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TRAILBLAZER

By
ROCHEL GOLDMAN
as told to
SARA GOLD





Mrs. Rochel Goldman was born in France in 1952, while her family was enroute to America, and raised on *shlichus* in Cleveland, Ohio, by her parents, Rabbi Zalman and Rebbetzin Shula Kazen. In 1973 she married Rabbi Yossy Goldman. They have been on *shlichus* in Johannesburg, South Africa, since 1976. To Rochel, the *hiskashrus* of her children and their continuity of the Rebbe's vision is her greatest achievement. To read about Rochel's family of origin and her upbringing, buy the book *The Queen of Cleveland*, which was reviewed in the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* Nissan issue. To read about Rochel's adult life in South Africa, get comfortable... -Ed.



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After we got married, my husband, Rabbi Yossy Goldman, and I had many offers to go on *shlichus*, including a few positions in the U.S., and a very persistent invitation from South Africa. The *shluchim* there, Rabbi Mendel and Mrs. Mashi Lipskar, wanted us to come and kept asking us to mention Johannesburg to the Rebbe. We sent a letter to the Rebbe sharing our commitment and desire to be his *shluchim* and included all of our options. The Rebbe underlined Johannesburg. With that one stroke of the pen, we were given our soul mission for life. We were lucky to have a clear answer from the Rebbe; not all *shluchim* got such unmistakable responses. The Rebbe asked my husband to make sure I was on board. It was always important to the Rebbe that the wife be willing to go as well. I was, of course, in full agreement as I had faith in the Rebbe's vision.

We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. Virtually all *shluchim* go to check out their place in advance; we had never been to South Africa before. It was a 20-hour flight with a stopover in Eretz Yisroel. There were no direct flights at the time.

We arrived from New York—my husband, two small children, and me—in 1976, during the Apartheid era, a time when racial segregation was enforced by government law in South Africa.

There was a lot of racial tension in the country. We'd take our children to the park and see signs on the benches saying, "Whites only." The Jews we met gave us an interesting "welcome." They told us we were crazy for coming. "We're all leaving before the revolution!" they told us.

People feared that a violent overthrow of the white-minority government would happen as it had in other African countries. There were packed flights leaving South Africa, with many Jewish professionals on board.

Our first posting was the very first Chabad House in Africa. We spent ten years there, strengthening Jewish life and introducing Chabad community programs like adult education, the giant public *menorah*, Gan Yisroel Day Camp, Lag B'Omer parades, and South Africa's only Jewish radio program. Chabad was in the vanguard of the outreach movement and, slowly but surely, the community was transformed, with many hundreds of newly Torah-observant families. Our original students at the Torah Academy—the Chabad community day school—went on to produce a whole new generation of *Anash*. Today, *baruch Hashem*, we have a student body of some 650 students, *kein yirbu*.

Ten years after we arrived, in 1986, my husband was head-hunted to be the rabbi for Sydenham Shul, the largest Modern Orthodox shul in South Africa, with over 1,000 people on a Friday night (plus a few hundred teens outside!). With the Rebbe's guidance, we took on the position and our *shlichus* changed quite dramatically. At that time, it was very unusual for a Chabad rabbi to serve in a regular Orthodox shul. Once people saw it was successful, many other shuls began to look for a Chabad rabbi too. Today, most of the Orthodox shuls here are headed by Chabad rabbis and rebbeztins.

At Sydenham, our youthful Chabad energy brought many positive changes. Through our

Rochel with her daughter Musya (Shemtov) at the Rebbe, early 1990s.



various *mitzvah* campaigns, the community started to move from being just “traditional” to getting involved in action-based *mitzvos*.

‘...AND THEN IT WILL BE EVEN BETTER!’

Whenever people would ask the Rebbe about the future in South Africa, the Rebbe would tell them there’s no need to leave. The day President Nelson Mandela (imprisoned for 27 years for fighting for racial equality, and later to become the first black president) was released from jail, a tense time in the country, the Rebbe told Mr. Koppel and Mrs. Selma Bacher (the founding couple of Chabad in South Africa), “Tell them [the Jews in South Africa] not to be afraid. Moshiach is coming soon. It will be good until he comes, and then it will be even better!”

