

Living upstairs from the Machlis family brings a profusion of experiences. Drop in to borrow a potato? You're invited to take one from the crate. Ask for their kugel recipe? You have to divide it by ten. Need a Shabbos goy? Go pick your preferred nationality from the dozens of tourists. Just daily life in Maalot Dafna 137...

Aromas from Downstairs

A neighbor's fond memories of Mrs. Henny Machlis a"h

MICHAL TRENK

Every Shabbos, for the past 35 years, the Machlis family has opened their home to anywhere between 100 and 300 people, who come to taste a Shabbos experience. Over the years, they have become almost legendary — many people know them, more know of them. But to us, they are simply the downstairs neighbors.

On Erev Shabbos *parshas Noach* I woke up to a new reality. After years of battling cancer, Mrs. Machlis passed away — on Friday, her favorite weekday.

During the week of the shivah, I watched from my window as hundreds of people passed through the Machlises' home, and shared how their lives were forever changed by Mrs. Machlis.

Students, rabbis, family, friends... They each had a unique perspective on their own personal loss.

Allow me to share mine.

PART OF OUR HOME

After several years of renting, my husband and I started discussing the idea of buying our own apartment. We began searching for an apartment that would somehow fit all of our criteria — good size, good condition, good price. Our apartment offered none of those. Still, it offered one feature we could not forgo: good neighbors.

One afternoon I sat with my children on the grass outside the Machlises' entrance. I was soon joined by Tamar, then the Machlises' most recent newlywed daughter.

She sensed my worry. "What's the matter, Michal?"

"It's nothing... I just... I don't understand how young couples can afford to buy apartments in Yerushalayim."

"I know exactly what you mean. Long before I even got engaged, I told my parents that I was already davening to be able to afford an apartment in Yerushalayim."

"Really?" I asked "And what did they say...?"

"Well, obviously, they said I was crazy!" She laughed. "I mean, why wasn't I davening for a house?!"

During the shivah, Tamar told me, "Hashem was not just a concept for us growing up. My mother *lived* with Hashem. She woke up every morning talking to Him and went to sleep at night talking to Him. Hashem was a part of our home."

Occasionally, I'd get a glimpse at the overwhelming expenses incurred by the family's Shabbos hospitality. Once, when a new supermarket opened up in Yerushalayim, my husband and I met one of the Machlis daughters pushing two packed carts down the aisles. "Isn't this place amazing?!" she exclaimed. "I can get all of our Shabbos groceries here for less than 10,000 shekels!"

Yet despite the tremendous financial pressure, Mrs. Machlis wasn't worried. Her mantra — "Hashem will send it, He always does" — was realized again and again. Someone once called, on Erev Shabbos, and said that they would like to donate their birthday money — a sum of \$2,500, the approximate cost of one Shabbos. A businessman who frequented the Machlis home as a *bochur* suddenly surfaced years later and gave a check as a token of gratitude. A married couple once called and asked to please be given the privilege to pay for a complete renovation of the Machlises' outdated kitchen. Such stories occurred daily in the Machlis home.

Aromas from Downstairs

HE ALWAYS DOES

One Thursday night, I was up late cooking for Shabbos when I realized I was out of oil. It was well past midnight and I knew that the Machlises were the only neighbors who could possibly still be awake. I knocked lightly on the door and was greeted by a daughter, Sarah, a teenager at the time. She sat alone, holding a peeler and looking at a mountain of potatoes.

“How will you be able to finish this all on your own?” I asked. But Sarah didn’t seem worried in the least.

“Oh, Hashem always sends us help. It’ll get done,” she answered. I looked at the pile of potatoes, the stacks of tables and chairs waiting to be arranged and set. It was hours and hours of work. It couldn’t possibly be done by one teenage girl.

Suddenly, a *bochur* stuck his head around the front door. “Excuse me,” he called, “do you need help preparing for Shabbos?”

I couldn’t believe it! At that time of night? I guessed she was right, Hashem does send help.

