the old Chabad House. Kandlekar’s sons attend Shule and the elder one reads from the Torah and leads some services.

The Shul was dilapidated and the atmosphere stifling. Old ceiling fans whirred above, while pigeons flew around, occasionally greeting the unsuspecting with fresh droppings; what a scene. The Chazan, Mr Dindorkar z"l was a Bene Yisrael Jew. His voice wasn't great, and he davened a little too slowly for my taste, but he had an endearing quality. I liked him. Perhaps I just wanted the experience to end quickly.

Reb Gavriel was cajoling me into davening Kabbolas Shabbat. I couldn't understand the reason, given that there was a Chazan already employed. In Yiddish, he quietly explained the reasons. I didn't know the Nusach but felt there was no halachic choice except to daven for the amud. In my mind I had barely stumbled through the davening (have you ever said that Sefardi version of Kaddish?) but in the mind of the paltry few locals I was an instant celebrity. My standing was enhanced on the following day when they realised I was a Cohen. They duchened twice every Shabbat, and as a lone visiting Cohen, each and every person touched my hand with their Tallis after duchening and then kissed their own Tallis. This was all new and strange to me.

Back at the Chabad House, we ate on the roof. There wasn't enough room in the unit to accommodate the crowd of 15-20. I couldn't believe there were other Jews in India. I had been ignorant on my previous trips. I discovered businessmen (mainly working in diamonds) and the Israeli backpacker phenomenon. Like Abraham and Sarah, Reb Gavriel held court with the males, and Rivki was in animated discussion with the females. They were on a mission, and it showed. Mendy, their son, was present for a short time, and then was put to bed by Sandra Samuel, one of the valued home-helpers. Sandra is now world-famous. She saved Moshe Tzvi, the little brother that Mendy would never meet. Mendy was a child always crying, and who seemed to be in great pain. I was to learn later that Mendy had an incurable disease, which would lead to his premature death.

The scene was surreal. On the roof of an old hotel in Mumbai on a Friday night, surrounded by peaceful Hindus we sat and spoke on a rooftop overseeing the famous Gateway of India.

Reb Gavriel had done his apprenticeship in Bangkok. Each guest was given the choice of

dvar torah, song, story or hachlata tova. Thankfully, I wasn't the first person to be called upon. I could have sung a song given that I run the Schnapps band in Melbourne, but I ended up presenting a dvar torah. I was to continue the tradition of giving a dvar torah each and every time I visited. My most recent dvar torah, was a few weeks ago before the tragic events that unfolded leading to the murder of Reb Gavriel and Rivki. Ironically it was Parshas Noach. I spoke about Cham and Yafes. I mentioned Rav Soloveitchik's observation that while Shem possessed ethics, Yafes was limited to etiquette.

Ironically, I didn't speak about Cham. Ominously, Cham arrived a few weeks later in the form of murderous Muslim terrorists; descendants of Phut the son of Cham, whose progeny are thought to have inhabited the India region. Ironically, the terrorists came through the harbour near the gateway of India.



Over the years, I watched Reb Gavriel and Rivki evolve from two very young and inexperienced Shluchim to polished, non-judgemental and tolerant role models.

There was some tension between the existing community and the perception of the "incursion" of Chabad into their space. I could detect it and wasn't sure how to tackle the situation. On one occasion, after returning to Australia, I decided to send an email and be forthright. To his great credit, Reb Gavriel thanked me for my advice and shared no animosity, thereafter. Indeed, I was to become a sounding board on our walks back and forth to Shule on Shabbat.

On my last Shabbat with Reb Gavriel and Rivki, only a few short weeks ago, most guests had left after the Shabbat meal. I usually went for

an afternoon nap. This time, I found myself drawn into conversation with Reb Gavriel and Rivki. We sat for hours and spoke about different things. We shared a bond and an understanding. In Melbourne, some people joked that I had become the “Shliach for Mumbai.” No, Reb Gavriel and Rivki, may their innocent blood be avenged, were the dynamic team. They were everything. I was merely one of many occasional visitors, drawn to their Shabbat table by the extreme dedication and mesiras nefesh they personified through their mission.

