

## **A Modern Matriarch- Lech Lecha 5776**

**Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky**

**Congregation Shaare Tefilla**

**Dallas, Texas**

I promise, today's speech *will not* be about Back To The Future, and it *will not* be about the Mets' clean sweep of the Chicago Cubs, the event that proved that Back To The Future was actually a movie. Instead, I want to tell you about one story in the Jewish world that went sadly underreported. It was the death of a woman who touched the lives of thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of people who interacted with her over the course of her tragically short life. That woman's name was Rebbetzin Henny Machlis, and she passed away at the age of 58 right before last Shabbos, just hours before the bar mitzvah of one of her grandchildren. Rebbetzin Machlis and her husband (yble''t), Rabbi Mordechai Machlis, are legends in Jerusalem. This week, throughout the world- including right here in Dallas- people are coming together to celebrate the Shabbos Project, but long before Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein thought of The Shabbos Project, Rabbi and Rebbetzin Machlis were the *original* Shabbos Project. Week in and week out (with the exception of the week of Pesach) the Machlis' Shabbos table in their apartment in the Maalot Dafna neighborhood of Jerusalem were open to anyone to come and join them. There were seldom fewer than 150 people present at a Friday night meal, slightly fewer on a typical Shabbos lunch. It was crowded, people were almost literally sitting on top of one another, but somehow, there was always room for one, five or 10 more guests. This was, of course, well beyond the means of the Machlis family; it costs about \$3K a Shabbos to feed that many people, but Rabbi Machlis is a teacher and they have 14 of their own

children. They were mortgaged to the hilt and in heavy debt, and the meals were often financed by well wishers and former guests. Those guests came from all over; some of them were invited, others heard about it through word of mouth and still others would be “chapped” by Rabbi Machlis at the Kotel, where he typically went to daven at the latest minyan so he could identify and invite the stragglers. These meals could be the sight of some high drama; many of these participants were not even Jewish. It was not uncommon for Christian spiritual seekers to dine the Machlis table as they searched for an authentic Jewish Shabbos experience, and sometimes the occasional missionary would attempt to convert the Machlis’ over a plate of gefilte fish. And among those who were Jewish, many were mentally unstable. Homeless people slept on the Machlis couches, sometimes for weeks at a time, and those who were really dangerous to the family were not turned away- they were invited to sleep in the Machlis van. The Machlis home is a literal fulfillment of the exhortation of the prophet Yeshaya, which we read in the Haftara of Yom Kippur morning:

הָלוֹא פָּרַס לְרַעֵב לַחֲמֶךָ וְעֲנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תָּבִיא בְּיַתְּ כִּי תִרְאֶה עָרֶם וְכִסִּיתוּ וַיִּמְבְּשׁוּךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם.

“Is it not your role to spread your bread to the hungry, and to bring the poor that are cast out to your house? When you see the naked, that you should cover him; and that you hide not yourself from your own flesh?”

A columnist named Sara Yocheved Rigler wrote a beautiful tribute on the website Aish.com, in which she related the one story Rabbi Machlis told at the funeral:

*He invited a destitute man whom he always saw at the Kotel (Western Wall) to come home with him to eat. That day Henny served her homemade whole-wheat pizza. The man loved it. He came back to their house every day asking for a slice of whole-wheat pizza. Finally, Henny suggested that she could teach him how to make whole-wheat pizza himself. Painstakingly and with infinite patience, Henny taught him how. One*

*night several days later, at 3 AM, there was a knock on the door. “Not on the front door,” Rabbi Machlis related. “Our front door is always unlocked. Someone was knocking on our bedroom door.”*

*The loud knocking woke them up. Alarmed at what must be an emergency, Rabbi Machlis went to the door and asked, “Who’s there?” When the man identified himself, Rabbi Machlis asked, “What’s wrong?”*

*The man replied, “I forgot how to make whole-wheat piZZa. I need your wife to explain it to me again.”*

*Rabbi Machlis was exasperated. “At 3 o’clock in the morning, you need to remember how to make whole-wheat piZZa?”*

*But Henny calmed him down. “It’s a test,” she assured him. “It’s from Hashem.”*

*Then Henny reiterated to the man, step by step, how to make whole-wheat piZZa.<sup>1</sup>*

Indeed, Rebbetzin Machlis’s sacrificial hospitality was in evidence even during the illness that took her life. Reportedly, she gave up her bed at Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York so that a homeless woman she knew could sleep in it. At Mrs. Machlis’ funeral, one of her sons was pushed out of the way by a mentally ill “regular” as he followed behind her casket, because he said, “This is my mother! I have to get closer!” Everyone loved her and Rabbi Machlis because they were, and are, completely sincere and genuine. Rebbetzin Machlis believed that she has a mandate, an obligation, to do whatever she can to use her ability to share Shabbos as a way of preventing the raging spiritual genocide she was convinced is ongoing, whether that included a heavy debt load or constant Shabbos meals. And Rabbi Machlis, himself, is deeply sincere and full of love for every Jew- indeed, every human being. A friend of mine once walked with him in the Old City, and saw Rabbi Machlis hug a random Arab saying “*Abalan, ben dodì,*” Hello my cousin!

