

David Eliezrie

THE SECRET OF
CHABAD

**INSIDE THE WORLD'S MOST
SUCCESSFUL JEWISH MOVEMENT**

The Toby Press

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Chapter One

Gabi and Rivkie

It was a crisp fall morning in Kathmandu, perched in the mountains of Nepal. Chani¹ Lifshitz was starting her morning on the day before Thanksgiving, Wednesday, November 26, 2008. As is often the case for young mothers, things were hectic for Chani as she went about getting the four kids up, dressed, and ready for their day. When things calmed down a bit, she lifted the phone to call her BFF, Rivkie Holtzberg, who was not around the corner in a suburban housing track. Rivkie was a thousand miles away, across in the Himalayas in the bustling city of Mumbai. Chani and Rivkie, two Chabad rebbitzens, shared the responsibility of Jewish leadership in remote communities with their husbands. They had met accidentally in Bangkok five years earlier. Chani was waiting for her visa to return to Nepal. Rivkie was teaching in the local Jewish school, but was about to leave for Mumbai to launch a Chabad Center. Both were Israelis. Chani was raised in the hustle of Rechovot, part of the Tel Aviv urban sprawl. Rivkie grew up in Afula, the dusty agricultural town at the center of the hot Yizre'el Valley in Israel's north.

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Both women came from Chabad families, but had never met before Bangkok, where, as Chani² put it, “We clicked.” Both lived in exotic, but similar worlds: young religious women, raising families in Nepal and India, far from friends and family. “There was no one religious like us,” says Chani. Nepal was one of the only countries in the world without an indigenous Jewish community. In Mumbai, Rivkie and her husband, Gabi, were among only a few religious Jews, and Gabi was the only rabbi in the city. Thirty-five hundred Jews lived among twenty million Indians in Mumbai with no anti-Semitism. The local Jewish population was aging, but far from observant. By the time Rivkie arrived with her husband, Chani had been in Kathmandu for six years, and she offered to mentor Rivkie. “I was a relatively veteran emissary in this neck of the woods,” Chani explains. “Rivkie was searching for knowledge, and she wanted to do everything in the best possible way.”

In Nepal, the mission of Chani and her husband Chezki were the thousands of Israeli backpackers³ trekking this mountainous region. Many young Israelis take a “shnat chofesh” (a year-long break after their army service or after university). They are looking for adventure and an escape from the pressure cooker of Israeli society. Gabi described these wandering Israelis: “They come here to do everything the army didn’t allow them to do. Their shoes had to be polished and tied – here they wear sandals. They had to cut their hair – here they grow their hair long.”

A string of Chabad Centers⁴ popped up as outposts⁵ of hospitality for these wanderers. Most secular Israelis feel comfortable in Chabad, whose Judaism is non-judgmental. The Shabbat dinners and the Hebrew-speaking rabbis and rebbitzens remind them of home. Passover in Kathmandu has become legend for young Israelis. Trekkers often plan their journeys to reach the Chabad House in Nepal for the holiday celebration. In Mumbai, the mission of Rivkie and her husband Gabi was more diverse. They split their attention among the local community, business people coming to Mumbai who needed kosher food, and the Israeli travelers.

That pre-Thanksgiving morning’s conversation between Chani and Rivkie was foreboding. “I had a sense of unease,” Chani says.

“The conversation was unusual, almost fatalistic. Rivkie had been different for the last month, she had always been very optimistic, but now, something was troubling her. Later on, her mother told me she sensed it also.”

Rivkie was under strain. Her second child was sick in Israel, where the hospitals were equipped to handle his disease, so Rivkie and her husband were commuting from Mumbai to Israel to take care of him. The newest baby, Moshie, was not sleeping well; there were financial pressures involved in a new building they had purchased.

Rivkie carried her challenges on the inside; Chani was one of her few outlets. Erin Beser,⁶ an American intern for the JDC,⁷ the American Jewish organization, was a regular at the Chabad Center. Beser says, “There was always a smile on Rivkie’s face; she acted like she had no problems. We didn’t know she had a sick child, she never mentioned it; finally someone else in the community told us.”

Chani tried to lift her spirits. “We talked about plans for the building dedication. I would come there for a week, and then she would come to Nepal to help me in a few months when I was due to give birth.” Rivkie wanted to take a break that day. “I suggested that she go to the Taj Hotel⁸ to sit in the lobby and relax a bit.”

Mumbai is one of the world’s largest cities – sprawling, dirty, children begging on every street corner, some just hundreds of yards from luxury hotels. Polytheism is still prevalent. Rivkie was far away from her family and friends. But despite the unease these elements of her life in India aroused in her, Rivkie was deeply committed to her shlichus, her mission. Her cousin Penina Glitzenstein,⁹ a Chabad emissary in the Ukraine, says, “She always told me how great and interesting life is helping others.” Rivkie hosted people nightly, and looked effervescent on a video shot by a visitor.¹⁰ “It’s wonderful,” she said. “In Israel you don’t host people every day.” Beser says, “She was always full of ideas to do more for the community. She had a sense of mission. To Rivkie, her first concern was everyone else.”

Off and on that day, Chani and Rivkie spoke. The last time was just after 7:00 p.m. “She told me what she was preparing for each guest for dinner. This was typical Rivkie, catering to the individual needs of each guest.” The rainbow of the Jewish world was at

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her table, Rabbi Leibish Teitelbaum, age thirty-seven, from Jerusalem and Rabbi Ben Zion Croman, age twenty-eight, from Brooklyn, in India to certify kosher food production. Yocheved Orpaz, sixty-two, who came to thank the Holtzbergs for their help. Norma Rabinovich-Shvarzblat, forty-nine, from Mexico, planning to fulfill her lifelong dream of immigrating to Israel the next day. David Bialka, an Israeli diamond dealer.

Just before dinner, Chani received an e-mail. Rivkie was wondering, “What color should I paint the bedrooms in our apartment on the sixth floor of the Chabad House?” Chani had some ideas and tried contacting her again, but it was too late.