The Challenge of Mumbai

Mumbai wasn't a far-flung Western locale in the middle of nowhere. I acknowledge that such places do present significant challenges for people setting up Chabad Houses and I commend them for their work. Mumbai, however, is different. It is more than remote and challenging. Even those who came to “help out” before Pesach, had difficulty coping in a physical sense. I remember 3 young Bochurim who simply struggled to venture outside after one day. Most Westerners are in shock given the extreme contrast to the, perhaps, pampered lifestyle we lead.

My trips were always timed to be between Smachot, lecture schedules, Sefira or the 3 weeks. Inevitably, I was on a flight to India the morning after a Simcha. After my first meeting, I felt a need to collect money to assist Reb Gavriel and Rivki. I don't find “collecting” a natural activity, and luckily I was able to enlist the gregarious Avremy Raskin, and on other occasions Yitzchok New and Reuven Tatarka, to collect on my behalf. Upon arriving in Mumbai, I added my own contribution, and passed on the tzedoko. I knew that this money wasn't wasted. Reb Gavriel and Rivki were very touched that a community in Melbourne was assisting them. I became one of the regulars in their house. There were certainly some strange and interesting people passing through.

One time, Reb Gavriel suggested that perhaps I should sing a song because Rivki had enjoyed my singing. I made the silly and rather self-centred mistake of mentioning *that* Avraham Fried concert which I had sung at, when Avraham's voice decided it would not function. They loved the story so much, that each time I came, they re-told everyone at the table. For them, I was someone semi-famous.

I didn't want to deflate this perception given that they felt it provided their table with added importance.

When we sang together, I chose to sing Chabad Nigunim because I knew that this was precious to Reb Gavriel and Rivki. Ordinarily the songs were “simple and contemporary”—the type of songs designed for people of all walks of life. On Shabbat afternoon, we farbrenged, singing and exchanging Divrei Torah, as well as discussing Halachic issues that had arisen. These weren't simple issues.

What do you say when you are told that Reb Gavriel discovered that a woman seeking a Get was actually in a relationship with another man, and pregnant with that second man's child. The two Israeli Dayonim who had come to help with this particular Get, were aghast and almost annoyed, that Reb Gavriel had asked probing questions upon noticing a ring on the women's finger, as there was now a case of potential Mamzerus. I suggested to Reb Gavriel that he needed to find a reason to excise the original kiddushin, following the view of Reb Moshe, as opposed to Rav Henkin on such matters. He agreed, but said that the matter was now with Chief Rabbi Amar. Reb Gavriel didn't indulge in a crooked path. He was direct and followed derech hayosher.



I won't forget the last Motzei Shabbat at the Chabad House with Reb Gavriel. It was late, and everyone was asleep except for Reb Gavriel and I. Sitting in his office, he asked me to sing Unesane Tokef. He knew I davened for the amud at Elwood Shule in Melbourne on Yomim Noroim. I felt uncomfortable but complied because I realised that he simply wanted to learn as much as he could. Suddenly, he pulled out a letter and asked “how would you pasken on these sheylos”. I

looked at him, incredulously, at first. It was clear that he had become the de-facto Chief Rabbi of India. This particular letter was from the tiny community of Jews in Ahmedabad (which he had never visited). I read the letter, and between the lines could discern what was happening. He had been sitting on the letter for months. My advice was that this was the type of Shayloah that couldn't be answered unless one really knew the people. I figured that this would also provide Reb Gavriel with a pretext to meet these Jews by asking them to come to Mumbai. It was a tribute to his modesty and tzidkus that he saw fit to share such things with me.

It is hard for me to imagine that he and Rivki are now hovering around Gan Eden. Mumbai without both Reb Gavriel and Rivki just isn't Mumbai.

One Friday Evening

One Friday evening, I found myself sitting on the roof of the old Chabad House. I wasn't in a talkative mood, being really tired, and wanting to get back to the Taj to sleep. The person opposite me (who had introduced himself to everyone as "Mordechai visiting from England") had a thick English accent and persisted in making conversation, eventually introducing himself as Martin Gilbert. I then introduced myself. Turning to him I said, "you are not Sir Martin Gilbert, are you?" to which he answered, "I'm afraid so".

