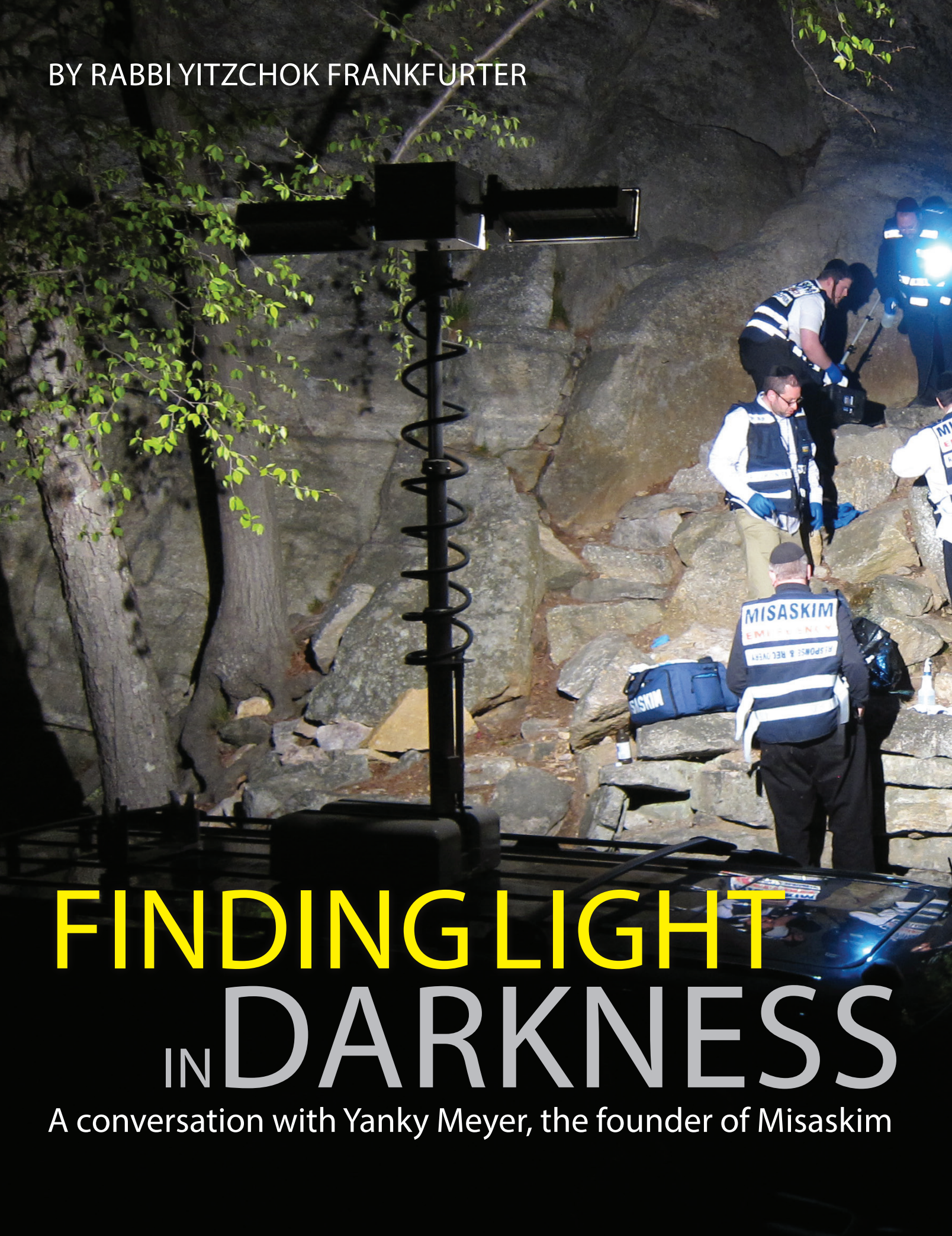


BY RABBI YITZCHOK FRANKFURTER



# FINDING LIGHT IN DARKNESS

A conversation with Yanky Meyer, the founder of Misaskim



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# M

any of the stories my esteemed guest shares with me are not for the faint of heart.