As Rivkie was preparing dinner, a fishing trawler¹¹ hovered a few miles off the coast of Mumbai. The five sailors on board had been killed when it was hijacked three days earlier near Jakhau, thirty miles south of Pakistan, seized by the Islamic terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT),¹² literally, “Army of the Pure,” based in Pakistan with links to both Pakistani intelligence and Al Qaida.

The trawler headed south five hundred miles toward Mumbai, India’s window to the West. During the journey, the group was in constant contact by satellite phone with their handlers in Pakistan. The ten terrorists on board had undergone rigorous training for months in Pakistan. They made up five lethal teams, each with a different target in the city. In a phone conversation picked up by Indian intelligence, the handler in Pakistan told his men before they began their attacks: “This is a struggle between Islam and the unbelievers.”

The ship arrived off the coast of Mumbai around 2:00 p.m. The terrorists waited onboard until darkness engulfed the ocean. They hugged each other and prayed together, then boarded a raft that moved silently in the water for the last five miles toward the beach on the southern tip of Mumbai. Fishing boats dotted the water, masking their incursion. Not far away were the five prominent targets: the posh Taj and Oberoi hotels, the railway station, the popular Leopold Café, and the Chabad House.

The attack was meticulously planned. David Headley,¹³ an American-born Pakistani, later arrested by the FBI and tried in Chicago,¹⁴ was LeT’s spy. Headley’s US passport allowed him to

travel to India eight times to survey different targets. The Chabad House was added only after his last visit in August 2008. The terrorists thought the Chabad House was a base for the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service – probably because the place was almost always full of Israelis. Erin Beser says, “The guys from EL AL, the members of the consulate staff were all welcome on Shabbat.” And Israeli backpackers were coming and going all the time. Rabbi Yosef Chaim Kantor¹⁵ of Bangkok says, “We are a religious organization¹⁶ providing hospitality and educational and religious programs, and are not involved in any government activity.” Headley later testified,¹⁷ “[LeT] considers the Jewish people a number one target.” The handler in Pakistan told the terrorists by phone, “Every person you kill there (Chabad House) is worth fifty killed in the hotels.”¹⁸ Headley did extensive surveillance, “I did not go inside; it was a very small establishment and would serve the purpose of the stronghold.”

The boat reached the shore around 8:30 p.m. The terrorists split up into five groups. One continued in the raft to the oceanfront Oberoi Hotel in Nariman Point. Three other groups, of two terrorists each, hailed taxis to the Taj Hotel, the train station and the Leopold Café. Each team left a bomb in its taxi, set to go off a half hour later, in order to add confusion to the attacks. Two gunmen, Abu Amar and Babar Imran, headed out by foot toward the Chabad House just five hundred yards away.

In the Chabad House, things had settled down after dinner. David Bialka¹⁹ from the Israeli beach town of Netanya was getting ready for bed in a fourth-floor guest room. Sandra Samuel, Rivkie’s Indian assistant and nanny to young Moshie, was with Jacky the cook in the ground-floor storage area putting leftovers in the fridge. In the third-floor synagogue, Rabbis Ben Zion Croman and Leibish Teitelbaum were studying. Gabi and Rivkie were nearby. The two other women, Yocheved and Norma, were about to leave after dinner.

After making their way through the darkened alleyways, Amar and Imran arrived at the Chabad House around 9:00 p.m. There was a guard on duty every day, but, strangely, that night he had disappeared. Sandra, who was on the ground floor, heard some noise outside. Thinking it was some kids shooting off fireworks, she opened

the door and the two terrorists pushed their way inside, shooting toward her and Jacky. The nanny and cook ran down the hallway into a storage room and closed the door. Sandra phoned Rivkie on the third floor to warn her of the attackers. On the phone she heard the voices of Gabi, Rivkie, and others all talking at once.

When the terrorists entered the third floor, they spotted Rabbis Teitelbaum and Croman studying. Teitelbaum was killed instantly, Croman put up a fight, but, hit by bullets, he succumbed. Their books remained open and covered with blood. Hearing the attack, Gabi called the security officer at the Israeli Consul General telling him quickly, "The situation is not good – terrorists..." The phone was cut off. Gabi was wounded in the leg; later that night he tied a tourniquet in an attempt to stymie the bleeding. The terrorists started taking shots from the windows. Neighbors heard Rivkie's voice screaming from the Chabad House later that night, "Save us, save us!" and yelling out her husband's name, "Gabi, Gabi!" The terrorists seized the two other women, Norma and Yocheved, and moved them up to the fourth floor.

Upstairs, Bialka was reading when he heard the shooting. He realized that the only escape was through a bathroom window. He climbed down the pipes that ran along the outside of the building. Later, he told the story to Israeli TV.²⁰ "I went down to the ground and hoped they would not notice me. Glass was breaking from every direction. When I reached the ground, the local Indians were sure I was a terrorist and knocked me down." The police arrested him, then released him the next day. Traumatized from the experience, Bialka fled India and arrived home in Netanya, Israel, before the Sabbath.

Sandra passed the night behind the jammed door of the service kitchen on the second floor together with Jacky. "I got down low between the wall and the fridge." She was surprised the terrorists never came back for them, later telling an interviewer,²¹ "Maybe they thought we had run away through the back door."

The news began to dribble out of Mumbai. On Wednesday morning, a reporter contacted Rabbi Motti Seligson, director of Media Relations at Lubavitch headquarters on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. "Something is going on in Mumbai; check up on your people on the ground." Seligson started to reach out, but there was

little information. He called both sets of parents to verify that Gabi and Rivkie were in Mumbai. No one was answering any of the numbers in the Chabad House or the cell phones.

In Afula, Rivkie's mother, Yehudit Rosenberg, got a call around 8:00 p.m. Israel time from Israel's Cheder Matzav, the government's emergency control center, asking if they could verify her phone number but gave her no information. As the rumors intensified, Yehudit²² called the control center back. "They told me there was an attack in India but they did not give me any details, nor that the Chabad House was a target." The family was on edge. "We were worried. At 2:30 a.m. (5:00 a.m. in Mumbai), we got a call from Gabi's cousin in New York telling us the terrorists had entered the Chabad House; things were confusing." In the morning, the news became tragically clearer. The Israeli media arrived and encamped outside the Rosenbergs' home.

