

By E. Stern

Angels

By Any Other Name



Misaskim. You see the symbol on the *shiva* chairs, water coolers and *aron kodesh* in the *bais avel*, and you think about the kindness and compassion pulsating behind this organization. You hear about how their volunteers take charge at accident sites and disasters, and you are amazed at the level of professionalism and expertise of the members of the organization. You read about their contributions to *Klal Yisroel*, how they assume responsibility for the community's *mesei mitzvah*, how they meet with government officials to educate them regarding our community's unique needs, how they work 'round the clock and 'round the world to help any *yid* and every *yid*, and you feel privileged to be part of a nation that boasts of such a special organization.

Yes, in the past five years, since Misaskim's inception we've become so accustomed to seeing the blue-and-yellow logo on trucks and chairs and *shiva* bulletins that we are hard-pressed to

remember a time without Misaskim. Perhaps you are wondering how *Klal Yisroel* managed all these years without this organization. Who did all this work before Misaskim came around?

Interestingly enough, the answer is: the Misaskim members!

"We were a group of 5-6 individuals, belonging to several different organizations such as Hatzalah and Boro Park Bikur Cholim, doing all of this unofficially for the past two decades," says Mr. Yanky Meyer, Misaskim volunteer. Today, everyone knows about the five categories of Misaskim services; *kavod hames*, *chevra kadisha*, *mes mitzvah*, disaster/accident recovery and *gemach nichumim*. These services evolved after years of being called "just to do the legal legwork after a crib death" and "to arrange the burial of this homeless man" and "to make a quick clean-up and gather the body parts after the car accident."

1985-2005

1985-2005: Angels Without an Official Title “I remember my first introduction to it all,” Yanky reminisces. “It was December 1985. I went on a Hatzalah call to the home of an elderly man who had water in his lungs. At 12:00 am, a few hours after I drove him to the hospital, I got a call from the hospital, informing me that the man died and they were trying to contact his next of kin. After calling some neighbors, I realized that he had no family to depend on and no friends who knew about his death; this *chessed* was exclusively mine. It was my first encounter with a *mes mitzvah*. However, I had no idea what to do with this awesome *mitzvah* that fell into my lap, so to speak. I called up a fellow Hatzalah member. Together, we did some detective work and found out that this man *davened* in Novominsk. So, we contacted the Novominsker Rebbe, *shlita*, who told us that he indeed was a *mispallel* in the Novominsk *Bais Medrash* and is a *mes mitzvah*. Together, we took care of the arrangements. I thought that the story was over.”

But, it wasn't. Ever since that initial encounter with *niftarim*, Yanky and his *chevra* began to be contacted with dozens of strange-and sometimes even ordinary-death cases, so that they could ‘work things out.’

There was the story with a *mes mitzvah*, named Richie Miller, who had died in 1987 at a local hospital and was suspected of being Jewish. “All we had was half of his social,” recalls a Misaskim volunteer. “We ran down to the police station. The detectives pieced together the rest of his social security ID and discovered an old driver's license on file. The address on the license directed us to a neighborhood that most of us would never visit in broad daylight. But, we were undeterred and raced over-only to discover that Mr. Miller had moved several times since. After extensive investigations, we found out that he was a panhandler in one of New York's busiest train stations; had a run-in with the law numerous times-but still, no one knew if he was Jewish. The more we found out about this man's absurd life, the more intriguing the story became. Yet, we were single-minded on this mission; we had to know whether to give him *kevuras yisroel* or not. Finally, after

following his paper trail, we tracked him down to Maryland, where a *mohel* had a registry with the names of the boys he had circumcised, and yes, Richie Miller was listed. So were his parents. He was one-hundred percent Jewish!” Of course, they arranged *kevuras yisroel* for him.

And then there was the dramatic introduction to disaster recovery, after the catastrophic explosion in the 18th Ave. Plumbing Store in Boro Park in July 1987. The scene was a mess; numerous fatalities, many wounded, police officers, Hatzalah members and law enforcement officials milling around. “The medical examiner, who knew us from previous joint projects, led me to the temporary morgue and said, ‘Clean these up for me, so I can do an ID on them. I know your community is particular with how these things are handled.’ That was when I received my first hands-on experience with the Jewish accident recovery process-how we gather all bodily remains, clean-up the bodies and safeguard the *kavod hames* throughout a mass casualty incident.”