During a particularly difficult time, the community kept asking us to check if the Rebbe had retained his confidence in our future here. Rabbi Lipskar asked the Rebbe again. His response? “*L’pele hasheilah!*” Loose translation: “I’m surprised by the question!”

We’re so lucky that we have a Rebbe whom we trust. We weren’t worried at all because of the Rebbe’s assurance that things would be good. Indeed, our community is vibrant and Yiddishkeit continues to grow stronger.

SPARKS ON A SAFARI

My mother, Rebbetzin Shula Kazen, *a”h*, was visiting us one summer in the 1980s and we took her on a trip to a game reserve with our family. Visiting a game reserve is a safari adventure, with thousands of animals, including predators, in their natural environment. It was dark and raining when we

got into the car to go home. We stuck our key in the ignition, and it broke in half. It was before cell phones, but luckily the reception office was still open. We called a couple we knew nearby who were happy to drive the hour and a half to bring us our spare key.

In the meantime, the office had closed. We were waiting, alone in our car, hearing the roars and sounds of wild animals. It was dark outside and pouring rain.

My husband had a Sunday night radio program where he would share words of Torah and inspiration. We tuned in and it gave us *chizuk* while we waited for help to come. We tried to turn what could have been a fearful experience into a meaningful one; we explained to the children that we were elevating the game reserve by listening to words of Torah there.

MIRACLES IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 1990, there was a family in our community whose teenage son had a malignant tumor in his back. I told the family, “You have to bring your son to New York to ask the Rebbe for a *brachah*.” They were reluctant to go because it was winter in America, and the average person wouldn’t take their immunocompromised child on such a trip. I said, “Listen, the weather isn’t such a problem—you want your child to be healthy!” They listened and made the trip. My father-in-law, Reb Shimon Goldman, introduced them to the Rebbe at Sunday dollars. The Rebbe gave their son a *brachah*, “You will be blessed to study Torah and do *mitzvos*.” Despite the doctors’ grim prognosis, the boy made a complete turnaround. He is now *frum*, married with nine children, and active in Jewish education.





L-R: Rabbi Yossy Goldman, Shmuly (9), and Choni (7), handing their *panim* to the Rebbe on 12 Shevat 5750/1990.



Rochel with six-week-old miracle baby Nissen at the Rebbe in 1992.



Rabbi Yossy Goldman with his daughter Zeesy (Deren), visiting the Rebbe for her bas mitzvah in 1991.

A MOST MIRACULOUS MIRACLE IN THE YEAR OF MIRACLES

When I came to the hospital to give birth to my tenth child, Nissen, my doctor told me that since he was lying transverse, I'd have to have a C-section.

But I insisted on being able to give birth naturally, as I did for all my previous children. My doctor, who had 40 years of experience, for the first time in his career called in another doctor for a second opinion. It was 1 o'clock in the morning.

I told the doctors, "It's *Tehei Shnas Ar'enu Niflaos*, 5751 [1991]. The year of wonders and miracles. There's going to be another miracle—I'm not having a C-section for my tenth child!"

The second doctor told my husband that he agreed with the first doctor, but added, "Why don't you call New York?" Clearly, he meant the Rebbe. This was long before cell phones, and the hospital switchboard was closed. The doctor made arrangements for us to make the call. The Rebbe's answer was, "Seeing as the doctor himself suggested to ask me, I hope he will not have *farrible* [a grudge] if I say we should listen to the *kimpeturin*, the woman in labor. Let us wait."

The doctors were anxious to do the C-section as soon as possible, since they were picking up signs of fetal distress. Reluctantly, they agreed to wait. When the doctor checked me again, sure enough, the baby had just turned into the right position all by himself! This, they said, was something that never happens at this late stage of labor. And, *baruch Hashem*, the baby was born in good health soon after.

We found out a year later that this second doctor was so overwhelmed by the clear miracle he'd witnessed that he became *shomer Shabbos*. The *neshamah* of my son, even before

he came down into this world, inspired someone to become *shomer Shabbos*.

Today, Rabbi Nissen Goldman and his wife, Ariella, are the *shluchim* in Cape Town for Chabad on Campus, continuing to make miracles with the students they teach and care for.

TO ADOPT OR NOT?