Gabi's father, Rabbi Nachman Holtzberg,²³ was home that Wednesday in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. "Late in the afternoon, my wife called. Her sister had seen a media report that there was an attack in Mumbai, and terrorists had entered the Chabad House." Holtzberg tried to reach his son but no one answered. "I realized the situation wasn't good." Holtzberg headed to Chabad's main synagogue on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, New York. Together with others who had flocked there, they prayed through the night.

As the news turned bleaker, a crisis-management team was assembled. Seligson²⁴ filled a dozen of the workstations in Chabad.org, on the fourth floor of the office building adjacent to 770, with a team of young rabbis. They set up communications with India and began monitoring the media and government sources of information. They decided to call the local hospitals, but they didn't speak the language. An e-mail²⁵ was dispatched on the internal Chabad mailing list read by thousands of rabbis around the world. Cryptically worded, not wanting to reveal exactly the reason a translator was needed, it asked for someone who spoke the native language of India. Professor P. V. Viswanath²⁶ of Pace University volunteered and headed from his home in New Jersey to Brooklyn.

The two senior executives of Chabad were each dealing with personal adversity. Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, the Rebbe's secretary for

over forty years, and chairman of Merkos, the Chabad educational arm that operates Centers in over eighty counties, was sitting Shivah (the week of mourning) for his brother. Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky, the vice-chairman, who travels extensively and is intimately involved with the network of Centers around the world, was at the hospital, his father on the edge of life. Seligson, along with Rabbi Mendy Sharfstein,²⁷ director of the security office in New York, was constantly updating Rabbis Krinsky and Kotlarsky.

That evening in California, I got a call from the team in New York asking me to join the Crisis Management Team. For the next thirty-some hours, we had an open conference call, and we needed someone on the ground in Mumbai. Late that night, Seligson²⁸ contacted the CNN International News desk in Atlanta. An acquaintance was on duty and she gave him the cell number of Raksha Shetty,²⁹ a CNN-IBN reporter in India who was broadcasting live outside the Chabad House. During the coming hours and days, we spoke to her during the breaks in her live updates. She provided crucial details and background to the team in New York.

After midnight, FBI agents arrived at Chabad headquarters. The agents were deeply impressed with the professionalism of the operation mounted in Brooklyn, telling Seligson, “You have better information than we do at the FBI office.”

CNN’s Shetty was helpful, but we still needed our own representative on the ground. Rabbi Dov Goldberg³⁰ was at the Chabad House in Goa, an hour away from Mumbai. He had spoken to Gabi at 7:00 p.m., and sent him a text message later, but did not get a reply. Around 3:00 a.m., the phone rang waking up Goldberg in Goa; it was Chabad headquarters in New York. “They told me that the terrorists were in the Chabad House and I should fly out on the first plane in the morning.”

In Washington, Rabbi Levi Shemtov, who directs Chabad’s American Friends of Lubavitch DC office, tried calling Gabi’s cell phone. Someone answered speaking a foreign language. Realizing it must have been the terrorists, he needed a translator.³¹ Viswanath, the Indian translator who was now in Brooklyn, got on the phone. Shemtov called Gabi’s cell phone again. I monitored the call from

California. Viswanath had some trouble with the dialect of Urdu that originated in Pakistan. The caller said his name was Imran; he claimed no one had been hurt. "Put us in touch with the Indian government and we will let the hostages go," he said. Shemtov³² called the Indian embassy in Washington and tried to reach someone of authority in India, Viswanath said later in a newspaper interview. "When we tried to call the Indian authorities, we were bounced from one office to another. The calls continued on and off till around 5:00 a.m. New York time, and ultimately they failed to connect the terrorist in Mumbai with officials in India."

The Crisis Management Team in the US feared that the terrorists could be following the media reports. Later it was revealed that there were 181³³ calls between the controllers in Pakistan and the terrorists in Mumbai. Independent community blogs³⁴ were asked to suspend any reporting. The spokesman of Chabad in Israel was being interviewed on Israeli TV. I called his associate and told him to pull him off the air. We feared any detail emanating from Chabad sources could be used by the terrorists in Mumbai. We began issuing reports on Chabad.org, the movement's official site. Each piece of information³⁵ was carefully vetted to ensure that no one in the Chabad House would be put at risk.

An assault was needed to free the hostages, but the Indian authorities seemed paralyzed. A commando unit had been mobilized in Israel and was preparing for the six-hour flight to Mumbai. Two Israeli consular officials were on the ground not far from the Chabad House, observing the situation. In the middle of the night, the crisis team in Brooklyn received a notification³⁶ from a senior Israeli government official: the Indian government rejected Israeli assistance. Only the Indian military could save those alive in the Chabad House.

The terrorists were holed up on the fourth floor with the two female hostages during the phone calls with us in the US.³⁷ Sandra Samuel, the Indian nanny, was still hiding in the second-floor kitchen. Around 11:00 a.m. India time, she heard a baby cry. "Suddenly I hear the baby calling me, 'Sandra, Sandra, Sandra.'"³⁸ Moshie was a few days shy of his second birthday. Opening the door of the kitchen, Sandra saw that the staircase leading up to the second floor had been

blown up by the terrorists. Climbing over the rubble, Sandra moved up to the third floor where the baby was crying. A few hours later, she told Israeli reporter, Aimee Ginsburg,³⁹ “The baby was standing next to his mother, who was lying on her side. His father was lying next to her on his stomach. Their eyes were closed, unconscious. Next to them, I saw the legs of another man sticking out from under the table, with blood. Baby’s pants also had a big circle of blood. The terrorists must have been upstairs. I grabbed the baby and ran out.” Five hours later, sitting in the Israeli Consulate, Sandra was full of misgiving, regretting not going back into the Chabad House a second time. “I should have tried to help Rabbi and Rivkie. I should have checked to see how they were. What kind of person am I just to have run out?”