“One of the things Misaskim takes care of,” Yanky

Meyer, its benevolent founder, tells me, “is burying amputated limbs. We got a phone call about a young mother who had to have her hands and feet amputated. As tough as I am, I cried for a week. Her son’s bar mitzvah was coming up, but she said that she couldn’t make one because she just couldn’t face it. The bar mitzvah ended up being held in a beautiful hall and Avraham Fried came to sing. Who put that together? We did.

“I’ve stood at the exit ramp of airplanes many times waiting for people to come off so I could give them a besorah that wasn’t good. Whenever I have to tell a family that they’ve lost a loved one, all I can think is that in the next 30 seconds I’m going to turn their lives upside-down forever. It’s something that can never be undone. It hurts a lot, and there’s nothing you can do to comfort yourself when doing it.”

“And you walk around with that pain inside you?” I ask him.

“I sure do,” is his candid response. “Sometimes I see people on the street and I immediately recognize them and think, I was the one who informed them. Someone had to do it, and I was put into this position to do it, but it hurts. You can’t just ignore it. I invite these people to my simchos and they invite me to theirs, but it doesn’t cover up that pain. It’s there all the time. That’s the nature of it.

“The Eibershter made us in a way that we are able to forget things and heal over time, but it’s not as if I’ve only done this once and that was the end of it. Let me tell you a story:

“One time I got a phone call at 4:30 in the morning about a crib death. The race was on to be able to bring the child to kever Yisrael. We were finished by noon, after which a couple of us who were involved in the case went to daven Shacharis. At 12:25 we got a phone call about another crib death in the community, which is something that had never happened to us before. Two crib deaths on the same day? When we came back to the medical examiner a few hours later, a non-Jew in the office started crying when he saw that we had brought another baby who had died suddenly. These guys see bodies all day long—it’s all they do—but it still touched him.

“The next day I went to the house of the parents of the first baby while they were sitting shivah and I took them to the parents of the second baby. One father is a Gerer chasid and the other is a Litvak. They held each other, they cried together and they



(L-R) Rabbi Yosef C. Golding, CEO; Yanky Meyer, President and COO; Meyer Weill, Vice President

became best friends. Both tragedies took place on the same day, with a baby of the same age—their birthdays were almost identical—and the same number baby in the family. Everything was similar. I cannot give someone the kind of chizzuk that these two can give each other. I don’t know if they’re still in touch, but at that moment they were able to help each other. It’s taking chesed and passing it along. It’s priceless.”

## More Than Tables and Chairs

“Most people think of Misaskim as the people who provide aveilim with siddurim, sifrei Torah and low chairs,” I say.

“That’s one of our biggest problems, because that’s actually at the bottom of the list of everything we do. The chairs only appear after everything else has been taken care of. For example, there was a bachur who passed away in Canada on a Friday a couple of weeks ago. He was a healthy boy from New York who simply collapsed while visiting there. The first thing we had to do was break the news to the parents. We have people who are trained to break the news in cases of tragedy. Then we had to find all the siblings and grandparents. Some of the siblings were on a flight to California, so we had to have people waiting for them in the airport to tell them to turn around. Then we had to deal with the medical examiner in Canada, which was very difficult. We had to get doctors from here to write letters; this went on until all hours of the night. It was a marathon but we weren’t able to get the body released before Shabbos.

“There were so many sh’eilos: What should we let them do? What can’t we let them do? How long should we fight with them?”

# FINDING LIGHT IN DARKNESS

A lot of different rabbanim got involved. We also had to have askanim in Canada get in touch with politicians as well as consult with some Canadian lawyers. It was a whirlwind of activity, and at the same time we were trying to comfort parents who had just lost their son.

