



Yanky Meyer

Misaskim's mission to memorialize those we lost during the coronavirus

Yanky Meyer speaks to Ami about plans to write numerous sifrei Torah

The Shabbos after Purim is when reality first kicked in that this virus would be a huge problem," says Yanky Meyer. As a dedicated Hatzalah member and the founder of Misaskim, Yanky is on the frontlines when tragedy strikes. "During the *seudah* alone there were 42 Hatzalah dispatch calls. We've never had that many come in during such a short time, but it was nothing compared to what we would face in the weeks ahead." By the time Shabbos ended, Misaskim was already working on arrangements for the first *meisim*.

"At first it was bearable, but then even

working off two or three phones wasn't enough. It was impossible to keep up, because every step of the way became a problem. We had to arrange for the proper safety precautions when handling bodies, arrange flights for burials, deal with cemeteries that didn't want to accept burials because they were already overburdened, work with hospitals to submit paperwork in time for *kevarah*... We'd get on the phone about one situation and by the time we hung up there were six more waiting. It was all compounding."

Most would recognize "Misaskim" from the labels on the low chairs and *aron kodesh* at *shivah* houses. For the organiza-

tion, though, supplying essential items to *shivah* houses is only one aspect of a multi-faceted approach to assisting with grief. Misaskim was founded more than 15 years ago when Hatzalah member Yanky Meyer saw a need. He and his team members were there for the family during the end-of-life situation, and then what? Who was going to support them through their grief and healing?

When Misaskim was first established, the primary goal was to take care of the initial grief, namely the *shivah*. Misaskim is the first on the scene to set up a *shivah* house, often working so quickly that "people have no idea how we even got



Disinfected shivah chairs awaiting distribution



there already,” says Yanky. In cases where the house was neglected during illness, Misaskim cleans up, stocks the cabinets, and pays outstanding bills—all so that the mourners can walk in and sit *shivah* with respect. “This led to doing a lot of other things,” Yanky says. “We would pick everything up, but then what? We started staying in the picture long after the seven days ended.” Today, 15 years after its founding, Misaskim takes care of mourner’s necessities, makes end-of-life arrangements, and cares for *almanos* and *yesomim* through Project Yedid.

As Yanky explains, “We had to look at the situations from every angle and think of what we could do to help. So many *almanos* were quarantined with young children who no longer had a father to entertain them, so we sent out more than \$65,000 worth of toy packages to the families.” The 1,700 toy packages went to families who recently

joined Misaskim’s lists as well as those who lost a parent prior to the coronavirus.

After Pesach, Misaskim arranged for fully-catered meals—including a *shlissel* challah—to be delivered to any *almanos* they knew about. “There was one *almanah* who we were trying to get a hold of for a

long time. When we finally reached her, she apologized because she was having problems with her phone line. Misaskim took down her information for the catered Shabbos, and within ten minutes there was also a volunteer ringing the bell so that he could stop in and fix her phone. Whatever is missing for people in *aveilus*, we try to help.”

Misaskim’s warehouses may have been temporarily closed due to safety concerns, but that doesn’t mean that the team slowed down. At the height of the outbreak in the tri-state area, Misaskim was dealing with an average of eight people passing away at home each day. For each case, Misaskim had to coordinate with the police and medical examiner’s office to have the *meis* released for burial. Yanky explained that it’s usually a lengthy process, which involves calling 911, which sends detectives to determine that the death is not a crime scene, then securing a doctor to sign the death certificate, and working with the medical examiner’s office to establish that no additional research is needed. “We were working so hard that we were getting *meisim* released within the hour when it usually takes up to four, but we needed to work that fast because as soon as we hung up with one family, we would get another call about another family who was now also dealing with a death.”

When they passed away, they were often alone. Their last heartbeat, last breath—and then families left to fend for themselves. No large funerals to give them

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the respect they deserved, no *shivah* house filled with people bringing comfort.