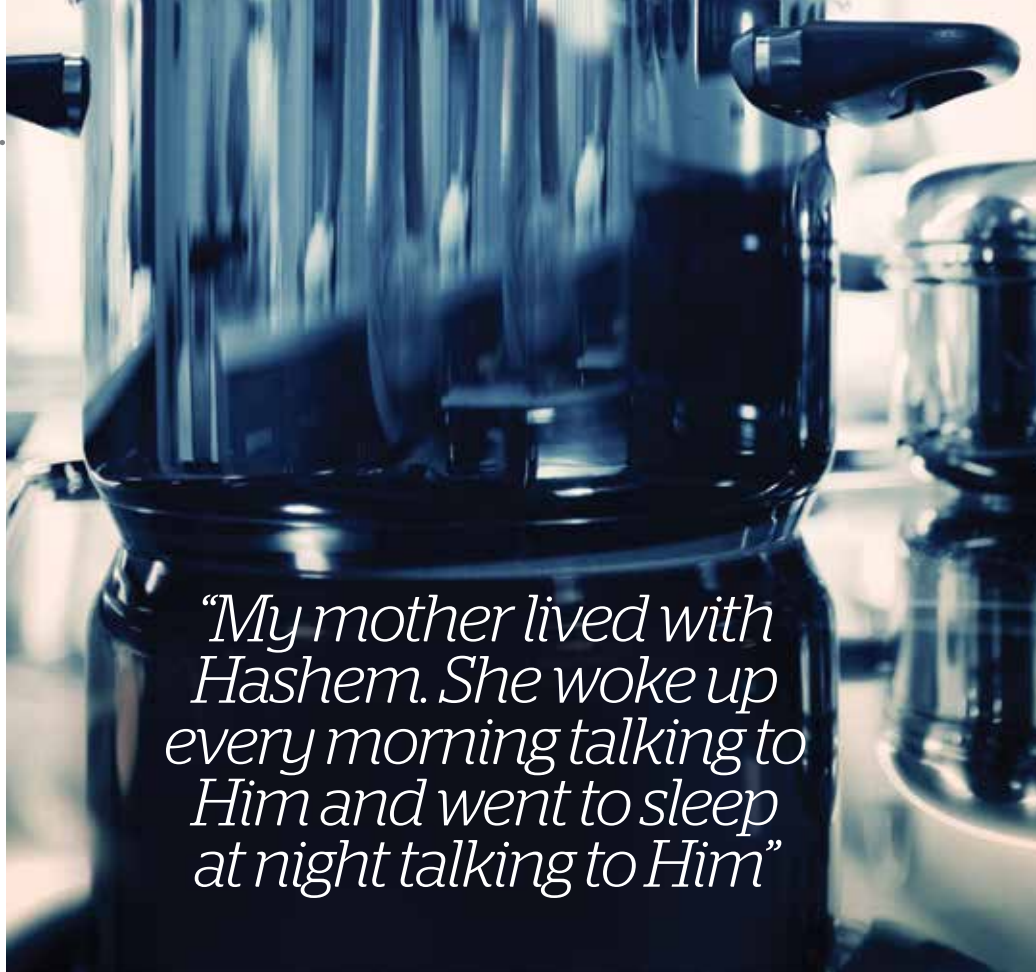
“This is amazing!” I said. “Just like you said! But, Sarah, even if he also spends the rest of the night working, there’s still no way you could possibly fini—”

Before I could complete the sentence, the door slammed open. The *bochur* called out: “Over here, guys!” and suddenly, another 20 *yeshivah bochurim* piled into the house grabbing chairs and tables and setting them up. Within minutes, before my very eyes, Shabbos was done.

I watched in complete disbelief, while Sarah remained completely unfazed. “See?” she said. “He always does.”

A SPIRITUAL INHERITANCE

Every morning when I passed by the Machlis door on my way out, I was greeted with a smile. Every time I bumped into Mrs. Machlis in the



“My mother lived with Hashem. She woke up every morning talking to Him and went to sleep at night talking to Him”

parking lot, she would stop whatever she was doing and give me a warm hug.

“Your face is *reshus harabim*,” she used to say. “What right do I have to walk around looking angry or sad?” It was so incredibly easy to assume that this came naturally to her, that she was simply blessed with an exceptionally cheery disposition. But in truth, it came from years of effort, deliberate and focused, to perfect her *middos* and character.

“My mother started working on her marriage long before she got married,” her daughter once told me. “And she worked on her parenting long before she had kids.”

Mrs. Machlis believed that the effort a person puts into spirituality automatically trickles down to one’s children.

“There are areas that my mother worked on as a teenager, that all of us kids naturally excel in. Not because she spoke about them, not because she enforced them, simply by inheritance.”

One of the values she was most

passionate about was the idea of having a calm home. “My mother taught us that it requires endless amounts of restraint, and endless amounts of patience to build a home,” said her daughter Sarah. Shortly before her *petirah*, someone got angry and screamed at her in public, shaming her terribly. Mrs. Machlis, who was suffering tremendously from the progressive stages of her illness, remained calm and unfazed.

