



the
Shabbos
Queen

*The remarkable life
of Henny Machlis*

BY SARA YOHEVED RIGLER

W

hat would a life lived entirely by the Ramban's dictum that nature is an illusion and that everything—*everything*—is a miracle of Hashem look

like? This was the life of Henny Machlis.

That's how she could give birth to 14 children—9 of them by Caesarean section.

That's how she could cook for almost 300 guests every Shabbos in a ridiculously small kitchen and serve a meal to 150 seated people—tourists, *yeshivah bachurim*, widows, university students, older singles, mentally ill people—in a standard-sized Jerusalem apartment.

That's how, with her *chesed*-laden schedule, she could find time to go to two Torah classes per week, *daven* three times a day, sometimes *daven neitz* at the Kotel, and spend an hour daily—and sometimes many hours—in *hisbodedus* (personal prayer).

That's how she could raise ten daughters and four sons with each one feeling like they enjoyed their mother's exclusive attention.

That's how, during the last two cancer-plagued years of her life, when visitors would say, "Cancer has a life of its own," or "That's the way the illness progresses," she would reply adamantly, "That's *sheker!* Hashem controls every cell every second."

~

Henny was born in Brooklyn in 1958, the fourth child of Rabbi Murray and Edith Lustig. Her great-grandfather was a *ben bayis* by the Sfas Emes. Although Henny's father had *semichah*, he did not practice as a rabbi. He had his own business—a food business. During her early years, the family lived in Crown Heights. Although her father was not a Lubavitcher, on Shabbos he usually *davened* at 770. One Shabbos he got in line with four-year-old Henny to greet the Rebbe. When their turn came, Henny said "Good Shabbos" to the Rebbe, but she was so small, he didn't hear her. So spunky little Henny got out of the line, marched up to him, and shouted, "Good Shabbos!"

The Lubavitcher Rebbe smiled, bent down toward Henny, shook her hand, and replied, "And *you* should have a good Shabbos."

In a deep sense, the Rebbe's *brachah* came true. Very few Jews were as connected to, and made as good a Shabbos, as Henny.

The family moved to Flatbush, where Henny attended high school at Central Brooklyn, the Yeshiva University High School for Girls. According to her childhood friend Leba Wassner Schwebel, Henny was bright and bubbly, idealistic and energetic.

It was the early 1970s, the heyday of the movement for Soviet Jewry. Henny and Leba went to rallies for Soviet Jewry, holding up signs demanding, "Let My People Go!" After the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the two girls would stand on Brooklyn street corners collecting money for Israel.

Henny attended Stern College, where she earned a B.S. in education plus a Hebrew teaching degree from Yeshiva University. She also studied dietetics at Brooklyn College.

In 1979, at the age of 21, Henny married Rabbi Mordechai Machlis, also from Brooklyn. Rabbi Machlis, born in 1952, is the son of Rabbi Eliyahu (Leon) Machlis, long-time *rav* and spiritual leader of Ohel Moshe, a *shul* and *yeshivah* in Bensonhurst. Rabbi Mordechai has a B.A. in Judaic Studies from Brooklyn College, *semichah* from Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, and an M.A. in Jewish history from Yeshiva University.

Three months after getting married, the Machlises moved to Israel. Within a few months, they were having 20-25 guests per Shabbos meal. As Henny recollected in my 2009 interview with her, "From there, it just grew, with Hashem's help and blessings.... When we got married, we decided we wanted to share Shabbos with the whole world. We thought that many Jews aren't *frum* because they think that religion is negative, oppressive, and heavy. But if we show them the beauty and the joy of Shabbos, they will want to become more directly connected to Torah and *mitzvos*. As it says in *Tehillim*, 'Taste and see that Hashem is good.' The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* teaches: 'Great is the power of food, because it brings people ever closer.'"

Henny decided to act upon this Talmudic dictum. Indeed, miracles occurred at the Machlises' Shabbos table.

