

From: <http://www.ascentofsafed.com> Story #1093 (5779-12) 11 Kislev 5779

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Last-Minute Shabbat Meals at Chabad of Athens

by Ben Chefetz (Sat. nite, Nov. 17)

[Bracketed clarifications and footnotes are mine –YT]

This Shabbos I had the tremendous privilege to be a part of something amazing, beautiful and enlightening. I am hoping El Al [management] will see this and understand that there is a much better headline than the false headline “Haredim Riot on Plane” which I currently see online.¹

Here is the short of it. Our El Al flight was supposed to leave at 6:30pm [on Thursday, and arrive in Israel at 11:30am on Friday]. 3 members of the crew were late and we started boarding at 8:30pm during which the crew members arrived. At 9:10pm the flight doors were closed and everything was calm for about an hour.

At around 10pm many of the passengers who were concerned about Shabbos starting asking the crew members for detail about departure and no answers were given other than we are leaving in 5 minutes. Keep in mind, that at 10:25pm sitting on a JFK runway, El-AL’s website showed our flight as enroute, having departed at 9:30PM.

I was sitting in business class, my seat was directly next to the stairs going to second floor, and 3 rows behind the first class food prep galley. I heard every exchange. At no time was there any physical threat presented by passengers concerned about Shabbos. I am loathe to use the term *Chareidim* [or ‘ultra-Orthodox’], this was not some *Neturei Karta* [Jewish radical anti-Zionist] protest full of black clad chasidim spewing nonsense. These were Jews from all walks of life and varied backgrounds who were concerned about Shabbos.

At 11:35pm there were about 40 passengers, myself included, who stood by the exit door and expressed our wishes to disembark from the plane. By this time we were sitting on the tarmac for two and half hours. One of the stewardesses told us that if they take us back to the gate and we get off the plane we would lose our tickets and not be rebooked. I am not sure if she was trying to shock us into sitting or if this was the real policy, but our response was unanimous; every single person said that’s fine, we are ok with that, just take us back to the gate so we don’t violate Shabbos. Not one person said, “What?? No ,you have to rebook us”, or, “you can’t do that”, there was a simple, basic understanding, we had Shabbos.

At one point someone, whom I later found out to be Rabbi Shalom Ber Sorotzkin, got on the intercom and said that he spoke to the pilot, and that the pilot guaranteed we would get to the airport before Shabbos, and that he (Rabbi Sorotzkin) arranged for

¹ Based on the Facebook posts of two non Shabbat-observant passengers. Times of Israel, Israel International News, TV channel 2, etc. The latter two subsequently printed contrary reports from the Shabbat observers in Athens.

everyone to have a place and a meal for Shabbos if they did not have time get to where they needed, since we would arrive only one hour before Shabbos.

Many of us, myself included, did not sit down and expressed our desire to go back to the gate.

At that point the captain came onto the intercom. He told us we were going to go back to the gate as soon as everyone was seated. And we all went back to our seats.

I can't begin to describe the sinking feeling in my stomach as I saw the plane turn away from the terminals and face the runway. In less than 6 minutes after telling us to return to our seats to go back to the gate, we were in the air. (FYI - there was no Wifi on the flight which meant our only source of information for the rest of the flight was the El-Al crew.)

Four hours into the flight the Captain announced that "because of the Charedim" the plane would stop in Athens. At which point, all the people who want to get off for Shabbos can get off the plane first, and then, (and here is the kicker), all the people who want to continue to Israel will also have to get off the plane and go on a different plane from IsraAir to go to Israel.

What a shame... I wish El Al had announced the truth. We were stopping in Athens because El-Al made a series of bad calls, and once they landed they could not depart on Shabbos which is why they needed a non El-Al plane to continue to Israel on Shabbos.

This only caused the internal tension to rise, as our only source of information was the crew, who were less than helpful and not at all sympathetic. To be very clear, no one was angry at the stewardesses, everyone understood that they did not make the decisions. We were requesting to speak to the pilot or someone who can speak for the pilot. Again, there were no attempts to break into the cockpit, there were no physical altercations. Yes, there were some raised voices, but most of the time (I have the videos showing) it was secular Israeli passengers who came to yell at the passengers who were concerned about Shabbos that we were ruining their weekend.

This in itself was absurd because we did not make the decision to stop in Athens and the majority of the religious passengers preferred that we continue to Israel and be stuck in the Tel Aviv airport.

As the minutes crept closer to our arrival into Athens there were discussions on the plane about whether it was *halachically* better to stay on the plane or to disembark in Athens. We had no clue what to expect. Would we stay in the airport? Was there a hotel? What would we eat?