“Ima, how can you allow someone to talk to you that way?” her children asked.

“Can’t you see she’s hurting? Hurt people hurt people,” she said, her voice filled with sincere concern.

IMMERSED IN PRAYER

Mrs. Machlis spoke to Hashem as naturally as one would speak to a friend or a loved one.

While cooking for Shabbos, she would always say: “Hashem, who puts the flavor in food? You do. Please put the *ta’am* of Gan Eden in this food. Who makes

food nutritious? You do. Please make anyone who eats this food be healthy and strong...” She would go on to ask that all who partake of her food be filled with love of Shabbos and nourished emotionally and spiritually.

In addition to her informal *tefillos*, she davened three times a day, even during the most painful stages of her illness. Just weeks before her passing, she returned from the US following an intense round of radiation and surgeries. Her flight landed on Erev Rosh Hashanah. From the airport, she took a taxi straight to Meron so she could spend what would be her last Rosh Hashanah immersed in prayer.

Her indescribable power of prayer was matched only by her extraordinary *ahavas Yisrael*. I experienced this myself, when I was expecting my third

child. I had been counting down to my due date with much anticipation. Any time I’d see any of the Machlis family, they’d smile and cheer me on: “You’re almost there, Michal!” Or, “Hang in there, you’re doing great!” But the big day came and went, with no sign of anything happening.

It was a Friday night, after the *seudah*. I was pacing back and forth outside my apartment as the last of the Machlis guests were leaving.

“Nu, any news, Michal?” Mrs. Machlis asked with her typical warmth. As if there was nothing else but me on her mind at midnight, on a Friday night.

“Nope. Nothing,” I said, frustrated.

“Don’t worry, I’ll daven for you. All at the right time...” she added nonchalantly.

The next morning I woke up early and

asked my husband not to go to shul. “I think something’s happening...” Our daughter was born a few hours later.

When I returned home from the hospital, I met Mrs. Machlis. “Mrs. Machlis! Remember I saw you on Friday night? You’ll never believe it – the very next morning I went into labor!” I said.

“Oh, how wonderful! Like I told you – all in the right time.... By the way, what time did your contractions start?” she asked, casually.

“Oh... I don’t know, I guess a little before 6 a.m., why?”

“Oh, no reason.” She smiled. “Just... I had told you I’d daven for you, so right after we spoke I stayed up all night and said the entire Sefer Tehillim for you. I finished a little before 6 a.m....” And she walked away.

That was Mrs. Machlis.

THE BIGGEST PROJECT OF ALL

Though the Machlises are famous for their Shabbos hospitality, those who knew her well were aware that it was just a fraction of Mrs. Machlis's greatness. Behind the public figure was first and foremost a mother, who considered motherhood to be her biggest life project.

During the shivah, her daughters recounted how passionately their mother felt about having children. I smiled as I heard that, remembering all the times I complained to her about feeling overwhelmed with my little ones, and how Mrs. Machlis was one of the only people to know how much I suffered during my pregnancies.

When I was expecting my first child, I confided in Mrs. Machlis that I felt too unwell to cook. She hugged me warmly and went on enthusiastically about what a privilege it was to bring a child into the world. The following Friday, someone left an entire tray of fish, soup, chicken, and even challah — an entire Shabbos — at our door.

"How did your mother manage with so many little kids?" I once asked one of the Machlis daughters.

"She was okay with the house being a mess, she let go of any ideas of perfection. As long as the kids were happy and taken care of. She didn't care about anything else."

One of the eldest daughters looked around at the shivah: 14 children, countless grandchildren. "Look what my mother left behind..." she said. "She never said it was easy — only that it was worthwhile."

"But... what about herself?" I asked.

Without a second of hesitation, she answered simply, "My mother didn't have a self."

Her sister Esther recounted that years before, she had asked their mother how she functioned on so little sleep. Mrs. Machlis told her: "Every night, for just a few minutes, I have a chat with Hashem. I tell Him all about my day and thank Him for giving me the strength I needed for what had to get done today. Then, before I go to sleep, I ask that whatever sleep I manage to get tonight will be enough to give me the *koach* I'll need for tomorrow."

At the *levayah*, Rabbi Machlis commented that usually, a person's children are younger than him. Mrs. Machlis, though, was a mother to people twice her age. Everyone was received by her with warm, maternal care. It didn't matter if you were young, old, rich, homeless, or mentally unstable.... She took everyone into her heart as if they were her own.