One Shabbos day a year ago, in the middle of the *seudah*, a drunk man, holding a bottle of arak and acting wildly, wanted to enter the Machlis home. People said, "Don't let him in!" Disregarding their pleas, Henny let the drunkard in and asked him to pour a shot of arak for each of the other guests. She whispered to her children, "His *neshamah* needs to drink, and he needs to give out drinks."

The man poured a little for everyone there, quieted down, then left. At Henny's *shivah*, the man appeared. He told the family that he had been drinking two bottles a day, but since that Shabbos, he never had another drink.

His wife, who had thrown him out, took him back. When she heard of Henny's passing, his wife told him, "You owe Henny Machlis our marriage—and your life."

Paul Harney, 27, from the Midwest, had a Jewish great-grandmother in his matrilineal line, but he had been raised Roman Catholic. On a visit to Israel, a friend brought him one Shabbos to the home of Rabbi Mordechai and Henny Machlis. As he would write many years later: "I was transformed! Before I knew it, I was

connected to Aish HaTorah and Mayanot, studying Torah and becoming a *baal teshuvah*."

The story of Paul—now known as Shaul Naftali—was repeated literally hundreds of times. Jews—Jews who knew nothing about Judaism, Jews who were practicing other religions, Jews who were inimical to Orthodoxy—came, imbibed the atmosphere of a Machlis Shabbos, and were miraculously transformed.

A Jewish girl from America with the outrageous name of Harley Davidson (named by two Jewish parents who were motorcycle enthusiasts) hated *frum* people. As an 18-year-old student in Bar-Ilan University, Harley grudgingly accepted her teacher Rabbi Machlis' invitation to go with her classmates of the overseas program to his home for Shabbat. As she later told one of the Machlis children: "I met your parents, and that was it. I could not believe how your mother was with the children."

Harley started using the Hebrew name "Tzivia," became religious, and is now married with children and living in a *frum* community in Israel.

One Rosh Hashanah, the Machlises had only 30 guests, including a young couple who had come to Israel for their honeymoon. The bride was an American reform Jew and the groom was a German gentile. The couple said very little, and seemed, as Henny told me, "pretty icy." Two years later, the Machlises received a letter beginning, "You probably don't remember us..." (Since there had been so few guests that Rosh Hashanah, Henny remembered them well.)

The woman went on to write: "When we left your place, we said, 'This is the kind of home we want to have—the light and the warmth and the children.' I had never realized that there was anything more to being Jewish than what I grew up with. We started studying Torah. Then we started keeping Shabbat, then *kasbrut*, then I started to go to the *mikvah*. We just want you to know that next week my husband will be undergoing an Orthodox conversion."

A young American Jewish woman who came to Israel on Birthright was supposed to go with her friends for a weekend to the Dead Sea. On Friday morning, she was bothered by a bad headache, so her friends went without her. Since she had nothing else to do on Friday night, someone convinced her to go to the Machlises. She had such an amazing, transformative experience that she resolved to stay in Israel and start studying Judaism. Later that night, she was hospitalized, and diagnosed with a rare form of meningitis. During the night, she died. Her parents subsequently expressed their appreciation that the last night of her life she felt so

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loved and happy. What happened that last night, however, was even bigger than that. The *baalei mussar* teach that the *Beis Din Shel Maalah* does not judge a person according to the level he or she reached (since many people die young), but rather according to their angle of growth at the time they died. This girl's decision to stay in Israel and study Judaism did not change her life, but it likely changed her eternity.

Valentina, from a Christian family, was a Central American beauty queen and a lawyer. She became engaged to Matias, a successful neurologist. Her siblings had gotten married in a Catholic church, but Valentina refused, protesting, "It's not my place." She used to cry into her pillow at night, "Where is my place? Where is my place?"