There was also the memorable episode involving *kavod hames* in December 1996, when a man died on a ship on Wednesday, day three of a seven-day cruise. The ‘Misaskim *chevra*’ was called to see how they could retrieve the body for burial as soon as possible. “We called the cruise company for assistance and information. They hung up the phone abruptly. At the time, we had a contact in a news station. We asked her to send a news truck to the cruise company's office. The reporters set up their big antennas and camera equipment and proceeded to the company's office and asked for the company's comments about their policy with regard to religious sensitivity... Within seconds, we received a phone call from the CEO, ready to do anything on our behalf... They offered to schedule a special stop mid-journey; the ship would dock in Jamaica that afternoon. We contacted the Jamaican government officials and received special permission to take the body off the ship. However, when we found out that the law in Jamaica would call for an autopsy, we nixed that option. We then tracked down a pilot who agreed to meet the ship mid-sea and transport the body via helicopter. However, there were still health



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department issues to contend with because the body would have to be embalmed before it could be sent to the States and there was no way to get around it. So after all the strings were pulled, the *gedolim* in Eretz Yisroel *paskened* that the body should remain on the ship until Sunday night, when it would dock in Florida. “

Yes, this special group of Misaskim angels spread their wings far and near during those pre-Misaskim days.

When a young *ba'alas teshuva* was found dead in her Brooklyn apartment, in December 89, they were contacted to inform her parents, who lived in Texas, about her death. So, they recruited the law enforcement agencies in Texas to do the notification and then spoke to the parents, cueing them in on the rituals of *kevuras yisroel* and went on to arrange the entire burial—from picking the parents up from La Guardia airport to ordering a *matzeiva!*

When the *frum* community experienced eight crib deaths one after another in 1996, they were the ones who smoothed the creases between the bereaved families and law enforcement agencies, ensuring that no autopsies were done and the *kavod hames* was upheld.

When an autopsy was called for a person who had passed away suddenly while vacationing in Tratola, one of the British Virgin Islands, in January 98, they managed to hunt down the pathologist scheduled to do the autopsy, discovered he was a co-partner of a business in the States, explained to the partner the religious sensitivities to autopsies and have the partner convince him not to do the autopsy.

When Eli Wald *hy”d* was brutally murdered in December 87, Tiby Feldman *hy”d* was shot in 92, and TWA Flight 800 crashed over the Long Island Sound in July 96, they were called to the scene to provide professional support and assistance in dealing with the *niftarim*. This was at a time when it was rare to find someone who knew how to deal with a body *al pi halacha* and according to the law of the land.

As the years passed on and their contacts grew, they found themselves becoming more informed about the

legal maze and more connected with the authorities and agencies, thereby helping families deal with death and acting as a liaison between the law enforcement agencies and the Jewish community.

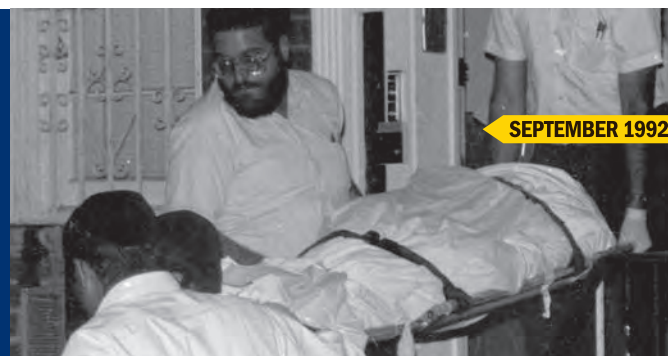
2004: Misaskim: Revolutionizing Chessed After two decades of working behind the scenes, in January 2004, these men gathered together and decided to make it official. They called their organization Misaskim, because they are *osek* in *tzarchei tzibur*. Why an official organization? A Misaskim volunteer explained, “Firstly, now people know where to find us. They don’t have to rely on the grapevine to locate us. Secondly, because we are more organized, we can do more for *Klal Yisroel*.” Since Misaskim began, these extraordinary *ba’alei chessed* have asked themselves time and again, “How else can we help *Klal Yisroel*?” And so, since Misaskim’s inception, every year marks the initiation of another Misaskim project which has revolutionized the concept of *chedsed* again and again.

Most notably, they began the *Gemach Nichumim*, the “*shiva* chairs *gemach*” which has made Misaskim so famous. “We were thinking how we can make the week of *shiva* a little more comforting, a little more

Center for Community Resources: Parent Organization, Same Motivation

When you think of the Center for Community Resources, you may associate the organization that coordinates the annual *Tehillim Asifa*, in which over fifty thousand *tinokos shel bais raban* gather in the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva* at over 150 sites spanning over five continents and join a hook-up to *daven* for the *cholim* of *Klal Yisroel*. **Or you may** link the Center for Community Resources to the Summer Safety Guide, an informative resource for the *frum* vacationer, reminding the reader about integral safety rules, steps to take during an emergency, travel tips and more. **Or you may** connect the organization with the *Birchas Hailanos* Directory, a listing of hundreds of fruit tree locations throughout the US distributed in the month of *Nissan*, free of charge. **Or you may** connect the organization to the people who did live hook-ups by *chasunas* for sick relatives who couldn’t make it to the event.

