

Winter 2008
Kislev 5769
Issue 8

NEWS ZAKA



MASSACRE IN MUMBAI

ZAKA volunteers are always ready to go wherever they are needed at a moment's notice. But this readiness was truly put to the test when the news came through about the terror attacks in Mumbai and the hostage situation in Chabad House ■ Shuki Brief, one of the six ZAKA volunteers to fly to Mumbai even as the action was unfolding, relates his personal story of those difficult days

The Long Road to India

Bnei Brak, Thursday, 11.30am

This wasn't the first time I've had to jump into action for ZAKA. But this time everything was different. 'Be at the Indian Embassy in ten minutes', screamed my beeper. 'You have 50 minutes to be on the plane'.

Within a minute, I was out the house, leaving my wife to pack my bags for the long and unknown journey ahead.

The Indian Embassy, Tel Aviv, noon

While we were under incredible pressure to meet the 6pm plane in Turkey, the Indians had all the

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Dear Friends of ZAKA

The ZAKA international response team played a unique role in the tragedy at Mumbai. The first Israeli representation at the scene, the six ZAKA volunteers were among the first civilians to go into Chabad House. They were able to maintain the dignity and honour of the victims in a society that has no respect for the dead.

Without their presence and dedicated work, it is doubtful that the bodies would have been flown back for burial so quickly.

With your continued support, British Friends of ZAKA can help ensure that these evil acts are met with true kindness, the Chesed Shel Emet of ZAKA.

Yours sincerely

Yehuda Meshi Zahav, C.E.O.

**David Zilbershlag, Chairman of
The Management Board**

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time in the world. We were frantically trying to get hold of all the necessary paperwork, while the clerk made no effort to hurry. It was as if we were just tourists, planning a trip. At that very moment, evil murderers were killing their compatriots; our sole desire was to get there and help, yet no one was willing to listen to us. Within a few minutes, the Rosenberg family joined us; beloved parents of Rivki Holtzberg, who were under terrible strain. We finally boarded the private plane, paid for by Rabbi Yitzchak David Grossman, Mrs. Rosenberg's uncle and rabbi of Migdal ha'emek, and are on our way to Turkey to connect with the first available flight out to Mumbai. The other experienced and devoted ZAKA volunteers with me included delegation head Haim Weingarten, Shimi Grossman, Gershi Kletzkin, Mati Goldstein and paramedic Eyal Ben-Ari.

Turkey, 6 pm

We arrive late, but the Foreign Office had arranged for the plane to wait especially for us. During the flight, we are amazed at the joie de vivre of the Rosenberg couple, who showed not a trace of tension. They were

quite simply full of joy, constantly expressing hopeful thoughts that everything would turn out well. We say Tehillim (Psalms) and speak words of faith and encouragement.

Rivki's mother recounts her strong bond with her grandson Moishe, about her long phone conversations with him, and what she manages to teach him over the phone – a loving grandma, making the long journey to see her children alive and well. The truth is that already before the flight they had heard rumours that their daughter Rivki, and son-in-law Rabbi Gavriel, were already dead.

Blood, Fire and Pillars of Smoke

Mumbai, Friday, 6.30 am

We transfer planes at Delhi to fly to Mumbai, scene of the ongoing terror attacks. A member of the local Jewish community drives us to the Israeli Consulate. The streets are filled with people, as if the stories of battles raging in several places here are nothing more than legend. Only the area around the hotels and Chabad House is cordoned off. Curious bystanders watch and listen just

50 metres from the battle itself, trying to solve the mystery that is occupying the entire world: what is really happening right now in Chabad House? Is anyone there still alive?

Friday morning

Rumours are rife about terrorists roaming the city streets. We are stuck in the Israeli Consulate, after hours without sleep or food. Should we move closer to Chabad House? The briefing we receive is frightening. "Don't move around the area, don't attract attention". We refuse their request to take off our *kippot* to hide our Jewishness, accepting a compromise to wear hats.