There is a couple in our community, Shelli and Alan, who were married for six years and had not yet been blessed with a child. In 1989, they went to 770 for dollars to ask the Rebbe for a *brachah* for children. Shelli passed by first and was so overwhelmed that she missed her chance to ask the Rebbe for a *brachah*. The Rebbe gave her an extra dollar for South Africa. Shelli told Alan, "Listen, it's your time. You have to ask!" Alan came to the Rebbe, and after receiving his first dollar, Alan asked the Rebbe for a *brachah* to have children. The Rebbe gave Alan a second dollar and said, "Give this to charity for your wife and have good news."

Shelli and Alan came back to South Africa very optimistic. Shelli was doing fertility treatments but was still struggling with miscarriages and ectopic pregnancies. In desperation, they put their name down to adopt a child. During this time, I encouraged Shelli to write to the Rebbe. She said, "But we've been there and done that and it's now eight years [six initial years, and two since the Rebbe's *brachah*!]" Although she was reluctant, I convinced her to write. Within a short amount of time, Alan received a fax from Rabbi Leibel Groner with the Rebbe's reply that he would pray for them (*azkir al hatziun*).

As the final fertility treatment still yielded no results,



they continued with the adoption process and were told that in four weeks a baby was due to be born who would be designated for them.

It was Erev Shavuos 1992 when Shelli discovered that she was pregnant! But they were not yet sure that the pregnancy would carry through. It was a very busy day at Sydenham Shul but they immediately came to see my husband in his office, uncertain whether they should give up the planned adoption or not. My husband told them that this was not a question for a rabbi, but for the Rebbe.

The Rebbe had already suffered a stroke but was still answering questions. My husband called his brother-in-law, Rabbi Moshe Klein, who had been helping the Rebbe since the stroke. He spoke to Rabbi Groner, who asked the Rebbe whether they should adopt. The Rebbe indicated that they should not proceed with the adoption. Indeed, they gave it up. Shelli had full faith in the Rebbe's *brachah* and wasn't worried that there was going to be anything wrong with the pregnancy. Eight months later, Shelli gave birth to a healthy baby boy. My husband named their son Rafi at his *bris*, and a few decades later we were invited to join them at his wedding, which took place in Israel. At the wedding, they showed the JEM video where Shelli shares this story of the Rebbe. All the family and guests were amazed by the miracle, especially that it took place after the Rebbe's stroke.

NO NEED FOR SURGERY

The president of our shul, no matter how many times we offered him, never managed to come with us on a trip to see the Rebbe. Some time after Gimmel Tammuz, he developed a back problem which required surgery. After one surgery, the pain was still there, and the doctors said they would have to operate again. I was traveling to New York that week and suggested he write a letter to the Rebbe which I would bring to the Ohel. He was skeptical of the idea but pushed himself to do it anyway. I brought his letter to the Ohel on Friday, and by Monday the pain was gone. He canceled his operation. He's now healthy

and walking with no unnecessary surgeries. He tells everyone about his miracle from the Rebbe and says that his only regret is not going to meet the Rebbe in person. After attending the Kinus Hashluchim with my husband one year, he spoke at the *kiddush* in our shul and told everyone that a trip to the Rebbe should be on everyone's bucket list.

SAVED BY A NIGGUN

We were driving back from a vacation one Erev Shabbos, with a full car of kids. My husband pulled to the side to let another car pass, and our car suddenly did a somersault; it flipped over all the way. People tiptoed over to our car to see if we were alive. Even though our car was completely totaled—all the windows were shattered—we were all okay. Only one of our sons got a scratch on his foot and my husband's shoulder got slightly bruised. The music that was playing in our car at the time was the *niggun* "Hoshia es amecha," a song which speaks about Hashem's deliverance for the Jewish people.

We got a call two weeks later—somebody told us that they started believing in Hashem after witnessing our miracle. We made a *seudas hadaah* to give thanks to Hashem.

I HAD MY TWO-YEAR-
OLD SON BENTZY
IN THE BACK, AND
REALIZED THAT IF I
GAVE THEM MY KEY,
THEY'D DRIVE OFF
WITH MY BABY. I SAID,
"LET ME TAKE MY
BABY OUT AND I'LL
GIVE YOU THE KEYS."