"The levayah was on Tuesday so they were in aninus for five days; the body was released on Monday, but then we had to drive it down to the city. A whole Sunday was spent in conference calls with coroners and doctors. We had to verify that what the doctors in Canada were telling us was true about what they claimed they needed to do."

"Doesn't the United States government have any power in something like this, considering that he was an American citizen?"

"When it involves the law of the land it becomes very difficult for another government to try to stop them."

"Did you try to get the American embassy or consulate involved?"

"A lot of people from both the federal and state governments were trying to help. The whole thing made me realize that we're very fortunate in New York to have people we already deal with in the medical examiner's office. I think we were probably among the first to lay the groundwork for that, things like getting them to open the office after hours or making it possible for the deputies to log into their computers

from home to sign off on death certificates. All these things were the result of our lobbying efforts. This is what we're here for and this is what we do all day, but it can't be done without an office infrastructure and everything costs a lot of money."

"Plus I would imagine that you have to retain a lot of lawyers."

"It's not about lawyers; it's about fostering relationships with law enforcement agencies and medical examiners and making them aware of the issues that affect the Jewish community. That's why we've never encountered a legal issue in New York State."

"I'm sorry to say that most people are totally unaware of what you guys do. All they know about is the chairs and the sifrei Torah."

"Okay, so let's talk about that. We have nine warehouses, a dispatching system and a brand-new website. Then there's insurance, trucks and gas. How much do you think all this costs to maintain?"

"How much does it cost?"

"Our total budget, including all our programs, is over \$2 million a year and climbing steadily."

"How do you raise those funds?"

"We break our heads. There are plenty of people who use our chairs without giving any money to Misaskim, but we need money in order to continue our work. And it's getting more difficult by the day. There are also air conditioners and water coolers,

"Sometimes I see people on the street and I immediately recognize them and think, I was the one who informed them. It hurts."

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A Misaskim vehicle in front of the Boro Park headquarters

burying of *meisei mitzvah*. There are other organizations that also do it, but we do hundreds per year. We have different systems in place for different areas and neighborhoods. Very often we do it through the Hebrew Free Burial Society. They have a *chelkah* in Staten Island where they've been burying thousands of *meisei mitzvah* since the 1800s. Some cases we can pass on to others, but when it comes to certain things there's no passing it along. Let's say someone dies in a remote area of the world where it's going to cost a fortune to bring him

which break down and have to be replaced."

"Unfortunately, there are always a lot of people sitting *shivah* at the same time."

"Two weeks ago on a Sunday, while everyone was sitting at pools and barbecues, our guys took care of 178 *aveilim* who were sitting *shivah*. In an average year, we service approximately 8,500 people. That's 2,500 homes we have to go to at least twice—once for delivery and once for pickup. Now imagine a *shivah* home on the fourth floor of a building without an elevator and with 20 people sitting *shivah*. You need manpower just to *shlep* everything upstairs—and who's going to clean up afterwards?"

"Where are the warehouses located?"

"Boro Park, Williamsburg, Kiryas Yoel, Monsey, the Catskills, Philadelphia, Deal and Lakewood."

"I would imagine that most of the stuff is being used at any one time."

"It depends when. There are certain days when we have nothing in the warehouses, but there are also days when we're mostly full. *Erev Pesach* we're full; *Motzaei Pesach* we're empty. People don't sit *shivah* on *Chol Hamoed*. The day after *Pesach* we had 78 *shivah* homes with over 300 *aveilim*. Within that two-week period we had over 500 *aveilim*. And it's not as if we can say, 'We're sorry, we're too busy. We'll get back to you in a couple of days.' And we have to get everything back as soon as possible, so we can rotate our supplies and give them to other people."

"Do you have enough *sifrei Torah*?"

"No."

### Other Costly Programs

"Yanky, you mentioned that this aspect of Misaskim is only the tip of the iceberg, but it also seems like the most expensive. Is that correct?"

