

Israel

SOUL OF A PIONEER:



Chevron through the Eyes of a Settler

By Sara Bedein

Photo: Jack Hazut-Israelimage





Rabbi Shlomo Ra'anan, zt"l

August 20, 1998: Screams of terror and pain pierced the silent Chevron night. The screams were coming from the bedroom where Rabbi Shlomo Ra'anan was preparing to retire for the night. Chaya, who was in the dining room, barely recognized the sound of her husband's voice. Seconds later, the 66-year-old rabbi, covered in blood, staggered out of the bedroom, while the terrorist, who held a long and bloody butcher knife in his hand, tried to drag the rabbi back into the bedroom. Stunned, Chaya screamed while she tried to pull her husband out of the terrorist's grasp. A tug-of-war ensued until finally the terrorist let go, but not before hurling the butcher knife at the rabbi and setting the trailer on fire. It was too late to save her husband. From the gaping wound in her husband's main artery, Chaya knew that his condition was fatal. Seeing the flames around her, she threw open the door and shouted, "Fire! Fire!" alerting the six other families living in the neighboring trailers.

The night after her husband's funeral, Chaya Ra'anan couldn't sleep, tormented by the demons in the trailer. "I couldn't bear the thought of going back to sleep in the bedroom where my beloved husband was murdered." Again and again, the words Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu said at the funeral came back to her—"the need to erect a yeshivah on Shlomo's grave." Following that sleepless night, Ra'anan knew what she was going to do. The first day of *shivah*, she gathered the heads of the Chevron *yishuv* together and told them of her decision to build a *kollel* in the bedroom where her husband was murdered. In less than a month, the room was renovated, *sefarim* were donated and Ohr Shlomo became a reality. Led by Ra'anan's son-in-law, Rabbi Yisrael Schlissel, the *kollel* prepares young men

for the rabbinate. Ra'anan's son, Michael, is among the members of this unique yeshivah.

"My revenge, in a sense, is in opening this *kollel*," says Ra'anan. "This whole house *is* my husband....I wanted it to continue breathing and living Torah just as if my husband were still alive. The terrorist sought to bring darkness; this yeshivah has brought forth light."

"We felt like we were moving to Gan Eden....My husband was so happy here—he became 20 years younger."

When the Ra'anans first moved to Chevron in 1992, they didn't think of the danger. Rav Shlomo, who was the only grandson of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, the first rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, was imbued with his grandfather's teach-

ings as well as his emphasis on the *mitzvah* of *yishuv Ha'aretz*—settling the land of Israel. "We felt like we were moving to Gan Eden," recalled Ra'anan. "My husband was so happy here—he became 20 years younger."

A gentle and modest man, Rabbi Shlomo was loved and admired by all who came in contact with him. "He would greet everyone he saw on the street with a smile and a *shalom*," said Ra'anan. "Even the Arabs here respected him. The Arab children used to run after him saying '*shalom, shalom*.'" Though he was a great *talmid chacham*, he would relate to even the smallest child as an equal.

The Ra'anans settled in Tel Rumeida, a Jewish neighborhood in the heart of Chevron, where they were one of only seven families living in the area. (Permission to expand the neighborhood beyond the initial seven trailers has been consistently denied by the Israeli government.) Bought by Chevron's Jewish community over 180 years ago, Tel Rumeida is also called "the Lands of Yishai" after King David's father who lived there with his