Several years after they married, Matias decided to volunteer as a doctor in Israel. Alone for the first couple months, Matias used to eat at the Machlises every Shabbos. Finally his wife joined him in Israel. The first Friday night, he took Valentina, wearing a sleeveless blouse and tight jeans, to the Machlises. On the way there, she told him, "The only thing I know about Jews is that they're dirty, they're gross, and they smell. Why are you taking me there? Do you think I want to be like these people?"

Matias reassured her, "No, I just want you to see what Shabbos is like."

When they entered the Machlis home, Henny greeted Valentina with a big hug. Enwrapped in Henny's embrace, Valentina looked up and saw Henny's glowing Shabbos candles. Valentina burst into tears. "This is my place," she cried. "This is my place."

Later Valentina, the beauty queen, lawyer, and upper class socialite, would say of that life-transforming hug, "That's what I needed in my life. I needed a hug."

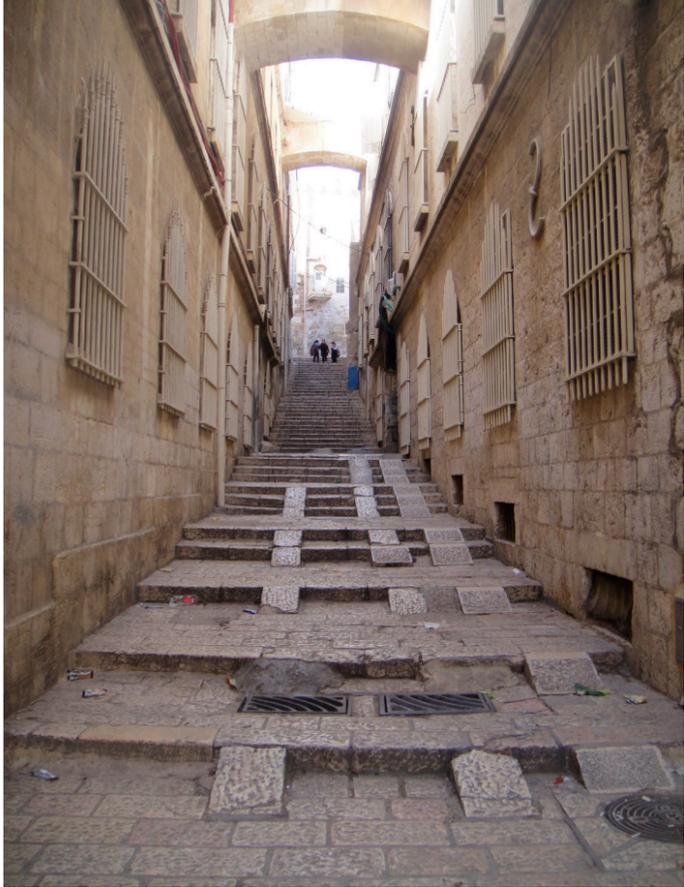
Since Valentina spoke neither English nor Hebrew, Henny could not verbally communicate with her. So after Shabbos, she took Valentina to her Spanish-speaking neighbor Chana Simon, who taught the "*Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach*" to gentiles. After one lesson, Valentina told Chana, "Leave me alone with this! I don't want to learn how to be a good gentile. I want to learn how to be a Jew."

Despite Chana's dissuasion, Valentina insisted that she would become a Jew no matter what. Valentina and Matias, with their three children, remained in Israel and studied for conversion. Two years later, when Rabbi and Rebbetzin Machlis took them to Rav Nissan Korelitz's *beis din* for their conversion, Rav Korelitz said that Valentina and Matias were the most sincere couple he had ever met.

The Machlises made them their halachic wedding (as they made scores of weddings, some for people they barely knew).

Almost three years ago, Valentina (now Batya) appeared at the Machlis house and asked Henny to come outside. She said, "I'm in my second month, and I'm going to abort the baby tomorrow."