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aish.com/sp/so/Henny-Machlis-A-Truly-Great-Jewish-Woman.html>

These stories are so remarkable, and since I've learned of Rebbetzin Machlis' passing, I've been reflecting on why. Throughout the literature of Chazal, we find scathing indictments of the character of Lot. He is viewed as Avraham's wastrel nephew, a mercenary and mendacious individual who was deeply entrenched in a morass of depravity despite his Uncle's loving upbringing and intervention. However, if we look at the text so far, there seems to be little indication that such is the case. Is there any reference at all to Lot's wickedness, and if not, why should we judge him so harshly? Does Lot get an unfair deal in the court of public opinion? One incident that seems to be a jumping board for this assertion is the one recounted in this morning's Sedrah, in which a fight erupts between the shepherds of Avraham and those of Lot. The Torah tells us that "the land was too big for them to live together," and they had to separate. What was the point of contention? A common explanation given is that Lot's servants allowed their sheep to graze on property that wasn't theirs, and Avraham wanted nothing to do with larceny and theft. But the midrashic work *Pesikta Rabbati* (3) elaborates further, stating the counterclaim of Lot's shepherds. "We aren't the ones stealing- you are! You are mistreating cattle that you claim as your own, but you know it will not outlive your master, and will not pass to another generation. Avraham has no heirs; Lot is the only one, so all the cattle is his. How can you not do whatever it takes to feed animals that you are merely babysitting?!" This claim was what caused the irreparable split between the two groups of shepherds. But why this? Shouldn't the theft itself have been enough? Perhaps we can suggest that Avraham was the consummate *baal chessed*, the person who performed acts of kindness with no ulterior motives and no negative associations. The opposite of *chessed* is often not just *achzariyut*, or cruelty; it's cynicism. Lot and his shepherds were cynical about Avraham's chances of ever fathering a child, they were cynical of the ability of divine prophecy to come true and Lot was only hanging around in the first place to inherit

the vast wealth his rich uncle had amassed. When that didn't work out, he left, and went to Sodom- the most selfish, cynical, immoral, depraved society there was. To be a *baal chessed* means to believe you have the ability to change the world, or at least the life of another person. It means suspending disbelief about the future of others, which, if based on past performance, might be a reasonable assessment. It means feeling optimistic about the future of a community or a relationship despite naysayers. Avraham, as the consummate and pure *baal chessed* who treated others with dignity and kindness and had no other agenda other than to share the greatness of God, could not have his name, his heart or his employees associated with this kind of cynicism. I believe this lesson of Lot and Avraham is especially important when we relate to people like the Machlis family. We live in a cynical age, where we constantly question the sincerity, integrity and motives of others, always assuming someone is seeking an angle or hiding a skeleton. If someone is such a sacrificial *baal chessed*, we assume they are either crazy or are some kind of Ayatollah with sinister financial and psychological motives, seeking to brainwash small minds, to beef up numbers and counting souls as conquests. Sadly, those assumptions, especially about religious leadership, are often accurate. But Rebbetzin and Rabbi Machlis were and are not like that. The late Jerusalem Post columnist Sam Orbaum once wrote a column about them, which opened this way<sup>2</sup>:

*Mythological tales are told of saintly Jews abounding in humility, knowledge and wisdom, wondrous people just as close to God as to humanity.*

*I found one. And he's no myth.*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://machlis.blogspot.com/>

*I can be forgiven for having harbored cynical doubts after hearing about Rabbi Mordechai Machlis, and before meeting him. Here in Rabbiland, there are many with many fine attributes, a few with none, and perhaps fewer who are so lofty that -- in Jerusalem's religion industry -- they are failures.*

*Rabbi Machlis... is a failure because he does not play the game. He is not loud enough about how quiet he is, he shuns the politics of power, prestige and influence, he doesn't understand the fashionability of false modesty, of cult of personality, of mystic stature-building. Doesn't hobnob or hustle, publicize or promote.*

*All he does, for heaven's sake, is do good.*

Maybe we aren't yet prepared to engage in *chessed* on the level Rebbetzin Machlis did; maybe we shouldn't be, and maybe she did go overboard. But our challenge is to learn the lesson of Rebbetzin Machlis' tragically short life. To seek out opportunities to help others even if they are painful to help and love others with no agenda or ulterior motive and to focus our lives and priorities outward. That a person like her is so rare, so remarkable and, often, so suspect tells as much about us as it does about her.