The entire time we could hear shooting and explosions from the area, although people were saying some were fake, designed to scare and put pressure on the terrorists. The Indian commandos encircle the building, an attack seems imminent, but still we can do nothing. Rumours talk about another battlefield, terrorists shooting innocent passers-by in the streets, and the Indians hurriedly move us into the backroom of the police station.

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After many more harrowing hours without information, we are informed that a hotel has been arranged for us. However, the hotel is an hour's drive away and Shabbat begins at 5:30pm, and so I hurry to tell the Indian representatives that this solution is impractical. An alternative option is found, and we make our way to the Suba Hotel, within walking distance of Chabad House. We hurry to leave our possessions there, and return to the scene.

Friday, 1.30 pm

Still no updates, only rumours. It appears the commandos have still not forced their way into the building, and that they are waiting further developments. Why did they wait for hours before entering the building? When and why did

they decide to go in? Whatever I tell you now is based on our personal analysis, supported by what we saw.

It's important to know that we were never briefed or told operational secrets. We saw what was happening, and we are still hopelessly trying to put together the pieces of this puzzle. The only certain thing is that those murdered, may G-d avenge their blood, took with them to the grave the precise details of when and how they were murdered.

Friday night, 7.30 pm

We get an urgent message to hurry from the hotel to the scene. But, as we are running there, we are told to stand by yet again, and we wait outside Chabad House without explanation until 10.30 pm. It is dreadfully hot, we are exhausted and starving

hungry, but the Indians keep pushing us back outside, and won't let us in to do our job.

Friday night, 10.30 pm

The grim moment arrives. Two bodies are dragged out of the door and rapidly put inside a waiting vehicle. We explain to the Indians how important it is to us that they shouldn't remove the bodies. They let us go into the vehicle to identify the murder victims, and slowly the horrifying picture becomes clear.

The first body identified is Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg, the Chabad emissary in Mumbai; the second is Rabbi Benzion Kruman, the kashrut supervisor, identified by our colleague Gershki Kletzkin, who knew him well from Israel. But there's no time for mourning or sadness;

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we gradually comprehend what is about to happen here. The Indians' belief and religion states a body has absolutely no value after death, and cremation is acceptable.

How can we explain to them, with such little time at our disposal, how important it is for us as believing Jews to preserve the honour of the dead and their bodies? In the end they concede, and an orthodox Jewish representative, who serves as the community's doctor, gets into the vehicle and promises to make sure the bodies of the martyrs, may G-d avenge their blood, will not be harmed.

We hurry to enter the building, unable to grasp the intensity of the horror which gradually unfolds in the coming moments.

The blood of your servants has been spilled

Friday night, 11pm

At first glance, we already understand the building has been totally destroyed. Wherever we go we see broken walls, probably from the shells fired during the bombardment. The Indian action mainly harmed walls and stones, and quite probably also the terrorists

themselves, but there wasn't anyone left to rescue. Did the Indians know that when they went in? No one has the answer.

We move between the floors, trembling with fear. We immediately see bombs, left in the doorways, and understand the great danger. But the thought that we might still be able to save someone keeps us from leaving. Only after we have checked each floor will we leave.

The first floor

The ground floor and staircase to the first floor are completely in ruins. We make our way upstairs, and find the next floor also utterly destroyed. Chabad House's beautiful dining room, where Israelis came from all over the world, is no more.

The second floor

The Rabbi's study was on the second floor, as well as the synagogue and library. Rabbi Teitlebaum's body was laid out on the floor, but I could not identify him. There was no blood in the rabbi's study but nearby there was a large stain of blood, probably from a body dragged through this area.

Third floor

Here too, everything was completely destroyed, although

there are no bodies. The third and fourth floors were used as a hostel for Jewish travelers – proving them a place to stay and kosher food.

Fourth floor

Here we find two dead terrorists, their bodies ridden with bullet holes, with many unexploded hand grenades scattered all around. We realize how dangerous this mission really is, yet we continue looking for bodies. The real horror was in the inner room – two Jewish female bodies, Norma Schwartzblatt-Rabinowitz and Yocheved Orpaz lying surrounded by tear-gas canisters, tied together with phone wire and gagged. An Indian commando's body was also found here, but still no sign of Rivki Holtzberg.

