A Glimpse Into the Life of Rebbetzin Rochel Chalkowski

A Role Model of Chessed

The view from the steps, leading down to the cul-de-sac in front of the Jerusalem home of Rebbetzin Rochel Chalkowski, offers a breathtaking vista of a valley; the kever of Shmuel HaNavi sits on the horizon. The enchanting enclave, edged with waterfall-like green foliage dotted with wildflowers, is on the outskirts of Givat Shaul. The bright white of window and door shutters are accentuated by potted pink geraniums on the patio — a French village atmosphere prevails.

Rochel, born in Paris, and Rabbi Moshe Chalkowski, shliita, born in England, have lived here since 1964; a peaceful retreat for this childless couple, who, from early morning until late into the night, give generously to Klal Yisrael.

When I arrive at the front door, it’s ajar — a gesture of welcome. I knock. An Israeli-accented “Welcome” with a Parisian flavor invites me inside before Rochel appears from within to greet me. Her great height and regal presence impress me. Her crown is an aquamarine fine cotton headscarf. Her garments flow in soft tones of lilac, purple and gray. Tall Lofty in both stature and deed, Rochel’s chessed work for Klal Yisrael towers Heavenward, yet her demeanor remains modest and humble. In
conversation, her pleasant voice is crystal clear — she dialogues carefully crafted, precise sentences, precise in fact. She is a woman of detail, whose interests span historical Jerusalem to the pressing needs of each person that seeks her support today.

Until two years ago, Rochel was the Head Midwife at Shaari Tzedek Hospital in Jerusalem, where she worked for forty years. Her “retirement” has not affected the pace of her life — she continues to work at the hospital twice a week and is quite busy with other equally important, challenging tasks, of a chessedig nature, especially with the BAMBI tzedakah organization.

Rochel recalls coming to see this apartment after she got engaged. “It was Sivan. The hills were green. Sheep grazed outside that window.” We are sitting in the square-shaped living room, lined with sefarim and framed photographs of contemporary tzaddikim of our generation. “I didn’t need to go inside the apartment, I knew we would live here — it was love at first sight. It would be years until my dream of buying all our Shabbos provisions in Givat Shaul was realized. I shopped at the open-air market, Machaneh Yehudah, for fish, chicken and vegetables, traveling back and forth by a primitive bus service, through olive tree-lined dirt roads.

“You can’t imagine what it was like in Jerusalem before the Six Day War — today it is a modern city; yesterday it was a very small town.”

After graduating Shaarei Tzedek nursing school, Rochel fulfilled a childhood aspiration and became a midwife. She worked at the hospital for five years before she married Moshe Chalkowski, a close talmid of Harav Shlomo Wolbe, zt”l, who was his neighbor for 25 years.

The Chalkowskis are childless. However, this decree has not affected their ability to ‘parent’ thousands of children — mostly young women on a spiritual quest, students of Neve Yerushalayim, where Rabbi Chalkowski is principal. “When I meet young girls ‘waiting’ to get married, they are usually bored and anxious. I encourage them to do something with their life — to be active doing something meaningful. I may not have been blessed with motherhood, but I never sat around waiting for things to happen in my life.”

Rochel’s mother was a widow for sixty years. “I never heard her complain. She was always busy doing something with her time. She never preached to me and my two siblings — we just saw how she did things. That was enough to tell us what she expected of us and what our potential could be.”

Rochel’s avodah as a midwife has allowed her to give to others in an all-encompassing way. “Every job a person does can be infused with chessed. Chessed is a state of mind. I began working as a midwife in the 1960s — I grew with my job. When I started at Shaarei Tzedek, we had six midwives and eighty deliveries a month. Today, we have sixty midwives for 900 monthly deliveries. Last night, on my eight-hour night shift, we had twenty-two births! That’s exciting! Jerusalem is no longer a big village. The population has swelled year after year and we have had to keep up with the leaps in births.”