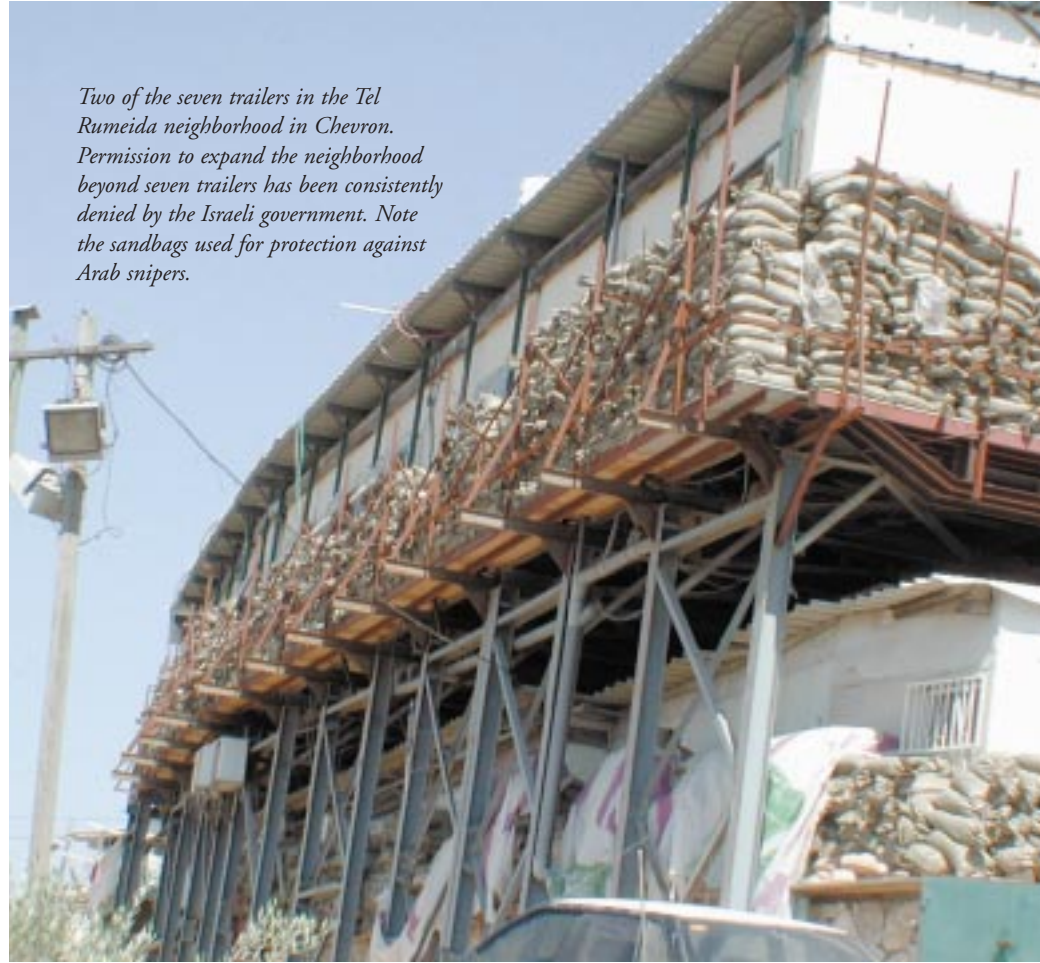
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family. “When we first moved here, we were euphoric that we were living in the place where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob dwelled as well as King David. The graves of Yishai and his grandmother Ruth are right above our trailer, which my husband fondly called ‘our palace,’” said Ra’anana. “There have been archeological excavations here which prove that this is the exact location where the Biblical Chevron was. King David ruled right here for his first seven years of monarchy. We see in this a message—the ruling over Israel begins in Chevron!”

For 20 years prior to moving to Chevron, the Ra’anans lived in the Kiryat Moshe neighborhood in Jerusalem, adjacent to the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva. This was especially convenient as Rav Shlomo spent most of his life within the walls of the yeshiva studying Torah. Indeed, Rav Shlomo was such a pious person, his wife recalled that “I saw my husband for the first time at the matchmaker’s house where a meeting had been set up between us. Though it wasn’t the Sabbath when we met, I felt like it was. Shlomo was a person of the Sabbath. His whole being was of sanctity and purity; he totally immersed himself in the learning of the Torah and the worship of God.”

Rav Shlomo was brought up in the same modest apartment off Jerusalem’s Rechov Jaffo where Rav Kook had actually lived. Rav Shlomo’s mother—who was the only child of Rav Kook to have her own children—inherited the quarters and brought up her family there. “Although at the time of our marriage, it had been 27 years since Rav Kook, *zt”l*, had passed away,” recalled Ra’anana, “his spirit was very much alive in my in-laws’ house. The rabbi’s chair was at the head of the dining room table with a special rug beneath it. Nobody ever sat in it.” Since the yeshiva, which Rav Shlomo’s father headed, was part of the same complex as the apartment at that time, the yeshiva boys felt very much at home in the Ra’anana home. “It was

Two of the seven trailers in the Tel Rumeida neighborhood in Chevron. Permission to expand the neighborhood beyond seven trailers has been consistently denied by the Israeli government. Note the sandbags used for protection against Arab snipers.



an ‘open house’—people were always coming and going. They would help themselves to refreshments in the kitchen....The door to the refrigerator was always broken as so many people were always opening and closing it. The yeshiva boys would walk into the kitchen and help themselves to drinks and a bite to eat. The kitchen was lovingly called ‘Cafe Ra’anana.’”

