

# Lev L'Achim Under Fire in the Negev

## *Outreach Efforts Continue Amidst Rocket Attacks*

By Shneur Bleemer

The daily rocket bombardment from Gaza, that had been basically confined to Sderot till now, escalated in to a full out attack on all of Southern Eretz Yisroel over the past couple of weeks. And the Israeli military response, which began earlier this week, has evoked an even greater rise in the number of long-range rockets and missiles aimed at Ashkelon, Netivot, Kiryat Gat, Ashdod and the many smaller communities and towns in between.

Life in a war zone is both traumatic and dangerous. One never knows when a missile will come sailing down from above. Serious injury and even death are part of the daily reality of life in Southern Israel and there is no room for 'business-as-usual'. Thus, schools have been closed indefinitely, stores are shuttered along the main thoroughfares and the hospital emergency rooms are full of bombing victims and others who have become afflicted with hysteria and other maladies common to a war zone.

While one would imagine that the outreach programs and *shiurei Torah* of P'eylim / Lev L'Achim would certainly be cancelled at a time like this, the opposite is true. The devoted men and women who are bringing the light of Torah to the masses see this as a time of special opportunity. With their world in crisis many people are finally ready to turn their hearts and minds toward Avinu Shebashamayim. Indeed, to those who are huddled in fallout shelters or simply hiding at home, the lack of work and structure to their days only exacerbates the tension and pressure. The calming effect of a Torah class or some time spent with a caring mentor can be the perfect way to restore equilibrium and hope for the future.

Late Monday evening, on the third day of the Israeli offensive in Gaza, a group of Regional Co-ordinators from Lev L'Achim converged on the home of Maran HaRav Aharon Leib Shteinman in Bnai Brak. These men stand behind the vast framework of Lev L'Achim activities in the southern part of Israel and they had many questions about what to do and what not to do during the current crisis.

Led by Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin, Director-General of Lev L'Achim and Rabbi Eliezer Rubinstein, Co-coordinator of the nationwide volunteer visitations by Kolllel yungeleit, and Rabbi Tuvia Levenstein, Senior Co-coordinator of Lev L'Achim activities in the South, the group included Rabbi Shimon Bitton (Beer Sheva), R' Mordechai Wolman & R' Moshe Glick (Ofakim) R' Yosef Betito & R' Avraham Gutstein (Ashkelon), R' Michael Za'ade (Sderot), R' Yair Elchadad & R' Chaim Lubaton (Netivot) and other representatives of Lev L'Achim in the Negev. The small room of Rav Shteinman was packed to capacity.

The assembled activists had arrived to seek guidance and counsel concerning their programs and the thousands of people with whom they are in contact. At the same time, they sought encouragement and moral support for themselves and their own families who are just as traumatized as the rest of the population.

The Rosh Yeshiva listened intently as each question was asked. It was apparent that the Lev L'Achim leaders were not looking for loopholes; they and their people were prepared to continue their *avodas hakodesh* without letup if Rav Shteinman would allow them.

The Rosh Yeshiva spoke in measured terms giving each question the careful consideration it deserved. With lives at stake, both physically and spiritually, an intense atmosphere permeated the room and not a sound could be heard as each question was decided.

The evening concluded in the wee hours of the morning with the Rosh Yeshiva wishing the participants a heartfelt *bracha* to be spared from danger and any impediments to their holy work.

The following is a transcript of the questions and answers as transcribed by one of the *askanim* in attendance:

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

Gathered here are the directors of Lev L'Achim activities in Southern Israel. These men work in Netivot, Sderot, Ofakim, Beer Sheva, Ashkelon, Ashdod and dozens of towns and Moshavim in between. They live and work in the line of fire. The rockets that are raining down are aimed at them, their families and the people they are in contact with and are bringing closer to *yiddishkeit*.

They need to weigh the physical danger to their own lives against the spiritual danger that threatens those who they touch on a daily basis. Are they to continue with their groups? With their Midrashot for women? With their home visitations? With their youth groups?

**Rav Shteinman:**

Just a few more days.... just a few more days. It will certainly be quiet once again.

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

But in the meantime, what should be discontinued and what efforts should perhaps be multiplied?

**Rav Shteinman:**

You dare not endanger your lives...