For the next hour I found myself in private conversation with Sir Martin and his wife, Esther. Esther was writing a set of books that served to record stories of Holocaust survivors.

I asked Sir Martin what brought him to a Chabad House on a Friday evening in Mumbai, of all places. He mentioned that when he was in China he had also visited a Chabad House, and liked the informal and friendly atmosphere. He commented that unlike China, where he felt they were being watched by the authorities, Mumbai was gloriously emancipated.

Sir Martin related that he had been travelling through India as a young student and became very ill. His mother advised him that if he was to become ill, that he should visit an Auntie Fori. Auntie Fori's husband, Mr B.K. Nehru was a famous distinguished civil servant of India,

also serving as Ambassador to the US and UK. He was a cousin of Prime Minister Nehru. Auntie Fori had curiously avoided shaking the hand of the German Foreign Minister when she had met him, and it transpired that she was a Hungarian Jewess. She knew nothing of her heritage. Begging Sir Martin to give her a history lesson about the Jews, he responded that he would write a series of letters to this effect, from England. This was subsequently published as a book entitled Letters to Auntie Fori.

Sir Martin sent me a signed copy and, in return, I sent the music to some Stoliner Nigunim. Esther's grandfather had been a Stoliner Chasid. Sir Martin and Esther left before everyone. I had surreptitiously revealed Sir Martin's identity to Reb Gavriel during the meal, but he and Rivki were otherwise involved. I suspect that if they had realised who he was, there would have been some fanfare.

For a number of years, Reb Gavriel would ask me to "tell the story about Sir Martin" to his guests. He was always proud. Everything was through Hashgocho Protis.

Slichos

How can I forget the weekend I found myself in Mumbai on the first night of Slichos. Again, it was a scene from a fairy tale. I arrived back at the Chabad House at 11:30 p.m. Normally, after Shabbat I quickly returned to the Taj, showered, turned down the air conditioning and was happy to be cool and comfortable. This time I had to venture out again into the stifling heat and up the steep staircase to the top floor. We had to be quiet because the noise of moving chairs disturbed the occupants below. Alas, there were only nine males. A quick Mechitza was erected, and we recited Slichos, leaving out those parts that are only said in the presence of a Minyan. At the end, Reb Gavriel and sang Rachamonoh Deyoney and it became lebedik. Rivki came in to take pictures. I was to hear from Binyomin Althaus, on my return to Australia, that he had seen a picture in some publication from Kfar Chabad (I think) and that he was "taken" by the scene.



Yissurim

One year, after I emailed Reb Gavriel to ask whether he would be around for Shabbat so that I could eat there, he replied in the affirmative, and said that Rivki was still in Israel. Rivki and Reb Gavriel had to leave Mendy in a specialist facility for terminally ill children. Reb Gavriel confided in the taxi to Shule that Friday night about the nature of the illness, and I realised then that the Mesirus Nefesh that he and Rivki had shown was simply LeMaaloh MiDerech HaTevah. He related that his second son Dov (may he have a refuah shelemah), also had the incurable disease and would be “lucky” to live beyond 5–7 years of age.

Reb Gavriel and Rivki had reached a crossroad in their lives. It was either go to Israel and abandon their Shlichus and watch their two sons perish in a palliative institution over the next few years, or continue to light up souls in India, visiting their sons whenever possible.

Reb Gavriel modelled his operation on the methods employed by Reb Yosef Chaim Kantor in Thailand, but I doubt that any two Shluchim ever faced the Holtzberg’s gut wrenching decision. I wondered what the Lubavitcher Rebbe would have advised. Suffice it to say that they chose to “ignite new souls” in India. I listened with incredulity and was caught between feelings of shock and awe.

Reb Gavriel and Rivki threw themselves into their Avodas Hakodesh with even greater fervour. I always asked about Mendy, and on one trip, I was to learn that he had passed away, and that a Sefer Torah was being written in his memory. I noticed a change in the attitude of some recalcitrant locals. I could tell that they “now” accepted Reb Gavriel and Rivki more, because they realised the

incredible mesirus nefesh that they were displaying for the community and the ubiquitous travellers. That Sefer Torah is now known for the location of the terrorists bullet in Parshas Acharei Mos.