"We do a lot of other things as well. For example, there's the

home for *kever Yisrael*. We step up and make it happen. Also, if stopping a cremation is a matter of money because the family is only willing to pay the \$1,500 cost of cremation, we'll often pay the difference—to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars per year.

"Everyone is in awe of what Misaskim does, but it never occurs to a lot of people to ask us where we get our funding from. No organization can run without money. You want to consider only the chairs? Who's buying them? Who's cleaning and fixing them? Who replaces them when they break? It was 100 degrees outside yesterday and I had to buy \$35,000 worth of air conditioners."

"I assume there isn't any government funding for what you do."

"We've gotten one grant in 15 years, thanks to Simcha Felder, and that was to upgrade our phone and computer system. Every day I wake up and wonder how we're going to make it through the day financially. When we did the last *ksivas haosiyos* for a *sefer Torah*, we went around to invite all the *rabbanim*, and the Munkatcher Rebbe told me a story that gave me a lot of *chizzuk*:

"There was an old childless couple who always assumed that no one cared about them or looked after their interests. When the husband passed away, the wife came home from the *levayah* to find everything she needed waiting for her in the house. When the Munkatcher Rebbe went to be *menachem aveil* she told him, 'I wish my husband were still alive so I could show him that there are people who care.' And not only do we bring air conditioners and equipment to a *shivah* house, but if they can't afford meals we provide that too. There was one family for which we had to bring 160 portions of food through the week of *shivah*."

"Do you do all the fundraising as well?"

"I used to. This past January I hired Rabbi Yosef C. Golding to be our chief executive officer. We were desperate for someone to put us on a stronger financial footing."

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## Widows and Orphans

"Then, of course, you also deal with the orphans."

"We have a program for yesomim to keep in touch with them after the aveilus. Twice a year, on Chol Hamoed Sukkos and Pesach, we bus them from all over for a special event so they can forget their sadness a little. A single day like that can cost the organization more than \$80,000."

"Where do you take them?"

"We do lots of different things. One time we had the FBI come down and show them all their 'toys' and paraphernalia. Other times we'll take them to places most ordinary people don't have access to because they need security clearance, like behind the scenes at airports. On Sukkos we built a 5,000-square-foot sukkah to give them a seudas Shlomo b'shaatah and also pay for kids to be able to go to summer camp."

"One of the yesomim developed a lifelong relationship with Rav Leibel Williger from Torah Vodaas just from dancing at a Simchas Beis Hasho'eivah celebration at Ateres Golda. Then on Chanukah we gave out Visa gift cards worth \$50 to \$75 to over 1,100 orphans so they could buy whatever they wanted. We also got gebentchtematbei'os from the Skverer Rebbe, the Skulener Rebbe, Rav Gamliel Rabinowitz and the Rachmastrivka Rebbe. Each kid got his or her own envelope that I'm sure they'll treasure forever. We do anything we can to give these kids chizzuk and a boost in life. If we had more money these programs could expand tenfold, because there's so much more we could be doing."

"Whenever we do a shivah delivery and we hear that there are young yesomim, we bring along toys. Everyone comes and feels bad for the kids, but they also forget about them. We give them 1,500-piece Binyan sets and it keeps them busy for the week. The latest thing we instituted is that when a young person passes

away, we come to the house on Friday afternoon at 3 p.m. and take away all the shivah stuff. Then our volunteers will wash the floors and dishes, put all the furniture back in its place and bring food and whatever else is needed for that Shabbos. On Motzai Shabbos they bring everything back within ten minutes after the zman. This way the family can enjoy as normal a Shabbos as possible."

"The yesomim stories are so touching. Is that what gives you the most personal satisfaction?"

"Yes, absolutely. I get a real chayus from seeing the smiles of the kids who come on Chol Hamoed. And there aren't any signs or references to Misaskim; we just want them to come and have a good time and know that someone cares."

