

How Hamas Brought Jews Back to Judaism

BY MENACHEM A. YITZCHAK

The massacre helped many in Israel understand that there is no escaping their Judaism, and they might as well embrace it.





There is a silver lining to the very dark cloud that is Oct. 7. The Hamas massacre united a bitterly divided country, shook the defense establishment out of its near-fatal “conception” about the nature of the enemy, and sparked a spiritual awakening that has Jews wanting to connect to their roots and their people.

A poll conducted by Lazar Research for *The Jerusalem Post* four months after Simchas Torah showed that an astounding 33% of the country said their faith had deepened since the massacre. The fact that Hamas was targeting Jews because they were Jews made them want to take a deeper look at what it means to be a Jew.

A Hebrew-speaking social media group called “Seculars who keep Shabbat” now boasts 10,000 members and hosts nonstop discussions on religion and Shabbos.

“On Oct. 7, we were given numerous signs that we had neglected our Judaism and our very essence – signs as unmistakable as an elephant,” reads one post. “Sadly, not everyone grasped or internalized these messages. Nonetheless, a significant number are now taking a moment for introspection.”

And that introspection has led many, especially soldiers, to gradually take on *mitzvos* – not all of them, not at first anyway, but those that speak to them.

Take *tzitzis*, for example. In the first weeks of the war, the Military Rabbinate was overwhelmed by 60,000 requests for *tzitzis* from soldiers. It issued an SOS to communities around the country, which rounded up volunteers to make them.

Rabbi Kuti Meyudovnik, whose organization V'heshiv Lev – Chabad Tefen, has distributed



23,000 pairs of *tzitzis*, explains the lure of that particular *mitzvah*. “The soldier feels that when he wears *tzitzis* he is showing everyone that he is a Jew,” he says. “He also feels that the *tzitzis* offer him protection.”

In general, he says, soldiers understand that “when all is said and done, there is only *Avinu Shebashamayim*. They understand that the massacre and the war was over just one thing, being Jewish, and they want their Judaism to be expressed in a connection with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.”

Another *mitzvah* that has attracted a following among soldiers and others is *tefillin*.

“Since the outbreak of the war in Gaza, I’ve been inundated with calls from people who want to wear *tefillin*,” says Rabbi Amichai Eyal (Hirsch), who runs Keshet shel Tefillin-Ohr Chadash, and has distributed close to 500 pairs of *tefillin*.

Rabbi Eyal, 48, who has been involved in outreach since his days as an *avreich*, is a bit of a *shadchan*, matching up people who have a spare pair of *tefillin* with those who are in need of them. However, with the surge in interest in the *mitzvah* post-Oct. 7, he was having difficulty keeping up with demand.

“I advertised, mainly in *chareidi* publications, asking anyone with *tefillin* they were no longer using, or perhaps that had belonged to a *niftar*, and the response was overwhelming,” he says. “People were happy to see them put to use. Instead of sitting in the closet, they’re now being used by a Jew who will put them on and recite *Krias Shema* daily.”

Before delivering the *tefillin* to their new owners, he has them checked by leading *sofrim* in Yerushalayim and refurbished. He also adds new straps. “They look brand-new,” he says. “It’s very important that a person who is beginning to get closer to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* receives something beautiful.”

“This morning I spoke to someone who isn’t religious about why *tefillin* are so important to him. He said, ‘I feel like these *tefillin* connect me to *Am Yisrael*, my people, and to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.’ He’s 20 and a soldier, and I’ll be going to his home tomorrow in Ramat Gan to deliver his pair.”

Rabbi Eyal echoes the notion that the massacre – being aimed at Jews solely because they are Jews – awakened the *pintele Yid* in many Israelis. “People say to me, ‘I want my children to see their father putting on *tefillin* in the morning.’ It’s a

bit strange to see men with tattoos and piercings donning *tefillin*, but it's actually incredibly moving for me," he says.

Rabbi Eyal gets on average 10 calls a day asking for *tefillin*. One of the first things he does is ascertain that the person is truly committed to wearing them regularly. He's not coming from a judgmental place, but trying to ensure that the will of the donor of the *tefillin* is honored, and the cost of the inspection and refurbishment is justified.

A few months ago, he received a call from Omer, a combat medic in an elite IDF unit, asking for *tefillin*.

In the course of the conversation, he heard the dramatic story of how Omer, who'd grown up in a completely secular home, had decided to take on the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*.

"We were on operational duty in Gaza, and Daniel, one of our soldiers, took a bullet to the neck," Omer related. "He was in critical condition and I worked on him for 45 minutes. Another soldier in the unit, who like me is completely secular, took out his cellphone and began reciting *Tehillim* out loud. Daniel, a religious soldier, was fading quickly and I screamed out at him to hold on, that a helicopter was on the way. I promised that if he stayed with us, I would put on *tefillin*."

Miraculously, Daniel recovered, and Omer kept his promise. Not only that, but he and his young wife have committed to running a traditional home.

Rabbi Eyal, who has *haskamos* from Harav Asher Weiss and Harav Yitzchak Zilberstein, stresses that he doesn't pursue people to convince them to take on *tefillin*; rather, they turn to him. He also doesn't buy the hype about religious-secular tensions and secular paranoia regarding *hadatah*, religious coercion.