RIPPLE EFFECT

In our early years at Sydenham Shul, beginning in 1986, we would have many Shul members as our guests virtually every Friday night and Shabbos day. Seeing our beautiful Shabbos table—our 11 children all dressed up for Shabbos, helping with the serving, singing songs, and sharing a *parshah vort*—inspired a lot of people to want to have that for their own families. It was unique because in South Africa everything is very casual; people don't necessarily wear Shabbos clothes. Over time, many families who spent Shabbos with us upgraded their own Shabbos observance; many became fully *shomer Shabbos*. We meet people all over the world who tell us that they spent their first Shabbos in our home.



Rochel (fourth from right) and the WOW committee at a cooking demo and challah bake 25 years ago.

WOW

My brother, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Kazen, *a”h*, was the founder of Chabad.org. In 1988, when he’d tell me about the internet and what it could do, I’d think he was fantasizing. I couldn’t imagine anything like it.

Soon after developing Chabad.org, in December of 1998, my brother passed away. I flew into New York for his *levayah* and *shivah*. It was in January, the beginning of the South African school year, so I gave up my teaching job for that year. Having more time on my hands spurred me to start a women’s organization called WOW: Women of the World.

WOW had three missions: to fund Jewish education, to nurture the nurturers (women), and to promote a positive South Africa. Some of the things we did were fundraise for schools to have Jewish learning material; host annual gala brunches themed with the three *mitzvos* for women; and publish positive news and attitudes about South Africa, based on the Rebbe’s confidence and *brachos* for our community. We flew in Chabad speakers for our events. We also had some of the most prominent people in the country, like President Mandela’s wife, as guest speakers. These events left a lasting impression on the women present. Just recently, one young woman told me she is *shomer Shabbos* today thanks to those inspirational events.

HIJACKED!

It was May 1995. A lot of people were leaving South Africa at the time because crime had spiraled out of control. Nelson Mandela had just been elected president in the first democratic election, but the old Apartheid police department which had kept crime under control was crumbling. Many senior police were taking early retirement as they refused to work under black bosses. As a result, crime was rampant. Car hijackings were common (thank G-d today it is much better, though far from perfect). Criminals would put guns to people’s heads and demand the keys to

their cars. Because of my large family, I had a 12-passenger van, which was highly sought after by the criminals. Everyone discouraged me from driving my van because of how dangerous it was. But what could I do? We couldn’t squeeze our family into a regular car!

One Erev Shabbos, I was delivering homemade *challah* to a family whose children were visiting from overseas (I would make a point of bringing people *challah*, so they’d taste it and want to start doing the *mitzvah* of *challah*). As I was driving out, I saw four guys in a parked car right behind me. One jumped into the passenger seat of my car, pointed a gun at me and demanded that I give him my keys. I had my two-year-old son Bentzy in the back, and realized that if I gave them my key, they’d drive off with my baby. I said, “Let me take my baby out and I’ll give you the keys.” This guy was obviously inexperienced because he said, “No, give me the keys now!” An experienced criminal would’ve waited for me to take out my baby and hand him my keys. I leaned on my horn, and he pulled the trigger of his gun at point blank range. Miraculously, it didn’t fire. He thought he’d scare me, but I wasn’t scared, knowing the stories of how the Rebbeim were unfazed by guns, those “little toys.” He opened his revolver to see why it wasn’t working and then closed it and pulled the trigger again. Again, it didn’t fire. He grabbed my hand. I quickly pulled back, jumped out of the car, threw my keys over the fence of



Rochel explaining the significance of reciting *Tehillim*. A *Tehillim* was gifted to all participants of this WOW event.

the house I had just visited, into the neighbor's yard, and rang the bell. As the people from the house came running out, he ran back into his car and sped off.

I am blessed with a strong faith and positive disposition. I felt that Hashem was protecting me, and that the Rebbe's *brachos* were with me. This was an open miracle that saved my life and the life of my baby!

The woman I had just visited told me that a similar story had happened to her. In her case, though, the criminal had let her first take her baby out of the car, and then she had handed him her keys.

Subsequently, we organized a Drive Against Crime with a parade of over 500 cars to drive downtown to the Minister of Safety and Security. Our two-and-a-half-year-old son wore a sign around his neck that said, "I was hijacked!" and we handed a petition to the minister with five suggestions on how to lessen crime.

