

## Community News

# The Human Spirit: Breaking the Glass

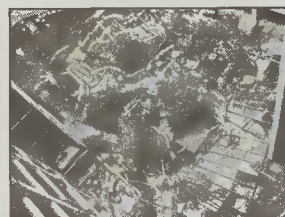
By Barbara Sofer, *The Jerusalem Post*

On October 10, Mariashi Groner paced in the hallway of the Hunt Valley, MD, hotel. Ever since arriving from her home in Charlotte, NC, she couldn't walk off her skittishness. The hallway - at the Embassy Suites - looks out over a central courtyard, green trees and stone walkways, wooden tables and an artificial pond. The comforting aroma of fresh popcorn was in the air. Above was a glass skylight that showed off the sunny, clear day and blue skies.

Mariashi, 47, is co-founder, with her husband Rabbi Yossi Groner, of the Chabad network in the Carolinas and the principal of the local Jewish school. This wasn't her first child to get married. In the previous three weddings she'd been the mother-of-the-bride, traditionally the more worry-laden role. Her vivacious daughter Leah had been married just a few months earlier. Today their son was to stand under the huppa.

The bride, Rochel Adler from nearby Baltimore, was lovely; a kind-hearted and generous teacher, a committed follower of the Lubavitch chasidic lifestyle, as are the Groners. Mariashi expected her to arrive any moment. The wedding was in a hall, but the photos would be taken in the picturesque atrium. The florist had called Rochel to get last minute instructions about the flowers; they were running a little behind schedule.

Mariashi understood the real source of her anxiety. Her son Ben-Tzion, the groom, had experienced such a turbulent life. When



The atrium ceiling on the floor of the Embassy Suites.

he was 16, an innocent-looking nose bleed turned out to be the first sign of a dreaded form of leukemia: acute myelogenous leukemia (AML), a fast-growing cancer of the blood and bone. Ben-Tzion underwent the harsh and harrowing treatments needed to fight AML, including bone marrow transplantation. Fortunately, his little brother Motti turned out to be a perfect match. Through all the treatments, Mariashi, like any Jewish mother of a gravely ill child, prayed to be able to stand with her son under a wedding canopy.

Ben-Tzion himself was confident that he would survive because of an unusual experience of his childhood.

The family had made one of its many trips from North Carolina to Crown Heights, in Brooklyn. As was their custom, they lined up on Sunday morning when Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, who died in 1994, passed out blessings and crisp dollar bills. So it was on May 5, 1991 the Groner family approached Rabbi Schneerson.

This visit was different. First, while addressing the Groner daughters, the Rebbe stopped and questioned Ben-Tzion's sister Leah about whether she lit Shabbat candles - a standard practice from age three for Lubavitch chasidim, particularly the offspring of rabbinic families. Rabbi Yossi's father was none other than the Rebbe's own personal assistant, Rabbi Leib Groner, and the family's adherence to chasidism came from the Groner sons. When Ben-Tzion popped out from behind his father, the Rebbe burst into an ebullient smile. He pointed at Ben-Tzion and declared, "When he gets married, his wife will give tzedaka."

Ben-Tzion was only eight years old. The in-house video system in Crown Heights routinely recorded the visit and the Groners took the video home. They didn't frame the dollar.

Ben-Tzion loved to see the video, hundreds of times watching the Rebbe speak of his charitable future wife. And through his horrendous medical ordeal, he assured his parents: "Everything is going to be okay. I have the Rebbe's blessing."

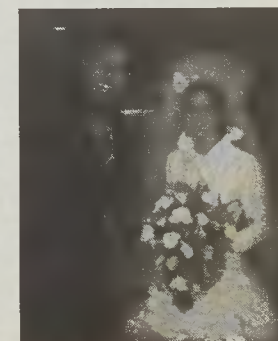
Such reminiscences ran through her mind on this wedding day, and Mariashi Groner couldn't quite get a grip on her emotions. "AML is a terrible diagnosis, but if you beat it, it's gone," she said. "Still, on an occasion like this, you can't help

but think back on how different life could have been."

Mariashi was also grateful that the lovely and charitable young woman hadn't been worried by her groom's medical history.

She took a deep breath. The wedding hall was only a mile away. All ten of their children and their small grandchildren had arrived safely and were already in the hotel. The day they'd prayed for was here. What could happen?

Suddenly, at five minutes before 2 PM, shortly before the photo session was scheduled to begin, there was a popping sound like gunshots and then a crash. Mariashi looked up. The ceiling of the eight-floor-high atrium was cracking.



Mr. & Mrs. Ben Tzion Groner

"I screamed and completely lost it; I thought I was seeing Satan." Huge shards of heavy, jagged glass and aluminum rained down on the lobby. The bride! Her children! Her grandchildren! The hundreds of guests in the hotel!

Ben-Tzion was by her side to calm her. It would be all right. It had to be all right. When the glass stopped falling, hotel staff searched under the debris. The bride hadn't yet arrived. The grandchildren were in a hotel room, eating kosher pizza delivered from Baltimore. No one was injured - not one person in the huge hotel.

Rabbi Groner said the near miss made the wedding even more joyful - every step on the dance floor affirmed life.

The building was evacuated. According to The Baltimore Sun, an engineer and the county's chief building inspector examined the site but were unable to determine the cause of the collapse.

But the rabbi and the rebbetzin told me they agreed on the cosmic import.

Said Rabbi Groner: "Sometimes a blessing can contradict a decree from heaven and goes against the natural order. We got to witness what happens when the heavens quarrel. And in the end, the blessing prevailed."

The story didn't receive wide publicity, but on a Crown Heights Web site a reader aptly commented: The glass was broken before the wedding.

Mazal tov! ☆

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