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

For example, there is a group of Kollel *yungeleit* who go each night from Netivot to Sderot....

**Rav Shteinman:**

I am told that the evenings are safer, that there are few if any missiles launched at night. If this is so, then whatever groups go by day should try to reschedule their work to the evenings.

**Rabbi Michael Zadeh (Sderot):**

There are missiles at night too, just not as many as during the day.

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

Our men are willing to go out and continue their work. They want the Rosh Yeshiva to provide them with an answer to reassure their wives!

**Rav Shteinman:**

This is why Rav Yisroel Salanter Zt'l never accepted a Rabbonus. He said that there will always be questions of *pikuach nefesh* and who can answer such questions?!

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

Our field personnel from Netivot say that they are as susceptible to attack at this time in Netivot as they are in Sderot. They gain nothing by staying out of Sderot for in both places they must constantly run to the shelters. So they want to know if there is any reason to stay home? They might as well be in Sderot and accomplish something between missile strikes.

**Rav Shteinman:**

*Shev v'al ta'ase* –to sit and refrain from doing– is the *halacha* in such cases.

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

The *p'eylim* understand that the Rosh Yeshiva does not recommend that they go out under such conditions. But they wish to know if they have the right to be “*machmir*” on themselves nevertheless?

**Rav Shteinman:**

If someone has “*zchus Avos*” (the merit of distinguished lineage) he has a protection that others do not possess. The Gemara tells us that one who has “*zchus Avos*” can undergo the ancient medical procedure of *hakazas dam* (bloodletting) even on Mondays and Thursdays, which are days of judgment when Chazal advise others not to put themselves in to a dangerous situation.

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

When the schools went on strike last year we arranged outings for the idle youth and succeeded in bringing many of them closer to Torah. Now, with the schools closed in much of the South, we feel it would be beneficial to take the secular youth on trips further inland to places where they can enjoy a spiritual experience and be out of the range of the missiles.

**Rav Shteinman:**

What is the question? Is there danger inherent in the traveling?

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

It is hard to say. Even the municipalities are suggesting that the youth go for day trips to the North. Why shouldn't we do the same?

**Rav Shteinman:**

If they are going to travel anyway then you may offer to take them on your trips. But as long as the other option is to stay where they are, it is better not to promote trips outside the home during a time of danger.

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

The *yungeleit* are wondering why it is permissible to venture outdoors to go to shul for Mincha or Maariv, but to do Kiruv activities they are now being told to stay home?

**Rav Shteinman:**

It is only *d'Rabbanan* to daven with a *minyan* and I would not suggest that anyone go out during a time of danger for that purpose.

**Rabbi Mordechai Wolman (Ofakim):**

I say a *shiur* every evening in a kibbutz near the border with Gaza. The participants have begged me to continue during this time for they feel that the *z'chus* of learning Torah is protecting them. The class is held in a fallout shelter and there is no danger once I arrive. Till now there have been no

report of vehicles in transit being hit by missiles. Do I have to fear for my safety while traveling to and from this *shiur*.

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

The basic question we are hearing from all of our personnel is why are we not obligated to set aside what is only a chance of physical danger for ourselves as compared to the definite spiritual danger to others that will result if we cease to operate in the South?

**Rav Shteinman:**

We are taught that Pikuach Nefesh pushes aside Shabbos. One may transgress the laws of Shabbos when his life is in danger.

There is certainly damage to the spirituality of Shabbos in such instances, yet we see that this ‘definite’ damage must be sustained in order to preclude the ‘possible’ damage to our physical selves.

The overriding point is our obligation to avoid putting ourselves in harms way.

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

Why does the tenet “A Shliach Mitzvah will come to no harm” not apply to us?

**Rav Shteinman:**

The Gemara teaches us that this rule does not apply in a situation where danger is rampant. Although I have refrained from proclaiming that one is allowed to go out and perform the work of Lev L’Achim under these circumstances, I would not deem it an *aveira* should one decide to go ahead and continue of his own volition.

**Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin:**

Will the Rosh Yeshiva give a *bracha* to those who will continue to go out and do our work?

**Rav Shteinman:**

May the merit of all the holy work you are doing throughout the year stand by you at this time to be spared from any physical harm.