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The Global News Service of the Jewish People

Pained but resolute, Chabad buries emissaries

By · December 2, 2008

KFAR CHABAD, Israel (JTA) – Rabbis wept, women wailed and Chabad faithful called for avenging the tragedy in Mumbai with holiness and love as thousands gathered here Tuesday for the funerals of the two Chabad emissaries killed in the Mumbai terrorist attacks.

The mourners came together under a sun-drenched Israeli sky in this Chabad-Lubavitch town near Tel Aviv outside the replica of the late Lubavitcher rebbe's home in Brooklyn, N.Y. The bodies of Rabbi Gavriel and Rivkah Holtzberg were laid out in front of the red-brick house side by side, wrapped in prayer shawls.

The rabbis eulogizing the couple said the tragedy of their being killed in the house in which they had hosted and celebrated holidays with so many should be met by even more outreach by Chabad emissaries.

"We need to have a revenge of light, an attack of holiness and love," said Rabbi Naftali Liebsker, who helps coordinate Chabad's emissaries, known as schluchim, worldwide. "Join us; that will be our answer."

Mourners appeared particularly aggrieved by the couple's now-orphaned son, 2-year-old Moshe, who was spirited out of the Mumbai Chabad House during the attack by his Indian nanny.

"The whole world and, of course, the Jewish people need an answer to the question asked by a 2-year-old child: 'Where is my mother?' " President Shimon Peres said.

For Israelis generally, the attacks in India thousands of miles away felt both painful and familiar. They know that Israeli and Jewish sites around the world are potential and sometimes relatively easy targets for terrorists. But the form of last week's bloody attacks and the prolonged commando raid at the Mumbai Chabad House has prompted Israelis to consider a new level of vulnerability.

"The war against terror has changed," wrote Amos Harel in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz. "Until now, the military assumed that after stabilizing the situation, it will have quantitative and intelligence superiority over the enemy. But as soon as large areas such as hotels are attacked, the challenge becomes incalculably more complex. Even Israel does not have enough units capable of handling a few hostage-taking and other attacks simultaneously."

Yarom Schweitzer, the director of the Counter-Terrorism Project at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies, said the Mumbai attack was being thoroughly scrutinized.

"No one is surprised that Jewish and Israeli sites are being targeted by global Mujahadeen, but the method of operation, including the massive manpower and firepower, are all being studied carefully to be ready for any surprise," Schweitzer told JTA. "Here they imported the battlefield into the city in a Babi Yar-style operation. They went in not planning for a hostage situation but pure killing en masse, and this is what should be acknowledged and prepared for."

Six Israelis were killed in the attack on the five-story apartment building that housed the Chabad center in Mubmai. They reportedly were bound and executed, and they may have been tortured before their deaths. Several were found in prayer shawls, possibly put on them by Gavriel Holtzberg before he was killed.

Sandra Joseph, the family's nanny, locked herself in a laundry room when the shooting began and heard Rivkah

Holtzberg calling to her for help. Then she heard shots fired followed by an eerie silence. Joseph said she then crept out of her hiding place and found Moshe crying next to his parents' bodies. She scooped the boy into her arms and fled the building.

The footage of Moshe in his nanny's arms was played repeatedly by Israeli TV stations. As part of the drama, cameras followed Moshe's maternal grandparents preparing to leave Israel for India holding out hope that they would be reunited with their daughter and son-in-law alive.

Instead they bid the couple final goodbyes at the funeral services at Kfar Chabad -- literally "Chabad Village." Adding to the cruelty of her death, Rivkah -- or Rivki, as she was called -- was six months pregnant at the time of her murder.

She and Gavriel, who like her was born in Israel but grew up in New York, had decided shortly after getting married to become emissaries for the Lubavitch movement.

In a video of the couple taken about two years ago in their Mumbai home, they are seen beaming wide smiles. A shot of Rivkah shows her bringing out a tray of Chanukah sufganiyot, jelly doughnuts. Gavriel describes the special sense of mission he feels helping out Israelis in distress, particularly those he would visit who were imprisoned in India, usually on drug-related charges.

Yossi Katz, a geography professor at Bar-Ilan University, was with the couple on their last Shabbat. A frequent traveler and visitor to Chabad Houses around the world, he said he had been especially taken by the warmth and enthusiasm of his young hosts.

Katz talked with the Holtzbergs about their sense of mission as Chabad emissaries.

"Rivki said that being emissaries for them had become a way of life -- not done in connection to something else, but their very lives," he told JTA.

Katz watched Rivkah explain the tenets of Judaism to Norma Shvarzblat Rabinovich, 50, a Jewish woman from Mexico planning to make aliyah who was visiting India. Rabinovich was killed at the Chabad House during the terrorist attack. She was buried Tuesday in Israel along with Yocheved Orpaz, 60, a mother of four from the Tel Aviv suburb of Givatayim who had gone to India to meet her daughter and two grandchildren who were traveling there.

Two Israeli kashrut inspectors also were killed in last week's attack. Aryeh Leibish Teitelbaum, 38, of Jerusalem, and Bentzion Chroman, 28, of Bat Yam reportedly had stopped by the Chabad House to pray before catching a flight to Israel.

Chroman, a kosher supervisor, is survived by his wife and three children.

Teitelbaum, who is survived by his wife and eight children, was in charge of kosher supervision for a large American organization and had traveled for work to India via China.

Teitelbaum's family, members of the non-Zionist Satmar Chasidic sect, caused some controversy in Israel when they requested that the Israeli flag not be draped on Teitelbaum's coffin at a brief state ceremony at Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv on Monday night, when the bodies arrived in Israel.

At Tuesday's funerals at Kfar Chabad, Lubavitch officials announced that renovations of the Chabad House in Mumbai would begin immediately and that the building would be dedicated anew, renamed for Gavriel and Rivkah Holtzberg.

One of the only items from the Chabad House to survive unscathed in the attack was a large, gilded framed picture of the late Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson. It was seen in photos and footage after the attack propped on a chair surrounded by broken glass and blood-splattered, bullet-riddled walls.