Horrified, Henny asked what had happened. Batya shared her story. A month before, she had had a bad migraine. She did a pregnancy test, which came out negative. In the hospital, confident that she was not pregnant, they gave her strong medications. Weeks



later, she realized she was pregnant. Tests showed that the medications had severely damaged the fetus, and the baby would be totally non-functional. All the doctors insisted that she abort. Distraught, Batya turned to Rabbi B. of Agudat Efrat, an organization dedicated to preventing abortions. After looking at the medical records, a grave Rabbi B. told Batya, "You know that we are probably anti-abortion. But if you give birth to this baby, you will be endangering your own life and the life of the baby. You must abort."

Tearfully, Batya told Henny, "That's why I'm having an abortion tomorrow."

Henny stared at Batya and said, "You cannot do this. I promise you, I promise you, your baby will be okay."

"But the doctors and the rabbi said it won't be okay," Batya cried.

The soft, loving Henny became hard as steel. "Do not abort this baby," she ordered. "I promise you the baby will be healthy."

Seven months later, Batya gave birth to a completely healthy baby boy. Now two years old, he has never even had a cold.

During Henny's final illness, returning home to Israel from treatment at Sloan-Kettering, Henny, the mother of ten daughters, phoned Batya. She told her, "I brought earrings back from New York for my eleven daughters. Please come and get yours."

After Henny's passing, Batya showed up at the *shivah* and announced, "She was my mother. I'm sitting *shivah*, too."

In fact, hundreds of people considered Henny Machlis their mother. At her funeral, one mentally-ill "regular" pushed Henny's son Moshe aside, crying, "She's my mother. I have to get closer." *Yeshivah* boys would say, "I have my mother in America and Rebbetzin Machlis is my mother in Israel."

A new Russian immigrant, an alcoholic, arrived in Israel on a Friday. He knew no one in Israel and had nowhere to go. Someone

suggested that he go to the Kotel. There Rabbi Machlis found him and invited him to come home with him for Shabbos lunch. The Machlis home became his home to such an extent that when he went to get his *teudat zehut* [identification papers], he legally changed his last name to "Machlis."

The Machlises's legendary hospitality was not limited to Shabbos. Random people would call and ask if the Machlises could make their wedding, or their *sheva brachos*, or if they could sit *shivah* in the Machlis home. A man who was put under house arrest was not allowed to stay in his own home. The police told him that if he didn't find a place, he would go to jail. So he, with his many children, spent his period of house arrest in the Machlis home.

Indigent people would "go shopping" in the Machlis kitchen. They would show up on a weekday with their shopping cart, and help themselves to canned goods and packages from the cabinets.

Guests cost, and not just the expense of the food. At the *shivah* the Machlis children told me, "Over the years, the guests stole everything—our father's silver *becher*, our mother's candlesticks that she had inherited from our father's

mother, our mother's jewelry, even her diamond ring, when she took it off one Shabbos to wash her hands."

"But," I protested, "in his *hesped* at the funeral Moshe said that someone borrowed her diamond ring."

The children laughed. "That was the joke. We would say, 'Someone stole your ring,' and Ima would say, 'They didn't steal it. They borrowed it.'"

A couple from America made *aliyah* and wanted to buy an apartment. Rabbi Machlis, who had a regular, if modest, salary as a *rebbe* in the *yeshivah* Lev HaTorah and also from Bar-Ilan University, signed as a guarantor on their mortgage. A few years later, the couple moved back to America, leaving Rabbi Machlis responsible for their debt of hundreds of thousands of shekels. Of course, the Machlises couldn't pay the debt. One day two burly, shaven-headed men showed up at the Machlises' door with legal authorization papers to confiscate everything of value.

"Where's the television?" they demanded.

"We don't have one," Henny answered.

"Where are the computers?"

"We don't have any."

"Where is your silver—*Kiddush* cups, candlesticks, whatever?"

"We have none."

"Where is your jewelry?"

"It's all costume jewelry." Then she added, "Do you want to take the *sifrei kodesh* [holy books]? That's all we own."