The Mikvah

Walking back from Shule one Shabbat, Reb Gavriel informed me that he was building a Mikvah. It would be modern and clean and equipped to the highest standards. Unless you have visited India, it is difficult to imagine how curious the concept of a modern and clean Mikvah is. In so-called “deluxe” hotels that I frequent, the “shower” is one of those bath/shower type combinations. Okay, so I am spoilt, and expect a separate shower, but when you are in a “5” star hotel, you expect some basics.



A *modern* Mikvah in India? What a concept. Indeed, I asked Reb Gavriel why he didn’t either add to the existing Mikvah and/or renovate. Of course, he met with opposition from a few locals. For them, a new Mikvah meant that the upstart and his wife were

implying that the existing Mikvah was not up to scratch. Ironically, it wasn't the Beneh Yisrael who objected. Rather it was a few remaining Baghdadis. Reb Gavriel launched into a discussion of Bor Al Gabei Bor, arguing that this was the best Chumrah. I responded that there were Deyos either way, but more importantly perhaps it would be better if he simply focussed on the "modern" aspect of the Mikvah. Again, to his credit, he quietly listened to my "free" advice.

I knew he had listened because during my last few moments with Reb Gavriel, while we were downstairs in the car port area, he pointed to a portion of the carport and said that he was about to build a new mikvah at that spot for both males and females. I asked why he needed to add to the existing Mikvah. He responded, with a twinkle in his eye, that the existing Mikvah was very successful because it was modern and clean and he only charged about 10 Rupees (50c) for a session. The local Jews regularly patronised his Mikvah. He now wanted something closer, specifically for the Chabad house. With India being a place where many seek the so-called spiritual side of life, I could well imagine many of those visiting the Chabad house also availing themselves of the new Mikvah.

Alas, Reb Gavriel and Rivki have now left this project to a new set of Shluchim who I hope will continue their Avodas HaKodesh until we are all transported on the wings of an eagle to Yerusholayim Ir HaKodesh.

The story of the Mikvah itself was miraculous. Reb Gavriel used to rise in the early hours of the morning, twice a week, and take a boat to a little Island off the coast, where there were chicken farms. He would then Shecht chickens for the week and bring them back for Rivki and others to clean. While the Mikvah was being built, he also had to keep a close watch on the workers to make sure that they didn't drop any liquid into the Mikvah or eat in the vicinity.

Normally there is a set period of Monsoonal rain. It is like clock work each year. The year that the Mikvah was completed there was no rain. Barely a drop had fallen, and it looked as though the Mikvah would lie empty for a full year. The Rav Hamachshir from Israel had arrived and was helping with the finishing touches. There was still no rain. The Rav

returned to Israel and Reb Gavriel and Rivki were quite upset that the Mikvah would not be functional for a full year.



On the Friday morning that I landed in Mumbai, the car from the Taj that was sent to collect me was somewhat different. I was met by a large four wheel drive. The driver explained that there had been a torrential downpour on Thursday night, completely out of keeping with this time of the year, and that it had been so intense, that it had destroyed parts of the road leading from the airport. The four-wheel drive was needed to navigate the damaged road with pieces of broken tar strewn far and wide. I hadn't realised the connection until Reb Gavriel explained that a Nes had occurred the night before and that this Nes was just in time for his Mikvah. In fact, the rain had been so strong, it had almost burst through the roof. Reb Gavriel was beaming. He felt that his Shlichus was blessed with Siyata Dishmaya, and he wasn't wrong.

Pidyon Shvuyim

I often wondered if there was any significance to meeting Sir Martin Gilbert. I didn't have to wait long to find out. An unfortunate Jewish girl, had fallen in love with a Jewish criminal in Goa, She had been taken captive. There is much more to this story, but let me just say

that various people, including Reb Gavriel and Rivki worked behind the scenes to help this girl who was now in prison, falsely accused, and dying.

I contacted Sir Martin and suggested that he pull some diplomatic strings in India to help out. He made contact with an International Human Rights Lawyer in Jerusalem and we exchanged emails on the matter. Let's just say that the girl survived and now lives in Israel, reunited with her mother. Reb Gavriel and Rivki acquired their Olam Habo from this incident alone. For their trouble, Indian Police hung around the Chabad house for months, until Rivki let them have it, warning them never to come back!

