

# Jerusalem's treasure



(Joan Roth)



(Courtesy)

## Remembering Henny Machlis, a truly righteous woman

• By ARI D. KAHN

A few weeks ago, on October 16, a very special woman passed away. Her name was Rebbitzin Henny (Lustig) Machlis. Henny was one of the most extraordinary people I have ever met, and I am sure there are countless others who share my opinion. Her life is the stuff of legend.

The Talmud relates tales of wealthy hosts who served their guests copious quantities of food. Some of these stories sound like hyperbole, and we might be tempted to dismiss them as no more than parables that embellish the truth, but there was one woman who lived among us who, although not particularly wealthy, and perhaps lacking the resources of those Talmudic hosts, served a generous amount of food to staggering numbers of guests. Hundreds of people came to her home every Shabbat, where food, words of Torah, good cheer and hope were shared. The Machlis home is living proof that the Talmudic legends were not invented: people such as these, although rare, do exist.

I have known the Machlis and Lustig families for a very long time. Rabbi Mordechai Machlis's father, Rabbi Eliyahu, was the principal of my elementary school, Yeshiva Ohel Moshe, and was the rabbi of my grandparents' synagogue in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn. In fact, Rabbi Eliyahu Machlis read the *ketuba* at my parents' wedding.

I was privileged to be a guest at the home of Rav Mordechai and Henny in Jerusalem more than 35 years ago, when they were first starting out. The Machlis table was always an interesting place, a meeting spot for a diverse collection of people. Because I had already known both Rav Mordechai and Henny for many years (Henny's brother was a classmate of mine in high school, and Henny was my sister's classmate), I always felt comfortable, at home, in their home.

At the time, they were a young couple, and their home was open. Had I been asked to pre-

dict the future, I would have assumed that as their family grew and the needs of their own personal lives put greater demands on their time and resources, their idealism and generosity would be forced to yield to the challenges and realities of raising a family. Yet as the years passed, not only did their hospitality fail to slow down, it grew – seemingly exponentially: 20 guests became 50, 50 became 100, then 200 and more.

Their kindness defied logic. It made no sense that a small Jerusalem apartment could hold so many people. Their home called to mind another rabbinic teaching: The Mishna recounts that when the people stood in the Temple, they stood shoulder to shoulder, with no space left unfilled, yet somehow, when they bowed in prayer, there was room for one and all. That same miracle seemed to repeat itself every Shabbat in the Machlis home.

But it was more than merely the number of guests that was astounding; it was the diversity of the people the Machlises hosted that was most impressive. Their home was open to everyone, even the types of people many of us would not want to have at our table. One of the most humbling experiences I have ever had was walking the streets of Jerusalem with Rav Mordechai. Although we were engrossed in an important conversation, I gradually became aware of something extraordinary: As we walked, we happened upon the city's unfortunates – homeless, poor and hungry people to whom others might toss a coin or two in condescension and walk on. Rav Mordechai knew each of these people by name. He knew their stories, their challenges, their medical and emotional conditions. To him, they were not anonymous beggars, they were people; they were cherished guests in his and Henny's home. While some of us feel special if we have a few guests – especially “important people” – the Machlis home was a haven for anyone and everyone, regardless of stature or status.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that

when Henny Machlis was alive, there were no homeless people in Jerusalem; everyone knew that they had a place to go to, a place to get a warm meal, a warm smile, and a place where they would feel welcome, valued, even cherished. This special feeling was not reserved for old friends from the old neighborhood: Every year for almost 40 years, tens of thousands of people ate, sang, and were inspired in the Machlis home.

In addition to all this, I have very personal reasons to thank Henny. Many years ago, in a faraway place called Flatbush, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, most young people dreamed of growing up and living in Flatbush; at most, they may have dared to dream of owning a big house in New Jersey or Long Island. On Shabbat afternoons, Henny volunteered as a *madricha* in Bnei Akiva. She spoke to the girls in her charge of a faraway Holy Land, the Land of Israel. She spoke with passion and idealism, and she lit a spark in the souls of those who heard her. One of those girls, my wife Naomi, still remembers those words as if they were spoken only yesterday.

And so, I thank you, Henny, for inspiring Naomi and all the other girls. I thank you for inspiring so many people through your warmth and hospitality, and for enabling me to understand that the sages of the Gemara were not exaggerating: there really were people in Jerusalem who hosted so many guests – not only thousands of years ago, but as recently as a few short weeks ago.

Some legends wilt under careful scrutiny; others grow larger. I challenge people all over the world to put this question to any gathering of Jews: “Have you ever had a Shabbat meal in the Machlis home?” I guarantee you will be shocked at how many people all over the world say “yes.”

Henny, please go before the heavenly throne and pray for your people. Pray for your wonderful family, and pray for the city of Jerusalem – the city you loved so much, the city that will never forget you.