In Afula, the report that a woman ran out of the Chabad House with a baby gave Yehudit Rosenberg⁴⁰ great hope. “Suddenly we heard that a European-looking woman and child had escaped from the Chabad House. I was so happy, I thought it must be Rivkie and Moshie. They were saved, but what about Gabi, I wondered.” In a short time, the news changed. Yehudit heard the woman was not European, and realized that her daughter was still in the Chabad House. She thought, “At least Moshie was saved.” The Rosenbergs decided to head to Mumbai, and they finally arrived early Friday morning.

Not far from another of the targets, the train station, where dozens lay dead and wounded, police captured a member of the terrorist team, Abu Jujahid. The Pakistani handlers⁴¹ ordered the terrorists in the Chabad House to open negotiations with the Israelis and use the two female hostages to free Jujahid. Discovering the number of the Israeli Consulate on Gabi’s phone, they made the call. One of the Pakistani controllers even spoke to one of the hostages in the Chabad House, urging her to help with the negotiations. “You will be home for your Sabbath,” he promised. When this failed, the Pakistani voice on the telephone ordered the terrorists in Mumbai to kill the hostages.

By Friday morning, the terrorists had been subdued in the two hotels and in the train station, but the Chabad House remained

under their control. A close friend of Gabi and Rivkie, Dr. Aron Abraham, and some Jewish volunteers, began moving toward the Chabad House on foot. Late Friday afternoon, they crouched in the narrow street outside the Chabad House waiting for the final assault to begin. For hours, there had been shooting. Indian soldiers were firing into the Chabad House from nearby buildings.⁴² Just before sunset, the Indian commandos began their final attack. Soldiers dropped from helicopters and another group assaulted the building from below. As the Sabbath began in Mumbai, the shooting stopped. After sunset, Dr. Abraham entered the building. Tear gas lingered in the air; hand grenades littered the floor. Confirmation⁴³ was passed on to Chabad in New York that there were no survivors.

It was Friday morning in California. Sitting in my office, I heard the news. The last few days had been a roller coaster of emotions. There were moments when we had much hope and others when we secretly feared the worst. Still, we did not want to believe that the end would be so heartbreakingly catastrophic. The reality sank in, the anguish intense. I just slumped down and began to cry.

Dr. Abraham⁴⁴ had been studying for conversion to Judaism, and the conversion process would be completed some months later in Israel. Later Friday night,⁴⁵ he accompanied the remains of those slain in the Chabad House as they were transferred to JJ hospital, where all the bodies of those killed in the attack were being placed. Prior to leaving the Chabad House, he covered each of the bodies with a talit (prayer shawl). In the hospital, he asked that Jewish tradition be respected regarding any unnecessary autopsies.⁴⁶

As Shabbat began at sunset in Mumbai, the Rosenbergs, Moshie, Sandra, and others found refuge in homes of the Israeli consular officials. At that point, the battle at the Chabad House was still grinding on, the final outcome unclear. There was a sense that the news was bad; still a feeling of hope lingered. Yehudit, Rivkie's mother,⁴⁷ says, "We did not want to give up, we were filled with faith."

Yehudit remembers those moments: "We lit the candles. With tears and prayers, we entered into Shabbat." She prayed that women around the world would light candles for Rivkie's sake. "Our hosts

already knew late Friday night the bad news. At eleven the next morning, they shared the information with us. Afterward, my husband began to pray the Sabbath morning prayers. I will never forget the *Av Harachamim*.” This is the prayer said every Shabbat and on holidays during the Yizkor Memorial Service. Composed in the wake of eleventh-century crusades, the prayer recalls the death and destruction that European Jewry suffered as armies driven by religious zealotry marched across Europe on their way to the Holy Land. Its poignant message, reaching through the centuries, is: “May the all-merciful Father remember with mercy the pious, the upright, and the perfect ones and the holy communities who gave their lives for the sanctification of the Divine name.” As her husband, Shimon, uttered these words, Yehudit says, “He was full of tears.” Her voice drops off as she tells me of those terrible moments. Finally there are no words; we sit in her home in Afula, in absolute silence.

In New York, Shabbat would not begin for a few hours. The press converged on Lubavitch World headquarters. Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky had completed his observance of *Shivah* the previous day. Now he was faced with the task of consoling others. The world paused, focused on Brooklyn, where CNN and other networks were broadcasting live. In a voice laced with deep emotion, Rabbi Krinsky⁴⁸ said, “With profound sadness and deep sorrow, we received the definitive news, just a short while ago, confirming the brutal murder of two of our finest, Rabbi Gavriel Noach, twenty-nine, and Rivkah Holtzberg, twenty-eight, our dear representatives in Mumbai, India, who served their community with love and devotion. We express deeply heartfelt condolences to the parents and family of this beautiful young couple, and to the families and loved ones of each of those who have been brutally murdered in this senseless, barbaric attack. In the traditional Jewish blessing to mourners: May G-d Almighty comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

Rabbi Krinsky seemed to sense Rivkie’s mother’s private prayer as she lit the candles in Mumbai. He added a special request, asking Jews around the world to do a *mitzvah* (a good deed, a personal act of goodness) in their memory. “As the Shabbat approaches, we call upon Jewish women and girls to brighten the profound darkness the

world is witnessing, and usher in the Shabbat by lighting the traditional Shabbat candles, eighteen minutes before sunset. I am certain that this would be Gabi's and Rivkie's wish."

The tragedy in Mumbai cut a deep wound; Chabad Rabbis and Rebbitzens around the world were stunned. Their brother and sister had been killed. Absolute evil had encountered absolute goodness, and this time, evil had prevailed. Across the globe, hundreds of thousands, seeing the deep pain and anguish, shared the despair of their community leaders. A chord had been touched. The loss in Mumbai revealed the intrinsic link that connects Jews and humanity from all over.

In our Chabad Center in Yorba Linda, California, we were numb with sadness. We sent out an e-mail with Rabbi Krinsky's request. As the sun began setting in Yorba Linda, dozens of women – soccer moms and seniors, religious and secular, many who rarely frequent a synagogue – converged on our Center. They welcomed the Shabbat together with the traditional ceremony of lighting the Shabbat candles. Singing songs, and sharing words of inspiration, they were a microcosm of communities around the globe. The Jewish people mourned, but in a unique way, by lighting up the world with one more mitzvah.

