

# Making The Worst Of Times A Bit Better

by Sarah Spielman

It started as a group of five-six individuals, belonging to organizations such as Hatzolah and Bikkur Cholim, who had a knack for being at the right place at the right time. For some reason, they were always the ones called “to do the legal legwork after the crib death,” “to arrange the burial of this homeless man,” and “to make a quick clean-up and gather the body parts after the car accident.” Dedicated and unassuming, these noble-spirited individuals were committed to helping Jews, regardless if this chore was listed as one of their organization’s official services.

**I**n January 2004, after two decades of working behind the scenes, the men convened and decided to establish an official organization. They called it Misaskim [“those who do”], because they are “osek” - occupied, in tzarchei tzibur - “the needs of the community”. Why an official organization? Rabbi Yanky Meyer, Director of Misaskim, explained, “Firstly, we wanted it to be easier for people to find us. They don’t have to rely on the grapevine to locate us. Secondly, we wanted to be more organized, so that we can do more for Klal Yisroel.” Two selfless motives; one golden organization.

As the years passed, these extraordinary ba’alei chesed have asked themselves time and again, “How else can we help Klal Yisroel?” And so, since Misaskim’s inception, they have initiated innovative projects, which have revolutionized the concept of chesed again and again. Today, their comprehensive services are divided into five umbrella



categories; kavod hames, chevra kadi-sha, mes mitzvah, disaster/accident recovery and gemach nichumim.

These projects evolved from sharing others’ pain with open eyes and an open heart. “Anyone could have really thought of these ideas,” Rabbi Meyer says modestly. “It does not even require so much creativity or organization, but rather a genuine desire to help those people suffering out there. Take for example Misaskim’s famous Gemach Nichumim, [chesed for mourners] the famed ‘Shiva Chair Gemach.’ Everyone knows how painful it is to sit shiva. So,

we brainstormed and came up with a long list of items which would make the shiva week so much more comforting and comfortable. We started small; 200 folding chairs, 30 low shiva chairs, 6 water coolers and several fans. We had one truck, servicing Boro Park and Flatbush, NY. Within weeks, we expanded to include Williamsburg. Today, we have 2,500 folding chairs, 300 plastic shiva chairs, 100 comfortable shiva chairs, 65 water coolers, 50 aronei kodesh, dozens of air conditioners, fans, phones, faxes, tape recorders and more. We rent five warehouses



to store our equipment and have nine trucks to transport the equipment to practically every community in the NY/ NJ tri-state area. In the average week, Misaskim makes an average of seventy pick-ups and deliveries to thirty-five shiva homes."

And so it was with each of the Misaskim initiatives. Misaskim heard the clarion call...and responded. To ease the stress and difficulties of organizing funerals, they purchased light genera-

tors, sound systems and trucks for all burial societies to use. To provide emotional support for grieving families, they teamed up with Chai Lifeline and trained a crisis intervention team. To inform the public about shiva locations and visiting hours, they posted the Shiva Bulletin online and in newspapers.

Rabbi Meyer said, "This is the fundament of chesed. Stop, look and listen. You don't have to be an official 'Misaskim volunteer' to make a difference to a

suffering individual. You can join Misaskim's 'chessed revolution' by thinking of how you can help the needy people in your life.

"Some things you can do which I learned from my experience with my Misaskim families: Before going to be menachem avel (comfort mourners), why not find out if it's a convenient time for you to visit? All too often, we come to families after 11 pm on the first day of shiva, and the family members

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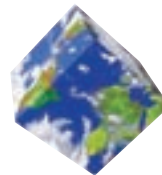
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are exhausted both emotionally and physically, but they're busy entertaining well-meaning visitors. Give those people some space. They're human! They need their privacy and their unwinding time – especially on that first traumatic day! When you are sending supper to a needy family, why not spend a moment finding out their taste preferences? We once had an instance when we've discovered a fridge stocked with a week's worth of suppers of meatballs and spaghetti – and those people happened to have been allergic to meatballs! What about offering to do your friend a favor after she finishes sitting shiva and everyone has already forgotten about her? That's what we try to accomplish with the Yesomim Chol Hamoed Trip! Life after the death of a loved one death is painful. Think of how you can alleviate the pain. These ideas may seem to be trivial. But that's truly what chesed is all about. Think-

ing of the details which may be insignificant to you, but are important to the recipient and doing them right. As one Misaskim beneficiary commented, 'You even took my laundry to the laundromat to prepare my house for shiva. How can I thank you for thinking of everything?!'

"And one more tip: You don't have to start big. People have great ideas, but they think that it's impossible for them to do it. I am overwhelmed how a small chesed initiative mushroomed into a national organization. When we started out, no one knew about Misaskim. Today, we've made breakthroughs in Washington DC, made improvements at La Guardia, Kennedy and Newark Airports; we've teamed up with local and Federal agencies and become a primary go-to contact in emergency situations. Still, making it big was never our goal. We only wanted to help people. And the better we

can do it, the happier we are!"

For hundreds of people, Misaskim makes the worst of times a little bit better. It's not only what they do; it's how they do it. They truly feel for you, care about you and want to help you. And that's what chesed is all about.

A recent aveil related her experience with Misaskim: "They came in and brought everything - chairs for us and chairs for visitors, a water cooler, since it was so hot and siddurim for minyonim. They even covered the mirrors. All without any fuss, justly quickly and smoothly. They're amazing!" ▲

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