Perhaps you do not connect this wonderful organization with Misaskim. Yet the very same *ba’alei chessed* who initiated the Center for Community Resources in an effort to help *Klal Yisroel* began a project called Misaskim to help *yidden* worldwide. With time, as more and more projects spiraled under this sub-organization, Misaskim outgrew its parent organization and became an entity of its own.



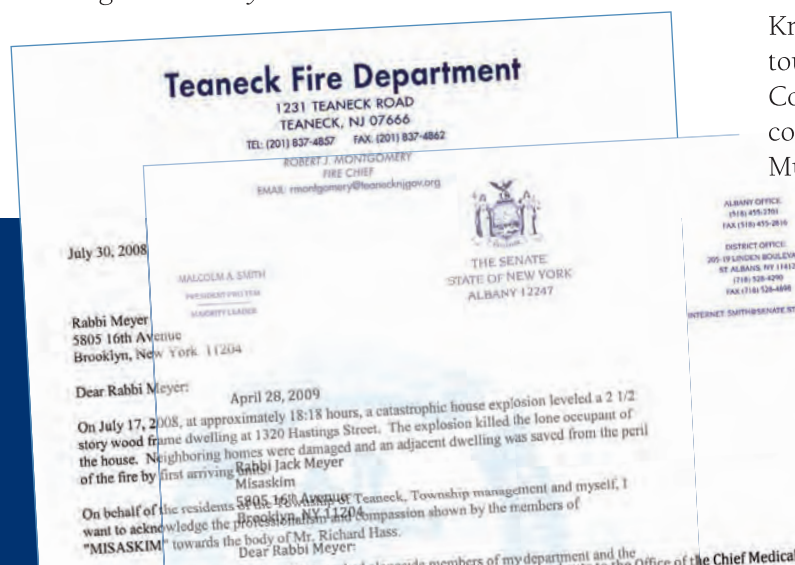
comfortable,” says Yanky. “We began with 200 folding chairs, 30 low *shiva* chairs, 6 water coolers and several fans. We had one truck, servicing Boro Park and Flatbush. Within weeks, we expanded to include Williamsburg. Today, we have 2,500 folding chairs, 300 plastic *shiva* chairs, 100 comfortable *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 tri-state area. In the average week, Misaskim makes an average of seventy pick-ups and deliveries to thirty-five *shiva* homes. This past May, after the week of *Shavuos*, after deliveries to over three hundred *aveilim* sitting *shiva* in more than forty locations, our warehouses ran dry. Ever since, we have increased our inventory to ensure that we are equipped to service even more people...” In five short years, the *shiva* house has become synonymous with the blue and yellow stickered chairs that speak volumes about Misaskim’s compassion. As one five-year-old girl who lost her Mommy phrased it: “There’s a very nice company that cares a lot about people like us. They gave us the coat racks, the chairs and even the water cooler. See the stickers?!”

2005: The Step-Up of Organization with Sophistication When the organization began, the Misaskim team discarded all of their amateur equipment and outfitted the volunteers with equipment so sophisticated that even the city relies on Misaskim equipment today. There were certain instances in which law enforcements didn’t begin investigations until Misaskim brought their equipment to the scene. They also purchased their own *levaya* equipment-sound systems, light generators, trucks-so that they would no longer have to run around from *gemach* to rental service to organize a *levaya*.

2006: Emotional Support System Comforts Mourners In conjunction with Chai Lifeline, Misaskim added a crisis intervention team to its services, providing emotional support for the grieving families receiving Misaskim’s assistance. Now, besides for delivering *shiva* chairs, helping families receive death certificates and expediting *levayos*, Misaskim gives the bereaved individuals *chizuk* and wherewithal to withstand their trying ordeal.

2007: The Shiva Bulletin: Service for the Public and the Mourners As Misaskim became a central source of support for bereaved families, they took the notion of providing support for families one notch higher when they introduced the *shiva* bulletin. One of the most therapeutic aspects of the *shiva* week is the many visitors who come to comfort and connect, hear, share and care. Of course, in order to make the visits, the *tzibbur* must know who is sitting *shiva*. As an aside, sometimes these very visits are made at inconvenient times and are extremely taxing for the *aveilim*. The *shiva* listing is a newspaper bulletin informing the public about the *shiva* locations and visiting hours, so that everyone can perform the *mitzvah* of *nichum aveilim* in a most *mehudar* manner.