When they served breakfast I realized that the packaged egg which they served for breakfast and the half a sandwich I had left from when I boarded the plane could very well be all we had to eat on Shabbos. I even put some nuts into my backpack for *Shalosh Seudos* [*Seudat Shlishi* -- the Third Shabbat meal – towards the end of Shabbat].

When it was clear that we were landing in Athens and we would begin our descent, we returned to our seats. Many of us tried to separate our *Muktza* [forbidden-to-use-on-Shabbat] items and to make sure our *Tallis* [prayer shawl] and *Siddur* [prayer book] were easily accessible.

After the plane landed and we stopped, we disembarked on one of those rollaway staircases to get onto one of several shuttles. I was one of the first people onto the shuttle and I watched as dozens of more Yidden [Jews] came off the plane with no other thought than, to stay on the plane would be *chillul* [a profanation of] Shabbos, and that getting off the plane was the best chance of keeping Shabbos.

Chasidim got off the plane, as well as men with black hats, colored shirts, in t-shirts, and in suits; women with *sheitels*, [wigs], snoods, or no hair-covering; in skirts or in pants; everyone [150-plus people] coming off the plane was united in one thing – We believe in G-d [the Creator] and His Torah, and Shabbos was our gift from Him and our inheritance and we would uphold it.

As the first shuttle was full and started towards the airport (there were more shuttles behind us) everyone broke into a song for *Shabbos Kodesh* [the holy Sabbath].

Once we got to the airport we were met by a woman from El Al who was very sweet. She took the time to explain to us that we were would be staying across the street (literally) at a hotel and they would take us as soon as the other shuttles arrive.

As they led us into the hotel it was very chaotic. There were four hotel clerks and [a shuttle load of] people started surging towards the front desk. At that point, one Rabbi, whom I later learned was Rabbi Akiva Katz, yelled above the crowd and explained to everyone that we would need to create orderly lines in order not to overwhelm the clerks. He also let us know that they had set aside a place for davening and that Chabad [House of Athens staff] had prepared food. This helped reduce the stress in the room and the process became more orderly as people were focused on getting to their rooms and ready for Shabbos in the 40 minutes we had left till sunset.

Walking into *Kabbalas Shabbos* (the “welcoming the Shabbat” prayers -- I was late) was beautiful. The room was full of 60 or 70 men and about 10 women and everyone was singing. Rabbi Jesse Horn from Yeshiva Ateres Kohanim led *Kabbalas Shabbos*. We were all so happy to be able to keep Shabbos, and the *davening* (praying) and level of *simcha* (joy) was very high. I think we must have danced four or five times during *Kabbalas Shabbos* and *Maariv* [Evening Prayer].

After *Kabbalas Shabbos* we walked through the hotel to the dining area and I can tell you with 100% conviction that what I saw was beyond anything I could have imagined.

85% of the dining area was reserved for our Shabbos meal. The tables were set beautifully with bottles of wine, grape juice and *challah* rolls. [The area] where the hotel usually displayed its salad bars and assortment of cold meats it was now filled with platters of *gefilte* fish and 6 or 7 large bowls with a variety of salads and dips, it was as if this had planned for weeks in advance. There was plenty of meat for the main course and an assortment of side dishes to accompany it.

The *Seudah* [meal] was beautiful and everyone sang *zemiros* [songs] and *niggunim* [melodies] and there were many *Divrei Torah* [short speeches of Torah explanation]. Several people had stopped at the Duty Free store to get bourbon and scotch for the crowd, and it was very *leibdige* [lively] and the singing went on for quite a while.

I woke up several times during the night as my body was still on NY time, and each time I went downstairs to the lobby there were people learning [Torah] together or talking about the *Parsha* [Weekly Torah Reading].

Shacharis [the Morning Prayer] was another beautiful *davening* and it was interesting to see how it was a mix of *Sefard*, *Sefardi* and *Ashkenaz Nusachim* [text and prayer-order variations].

After all the prayers were completed, several people went to the kitchen to help Rabbi and Rebbetzin Hendel (the Chabad *Shluchim* [emissaries] in Athens) prepare for the Shabbat Day meal.

There were also two classes being taught -- one in Hebrew, and one in English by Rabbi Yossi Baumol.

After the teachers finished we went to the dining room where, like the previous night, there were copious amounts of delicious food, [including] a wonderful meat *kugel* wrapped in pastry, brisket, and a large assortment of salads. Unlike the previous night, where everyone sat next to people who were closest to them in their style of *mitzvah*-observance, the seating during the Shabbos Day meal was heterogeneous. Chasidim sat and *schmoozed* [conversed] with Zionists, *Modox* [Modern Orthodox] sat with the black hatted... (I only use these labels so you can visualize the seating, but there were no labels at this Shabbos meal, we sat in true *achdus* [unity]).

