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From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles editor@ascentofsafed.com

Hebron Stairs of Hope

Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz – a.k.a. “Shwartzie”:

In 1993, Olivia and I brought our son Yosef, age 12, to Israel. Yosef and I spent our first Shabbat in the Jewish community in Hebron, now an almost all-Arab city surrounding a small enclave of 70 Jewish families.

A man named David Shirelle picked us up in Kiryat Arba, a safer adjoining Jewish settlement where we had been staying, to bring us to his home in the Beit Hadassah neighborhood of Hebron just a few minutes away.

On the way to Hebron, we discovered that we both grew up in Atlantic City, and my family bought their kosher meat from David's grandparents, and that my father had officiated at David's parents wedding.

David and I became close friends, and the 1993 trip was the first of many visits I made to Hebron, one of Israel's historic holy cities and site of the Cave of Machpelah, where the Biblical ancestors of Jews are buried.

R. David Shirelle:

I think everyone knew Shlomo's favorite time of the year was summertime, the months spent in Israel. Although the majority of his time was spent teaching in Safed (as resident summer scholar at ASCENT!), every summer he would take off two weeks to breathe the air of Hebron, learning, praying, talking to everyone. He was at home.

His daily schedule would include an immersion in the *mikvah* in the Abraham Avinu neighborhood; praying in “Machpelah Cave,” the burial place of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah;¹ learning Torah in the Menucha Rachel shul;² reciting some psalms at the graves of Jesse and Ruth;³ eating at the Shirelle home; and of course, talking to every IDF soldier along the way. I was always amazed that within hours of arriving he knew every soldier's name and where each came from.

One summer afternoon, towards the end of a week in Hebron, Shlomo walked in my house after returning from the grave of Ruth and Jesse in the Admot Yishai neighborhood, which happens to be the first palace of King David; it was there in Hebron for many years before it was in Jerusalem.

Shlomo said to me, ‘What a long walk up! Isn't there a shortcut?’

I explained to him that there actually is, by taking the steps right outside my house. It is half the distance, but there is one problem: years ago, when the Arabs saw that the

¹ And, according to various sources, Also Adam and Chava (Eve)

² Named after Rabbanit Menucha-Rachel Slonim, the daughter of the second Lubavitcher Rebbe, who was considered the matriarch of the Jewish community in Hebron from 1845-1888

³ Great-grandmother and father of King David

Jews were enjoying the shortcut, they built a wall blocking the way. 'Young teenagers are still able to climb over, but for you and me, Shlomo, as young as we like to feel, forget it; it's not for us.' I said.

Now the Jews in Hebron are known to be tough, but here we had a problem. The courts had decided that the wall was now built, and the soldiers had been given clear orders to protect it and even arrest anyone who tried to damage it or take it down.

The local Jewish residents tried everything: speaking to the top generals in the Army, Knesset members, ministers, and so on. But it seemed that the wall was there to stay.

After hearing these details, Shlomo said: 'It can't be. It doesn't make sense, I'll have to check it out myself.' And then he was out the door.

A few minutes went by and Shlomo was back in my house, very upset. 'You're right, I tried walking up the steps,' he said. 'What a great shortcut, but halfway up, there's a wall blocking the path. I can't get over the wall. We need to do something.'

I said: 'Good luck, Shlomo; we've been trying for years to solve the problem. Don't waste your time.' I told him that so many people had walked up these steps to find themselves blocked, causing them to turn around and come all the way down again, that the steps actually had been given a name by the Jewish residents: "*Madraigot Ha-Yi'ush*" 'The Steps of Despair.'

An hour went by and Shlomo was back in my home again, this time full of dust and dirt. 'Shlomo, what happened?' I asked.

'*Baruch haShem*-Thank G-d, we took the wall down. The shortcut is now open to all.'

'Shlomo, what are you talking about?'

Very excited, he explained to me that he had spoken to the soldiers, and they knocked the wall down. 'You're telling me that you simply spoke to the soldiers and they said, 'No problem,' and they knocked the wall down?'

'Yes, that's what happened.'

Shlomo went on to explain. 'I spoke to Motti, and he gave the orders to knock it down.'

'I can't believe this! Who's Motti?'

'Motti is the head officer,' Shlomo explained.

Shlomo of course, knew every one of them by name. He continued, "Well, I was sitting and talking to the soldiers, a great bunch of guys: Shimon, Rulet, Heshy. Sholom – did you know Sholom is a Jersey boy? Anyway, they saw how the wall really bothered me, so they spoke to Motti, their officer. Motti arrived at the scene and spoke on the Army radio to Itzik, Itzik called Avi, who phoned Dudu and told him to bring a big, five-kilo hammer. Next thing you know, no wall.'

Shlomo was so happy, but I continued not to believe, telling him he was dreaming. 'Let's go look together; I have to see this for myself.'

When I started up the steps with Shlomo, I couldn't believe my eyes. Sure enough, no wall.

After asking the soldiers what happened, they answered, 'Shlomo asked us to knock it down, so we did.'

'What?' I said, facing the soldiers. 'This guy has been here a week, and you do whatever he wants?'

'Well, he's such a nice guy,' the soldiers said.

'I'm also a nice guy,' I answered. 'I've been asking you to knock down the wall for the last ten years, with no success.'

Finally, one of the soldiers explained, 'Shlomo may have only been here for a week, but every day this week, he bought lunch for the entire unit. One day pizza, next day falafel, and then *malawach* (Yemeni fried flatbread) together with ice cream and soda. He showed his true and sincere love to us.'

I looked at Shlomo in amazement. 'Shlomo, is this true? Every day, you have been buying lunch for the entire unit?'

With his modest smile and special laugh, he answered, 'Hey, look what you can do with fifty dollars in Hebron.'

From that day on, the name of the steps changed. Anyone visiting can pass by the steps and see the new name embedded in the wall: "The Steps of Hope." "*Madraigot Ha-Tikvah*" is what these steps are named now.

That was Shlomo. Whether in his home Friday nights with all the guests, on the beach, or in the *casbah* (marketplace) of Hebron, he taught us all what *ahavat Yisrael*, true love of one's fellow Jews, is all about. Not just talking about love, or learning about it in a book, but getting out there, finding Jews in need, loving and caring for them, and showing them the steps of hope in life. He taught us all that true love can knock down even the biggest wall."

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*Source:* Supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from "*I Love when that Happens*" by R. Mendel Schwartz ("May the Schwartz be With You!")

*Connection:* Weekly reading -- Jewish rights in Hebron, and especially the ownership of Machpelah Cave, date back nearly three thousand seven hundred years (3695, to be precise), as documented in the opening verses (Gen. 23:1-20).

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz** [7 Kislev 5705 -12 Shvat 5777 (Nov. 12,1944–Feb. 7, 2017)] was a staff rabbi of the very first campus Chabad House in the world, in Berkeley (California) and then Los Angeles. In the 1980's the widowed Schwartzie married Olivia, and in the same decade they opened *Chai Center*, independent of Chabad, to give full expression to his creative--and *wild*--ideas for adult education for "every Jew that moves." Over the years he had a life-changing effect on thousands of Jews. For the last two decades of his life, he was Ascent's "Summer Rabbi-Scholar in Residence"--accompanied and aided by Olivia, of course.