"I don't even have the right words," Yanky says when describing the toll the coronavirus took on *levayos* and the *shivah* process. "Because of all the restrictions, people did not have the time to grieve when they lost someone. People who would have had hundreds at their *levayos* had barely a *minyan*." The guidelines for *aveilus* give structure and a form of closure, but many in this current era had to do without them. "There's a big void for the families who lost people," Yanky continues. "It takes a huge emotional toll. It's not enough that they died alone, they were buried that way too. We worked to allow *levayos* in the streets and try to give people a little bit of *kavod*, a chance to say goodbye, but many *meisim* didn't even have that."

Misaskim was on the scene when the Novominsker Rebbe, *zt"l*, passed away.

"He's someone who would have had a *levayah* with tens of thousands of people. Instead he had just a few, but we knew that he did not want to make a *chillul Hashem*." In order to adhere to the Rebbe's *ratzon*, the Misaskim team went around in the middle of the night to

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make sure every *yeshivah* was aware that no one was allowed at the *levayah*. "And as that was happening, we also had several other cases," says Yanky.

When a *meis* was arriving in New York just minutes before the cemetery closed for Yom Tov, Misaskim was waiting on the tarmac to offload the *aron* and ensure a proper *kevurah* in time. When someone passed away in a New York hospital and the window to transport to Eretz Yisrael was closing, the team arranged a death certificate within 15 minutes—and managed to make arrangements in time. Not 20 hours after he passed away, the man was buried in Eretz Yisrael.

All of what Misaskim does comes back to the core value of affording respect during a vulnerable time. "That's what's so painful about corona," Yanky continues. "How could we show respect to these people who didn't have a proper *levayah* or *shivah*? I kept thinking about how we could memorialize them, how we could make up—even just a little bit—for what they didn't have. We thought about it for a long time and then we realized, what better way than through a *sefer Torah*?" *Sifrei Torah* are universal, used daily across every sect and community. "But this virus is something that's never happened before, so we need to respond with something that's never happened before. That's why, instead of just one, we are planning to write 18 *sifrei Torah* at once."

The specific number comes from a *pasuk* referring to the Torah, "*Vachai bahen*



Toys and games donated to children orphaned by the virus



Yanky Meyer with Councilman Chaim Deutsch

—and you shall live by them.” The numerical value of “chai—life” is 18, hence the number of scrolls that Misaskim wants to write. The *sifrei Torah* will join Misaskim’s collection so that, in the future, even more families will have access to the resources they need to sit *shivah* at home. “It’s an appropriate way to honor all the people we’ve lost. They didn’t get the respect of a full *shivah* house, but through them we can make sure that many other people do,” Yanky shares. When Misaskim broached the idea with those now in *aveilus*, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. “People feel that this is something concrete and meaningful that they can do.”

Having a *siyum* for 18 *sifrei Torah*, simultaneously, is unprecedented, but so was the virus. During the Torah campaign, families can dedicate a portion of each scroll in honor of their loved ones—with the goal of compiling the names of those we lost, every soul

remembered. The 18 *sifrei Torah* will serve as a memorial—*vachai bahen*—and a way to perpetuate their honor.

“Imagine what that *siyum* will be like,” Yanky says. “The streets all blocked off, thousands of people coming out, huge podiums filled with *rabbanim* from around the world... All of this within a

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year of losing so many people. It’s never been done before, and there’s no better way to honor them.”

As Yanky explains, the *sifrei Torah* Misaskim uses every day are unique in that they belong to the *klal*. “They don’t belong to any specific crowd or *shul*. They don’t stay put in one community. They move from home to home and place to place for whichever *Yidden* need them.” After a time when many had to do without, these 18 new scrolls—*klal Yisrael’s sifrei Torah*—will afford respect to anyone experiencing loss. It’s the echoing parity of the role they will play. “If there’s one thing we can be proud of, it’s that all Jews came together during this tragedy. It brought out the best in us. Now we can unite again for a joyous—even if it’s bittersweet—time.” ●

To add the names of those our global Jewish community has lost during the coronavirus, visit misaskim.org.