As the birthrate has increased, so has the need to improve the midwifery service. “There was a time when the birth was central to the relationship between patient and midwife — albeit a technical relationship. Over the years, we have had to change our approach. I take on midwives who would do their job even if they won the lottery — they love what they do and their love of their profession and people shines through at every stage of the delivery process.”
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of the delivery process. Today women need a more understanding and sympathetic relationship with their midwife. I can say that 99% of our staff knows how to make patients feel calm and at peace with the labor process. Our goal is to ensure that the new mother comes out of the delivery room with a positive experience of birth and her relationship with the staff — she shouldn’t feel afraid to come back to the hospital and have another baby.”

Sometimes births do not proceed according to plan. “One year we had two tragedies within half a year,” recalls Rochel, whose face has taken on a serious expression. “When this happens, it is also a trauma for my staff. After these tragedies, I held a staff meeting in a private home. I invited a Rav to give the midwives chizuk. The job of a midwife entails merit and emunah every step of the way.”

Every woman in Rochel’s life is beloved by her like a daughter. Countless seminary girls have found a place of understanding — and have blossomed — under her loving care. "Rina" was a bas bayit by us for fifteen years. She became ‘our’ daughter. She is now married to a talmid chacham and we have two little lovely ‘grandsons’ — pure nachas. Many former students, even though they are already grandmothers, are still considered part of our extended family.”

Thirty-three years ago, in 1973, when the Yom Kippur War began, Rochel Brodt Herz, a"h, a dear friend, and Rochel Chalkowski’s sister — who both lived in Switzerland — phoned her, wanting to do ‘something’ for Israel. “I knew a family that needed help, so she sponsored them on a monthly basis. After the war, my friend wanted to continue her good deed. Hakadosh Baruch Hu has good soldiers.”

This one act of chessed — which mushroomed over time — was the inspiration behind Rochel’s tzedakah organization BAMBİ — known as Matan B’Seter Bambi — which has five-hundred monthly beneficiaries, plus a few hundred extra before Yom Tov and Purim. “These families get from $100 each month, up to $1000. I travel to chutz la’Aretz two or three times a year for parlor meetings to raise funds for our organization that remains office-less — dedicated volunteers help me coordinate our monthly obligations.”

The name for the tzedakah organization BAMBİ took its inspiration from Rochel’s nursing school days when a patient in the hospital nick-named each of the four nursing students named Rochel with a different endearing, distinguishing name — Bambi was his choice for Rochel Chalkowski.

Today, BAMBİ has an annual budget of a one million dollars. It is coordinated by a New York committee of professional ladies. In North America, Canada and some cities in Europe, BAMBİ has thirty-five chapters with people devoting their time to helping raise tzedakah.

What is the message Rochel delivers when she travels abroad? “That there’s real poverty here in Eretz Yisrael — not every Jew is wealthy or can manage. Most times, people I meet just can’t fathom what I am talking about. They can’t imagine what life would be like without social services — which are non-existent in Eretz Yisrael. A young couple without any means of family support can struggle for life. A man

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“Anyone can do a chessed. I recall a young avreich living in Tzfat who saved up a little money to buy three pumps for a gemach because he wanted to do a chessed in his community. That young man was Uri Lopiansky — the founder of Yad Sarah, who today is the mayor of Jerusalem. From small acts of chessed, fruits of chessed grow.”

Panic-stricken parents come to Rochel. No one is immune from needing help. “Last week, a mother knocked on my door at 11 p.m. Her son had contracted a particular condition that requires injections twice a month, and they didn’t have the $100 to pay for even one shot of the medication. Her pain was not extraordinary — the government doesn’t pay for this life-giving medicine. Where was she supposed to find the money every month? Baruch Hashem, BAMBI can help her. This is just one case of hundreds that I deal with on a regular basis.”

Has the Israeli government abandoned its people? “It probably appears that way, but in reality they probably don’t have funds for everything,” Rochel says, shaking her head, her eyes glazed with tears that refuse to fall. One has to be tough to survive in this world — one has to be strong to ask for help. Sadly, desperation is usually the deciding factor that drives a person to ask for financial aid.

“Wherever a person is, they can do chessed,” Rochel declares. She is a number-one chessed coach. “A smile, a good word, taking an interest in another person’s situation and giving chizuk — these are all acts of chessed every person can do. Start small and let the chessed lead you to where you need to go.”

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*A Not her real name