As the sun set Saturday evening in Mumbai, and Shabbat ended, Israel's Ambassador to India, Mark Sofer, who had arrived Friday from Delhi, told Rabbi Goldberg that the Indian government wanted to use the bodies for their investigation. But Jewish tradition mandates that funerals be done swiftly, out of respect for the deceased. An investigation would delay the funerals unnecessarily, possibly for weeks. Finally, the ambassador reached the Indian prime minister⁴⁹ and told him, "Mr. Prime Minister, if the government does not release the bodies, it will become an international incident. Tomorrow there will be demonstrations in New York, Paris, and Tel Aviv, and I cannot stop it." Fearing public pressure, the prime minister relented, permitting the remains to be flown to Israel. The Israel Air Force dispatched a plane to Mumbai to bring the families and bodies home.

On Monday morning in Mumbai, some Jewish volunteers were given a four-hour window by Indian authorities to re-enter the

Chabad House. The building still reeked from the battle that had ended on Friday evening. Bullet holes peppered the walls. Death and destruction were everywhere. The volunteers went from floor to floor, collecting many personal items. As they finished the task, they all gathered in the synagogue on the third floor. They planned to take the Torah scrolls back to Israel, fearing they could be vandalized where they were. Before removing the scrolls, they began singing Jewish melodies.

On Monday before the families of the slain left India to return to Israel, Mumbai's Jewish community gathered for a memorial prayer. The historic Kneset Eliyahu synagogue was full.⁵⁰ Rabbi Shimon Rosenberg, the Israeli ambassador, and others spoke. Prayers and psalms were said. Two-year-old Moshie shattered the hearts of all. Not understanding the events that were surrounding him, he clutched a red ball, crying out time and again, his voice echoing throughout the large sanctuary, the Hebrew word for Mommy: "Ima, Ima, Ima, Ima."⁵¹

As the Israeli plane left Mumbai Monday evening, the cargo hold was filled with the bodies of those who had lost their lives simply for being Jews. On board, the families, friends, volunteers, and Israeli officials sat mostly in silence, trying to make sense of the senseless evil. Mati Goldstein⁵² sat with Rabbi Shimon Rosenberg and told him of the Torah scroll they had discovered earlier that day with the words "after the death of the two sons of Aaron" torn by a bullet.

When Gabi left home to take up his new post in Mumbai, he eerily told his father (referring to the classical Jewish belief in the coming of the Messiah),⁵³ "I will come back with Moshiach or in a casket." Chabad shlichim accept a posting for life. No one had dreamed that the Holtzbergs' return would be so quick and so brutal.

The road to Mumbai had started for both of them decades earlier. Both grew up in Chabad homes, where idealism and caring for others were instilled from childhood. In the early seventies, inspired by the Rebbe to move to a small city without a strong religious tradition, Rivkie's parents moved to Afula in Israel's north. When they arrived, a young Chabad couple in an immigrant agricultural town with few friends and no family, they were much like Gabi and Rivkie,

who arrived in Mumbai thirty-five years later – an anomaly. At the time, the Chabad community was centered in Kfar Chabad, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv. The national network of institutions that reaches today to every community in the country was just beginning to evolve.

They both became Jewish educators. Every Shabbat, Shimon would visit a different synagogue, getting to know the residents, sharing a few words of Torah from the pulpit. Yehudit taught in the government-sponsored Chabad school in Taanach, a small agricultural village a few miles south of Afula.⁵⁴ The classrooms were filled with immigrant children whose parents were farmers. Most were not religious, but they chose the Chabad school to give their kids a foundation in Jewish tradition.

The Rosenbergs raised a big family; Rivkie was number six out of eleven children. The Rosenbergs' home was open to the community; it was an environment of kindness and hospitality for guests and Jews from all backgrounds. When Russian Jews began immigrating to Israel in large numbers, Yehudit designated a room that she filled with donated clothing. Daily, the newly arrived families would come to find things for their children. "Every Shabbat, a few of those families would join us for meals," Yehudit said, "and years later, when I would run into them, their first question was always, 'How is Rivkie?' She was the dynamic one; she was the child they always remembered.

Rivkie and her good friend, Chani Goldstein, were the only two Chabad kids in the class in the school in the village of Taanach where her mother taught. The other children were from varied backgrounds, somewhat traditional with a mix of secular and a few Orthodox. Chani Goldstein⁵⁵ remembers, "Rivkie began acting like a shliach from childhood. She had the character, and was very outgoing. She was best friends with everyone but she did not compromise her standards."

For high school, she commuted to the Chabad girls' school in nearby Haifa. One of her classmates tells of the first day in school. "We are sitting in class and she comes in with smiles and self-confidence: 'Hi, I'm Rivkie Rosenberg from Afula.'" She was a natural leader. Rivkie was fifteen when a troubled girl, from outside the Chabad community, joined the school. Her parents were divorced,

and she was disheveled, distraught, her face disfigured. It was Rivkie who befriended her. “One day,” Chani⁵⁶ says, “the girl revealed her secret. She told us that her father was beating her.” The girls feared getting involved, but Rivkie took action. She marched off to the school counselor and arranged an intervention. Her mother was proud of her taking responsibility. “Others would not befriend this girl, but Rivkie took her home, bought her clothes; she uplifted her.” Rivkie nurtured the girl to a point where she could function normally.

Rivkie attended seminary, a post-high-school, college-level program in Kfar Chabad. She and her cousin, Penina Glitzenstein, joined her older sister and another cousin. Four grandchildren – two sets of sisters – lived for three years with their elderly grandmother in Lod. Their grandfather had passed away a few years earlier. Rivkie’s grandmother, Itta Kaylah, came from Poland. At sixteen, she was in a Soviet work camp in Siberia. After the war, she moved to Israel. She lived in a simple apartment in the Chabad neighborhood in working-class Lod, spending much of her time in Torah study. Penina⁵⁷ says, “She had a profound impact on us.” Deeply pious, she would share Chassidic lore with her granddaughters, one of whom recalls that she recited the whole book of Psalms every day. The gregarious girls enjoyed the intergenerational mix – the way their grandmother connected them to the richness of European Jewish culture, tradition, and scholarship, as well as the good times they had. “Four granddaughters together was lively,” recalls Penina.