Fifth Floor

Here the Rabbi and his family lived. The baby cot was abandoned, the furniture damaged, a family life destroyed. There are no bodies here and this floor fared relatively well. We then assumed that the Indian soldiers must have taken Rivka's body out of the building moments before we

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arrived, as they did with Rabbi Holtzberg and Rabbi Kruman.

After a short consultation, we realize that saving a life is more important than honouring the dead and therefore we must continue, as every moment in the building is life threatening. We told the Indian soldiers that we must cover the bodies in ZAKA body bags so that we can identify which bodies to save from autopsy. After doing this, we left the building, advising the soldiers that the building was booby-trapped and that they should clear the surrounding area. It was only then that they blocked further entrance to the building.

Acharei Mot Kadoshim

Friday midnight

We stand outside the building, struggling with difficult emotions

and unanswered questions. The media are talking about the talit that was waved from a window – who and why? Was it the Rabbi asking to be rescued? This is hard to believe since Moishe's Indian nanny Sandra claims to have seen the Rabbi, unconscious, on the first day. We can tell that he was one of the last to be killed. Whose voice was heard screaming for help in the background of a phone conversation between Chabad Washington and the terrorists? The answers to these questions

will be buried with the holy bodies.

During the night we stayed outside the building, waiting for the soldiers to clear the explosives. Again, we were able to drink only water, as the food provided by the Indians was not kosher.

Shabbat morning, 6 am

At 6 am, the Indians tell us that they are ready to evacuate the bodies of the terrorists, followed by the hostages. We



beg them to remove the Jewish bodies first, out of respect for the dead, although they insist on doing things according to plan. After I told the American embassy representative that one of the slain women may hold American citizenship, the demand is made to evacuate the women first. Only then do the Indians agree that we evacuate the Rabbi's body before the terrorists.

Shabbat morning, 6.30 am

The Indians do not allow us to join their convoy to the hospital,

so we make our own way. All the bodies are lined up, ready for autopsy, and we make sure nobody touched the Jewish bodies. This was not easy as Indian law requires an autopsy in such cases. Only after our protestations and those of the Israeli Consul, did the Indians finally agree. In the hospital, we found Rivka's body, covered with a talit by the Jewish doctor who had made sure nobody touched her or did an autopsy.

Motzei

Shabbat

Finally, after two days, we ate. The Israel Consul gave us some meat, cold chicken and sardines, the same meat that Rabbi Gavriel had ritually killed on Thursday, the day of the attack. After talking to the locals, we found that although they did not know what Chabad House

was, this was where they would buy chickens, slaughtered and koshered by the Rabbi. That Thursday morning, he had slaughtered 400 chickens.

Motzei Shabbat, 01:00 am, the hospital

The Indians were insisting they remove the bullets from the bodies of all the victims. After consulting with the Rabbi of ZAKA, Rabbi Yaakov Roget and with Rabbi Meir Bernsdorfer of the Jerusalem Badatz, it was ruled that we may agree to this,

provided it is a condition.

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However, we managed to convince the Indians that this would be contrary to the Jewish laws of honouring the dead, as the removal of each bullet would cause further loss of blood.

Sunday morning, Chabad House

We finally get to enjoy a hot meal and some sleep. Afterwards, we entered the building and began our holy

work. Yehuda Meshi Zahav, the Chairman of ZAKA, joined us after arriving on the air force flight earlier that day. When he opened the ark, he found the Torah scroll with bullet marks in the portion of Aharei Mot. Very chilling...

Monday, Air Force Plane

Finally we begin our journey home with the Rosenberg family, who are as strong and full of

belief as they were when they arrived. Sometimes, the mother would start crying. It was only on the plane that we heard Sandra's chilling story. When she realized what was happening, she locked herself in the stock room on the first floor, together with the Indian chef. The next morning, she heard Moishe calling her name. She opened the door, peeking round to see that all was clear and ran to save him and escape the building.







NEWSZAKA

Published by:
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