Henny was unfazed as the men, who looked like Mafiosos, searched the apartment. When their search confirmed the truth of Henny's state-

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ments, one of the men wrote on his report: “*Ein po ma lakachat*. There’s nothing here to take. Just tables and plastic chairs.”

They turned to leave, but Henny was not finished with them. “Did you put on *tefillin* today?” she asked. Disconcerted, the men stared at her. “Get *tefillin*,” she called to her son Yehoshua. The two men put on *tefillin*, said the *Shema*, then left—with more, not less, than they expected.

~

Paradox. Henny was a person of the heart. But she was also a person of the head. Whenever she expressed an idea, she cited sources. Chumash. Mishnah. Gemara. Midrash. *Zohar*. *Tanya*. Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsh (one of her favorites). Rav Dessler. Rebbe Nachman of Breslav. She regularly attended Torah classes each week. During one period, she attended Rav Kelemen’s *mussar* class in the Old City and Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller’s weekly class in my home, as well as *shiurim* by Rav Yonkie Korelitz and Rebbetzin Altusky. Torah for her was never an intellectual exercise, but rather a path of self-transformation. She belonged to Rav Aryeh Nivin’s Personal Growth Chabura, as well as Rav Leib Kelemen’s Mussar Vaad for women.

Paradox. Henny was a paragon of *chesed*. But she was also a paragon of *gevurah*, a veritable warrior when she believed in something.

Years ago McDonald’s Israel announced that they were opening a branch on Shammai Street in downtown Jerusalem, and the branch would not be kosher. Henny was livid. She resolved, “This will not happen!” She got dozens of Knesset members to sign a petition against the opening of that MacDonald’s. She went to see the owner, who defended himself by saying that the meat and the cheese would be kosher (even though they would offer cheeseburgers and dairy drinks and desserts). She wrote to the international CEO of McDonald’s, who claimed he had no power over the Israeli franchise. When the McDonald’s did indeed open, Henny printed 6,000 fliers warning that it was not kosher. She and her friend Cheryl Matthews stood in front of the large restaurant and distributed the fliers to every would-be customer. Many men wearing *kipot* were on their way in, unaware that it was *treif*, until Henny thrust her flier into their hands and demanded they stay away. She drove away enough customers that McDonald’s called the police on her. The police made Henny and Cheryl move to the opposite side of the narrow street, where they continued to dispense the fliers.

A postscript: Last year the large, *treif* McDonald’s on Shammai Street closed its doors. A rabbi told Henny that it was her spiritual resistance that eventually drove the enterprise out of business. A kosher McDonald’s now operates a couple of blocks away.

Henny was extremely *makpid* on *chalah Yisrael*, although she respected those who relied on the *heter* of *chalah stam*. In the hospital two weeks before she died, Henny was unable to eat.

Someone brought her an Ensure energy drink. She looked at the can, saw that it was not *chalah Yisrael*, and refused to drink it.

Rivki, who came from a *chareidi* family, was doing National Service at Shaare Zedek Hospital when she started dating an Arab doctor. Henny’s twin daughters were friends with Rivki. They persuaded her to come home with them, in hopes that their mother would be able to convince Rivki to break off the relationship. When Henny saw that both her logic and her entreaties fell on deaf ears, she confiscated Rivki’s cellphone, locked the doors, and told Rivka that she could not leave the house until she agreed to end the relationship. “You’re keeping me a prisoner here!” Rivki screamed. “I’ll call the police!”

“I don’t care,” replied Henny. “I’ll go to jail for you. But you have to cut off this relationship.”

After three days in the Machlis house schmoozing with Henny, and a visit from her parents, summoned by Henny, who promised to provide her psychological help and emotional support, Rivki capitulated. Today she lives in Bnei Brak with her *frum* husband and children.

When I heard this story from Henny’s children, I thought, *If I heard about a Jewish girl dating an Arab doctor, I would make a cursory lament, shake my head, say, ‘How terrible!’ and go about my business.*

Henny, on the other hand, never indulged in cursory laments. Every Jewish girl or woman in trouble was her daughter. Every Jewish boy or man in pain was her son. She would not rest until she did everything she could to help them, as the following miracle story proves.