At twenty, Rivkie was off to Riga in Latvia with her cousin Penina to teach. Rivkie insisted they stay for the summer and organize a camp.

Gabi was number six of an Israeli family of eight. When Gabi was eight, the family moved to the us where his father, Rabbi Nachman, had landed a job as a schochet (ritual slaughterer of kosher meat). Yisroel Hahn,⁵⁸ today a shliach in Spokane, Washington, was another Israeli kid in Brooklyn, and they became buddies. Gabi, he said, was studious. “He could be rowdy if he wanted to, but he was very focused. He never got into sports like the American kids.” Hahn said Gabi had drive and ambition. “He was stubborn. If he wanted to get something done, it got done.” At eleven, Gabi had mastered

the six orders of the Mishnah by heart. Hahn said this surprised his teachers. “No one had ever done that before. Gabi would look for a challenge and overcome it.”

At fourteen, Gabi encountered Islamic terror for the first time. His father’s job had brought them to Argentina for a short stint. Hezbollah terrorists bombed the local Jewish Community Center killing eighty-seven, and injuring over one hundred. Gabi’s yeshiva was down the block. After the massive explosion, Gabi⁵⁹ ran to the burning building and started pulling out the wounded.

Gabi’s classmate, Menachem Heller,⁶⁰ recalls, “At fifteen, we decided to finish the Talmud⁶¹ (sixty-three tractates, over five thousand pages). Every night we would stay late, till after 11 o’clock.” They studied for a year. After that, Heller had other things he wanted to accomplish. He told Gabi, “Maybe we can continue this at a later date.” Gabi, however, completed this monumental task. As Heller puts it, “He wanted to finish, so he finished it.”

In the Chabad community, young people begin to think about settling down and getting married in their early twenties. They date with the intent of marriage.⁶² Family, friends, and at times a shadchan (matchmaker), suggest ideas. Most young people seek the advice of their parents, who help screen prospective candidates. Still, the choice is theirs, and, as the Rebbe advised a young woman, “There must be Hamshachas Halev, an attraction of the heart.” The goal is marriage; if it clicks, they pursue the relationship. With Gabi and Rivkie, it seemed like destiny from day one. Her childhood friend Chani⁶³ says, “When they became engaged, she was radiant. She was on a high, two souls connected.”

They married in Tel Aviv in 2002; he was twenty-three, she twenty-two. For the first year, they lived in Migdal Ha’Emek, not far from Afula. Gabi studied in kolel (an advanced rabbinic program for married men) and Rivkie taught in school, as well as aerobics. After marriage, most couples spend a year near family, the husband still studying. This gives the young couple time to adjust to marriage before being propelled into the hustle of regular life. Later, some choose shlichus – joining the Chabad network, either opening a new location or finding a position in an existing institution. Others

pursue careers in business or they may choose to pursue additional education to provide them with job skills. A few outstanding students remain studying for additional years.

India was slated for expansion. The idea had been batted about between the headquarters in New York and Rabbi Yosef Chaim Kantor, the regional director in Thailand. Mendy Glitzenstein,⁶⁴ married to Rivkie's cousin Penina, had heard the rumors about India and thought it was a good idea for Gabi and Rivkie. "He wanted a place where he could realize his true potential. He was a *schochet*,⁶⁵ and he knew Hebrew and English." Gabi was intrigued; India was one of the few countries without a permanent Chabad presence, and the idea excited him. Gabi had spent a year in Bangkok with five rabbinical students, and he became good friends with Rabbi Kantor,⁶⁶ who says, "The year in Thailand inspired Gabi and he wanted to go to a similar kind of place." During a visit to New York, Gabi spotted Rabbi Kantor on the corner of Crown Street and Brooklyn Avenue in Crown Heights. Kantor recalls the encounter: "Gabi walked by and said to me, 'I heard you guys are looking for someone to go to India, what about us?'" India had special challenges: it was remote, a totally different culture, a local community in decline. To Kantor it seemed like a natural fit. "You would be the perfect people," he said. Shortly afterward, Gabi and Rivkie met with Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky when he was visiting Israel. He formally offered them the position and they accepted.

Now the question was funding. They applied for a Rohr Grant to underwrite the initial startup costs for the first few years. George Rohr is a venture capitalist in New York. Together with his father, Sami, he has fueled the expansion of Chabad around the world. With the help of Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky at Lubavitch World headquarters in Brooklyn, the grant was approved. Gabi and Rivkie started to plan the move.

Gabi's father felt deeply honored. "Our son would head Chabad in a country," a rare privilege in a time when most such positions had been filled. Rivkie's mother, Yehudit, said, "We were proud that our children were chosen to fulfill the Rebbe's mission in such a difficult place." She asked her daughter about the security. "Rivkie did not have any concern; they did not feel there was risk."

After a while, they visited Mumbai for the first time. Yehudit says, “Only after going there did we understand how tough this mission was.”

Just before Chanukah in 2003, Gabi and Rivkie arrived⁶⁷ in Mumbai with one-year-old Menachem Mendel. There had not been a permanent rabbi in town in years; local synagogues were run by chazzanim. There were beautiful edifices populated by aging Jews. For centuries, there was a small Jewish community in Mumbai. In the early nineteenth century, the population boomed with large numbers of Baghdadi Jews fleeing anti-Semitism and seeking economic opportunity. The immigration of David Sassoon in 1832 propelled the community to a new plateau. His philanthropy fueled the growth of Jewish life. Numerous synagogues and Jewish schools were erected. In the late 1940s, over thirty thousand Jews lived in Mumbai. In the postwar years, the great majority of Jews immigrated to Israel. Today, the Jewish community in Mumbai numbers some 3,500.