2007: The EOC: Connections During Crisis With the inauguration of Misaskim’s state-of-art EOC, Emergency Operations Center, Misaskim has found another way to provide vital support to *Klal Yisroel* during times of catastrophe. This sophisticated control center is equipped with the most advanced communication systems, including international news wire feeds, data systems, land line, wireless and satellite phones. In the event of a community-related emergency, the EOC is a conference center for community organizations and city agencies. In fact, during the recent Mumbai Massacre, the EOC was set in motion for the Kruman and Teitelbaum families and kept in constant touch with the State Department, the FBI and the Chabad Command Center in Crown Heights. Through communicating with ZAKA volunteers and contacts in Mumbai, the EOC confirmed for the Teitelbaum,



Kruman and Rabinovitch families that their relatives were amongst the *kedoshim, hy"d*. Indeed, the EOC is one of Misaskim's most well-kept secrets, which has helped *Klal Yisroel* time and again in situations of crisis.



2008: Yesomim Chol Hamoed Event Gladdens Orphans One of Misaskim's members had a brainstorm. He said, "We help individuals deal with disaster recovery, assist with their bureaucratic affairs, provide *chevra kaddisha* services, offer crisis intervention support and give them the *nichum aveilim gemach* equipment. But what do we do when the week of *shiva* is over? Working one-on-one with so many families experiencing tragedy has brought us face-to-face with the heartache and void

A Summer of Kindness Amidst Crisis

This past summer was challenging for *Klal Yisroel* and particularly challenging for Misaskim. As *Klal Yisroel's* crisis support system, Misaskim was called upon time and again to provide their vital services in times of tragedy and crisis. When the fastest way to transport a body from South Carolina to *kevrurah* in New York was through driving 950 miles overnight, two Misaskim volunteers did just that. After a tragic accident in the Catskills, Misaskim transported family members from camps, airports and vacation locations, so that they can attend the *levaya*. During the helicopter accident in the Hudson, Misaskim was on site to deal with the disaster recovery and Jewish bodies. Indeed, Misaskim is an icon for kindness and compassion during crisis and tragedy, supporting *Klal Yisroel*, one crisis at a time.

echoing after every *petirah*. Why not infuse some joy into the lives of these *yesomim*?" And so, the Misaskim *Yesomim Chol Hamoed* Event was organized. An exclusive program, designed to give *yesomim* a spectacular *chol hamoed* experience, injected an extra measure of joy in the *yom tov* of these orphans who experience so much sorrow year-round. From a most extravaganza *simchas bais hashoeva* featuring *gedolim* and popular singers to trips to one-of-the-kind places, this trip has been the highlight of hundreds of *yesomim's chol hamoed*.

2009: Misaskim Meets with Washington

Tuesday, June 16, 2009, was a historical day for Misaskim-and *Klal Yisroel*. It was remarkable because Misaskim was invited to Washington as a spokesman for the Jewish community to better understand the Jewish perspective and needs regarding *kavod hames*. It was even more remarkable that so many diverse national and international organizations joined together in unity for this conference. It was most remarkable that the day was a tremendous *Kiddush Hashem*, as officials expressed admiration with Misaskim's professionalism and its unique ability to harmonize *Torah* law with government requirements. At the end of this conference, government officials were enthusiastic to the ideas presented and promised to work along with Misaskim to safeguard our sacred traditions. Indeed, this conference carries new promises for Misaskim-and *Klal Yisroel*.

A Peak at the Future: Misaskim's Website Info Resource In Misaskim's office, the question that reverberates again and again is "how else can we help *Klal Yisroel*." One of the projects on the horizon is Misaskim's website, currently under construction. No one is ever prepared to deal with a tragedy. So this site will be a resource of information at every person's fingertips, walking the individual through the grieving process with information from chapels to *shiva* bulletins to *matzeivos*. This will be a one-stop shop for anyone experiencing crisis or tragedy.

Misaskim of the present, Misaskim of the past and Misaskim of the future are three different entities. Misaskim of the past is the story of a group of dedicated *ba'alei chassadim* who selflessly volunteered time and again to do a difficult *chessed* without any recognition or accolades. Misaskim of the present is the heroic tale of a team which has expanded to devote itself to *Klal Yisroel*, constantly upgrading its programs and broadening its services to do more and be more. Misaskim of the future, *b'ezeras Hashem*, brings promises of more kindness and more goodness, more *chessed* performed with the same altruism and devotion of Misaskim of the past and the same quest for continued growth of Misaskim of the present.

For more information or assistance, please call our office at 718-854-4548 or visit us at www.misaskim.org



MISASKIM'S RABONIM, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF HARAV YEchezkel Roth Shlita, Signing a Heter Nisuin Arranged by Misaskim.