The Machlis's youngest child, 12-year-old Efrat, was born with Down syndrome. Despite limited mobility and her inability to communicate verbally, she is a happy and vibrant little girl. Mrs. Machlis always insisted that she be treated like any of the other siblings. "Efrat understands," she would say.

On Thursday morning, when the family got up from shivah,

they all went to the Sanhedria cemetery, to visit the *kever*. A while later, I received a frantic call from the 18-year-old daughter of one of the neighbors, who had volunteered to watch Efrat during this time.

"Michal, I need help!" she said.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I pressed the phone to my ear: there was a commotion in the background.

"I had to take Efrat home from the cemetery. Except that a few minutes after we began walking home, she suddenly sat on the sidewalk and started crying. She's refusing to move! It's been 40 minutes and I can't convince her to come!"

I grabbed my bag and jumped in the car. When I arrived, another neighbor was already there. Together, we gently picked Efrat up and put her in the car. We drove her home and helped her walk to the Machlises' apartment. As she walked down the familiar path, her pace quickened. Then she suddenly stopped. She stood frozen, staring at the front door, tears slowly trickling down her face.

As I looked at her at that moment, I knew that what Mrs. Machlis had said all along was undoubtedly true — Efrat understands.

MY MOTHER'S PALACE

"This was my mother's palace," said Sarah Machlis during the shivah as she lovingly looked around at the walls of their simple apartment. Filled wall-to-wall with *seforim*, and filled with simple furniture, every Friday it becomes an ocean of folding tables and plastic chairs that often spill out into the street.

Mrs. Machlis felt she had everything and yet that nothing was hers. Even her diamond ring was once lent to someone in need, never to be returned. In fact, their oldest son, Moshe, recalled at the *levayah* that when he first got married and joined a *kollel*, his mother told him, "If tough times come and you ever need to leave *kollel*, please come to me first. I'll sell all my jewelry for you to stay in learning." She had forgotten that she didn't have any jewelry. Over the years, the guests had stolen it all.

When the Machlises purchased a new oven, Mrs. Machlis was overjoyed — it could now fit double the amount of *kugel*!

When they received a donation to fix up their outdated kitchen, Mrs. Machlis was thrilled — more counter space to fit the dozens of trays of Shabbos food.

When the opportunity came up to extend their small apartment, Mrs. Machlis lit up with dreams of creating more space to seat guests.

Material objects meant nothing to her. They were only a means to allow her the things she truly considered priceless.

"She didn't leave a will behind," her daughter said at the shivah, "but what she left us was bigger than anything. She left us a lifetime of *emunah* and values that didn't need to be taught. We lived them

and breathed them from infancy. She left us with a love for every soul that comes through our door, with a passion for *chesed*, with an unwavering sense of trust that Hashem loves us and will take care of us in every possible way. My mother didn't leave us much in physical objects or possessions. She knew she was going to have to leave us at some point and she wanted to leave us with something that would last forever."

PART OF THE FAMILY

The Machlises' hospitality was not limited to Shabbos. It was a way of life. No one was ever turned away from their home. When they ran out of room, the guests often slept on the couch.

One of my sons was once playing on our porch, when he told me he wanted to play with the "*kinderlach* of the family that lives in Machlis's backyard." Confused, I

peeked through the window. Down below, in the yard, I saw a tent, housing an entire family of guests.

When Mrs. Machlis was first diagnosed, many people wondered if the family would take a break from their Shabbos hospitality. They didn't. When she underwent brain surgery, people asked if they would now take a break. They didn't. The Shabbos following the shivah, everyone assumed that finally, now, they would take a break. They didn't. The family got up from shivah on Thursday morning. By Thursday afternoon, the tables were set and the food was prepared.

What all these people didn't understand is that the Machlises' guests are no longer guests. They are part of the family. You cannot take a break from family.

The Shabbos of Mrs. Machlis's passing was the Shabbos bar mitzvah of their eldest grandson. Arrangements had been

made for the family to travel to Ramat Beit Shemesh for the *simchah*. And so they did, just hours after her passing, directly from the *levayah*.

That Shabbos, like any other Shabbos for the past 35 years, a crowd gathered outside their door, waiting to be let in — even though they knew the house was empty. They waited for hours, refusing to accept that they would never again be welcomed by the familiar warmth and love that Mrs. Machlis had always given them. As the hours passed, one of the neighbors brought down Kiddush and challah for the crowd. But food was not what they searched for.

They continued to wait, until one of the guests, who knew the combination to the apartment, decided to simply open the door. They poured inside and just sat there, in the empty apartment.

All they wanted was the comfort of being home. ☺