"We got a letter from a father of six or seven children who had lost his wife. After the kids came to our event on Chol Hamoed he wrote, 'I want to thank you. After a year of aveilus and no music, you made my family feel normal again.' Some kids come during the year also, but he was makpid that they shouldn't participate

"Whenever we do a shivah delivery and we hear that there are young yesomim, we bring along toys."



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## RABBI YOSEF C. GOLDING'S REFLECTIONS ON MISASKIM

Misaskim is Yanky Meyer. Before I came on board, Yanky was the primary fundraiser. He was also the chief cook and bottle-washer. He did everything, and it was too much for a single person to do.

My relationship with Yanky goes back to my days as cofounder of the West Side Hatzalah, when Yanky was in Hatzalah of Boro Park. I came on board because he needed someone who would be focused on the organization so he could be busy with emergency services, the medical examiner and the coroner. Today is a typical day for Yanky. He has a meeting with the Fire Department in the afternoon. Then he's driving up to the mountains tonight but he has to be back in the morning to give a benediction at the graduation of the Port Authority police officers at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

When I worked for Agudah, I ran the Siyum HaShas at MetLife Stadium. I chose Yanky to deal with the security arrangements. This led to a meeting with the chief of Homeland Security. Today, Misaskim has a relationship with 70 agencies throughout New York and New Jersey, to the benefit of Klal Yisrael.

We just started a new campaign to write a minimum of 18 sifrei Torah. Right now Misaskim owns only a few; most of the ones we give out are on loan. We're already halfway to our goal. Each sefer Torah is going to remain in the area where it's being sponsored. With Hashem's help, the hachnasas sefer Torah for these scrolls will be held next year in a major public venue, and it will be an event that American Jewry hasn't seen since the Siyum HaShas in MetLife Stadium.

because of the music."

"I have some friends in Israel who told about 'yesomim shtieber' where the orphans can come and hang out together. Do you do that as well?"

"Not at the moment, but if we could swing it financially the sky would be the limit. We have so many ideas for what we could do for them. A number of years ago we got a phone call from an almanah whose husband had passed away years before. There was never any kind of fund set up for the family and she really didn't have any money. Her daughter was now ready for shidduchim but she couldn't even afford to buy her a dress! These kinds of things are going on right in our own backyard. We looked into the story and found out that it wasn't just a dress they needed; \$60,000 later the house was redone: windows, furniture, a fresh coat of paint. We bought the stuff but volunteers came to actually do the painting and installation. Taking care of yesomim and almanos isn't the responsibility of Misaskim, it's everyone's responsibility. While there are other organizations that take care of almanos like Samcheinu, we step in when there are kids still at home. Still, if I get a phone call from an almanah who says she's embarrassed to go around collecting but she needs \$8,000 for a chasunah, how can I slam the door in her face?"

"We even get phone calls to help people out of all sorts of things like arrest situations or getting stuck at customs or immigration because they know we have high-level relationships. For example, the FBI officer who was in charge of security for the Siyum HaShas is now the head of the New York Field Office.

"Another thing we do is arrange for burial when there's a neifel. It used to cost close to \$1,000 but we take care of them for \$150. We have chelkos where we bury them properly and separately k'das uk'din."

"Are your volunteers all involved in chevrah kaddishas?"

"Some of them are, but not all of them."

### From Hatzalah to Misaskim

"When was Misaskim founded?"

"Fifteen years ago."

"So you weren't around on 9/11?"

"I was at Ground Zero, but as a member of Hatzalah, not as the head of Misaskim. I was also a member of the Bikur Cholim of Boro Park's chevrah kaddisha, which at the time was the biggest one around that everyone used, even though there were individual kehillos that had their own."

"What made you decide to establish a new entity?"

"We did it because we recognized the need. We say, 'Atah chonein l'adam daas.' If you're going to help someone, don't do half a job, do the whole job. If a person just lost a loved one and needs to sit shivah, the first thing you think of is where is he going to get chairs and tables from? What about a sefer Torah?"