Gabi and Rivkie set up shop in the three-star Shelleys Hotel in Mumbai’s tourist district. The place was cramped; there wasn’t a proper kitchen. They would host Shabbat meals on the roof overlooking the sprawl of Mumbai. Kantor says, “Gabi was gung ho.” Gabi and Rivkie found a community whose glory had faded. He began attending services in the beautiful Knesset Eliyahu Synagogue built by the Sassoons a century ago. The members took a liking to Rabbi Gabi. He began to speak at the services and became accepted as the rabbi of the synagogue. On Sundays, Gabi would provide educational programs for the descendants of the Bene Israel in the Tiferet Israel Synagogue. Dr. Aron Abraham says, “Forty to fifty young people would come every Sunday to Rabbi Gabi’s classes.”

The hotel was untenable; they needed more space. Renting proved impossible. Gabi found the Nariman House, a relatively new building six stories high. Kantor says, “It was perfect.” It was tucked away in a small street and was considered a minimal security risk. Gabi was fortunate when George Rohr visited on Chanukah for a business meeting. They lit the menorah together at the Star of India. Kantor says, “Mr. Rohr admired the self-sacrifice of this young couple.” The Rohrs made a major grant that enabled the purchase.

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The new building changed everything. It was six stories high, air-conditioned, in a good location, and near the main hotels. The days of the cramped Shelleys Hotel were gone. Gabi had dreams of making major improvements: a restaurant, guest rooms, place for classes and programs. Gabi and Rivkie moved into the sixth floor. Meals were served daily to travelers. On Shabbat, the Chabad House was full with Israeli trekkers, businessmen, and locals. Erin Beser, the JDC staffer, says, “Chabad was our haven.” In his relaxed, informal way, Gabi drew his disparate, ever-changing congregation together each week. Beser says, “Everyone had to either tell a story, sing a song, or say a thought of Torah.”

The programs were growing, but a major personal crisis erupted that would forever alter their lives and complicate their mission in Mumbai. Young Menachem Mendel was sick with Tay-Sachs, a genetic disease found among Eastern European Jews. The doctors said there was no cure; almost all children with the disease pass away by the time they reach age five. The couple cared for the child in Mumbai as long as possible. Finally, they moved him to an Israeli hospital where the medical standards were higher and the doctors had experience with the sickness.

Rivkie, the outgoing girl, dealt with this crisis inwardly. When visitors to the Chabad House asked about children, she withdrew to a side room and burst out in tears. Together with Gabi, they shouldered the problem on their own. Visitors to the Chabad House had no idea that they had a sick child. Rivkie confided to one of her close friends,⁶⁸ “If someone can help me, good.” She didn’t need everyone’s sympathy. A classmate of Gabi says, “He did not want to be a burden on anyone.”

In Israel, little Menachem Mendel was placed in a special medical facility for children with Tay-Sachs. The doctors there told them the same thing they had heard in India: “There is nothing you can do. It’s just a matter of time.”

Now the couple wrestled with a bigger question: should they leave their post? Rabbi Kantor says, “The Holtzbergs could not easily be replaced, but ultimately, it was their decision.” A close friend of Rivkie’s explained: “Medically, there was no hope. They saw

shlichus, the mission in Mumbai, as a source of spiritual blessing.” They shuttled back and forth between the child’s bedside in Israel and Mumbai, but the sickness was so destructive, the young child barely knew his parents were there. Their second son Dov Ber, born in December 2006, tragically had the same disease. In September 2007, three-year-old Menachem Mendel succumbed and was buried in Israel. A close friend, a shliach⁶⁹ in another country, had long conversations with Gabi about his crisis of conscience. “It hit them very hard. One child had passed away; the other was in the hospital in Israel. He was alone in India, his wife in Israel taking care of Dov Ber.” Crying on the phone, he asked me, “Should I leave?” They spoke for a long time; Gabi said he was very torn. He felt that he was needed in Mumbai. “Ultimately he decided to stay.” Sadly, Dov Ber, the second son, passed away a few weeks after the terror attack on the Chabad House.

The funeral for Gabi and Rivkie was slated for Tuesday afternoon in Kfar Chabad,⁷⁰ the movement’s hub in Israel, located just ten miles from Tel Aviv. In Brooklyn, Gabi’s close friend, rabbi, and mentor Moshe Kotlarsky,⁷¹ was facing his own crisis. As the tragic events unfolded in Mumbai, he had been at the bedside of his father in New York, ninety-one-year-old Rabbi Tzvi Kotlarsky. The situation was critical; the father had only a few more hours to live. Rabbi Kotlarsky wondered how he could leave for Israel, even for just one day.

Kotlarsky had helped Gabi get the Chabad House off the ground in Mumbai. Globe-trotting Kotlarsky is known for his profound commitment to the shluchim, whether it involved attending a bar mitzvah in Kinshasa or sitting at the bedside of a sick child in California. Saturday night, twenty-four hours after the attack, we spoke. It was late, after midnight New York time, and he was sitting at his father’s bedside. He told me about his special kinship with Gabi, the moments they shared, the joy that Gabi felt when Moshie was born, how minutes after the birth, he called Rabbi Kotlarsky with the wonderful news of a healthy child. With a voice full of tears, Rabbi Kotlarsky said, “We were dear friends.”

Kotlarsky⁷² headed to the Ohel,⁷³ the resting place in Queens of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Jewish tradition teaches that prayer at

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the grave of a tzadik (a righteous person) has unique spiritual power. Kotlarsky prayed for the ability to go to the funeral. He raced back to the hospital and was told by the doctors about a sudden improvement. “He is doing better, you can take the flight.” A week later, Tzvi Kotlarsky passed away.

In Israel, the whole country had plunged into mourning. Israeli writer Yossi Klein Halevi realized the depth of the despair felt throughout Israel when he arrived at work that day and discovered coworkers, far from religious, sitting and crying. A few days later, he penned an article for *The New Republic*⁷⁴ titled: “Why Israelis Love Chabad.” An excerpt follows:

It is doubtful the country would have reacted with the same emotional intensity had the Holtzbergs been ordinary ultra-Orthodox Jews rather than Chabadniks.⁷⁵ Mainstream Israelis resent ultra-Orthodox Jews for separating from the state. Chabad neither separates nor demands, but gives. When our young people just out of the army travel the most remote corners of the world (because military service doesn't provide enough dangers and thrills), they invariably encounter a Chabad House. Israelis also love Chabadniks for their courage. Chabad activists rush to the front lines during war. One friend told me about her sister who was serving in a border post so sensitive that a visitor required special permission from the general in command of the front: “And then who shows up on Hanukah with jelly donuts? Chabadniks.”