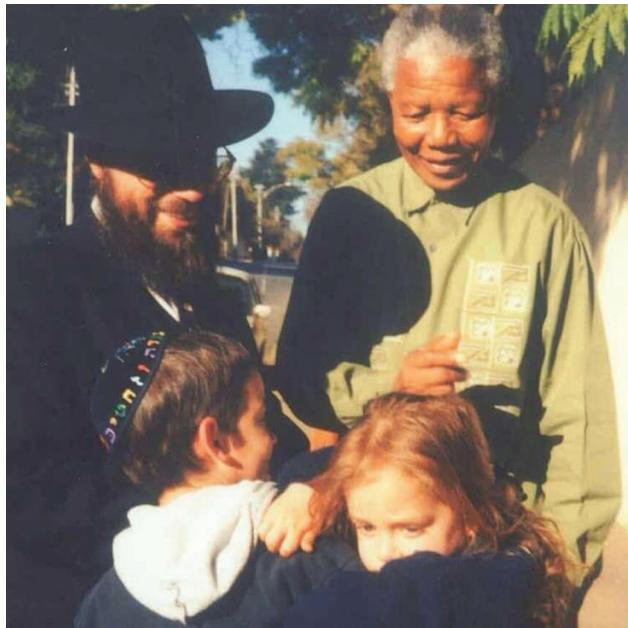
Around two years later (they're a little slow in South Africa) they thanked us for the suggestions and said they would work on it.

CHALLAH AND COOKING

I did a lot of cooking courses at Sydenham Shul, with the goal of inspiring women to bake challah, and making *yon tov* cooking easier and more exciting. I presented the idea of an "organic Pesach"—eating only natural, homemade food over Pesach—and the ladies loved it.

I would buy challah for the first few years I was married. When my sister, Mrs. Esther Alpern, *a"h*, heard that, she told me, "There are three *mitzvos* given especially to women—and you are going to give up one of them?!" Since then I've been making *challah* every week, even when I'm not home.

**'THERE ARE THREE MITZVOS GIVEN
ESPECIALLY TO WOMEN—AND YOU ARE
GOING TO GIVE UP ONE OF THEM?!"**



On the Goldmans' street in 1994. Back, L-R: Rabbi Yossy Goldman; President Mandela. Front: Choni, holding Nissen. Nissen, two years old, was too shy to look at the president. Mandela commented wryly, "This one is still fighting old battles!"

PRESIDENT NELSON MANDELA

One day, in 1994, my husband was driving home and saw President Nelson Mandela walking down our street, accompanied by only one guard. Mandela's house was not far from ours and he was taking a Sunday stroll down the road. My husband told my kids to quickly go out and see the president walking down the main road. They ran out of the house, and my 16-year-old son Mendel grabbed a camera. Mandela stopped and spoke with each child. He asked them their names. To my son Yisroel, he commented, "That's a beautiful name. Israel is a beautiful place. Chief Rabbi Harris will be taking me there soon and I am looking forward to it." He held my two children's hands and walked down the street with them, like a typical *Yiddishe zaide*.

President Mandela was the newly elected first black president (during Apartheid, blacks could not even vote). He led the country in its miraculous transition to a peaceful, democratic South Africa.

People ask if Mandela was a friend of the Jews. He definitely was. He was very grateful to the Jews for the political support they'd given him. A Jewish lawyer gave Mandela his first job. Five out of the 11 co-defendants in his famous treason trial were Jews who were his comrades fighting for black freedom. He was very good personal friends with then-Chief Rabbi Cyril K. Harris, who took him on a visit to Israel.

I believe he was a great man. How many political prisoners would sit in jail for 27 years and then come out and not look for revenge? He preached peace and reconciliation in South Africa between blacks and whites. He even had to fight against his own people who wanted revenge. But because of his wisdom and stature as an elder statesman he was successful. We could use him today!

LAND FOR PEACE?

In March of 2010 I took a group of ladies on the JLI Israel trip. We were staying at the David Citadel hotel but had to be switched to Mamilla as Vice President Biden and his whole entourage would be staying at the David Citadel. I asked to see him as I wanted to give him some papers I had prepared on what the Rebbe said about not giving back land for "peace."

The next morning, I got called out of breakfast by the Israeli police. My ladies were worried! The police interrogated me, wanting to know why I wanted to see the vice president. I told them that as a Chabad *chossid* I wanted to convey the Rebbe's viewpoint, which can only help Israel if the politicians would listen. They returned my passport and said that no citizen can see the vice president; but I can go to the U.S. ambassador and give these papers to him. And so I did.