"Before Misaskim, when someone passed away, people heard about it through the Jewish grapevine. Certain individuals were

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called who knew how to get them help. But it reached a point where we had to make a central number that everyone could call al kol tzarah shelo tavo. We had a case not too long ago of someone who passed away mid-flight on a plane. The family was able to make one phone call from the cockpit and they called us."

"How old was this person?"

"She was a woman in her 70s who had gone to the bar mitzvah of an einikel and was niftar on the way home. There were 18 family members with her on the plane. By the time it landed we were waiting at the door and had already been in touch with all the agencies involved. When the chief officer on the scene saw me there he said, 'Jack, you're here! I can see that this body is going to be released quickly.' The plane landed at 11:30 p.m. at Kennedy Airport and we still had to deal with law enforcement and the medical examiner, but the levayah was able to take place at 9:30 the next morning!"

"When did she pass away?"

"Eight hours before the plane landed, while they were still over the Atlantic. They covered her body and put it in the front of the first-class section, which was then cleared out for the members of the family. Before Misaskim, people would call Hatzalah and the chevrah kaddisha in a case like this, but there wasn't a central

entity that could help them. A lot of the people who are involved nowadays were doing these kinds of things even before Misaskim was founded, like Meir Weil and Yanky Landau. When Eli Wald, Hy"d, was killed on the streets of Boro Park around 30 years ago, I and a lot of my friends were involved in the aftermath."

"So you graduated from being a Hatzalah member to being the head of Misaskim."

"I'm still a member of Hatzalah."

"Do you go out on Hatzalah calls?"

"Yes."

"I'm assuming that you were born and bred in Boro Park."

"Yes. I went to Yeshiva Karlin Stolin in Boro Park."

"I would imagine that most of your volunteers aren't Hatzalah members as well. But why would someone who wants to do volunteer work choose Misaskim over Hatzalah?"

"Everyone is cut out for something else. Why would someone join Hatzalah rather than volunteer for Chai Lifeline? Why Hatzalah over volunteering for Chaveirim? Everyone has something special he feels he can contribute. We also have eight non-Jews who work for us on Shabbos because there are always problems when you have to deal with a meis on Shabbos. You also sometimes have to interact with law enforcement or the medical examin-



First responders at the Sassoon home after the fire

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Misaskim director Yanky Meyer speaking with NYC officials at the Sasson funeral

er's office."

"Who's your rabbinical adviser?"

"Rav Yechezkel Roth has been our moreh horaah from the very beginning. Whenever we have to deal with autopsies or crime scenes or dealing with non-Jews on Shabbos, everything is done according to his psak, and he answers us right away."

## Emotional Perseverance

"How do you deal with all this stuff emotionally?" I solicit.

"You really don't have too much time to think about every individual case, because by the time you're finished with one you're already dealing with two more. But would I say that it doesn't affect me? Of course it does. I'm a Yid with a Yiddishe heart, so it's going to have an effect. We just don't have time to dwell on it."

"A few years ago I met with Yehuda Meshi Zahav, the founder of ZAKA, in his office in Yerushalayim and had a very interesting conversation with him. Are ZAKA and Misaskim partners?"

"Not officially. They run their own entity in Eretz Yisrael and we run our own in America. If I need help in Eretz Yisrael I'll call him because I'm not going to stick my nose into their operation, and the other way around. There's no official partnership or anything like that."

"Your actual work is a bit different as well, as they typically deal with a different type of situation."

"That's true, but there's another aspect as well. In Eretz Yisrael the government is mostly Jewish, and they're just as interested as ZAKA in trying to help a family bring a niftar to kevarah as fast as possible. It doesn't make a difference if it's a chareidi or a chiloni because everyone wants to do the right thing. In America, by contrast, we have to contend with the laws of the land. For example, in Israel they can get access to a crime scene much faster than we can, because we have to deal with all the agencies first. While we eventually gain access, we might have to wait for it."

"I believe that ZAKA is almost an official part of the Israeli gov-

ernment's efforts to recover bodies."