Matir Assurim

This also reminds me of the strange (in my eyes) couple who were present each Friday night. She is of Yemenite extraction with a strong internalised sense of Jewish tradition and he an Ashkenazi with (now) white curly hair and blue eyes. They seemed always to be wearing the same clothes each time. While she had an overtly visible Yiddishe Neshoma he was quieter and seemingly struggling with belief. I discovered that their son was in prison on drug-related charges. They had picked themselves up and moved to Mumbai while living from the rental income of their apartment in Israel.

Where did they eat during these years in Mumbai: at Reb Gavriel and Rivki's house, of course. Who provided them and their son with all the assistance in the world? The answer is, again, Reb Gavriel and Rivki. I see this couple and am sure they are weeping at the calamity that has befallen us.

Lechatchila Aribet

It was always strange for me to hear Reb Gavriel tell stories about Chabad Rebbeim during his speeches at Shule. The Mispalleim were Iraqis and Bene Israel. They knew about the Rambam and the Ben Ish Chai. White Russia seemed to be a clash of cultures. It was almost comical. Nevertheless, Reb Gavriel persisted. Interestingly, they listened. Reb Gavriel's motto was "Lechatchilo Aribet"—one should overcome any seeming obstacle and proceed headlong with the task at hand.

I could not help but admire the Holtzberg's single-minded application to the tasks needed to increase holiness in the world. They were

not small-minded, slogan-bearing, chanters or flag wavers. Like Chassidim of old, yet under 30, they were involved in **doing**; not chanting. They loved, and were loved. They didn't estrange. Despite their comparative youth they understood the meaning of Yotso Scharo BeHefsedo, Vehamayvin Yovin. We spoke about this concept on our last Shabbat together.

Reb Gavriel used to tell the story of an old bed-ridden Chosid who was dangerously ill. The Rebbe Maharash said that this Chosid should go to the Mikvah. They couldn't understand how one could touch a Shchiv Merah let alone immerse such a person into a Mikvah. The story, which Reb Gavriel used to say he heard from someone who heard it directly from an elderly man who had witnessed it, was that the Maharash declared that they should lower the sick Chosid into the mikvah, strapped to his bed. Apparently, after this, the man became better. This was Lechatchilota Aribet.



My mind is now racing with tragic images of two bodies carried out of the Chabad House, to be taken to a Mikvah, only this time with no need for Taharoh or a Mikvah. The irony is inescapable. The picture is haunting.

The miracle of Moshie's Yeshuah is amazing. He was the most important thing in Reb Gavriel and Rivki's life. The story of his survival is beyond belief. On my last trip, I brought a range of Ajitas vegetable chips (unique to Australia and now exported). He loved them and we had to prise them away otherwise he wouldn't eat his lunch. Walking around with his blue "Chabad of Mumbai" yarmulka, he was the centre of attention. Sandra, who saved him, was always nearby,

watching his every move. I understand there are now moves to bring her to Israel.

There are other stories, but I hope I have captured some of the more important elements of this unique couple.

I want to address the last few words of this essay to the dear parents and the next shluchim. I ask that someone please translate this essay for Rivki's parents.

To the parents—Rabbi and Mrs Rosenberg and Rabbi and Mrs Holtzberg.

Reb Gavriel and Rivki HY"D are irreplaceable—period. They are a reflection of the types of homes they came from, and the Mosdos that they attended. They were Yechidei Segulah possessed with Tzidkus and Yashrus that is hard to find. None of us have explanations for why this happened and why it happened to two of Chabad's finest. I will just say that Hashem seems to have this unacceptable habit of calling back the Neshomos of the finest and best, at a time that we all consider as "far too early". I can't believe that Reb Gavriel and Rivki's Shlichus has seemingly come to an end in Hashem's eyes. It makes no sense to me.

I can only surmise that it must now be time for a new couple to step in, without fear, and continue this Avodas Hakodesh of re-acquainting Jews with their heritage.

To the next young couple.