I feel that wherever I go, I am on a mission to give over the Rebbe's message.

RAISING CHASSIDISHE CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA

We took our children to the Rebbe often. It was expensive to make the trip, but we decided to make it a priority. Visiting their grandparents in Crown Heights and Cleveland—Reb Shimon and Esther Goldman and Rabbi Zalman and Shula Kazen—gave our children living role models to emulate. Attending family *simchas* overseas had a positive influence too.

We sent them overseas to summer camp and *yeshivas kayitz* which they found exciting and inspirational. My husband would wake our children in the middle of the night (due to the time difference) to tune in live to the hook-ups of the Rebbe's *farbrengens*. We also had *bachurim* who came here as *shluchim*, and they would often *farbreng* with our boys, adding to their *hiskashrus*.

Sending our children to the Rebbe strengthened them and also inspired their friends and classmates. My children once went with my husband to the Rebbe and got all their classmates to write letters. The Rebbe had a lot of *nachas* receiving their letters.



Rochel holding two-year-old Bentzy at the Drive Against Crime parade in 1995. Bentzy is wearing a sign that says, "I was hijacked!"

Every night when I'd put my children to sleep, I'd read them stories of *tzaddikim* from *The Storyteller* by Nissan Mindel or share family Rebbe stories. They also saw all the work we were doing, and we included the kids in our work—they'd come with me to deliver *challah* and would be involved in our programs. We tried to raise our children to be givers, to create their environment. You also need a lot of *davening* to raise good children.

HOW *SHLUCHIM* "RETIRE"

After 35 years of leading our community at Sydenham Shul, we handed over the leadership to fellow *shluchim* we had guided and mentored for 14 years, Rabbi Yehuda and Mrs. Estee Stern. My husband assumed the role of Rabbi Emeritus for Life.

We still live in Johannesburg and continue teaching and my husband is still giving sermons at shul, but now we also travel around the world speaking to different communities. There is no such thing as retiring! We've visited over 50 communities in the last three years!

CONCLUSION

For my 70th birthday two years ago, our son Rabbi Michoel Goldman from Kauai, Hawaii, brought a printing press to our shul and we printed an official *Kehos Tanya* in Sydenham Shul. In the beginning of our *shlichus*, people were wary of Chabad and we would walk on eggshells in fear of sparking tension with anything Chabad-related. Today the Sydenham Shul is

listed in the back of all these *Tanyas*. It stands as a testament to all the Chassidus that was taught in our shul, and how far we've come. Today, the Rebbe is well known to everyone, and they are all proud of their Chabad affiliations.

Through Chabad, later followed by other outreach movements, Johannesburg is a different world from when we first came here back in 1976. When we arrived here we knew virtually every *frum* person in town. Today, we don't even know all the rabbis! ■



Rochel with her newest grandchild, Shimon Bentzion Shemtov, in Montevideo, Uruguay. He was born this past Lag B'Omer.

SARA GOLD is a graduate of Beth Rivkah Seminary Beis. She enjoys writing for the *N'sheiChabad* Newsletter and is also a morah in *Bnos Menachem* Preschool in Crown Heights.

ROCHEL GOLDMAN is most proud of her children: Rabbi Yochonon and Leah Goldman, Chabad of Center City, Philadelphia; Rabbi Michoel and Zisel Goldman, Chabad of Kauai, Hawaii; Mendel and Devorah'le Goldman, Trustee of the Torah Academy Foundation, Co-Founder of Chayenu, Johannesburg; Zeesy and Rabbi Oshy Deren, Chabad of the West Coast, Cape Town; Rabbi Shmuly and Frumi Goldman, Chabad of Sandton, Johannesburg; Choni Goldman, Chazzan at Gardens Shul and international events singer, Cape Town; Sarah and Rabbi Oshy Feldman, Gardens Shul, Cape Town; Izzy and Batsheva Goldman, Chair of Fundraising for Yeshivah-Beth Rivkah Colleges, Melbourne; Musya and Rabbi Mendel Shemtov, Chabad of Montevideo, Uruguay; Rabbi Nissen and Ariella Goldman, Chabad on Campus, Cape Town; Bentzy Goldman, Entrepreneur, Cape Town.