It was a tearful sight.⁷⁶ Tens of thousands gathered in front of the 770 Building in Kfar Chabad, the red brick replica of the Rebbe's synagogue in Brooklyn. In front of the red-bricked building, Israel's political and religious leaders stood near the bodies of Rabbi Gavriel and Rivkie Holtzberg wrapped with a talit,⁷⁷ lying on simple wooden benches. Rabbis Krinsky, Kotlarsky, and Shemtov, and shlichim from all over the world flew in. This wasn't just a Chabad funeral but a loss for all of the Jewish people. Israel's president, Shimon Peres, said the Holtzbergs were the “emissaries of all of the Jewish People.” Chief

Rabbi Shlomo Amar, who, as a young man, attended Chabad schools in Morocco, recognized “the holiness of their sacrifice.” Political leaders Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, Eli Yishai, and others participated. Rabbis Krinsky and Shemtov each eloquently eulogized the Holtzbergs’ sacrifice. Tens of thousands of regular Israelis, from the most secular to religious, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, all converged on Kfar Chabad. Israeli tv interrupted regular programming to broadcast the funeral live.

Rabbi Shalom White stood among the crowd. He is the shliach in the growing town of Perth on Australia’s western coast, the most distant outpost on the global network from Chabad headquarters in Brooklyn. White had arrived home from the grueling thirty-hour trip from Brooklyn after attending Chabad’s Kinus Hashluchim, the annual conference of Chabad emissaries. After landing in Australia, he heard about the attack in Mumbai, and he said, “I have to be at the funeral in Israel.” He headed back to the airport for another exhausting thirty-hour trip, this time to Tel Aviv. He arrived on Tuesday morning and went directly to Kfar Chabad. Standing next to him in the crowd was a young Israeli Chabad businessman, Rafi Goldmitz. They had been classmates years earlier at the Yeshiva in Kiryat Gat, Israel. Goldmitz knew that his old friend lived in distant Perth, Australia. Goldmitz wondered why he came so far. “Were you a good friend of Gabi?” he asked White. “No, we never met; he was a fellow shliach – I had to come. We were both shluchim, we were brothers.” That night, a few hours after the funeral, White headed back on the long flight to Perth, spending less than half a day in Israel.

But it was Rabbi Kotlarsky whose words penetrated everyone’s heart. Arriving straight from the airport, he spoke in Hebrew and English with passion and tears. He described Gabi and Rivkie as a couple of deep faith and purity of spirit, people who would always do for others.

Turning to the shluchim around the world he said, “This is the time to take strength, this is the time to do, we will answer the terrorists, we will not fight them with AK-47s, we will not fight with tanks, we will not fight them with grenades. The Rebbe taught us that a little candle in a room lights up the whole room. Such brutal

darkness can be fought only by torches of goodness and kindness and light.” He called on Chabad rabbis around the world to reach out to more Jews, to strengthen their work as an everlasting memorial to the Holtzbergs.

He told the massive crowd that Chabad would not retreat, and was committed to rebuilding the Chabad House in Mumbai.

Rabbi Kotlarsky raised the question all were pondering. “To Moshie, what do I say? You do not have a mother and father who will hold you, say with you the daily prayers, a mother who will kiss you and hug you.” His voice breaking, impassioned, he answered his own question: “Today you have become the child of the Jewish people, you are the child of four thousand shluchim and four thousand shluchos around the world. We are adopting you, you are our child, you are and will remain a shliach of the Rebbe.” With tears, he concluded with words directed to Gabi and Rivkie, “I say goodbye, you were good friends; you were shluchim par excellence. I have no idea why G-d has done this. You are prime examples of shluchim of the Rebbe. You did the mission to its fullest.”

Rabbi Rafi Goldmitz⁷⁸ came home from the funeral in a different state of mind. The encounter with his old friend Shalom White from Perth caused him to start rethinking his life. He told his wife, Leah, “There is such a love and unity among the shluchim. We need to go on shlichus. Together with his four children (including triplets, age four) they were living in what he calls, “the cocoon of the Chabad neighborhood in Kiryat Malachi.” Leah’s parents and uncles and aunts were just around the corner. Daily, he had been commuting to a teaching job in B’nai Brak, the bastion of traditional Judaism in Israel.

A few days later, Rafi Goldmitz headed to Chabad headquarters in Israel, located a few hundred feet from the site of the funeral in Kfar Chabad. Meeting with Rabbi Naftoli Lipsker, coordinator of the network of Chabad Centers, he said, “I want to find a place to move immediately and become a shliach.” Within a week, he and Leah were looking for a home in Merkaz Shapira, a small community of five hundred families in the Negev. Rafi says, “We started programs there a week later.” Goldmitz put a focus on the youth in

the community. “I work with the soldiers in the local training base.” He started classes and today has a synagogue with over one hundred attending every Shabbat.

In 2012, Goldmitz attended the annual shluchim convention in New York. Everyone was bused from Brooklyn to the Hilton in Manhattan for the banquet to conclude the five-day conference. Goldmitz sat next to Rabbi Moshe Liebllich⁷⁹ from North Carolina. They had never met; he told Liebllich he was from Israel, never revealing his name. Hearing he was Israeli, Liebllich decided to tell him a story he had heard that weekend at the conference. “The rabbi in Perth was flying back from the New York convention as the terror attack was underway in Mumbai. During the long trip he was not aware of the assault on the Chabad House. When he landed in Perth, he heard the tragic news. A few hours later he headed straight to the Holtzberg funeral in Israel. At the funeral he met an old friend of his from yeshiva. That friend was so deeply moved by this act of brotherhood that he was inspired to become a shliach.” As Goldmitz listened, it became clear he was hearing about himself. He turned to Liebllich and surprised him: “That’s my story!”