When people ask Ra’anana what brought her and her husband to Chevron—a place surrounded by hostile Arabs with only 50 Jewish families living in their midst—she tells them the story of her great Uncle Zalman.

In the 19th century, Ra’anana’s father’s family immigrated to Israel from Poland. One of her father’s brothers, Rabbi Zalman Baharan, was one of the founders of the Meah Shearim neighborhood in Jerusalem. At that time, the Jews lived within the walls of Jerusalem’s Old City where there was overcrowding and the sanitation conditions were very poor. At

7:00 PM every night, the gates to the walls would be locked and reopened again in the morning. After the curfew, any Jew outside of the walls was at risk of getting mugged or murdered.

“Rabbi Zalman is my guiding light,” says Ra’anana. “He decided to move with his family and a small number of other families outside of the walls. The only other Jewish neighborhood outside of the walls at the time was Mishkenot Sha’ananim.”

The neighborhood, which was established in 1874, was called Meah Shearim, “one hundred gates,” in the hope that it would be one of a hundred new neighborhoods in Jerusalem. “People warned my uncle against such a move, and told him that he was endangering lives. In those days, there was obviously no Jewish state, Jewish policemen or Jewish army. Yet my great uncle took that first step at considerable risk, and his vision was fulfilled as we see today many Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem.

“Moving to Chevron, I had the same vision that, despite the danger, we will

have merited to be one of the first of many Jewish neighborhoods in Chevron.”

Ra’anan has another deep connection to Chevron: her mother’s sister, Leah and Leah’s husband were part of a group of young scholars who moved to Chevron in 1927 to establish the Slobodka Yeshiva. When Ra’anan’s mother was a young girl, she and a younger sister went to visit their sister Leah who had recently moved to Chevron. Tragically, the weekend they chose to visit was the weekend of the 1929 massacre, which claimed the lives of 67 innocent men, women and children. That particular Friday, Leah’s husband happened to be delayed in Jerusalem and was not able to make it back to Chevron in time for Shabbat. Already at the onset of Shabbat, word had gotten out that the Arabs were plotting against the Jewish community. The Jewish owner of Chevron’s only bank, which was frequented by Jews and Arabs alike, lived across the street from Ra’anan’s aunt. Well respected by the Arabs in the area, the banker, who was the son of the chief rabbi of Chevron, Rabbi Yaacov Slonim, offered to hide Ra’anan’s relatives at his house, as he was sure that the Arabs wouldn’t harm him or anyone else in his house. Leah declined the offer fearing that her infant would get sick from staying in a house with so many people.

“This decision is what actually saved the lives of my mother and my aunts,” said Ra’anan. Ra’anan’s relatives went to hide at the home of Rabbi Slonim. “One of my aunts, who was 7 years old at the time, was peering out the window, and saw the bodies of the butchered being tossed outside the banker’s house like broken rag dolls.”

The banker was slaughtered along with almost all of his relatives and the rest of the people who were hiding at his house. The death toll from that house alone was 18.

While hiding at Rabbi Slonim’s house, Ra’anan’s aunts helped the rabbi move a huge closet against the door. Outside the door, the Arab land-

lord blocked the entrance to the house with his body. He sustained injuries as a result but succeeded in preventing anyone from gaining entrance into the house. (He risked his life to save the Jews because not long before the massacres, his son was gravely ill and a Jewish doctor nursed him back to health.)

The 1929 Chevron Massacre brought to a close thousands of years of consecutive Jewish habitation in the City of our Fathers. The wounded and the dead were moved to Jerusalem and Jews were unable to set foot in Chevron until the liberation of the city in 1967.

Even after the murder of her husband, Ra’anan is grateful to be able to live in Chevron and derives much comfort from the newly established *kollel*. Keeping alive the Ra’anan tradition, once again, there is a “Café Ra’anan” where yeshivah boys walk into the kitchen, helping themselves to drinks and a bite to eat. 