The rest of Shabbos and the subsequent trip back to the airport and our return flight to Israel was unremarkable, so I don't need to bore you with the details.

First I would like to thank the following people.

Rabbi Shalom Ber Sorotzkin who had the foresight before the plane took off to have his organization contact El-Al and Chabad and put pressure on to make this Shabbos happen.

[Menachem-Mendel] and Rebbetzin [Nechama-Dina] Hendel, the Chabad Rabbi and Rebbetzin based in Athens, Greece. They got the call at 11am Friday morning and by 4pm that same afternoon they had prepared a beautiful Shabbos for 150+ adults which was not lacking in anyway.

My 150+ new friends and passengers who gave me an experience and Shabbos I will never forget.

Now a quick note to El-AL: I don't know who handles your marketing and social media program but you wasted a huge opportunity. Next time this happens, here is what you do. You make sure you get a similar hotel and that Chabad sets up a beautiful Shabbos. You hire a local photographer and video guy, you video the

amazing Shabbos – and then you promote it as an “El-Al sponsored Shabbos of Unity.” If you need more advice feel free to call or email me, or just send me some tickets as a thank you.

I would like to leave off with a few thoughts having just spent one of the most amazing Shabbos of my life.

1. 150+ Jews from all backgrounds and religious orientations, wearing every outfit possible, walked off a plane with one thought – We will keep Shabbos, even if it means sleeping in an airport.

2. Unlike our Great Grandparents, who were fired if they did not work on Shabbos (USA), or where were ostracized, and possibly incarcerated for keeping Shabbos (USSR). How often do we get a chance to be *moser nefesh* [sacrifice so much] for Shabbos? This was a tremendous gift from ‘*Hashem*’ [G-d] to us that we had the chance to show Him how much we love Him and His Torah, and we ALL took it.

3. Every parent in that hotel who was not able to be home with their children that Shabbos taught their child a lesson that they could not have taught them in a 100 Shabboses at home. They showed that Shabbos means so much to Mommy and *Tatty* [Daddy (Yiddish)], *Ima* and *Abba* [Mom & Dad] (Hebrew), etc that they would walk off a plane in the middle of a foreign country with no guaranty of food or a place to sleep.

4. *Yom Tov* [the ‘pilgrim’ Festivals] in the *Beis Hamikdash* [Holy Temple] was probably like this Shabbos. Jews from all over coming together for G-d and his mitzvos. I hope to see all of my fellow passengers this *Pesach* [Passover] bringing *korbanos* [the required offerings] to the Temple [in Jerusalem].

May we be zocheh [have the merit] to see *Mashiach* [the Redeemer²] and the return of the Beis Hamikdash.

With much love
Ben Chafetz

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*Source:* Edited, annotated and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles. [The original article by **Ben Chafetz** was first posted on the Arutz Sheva English site and the Col Live chabad site.] Photo from the blog of Betzalel Steinhart.

*Editor’s note* (from ???): In gratitude, many passengers donated to Chabad in Athens contributions ranging from \$200 to \$10,000 (!), to enable them to build a new *mikvah*. The total was enough to cover all of the costs.

*More:*

From the blog of **Betzalel Steinhart**, as posted on the “Times of Israel” website:  
[//blogs.timesofisrael.com/im-one-of-those-violent-religious-passengers-on-el-al-flight-002/](http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/im-one-of-those-violent-religious-passengers-on-el-al-flight-002/)

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<sup>2</sup> ...of the Jewish people from their places of exile throughout the world. (‘Moshiach’ is short for ‘Melech HaMoshiach’ – the anointed king who traces his descent from King David.)

I am writing this as a response to the articles posted on the news and social media of violence on El Al 002 from JFK. I was on that flight and as I type this, I am in Athens airport waiting to board my [Saturday night, November 17,] 11:30 p.m. flight back to Tel Aviv.

I am not Haredi, just a religious man who keeps Shabbat, and neither were most of the 200 of us who got off the plane in Athens rather than desecrate Shabbat. **Maybe 20 percent Haredi at most.** The Chabad here were fantastic and a potentially horrible Shabbat was memorable.



[SNIP<sup>3</sup>]

I will eventually get home and I will proudly tell my kids that I chose to go to Athens and miss them, rather than break Shabbat. I will relay that same message to my Ramah Israel students in the future. I will be writing my own blog post about the actual Shabbat when I have the time. In the meantime, I'm still in line.

Shavua tov from Athens...

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<sup>3</sup> A lot of (mostly justified?) criticism of how El Al airline company handled the situation. Plus, a few more illuminating photos from Athens.