

First Place Winner of
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Prize: free round-trip ticket to Israel, courtesy of US Airways

A Jewish Heroine:
The Contribution of One Woman in Israel
By Jessica Silverman

Every Friday in Jerusalem, a siren pierces the late afternoon twilight, announcing the arrival of the Shabbat Queen. A certain calm falls over the normally hectic city—the Shabbat Queen’s gift to its harried citizens. As the siren wanes and darkness descends, one can almost imagine the entire population letting out a collective sigh of relief. The Shabbat Queen brings with her many gifts. For some, she brings a day to appreciate God’s creations. For others, she brings precious time to spend with family. But for one Jerusalemite, Barbara Silverman, the Shabbat Queen brings the opportunity to discuss men’s underwear with Israeli soldiers.

Barbara Silverman, my grandmother, was born in Chicago in 1931 and made aliyah in 1983. Her first trip to Israel was in 1950, shortly after the birth of the state. This was an era when it was not socially acceptable for women to travel and Israel was by no means a safe destination. Nonetheless, she defied societal norms and her father’s protests that she would go to Israel “over his dead body,” and spent a year working on Kibbutz Matsuba, just south of the Lebanese border. Though the work was torturous, accommodations awful, and the kibbutzniks lived under the fear of terrorist attack, she felt connected to the land and the people in a way she had never felt before. Eventually, her parents insisted that she return to the States and although she complied, it was then she decided that one day she would return to Israel and never leave. But, as in all good

stories, my grandmother was forced to face many challenges before she found herself with an Israeli passport in her name.

My grandmother told me that when she met my grandfather, she would get so excited every time she saw his beat-up car turn the corner, even when he was late, which was most of the time. They fell in love, settled into a community, took jobs, had three beautiful children, and built a life together, not in her beloved Israel but in Chicago. It was not a bad life, but not the one she envisioned for herself. Though she felt a profound void during these years, she tried to fill that void through grass-roots volunteering. In particular, she spent countless hours working for the Save Soviet Jewry movement, and in her spare time, she was involved in her synagogue and helped start a Jewish day school. But as hard as she tried to be happy in America, Israel never left her consciousness. After years of persuasion, and eventually an ultimatum, my grandmother finally convinced my grandfather that she could no longer live so far away from the land that she loved so deeply. So, in 1983 they packed up, as my grandfather puts it, “thousands of boxes,” booked a flight and said goodbyes to their Chicago friends. After kissing the tarmac upon their arrival, they faced many struggles that are common to most *olim*, but it did not deter my grandmother from becoming one of the most famous people in Jerusalem.

On a hot Thursday in 2000, my grandparents were driving past a checkpoint on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The soldiers at the checkpoint were sweating, and according to my Jewish grandmother, far too skinny. She decided that instead of simply cooking a Shabbat meal for two, that evening, she would also cook for the soldiers at this particular checkpoint. Late that night, she and my grandfather filled the car with chicken and kugel,

drove back to checkpoint and distributed the food to the grateful soldiers. They did the same the next week and the week after that and so on and so on and even added additional checkpoints to their route, until it seemed as if this had always been part of her pre-Shabbat routine. There was no way she could know it at the time, but my grandmother had started a project that would ultimately change the world, person by person.

She was a local celebrity among the soldiers at the checkpoints near her house. While the soldiers on duty were different every week, anyone who was stationed at the checkpoints knew that on Thursday night, he could count on my grandmother to show up to relieve their loneliness and boredom with her delicious food, a kind smile, and words of encouragement.

In the fall of 2000, when the second Intifada started, security measures were imposed that made it impossible for Barbara Silverman to travel to the checkpoints. But she is not one to let a simple IDF command stop her from providing for “her soldiers”. In a burst of inspiration, she put together a dozen packages full of baked goods, candies, and toiletries. She sent these through the mail to a unit of combat soldiers at an IDF base and then wrote an email to her entire address book about her new endeavor. Within days, she was receiving checks from all over the world from people she did not know, telling her to use the funds to send additional packages. How had this happened? Unbeknownst to her, the recipients of her email had forwarded it to their friends and family and soon thousands of people were aware of and supporting my grandmother’s efforts.

It was a good thing there was cash flow, because several IDF commanders had heard about "Barbara's Packages" and began to call her with the number of packages that they needed for their units and the time when they would pick them up from her tiny apartment in Jerusalem. Even though the requests were endless and often forced her to place everything else in her life on hold, my grandmother and crews of volunteers — friends of hers, Bar and Bat Mitzvah children and their families, Jewish Federation groups, yeshiva students, senior citizens from the neighborhood, even groups of Christian tourists—would spend their days making packages for the soldiers, filling them with candy bars, t-shirts, shampoo, hand-written letters of encouragement, and though it may sound corny, idealism and love.

But the story gets more interesting. It was not just the soldiers who appreciated the packages. During the Intifada, tourists virtually stopped visiting Israel. Many vendors were devastated by the lack of customers, and it was my grandmother and the tens of thousands of shekels she was spending each week that enabled a number of these merchants to stay in business. They provided her with the perfect combination of contents for her packages, including; socks, towels, t-shirts, toiletries, snacks, gloves, hats, fleeces, and, yes, underwear. Though business has improved and the merchants are no longer reliant on my grandmother's packages to make ends meet, she cannot walk through the *shuk* without dozens of vendors calling her name in greeting and showering her with praises.

Ten years after her first food delivery to a lonesome checkpoint outside of Jerusalem and with 150,000 packages sent to IDF soldiers at every base in the country and to combat units in the field, *A Package From Home (APFH)*, has become a well-

established organization. In particular, APFH has focused on sending packages to *chayalim bodedim*, lone soldiers with no immediate family in Israel. These brave men and women have left their homes and families from countries all around the world to join the Israeli army. APFH sends packages to their units and reminds these soldiers that while their families may be far away, they are never alone while they are in Israel. This message is reinforced with my grandmother's open invitation to lone soldiers for Shabbat meals in her home. Every Shabbat brings different soldiers to her door, some still in uniform, some with flowers in their hands, and some so thankful for a home cooked meal and good company that they stay long after the dishes have been cleared.

Since starting APFH, my grandmother has met thousands of soldiers and in an effort to ensure that she sends them packages that they enjoy and that are useful, she will ask them about what type of candy they like best, if they prefer chips or sunflower seeds or both, and which toiletries are easiest to use in the field. And yes, she will look at a soldier across her Shabbat table, a young man she has never met, and without an ounce of shame ask whether he prefers boxers or briefs. I have had the honor of participating in many of these meals, and I've met some amazing heroes. But each time I sit at my grandmother's Shabbat table, I am struck by the fact that she is as heroic as any of the soldiers to whom she has devoted her life.

The Shabbat Queen brings many gifts. For some, it is a hot meal at a checkpoint. For others it is an unexpected package at the end of a 50-kilometer hike in full gear. For some granddaughters, it is the realization that one person can indeed change the world. And for one amazing woman, the Shabbat Queen brings the peace of

mind that each package sent to the protectors of Israel is perfect, down to the very last pair of underwear.