"Yes. I understand they've been licensed as a responding agency."

"Meshi Zahav told me that ZAKA has in-house therapists to help the volunteers deal with everything they see."

"Most of them witness scenes that are much worse than the typical things we see, like bombings and terrorist attacks. But of course we have issues here as well, like when our people have to be present during a required autopsy to make sure that the very minimum is done according to our psak. We actually have a whole infrastructure in place. Having to watch an autopsy is no picnic. Unfortunately, we've already had to attend hundreds of them where we had to stand on top of the doctors until they were done."

"Meshi Zahav told me that music and singing are very effective in helping them to cope."

"Every person is different. One guy needs a vacation, another guy needs music. We also have get-togethers for our volunteers a few times a year, barbecues or different things during the winter. We talk about the different types of cases we had to deal with and so on."

## Tragedies

"I'm sure you're still carrying around the memory of the Sassoon family tragedy in Flatbush, in which a fire took seven of their children two years ago."

"For sure. There are some cases that stick out but each one is unique, and no two cases can be dealt with in the same way. I was there when Gavriel Sassoon was informed of what happened. He hugged me so tightly I thought I'd choke. I remember him saying, 'It's Shabbat, and I'm not allowed to cry.' Then, of course, he broke down. We had to deal with four different hospitals. Unfortunately, this wasn't the first child who had passed away in a fire, but this case was different because there weren't any family members in the waiting rooms for me to talk to. It was only after everything had been arranged with the medical examiners that we realized there was another daughter in the burn center in Staten Island with no one to look after her. I woke up Yanky Landau, who is our liaison to the burn unit, and the police drove us there to make sure she was getting the proper help until the family could intervene on her behalf."

"I've heard you're also involved in things that aren't tragedies at all."

"Indeed. Two years ago, on an Erev Shabbos, there was an El Al flight that was running late and wouldn't be landing until 5:30 p.m. in Newark when shkiah was ten after seven. There were people on board who had to get to Lakewood, Monsey, Passaic and Boro Park for Shabbos. We had enough advance notice to get to work on it. The plane landed at 5:40, and by 6:30 there was

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no one from that flight left in the building. By the way, I'm an official Port Authority chaplain. In order to make it happen they had to bring in extra customs agents and baggage handlers, and they also let the plane land ahead of the other ones waiting to land."

"Would you say that America is a *medi-nah shel chesed*?"

"Compared to the rest of the world, definitely."

"That story about the plane is amazing."

"We have problems like this all the time with planes either landing right before Shabbos or even on Shabbos because of weather delays and the like. It's not that often that we have six or seven hours to work on it before the passengers arrive."

"Are there more incidents like this now because it's summertime and more people are traveling?"

"No, *baruch Hashem* we're not any busier right now. The Eibershter should continue to help us, but the last few years have been *b'chesed uv'rachamim*."

"Do you have access to helicopters and all of those kinds of things?"

"We have access to whatever we need."

## Only Light

"We're speaking before the Nine Days, but I realize that what *Misaskim* does transcends the traditional concept of mourning."

"We're going to rebuild the *Beis Hamikdash* through our efforts," Yanky tells me resolutely.

"If you can see the light of *chesed* then there is no darkness," I tell him.

"It's pure *chesed*," he says in agreement.

"But we never forget that we're dealing with *aveilus*. We always tell our volunteers whenever we have to do a notification that they should realize that it's that family's '9/11'. For the rest of their lives they'll be able to tell you exactly where they were and what they were doing when we walked through the door."

"What you do is priceless," I tell him earnestly before we depart.

"I couldn't do any of this without my volunteers," he states humbly. "*Misaskim* simply couldn't function without the hundreds of volunteers in Kiryas Yoel, Williamsburg, Boro Park, Monsey, Lakewood, Deal and Philadelphia—and those are only our major locations." ●



Misaskim volunteer making a delivery to a shivah home

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