

Lev Lechayalot: Women holding it together in service of Israel

By Nechama Davis

AS WE still mourn the terrible losses on Simchat Torah, October 7, 2023 and in the war since, we also reflect on the many inspiring and creative initiatives of Jews all over the world, and Israeli society in particular, to support the war effort.

One such project, Lev Lechayalot, is the brainchild and “baby” of Rabbi Shalom and Rebbetzen Lynne Myers, veteran South African immigrants who run the Emek Learning Center community and Emek Lone Soldiers in Jerusalem. Through this project, they reach out to female soldiers and Border Police all over the country, whether lone soldiers or not, and those in combat or not.

The idea began on Simchat Torah itself, as the Myers saw their sons donning their army uniforms and reporting for duty. Within weeks, they managed to provide a barbeque for their son's unit in central Israel. (The sons in Gaza and the North were impossible to reach.) Lynne was struck how the men benefitted from the warm “hug” this event was giving them but that the female soldiers stood on the side, not part of it. She went up to them and started talking to them and hugging them. The response to her warmth was overwhelming. At that moment, she knew they had to do something especially for the female soldiers. And for their mothers, especially those overseas.

Lynne is a woman with a vision and a mission: to show appreciation and love to these young women, and to be there for them while they serve our nation in these dangerous and challenging times.

At first, the Myers ran sushi parties for the girls on the bases, and always brought along gift packages for each soldier. These were possible from donations from women all over the world: mascara from someone in the UK, biltong (beef jerky) from a woman and her friends in South Africa (so



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Rebbetzen Lynne Myers and a volunteer with women serving at a naval base.

far 130kg of it!), woolly hats from women who are knitting them in Australia. The list goes on and on, as women, in Canada and the US as well as within Israel, find endlessly creative and personal ways to send donations of money or goods.

“The part of the packages all soldiers seem to love most,” says Lynne, “are the ‘love letters,’ those notes which tell them how someone, somewhere, really appreciates and admires them and is praying for their safety and success!”

Sometimes the notes are typed, often they are hand-written and sometimes they are drawings done by young children. Every single one means the world to the soldiers.

In March 2024, the Myers decided to approach the IDF rabbinate in their desire to broaden the scope of their events for the female soldiers. They got a very positive reaction. Rabbi Myers was able to raise funds to enable the dynamic Sephardi woman, Rabbanit Keren Dadon, to run

Hafrashat Challah events (similar but different to “Challah Bakes”) . The rabbanit leads the women in exuberant song, dance and prayer as they each get a turn to knead the one bowl of challah (with gloves on!) and say their own personal prayers as they do so.

I recently had the privilege of attending one such party, travelling with a group of women to a base for female Border Police soldiers, women who are responsible for policing the streets of Beersheva during these volatile and dangerous times. Most of these soldiers are beautiful 18-20-year-old women, devoting two years and eight months of their lives to protecting us all, so that civilian life can carry on as normal.

These events - that one was the 25th so far, recently the 35th one was held - bring together women whose paths would probably not otherwise cross. We were a diverse group of volunteers: overseas visitors, new immigrants, veterans, some with family



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Rabbanit Keren Dadon raising the spirits of the soldiers.

members in the army and some not, all there to show our love and extreme appreciation to these young women soldiers for what they are doing for Am Yisrael in these challenging times.

Every single woman present, including all the kitchen staff, poured out her heart to God at the moment she took her turn to knead the dough.

The soldiers' commander, Shifra Buchris, is a most remarkable woman. On 7 October, she drove into the Supernova party with some of her team, and spent 12 hours there under gunfire, determined to save as many of the wounded as possible, "to reunite them with their families." Shifra, a warm, smiling, religious mother of 10, seems to regard all the soldiers as her children. This was reflected in her words to her soldiers at the Hafrashat Challah event: "Girls, now is your time to defend Am Yisrael, but I bless you that soon you will all find good husbands and marry and have children and grandchildren, building up our people."

The other woman who made a deep impression on everyone there was the head cook, an older Russian lady, Leah. Slipping off her plastic apron and placing a make-shift covering on her head, she raised her eyes to God and silently cried out for the return of the hostages and the healing of

the wounded. And no doubt some personal prayers of her own.

We, the volunteers, were in awe of all of these women, and felt a deep and hopefully ongoing connection with every one of them.

Through the making of challah dough and saying the prayers when challah is taken, we were a microcosm of the world of Jewish women, coming together to raise our voices in song and prayer and to support and value each other.

One month later, on 6 October 2024, we heard the devastating news of a terrorist attack at Beersheva Central Bus Station - one killed and 4 seriously wounded. The 20-year-old woman who was gunned down at point blank range by the terrorist was one of "our" soldiers, as were the 4 injured.

It was obvious that those of us who had visited the girls before, for a hafrashat challah party, would now make the sad journey to Beersheva with Rebbetzen Myers and Rabbanit Dadon to visit the shiva house and the girls in hospital

Shifra Chaya Soslik, may God avenge her blood, grew up in a warm and loving family, the youngest child by far. The mother would say, "I think you are the mother, and I am the daughter; you are wise beyond your years!" Her daughter was determined to serve the country and chose this form of service, knowing full well it carried high risks.

At the shiva, we also met Noam, Shira's boyfriend of only 5 months, whom Shifra called "my husband". In other circumstances, they would have been married by now, but Noam is currently serving in Gaza. Shira and Noam had arranged to meet up at Beersheva Central Bus Station at the time the attack unfolded. Unbelievably, Noam arrived, heard gun shots, killed the terrorist and then saw that his precious Shira was the victim. At the shiva house, we saw the incredible pain of the parents, the siblings, the grandmother and of Noam.

We walked out in a daze, overwhelmed by sadness. Then we were greeted by a calm, "biblical" scene, tens of camels walking around on a long sandy outcrop. It reminded us of famous biblical stories that took place in that part of the country, and how deep our roots are here.

We then moved on to Soroko Hospital to



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Soldiers reading 'love letters' in their gift bags from Lev Lechayalot.

visit "our" injured girls, Amit, Daria, Tanya and Raz, who had shared a room on the base with Shira. Each of them managed to smile and express optimism that they would eventually recover from the multiple bullet wounds they all suffered. They commented on the miracle of their survival and that they looked forward to our returning to celebrate with them at their *mesibat hoda'ah*, the party of giving thanks to God for their survival.

At every stage of the way - raising funds, making up the packages, leading trips to army bases, keeping in touch with the soldiers after the visits - Lynne Myers is leading from the front, and giving scores of Jewish women in Israel and around the world the opportunity to build bridges and break down stereotypes. Her goal is to bring unity to our fractured Jewish world, one hug at a time, one package at a time, one message at a time, showing deep and sincere appreciation to the female soldiers of the IDF. ■

South African-born Nechama Davis served as rebbetzen with her husband, Baruch, in Adelaide, Australia and in London, UK from 1988. They returned to Israel in 2022, and she is currently on the editorial team of Daf Hashavua, a publication of the United Synagogue, UK.