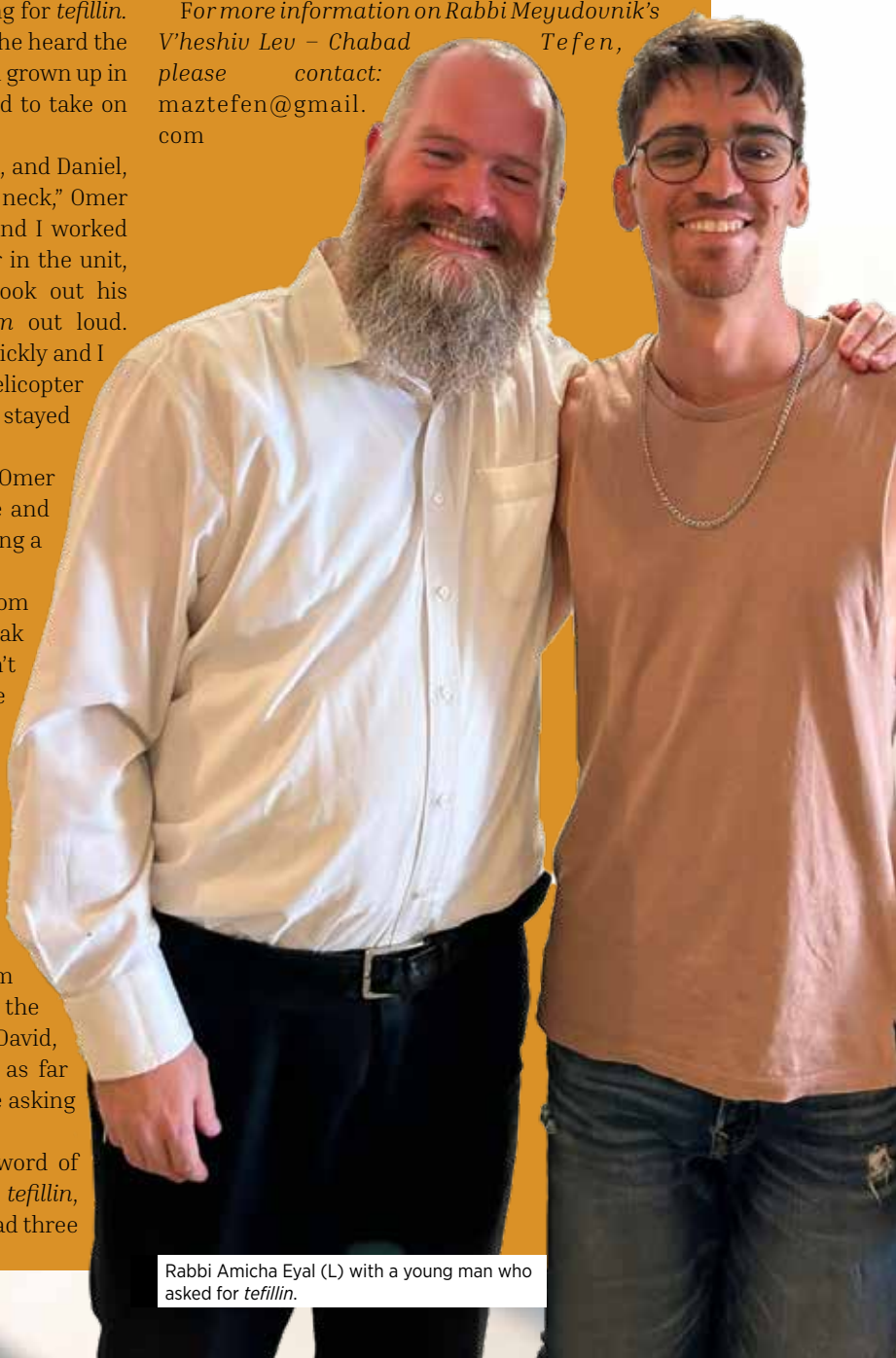
"It's a lot of noise from outside sources like the media, but it doesn't reflect what's really going on," he says. "I have people on *kibbutzim* from Hashomer Hatzair turning to me, from the Jordan Valley, Beit Alfa, Cheftziba, Nir David, Ga'ash, Givat Brenner. People who are as far from *Yiddishkeit* as you can imagine are asking to put on *tefillin*."

"In many cases, I get 'business' by word of mouth. One person starts putting on *tefillin*, and then I get a call from another. I've had three

individuals reach out to me who are descendants of prominent *Roshei Yeshivah* from previous generations. *Baruch Hashem*, I've had the merit to bring back children of such *Gedolim*. But on second thought, every Jew is a descendant of the greatest *Gedolim*, of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and it's a very great *zechus* to help bring them back." ■

For more information on Rabbi Eyal's *Kesher shel Tefillin-Ohr Chadash*, please check: tefflin.or-hadash.org.il

For more information on Rabbi Meyudovnik's *V'heshiv Lev – Chabad Tefen*, please contact: maztefen@gmail.com



Rabbi Amicha Eyal (L) with a young man who asked for *tefillin*.