Dear Rabbi,

You need to be a Talmid Chochom. You should have a broad yedias hatorah. You need to have an old-style appreciation of Torah that includes considerations which are not only Chabad-centric. You and your Rebbetzin need to be able to speak Ivrit fluently. You need to know Shechitah and Kiddushin, Gittin (but avoid the latter two L'Maaseh). Have a capacity to work long hours. More recently, Reb Gavriel was giving Shiurim professionally prepared by a Chabad organisation and was starting to build a clientele of locals who came to learn. You will need to continue that. You will need to learn how to relate to the locals and you will need to Leyn, preferably in Sfaradit, each week (this includes B from Klaf). You will need to have a reasonable voice. You will be tolerant but remain principled. In short, you have to be a talented Kol Bo-nik.

Dear Rebbetzin,

You need to be a Balabuste, including knowing how to clean Ofos. It is important that cleanliness and class are naturally part of your make up. That's ironic in Mumbai, but absolutely critical to your success. You should be a woman of this world, and be someone who carries herself most gracefully, but you must also be prepared to walk streets that are dirty, smelly and above all humid and hot. You will have to get your hands dirty, only to clean them later. The new Chabad house is air-conditioned, and after the repair work is completed, you will have a wonderful foundation with a great new kitchen, recently installed for Pesach. You need to know how to bake and cook for large crowds and not be flustered by unexpected crowds. You have to have eyes on both sides of your head, while you ensure that there is no Bishul Akum in the kitchen. At the same time you will have to watch your kids.

You need to both have outgoing personalities and yet both be inherently Tzniusdik, if you know what I mean. You have to be able to look at people in the eyes. You need to be naturally empathetic to people's problems. Not everything you see or do will seemingly have a connection to your Shlichus, but it will. You both need to be entrepreneurial. You have to seek opportunities and make ends meet. You have to be subtle. Luckily there are lots of good people in the world who will help you.

Indians are wonderful. Moishi would not be with us if not for the self-sacrifice of Sandra, one of the Indian staff. Indians are not anti-Semitic. Yes, they have different habits, are relatively disorganised, and take an eternity to do things, but they are warm and accepting.

The murderous terrorists came from a different source. These are not the Indians who live around the Chabad house.

Be prepared to have philosophical discussions with strange people seeking spirituality. At the same time, know when not to have such discussions! Be well read, or at least have a voracious appetite to continue reading. Be ready to bring your children up to a stage where you will need to send them out for continued education.

You need to have a lot of patience. India is a bureaucratic jungle. It will infuriate you. I will do what I can to help, and you are most welcome to contact me further in this regard, at any time. Others will have useful ideas based on their experience in Mumbai and will, of course, be of great assistance. Listen to them all and then forge your path.

If all this sounds like you need to be Superman and Superwoman, then I am sorry, but that is precisely what you need to aspire to be.

Reb Gavriel and Rebbetzin Rivki were exactly that—a superman and superwoman.

Note:

The text and pictures were taken by me and are copyright. However, it is my wish that as many people as possible read this essay and that they undertake to do something positive for the neshomos of the kedoshim.

I am more than happy to supply the text and pictures to any outlet that wishes to reprint this essay, as long as any changes are agreed to by me before re-publication.

POSTSCRIPT:

Last night (7th of Kislev, December 3, 2008) our daughter Talya became engaged to Zalman Aaron Bassin of Sydney, Australia. On Erev Shabbos Noach, I stood outside with Rivki showing her pictures of our children. She showed genuine delight in seeing my extended family and my own Eishes Chayil. Haltingly, after Rivki asked the ages of all our children, I informed Rivki that because she was so far away from the rest of the “Jewish Civilised World” I didn’t have any concern that she might divulge any secrets. I told her that Talya was in fact seeing someone that Motzey Shabbos, etc. Rivki then gave a Bracha and wished that there would be a Mazel Tov sooner than later.

They say that “Birchos Kaloh al Tehi Hedyot B’Einecho” which normally means that one should not be dismissive of the Bracha that a “simple” person might bestow.

Rivki wasn’t simple. Her Birchos “Kallo” was exactly that.

I thought to myself, wouldn’t it be nice if they came to Melbourne for a wedding.