Henny spent most of the last year of her life in New York, undergoing treatment at Sloan-Kettering. Shortly before Pesach this year, her son Yehoshua, knowing his mother loved music, organized a small concert for Henny in a friend’s apartment. Throughout the concert, Henny noticed a strange man talking to her son-in-law Moshe in the corner. After the concert, Henny asked Moshe who the man was and what was his problem. Moshe, who never reveals things told to him privately, declined to answer. Although Henny was not a nosey person, this time she pressed. “He’s in pain,” she told Moshe. “We have to help him.” Eventually Henny squeezed the story out of Moshe. Chezki was in the grips of a *shalom bayis* ordeal. The father of seven children, he was estranged from his wife. In fact, they were legally divorced, and he was scheduled to give her a *get* in the *beis din*. Four times his wife had called the police on Chezki and had him jailed. Rabbis had told Chezki to divorce her, but he still loved her, and did not want to break up his family.

Hearing the harrowing tale of this couple’s ordeal, Henny said, “We’re not allowed to judge him or her. When there are *shalom bayis* problems, it’s because of the *tzaar galus HaShechinah* [the pain of the exile of the Divine Presence].”

By this time, it was 1 a.m. Henny, sick from cancer and chemo, was exhausted. But she said to Moshe and Yehoshua, “We have

to *daven* for him. Right now.”

“We can *daven* for him tomorrow,” Moshe demurred, urging his mother-in-law to go to bed.

“No, he’s in terrible pain,” Henny insisted. (And wasn’t *she*?) “We have to *daven* for him right now. Get me a *sefer Tehillim*.”

So into the wee hours of the morning, Henny, Yehoshua, and Moshe sat there saying *Tehillim* for a Jewish man she didn’t know at all.

The day before their appointment at the *beis din*, Chezki again asked his wife to reconsider. She refused. She wanted the divorce.

The following day in the *beis din*, the chief *dayan*, as is routine, asked Chezki’s wife, “Do you want *shalom bayis* or do you want a divorce?”

To the shock of everyone present, she answered, “I don’t want a divorce. I like you, Chezki. I want to stay married to you.”

The *dayan* later told Chezki that in 35 years of overseeing 5,000 *gittin*, he never saw anything like this.

In the months since then, Chezki and his wife have been enjoying a miraculous reconciliation. Chezki knew that something supernatural had happened in his life, but it wasn’t until he flew to Israel for the last night of the *shivah* and heard from Moshe about Henny’s fervent *davening* for him, that he understood the source of his salvation. As Chezki testified to me, “I have no doubt that it was her prayers that saved my marriage.”

According to Chezki, everyone else had given up on his marriage. But Henny Machlis believed that Hashem and only Hashem determines everything in every moment, and therefore nothing is impossible.

On the morning of Henny’s brain surgery, her doctor, a world-famous brain surgeon and chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at Sloan-Kettering, the world’s foremost cancer hospital, looked in on his patient. Henny, being prepped for the surgery, said to him, “I just want to inform you that you are not the one who is doing the surgery. Hashem is doing the surgery.”

Then she added, “And did you put on *tefillin* today? Because your hands need to be blessed by the mitzvah of *tefillin* before they touch me.”

On the last night of the *shivah*, Jenny, a fortyish mother of five children, came to the Machlis house for a singular purpose. She went to see the legendary kitchen from which hundreds of meals issued every Shabbos. Jenny stood gazing at the cramped, simple kitchen for several long minutes. Then she said to herself, “I have no more excuses.” She went home and started inviting people for Shabbos. □

All the stories in this article are true, but most names have been changed in order to protect people’s privacy.

Sara Yoheved Rigler’s new book *Heavenprints* has a chapter about Henny Machlis.

“I don’t care,”
replied Henny. “I’ll
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But you have to cut
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