

Around the Community

Achiezer at 13: A Talk with Shalom Jaroslawicz

Part 9 of a Series

By Avi Shiff

In honor of Achiezer's 13th year, we are conducting a multi-part series celebrating the various facets of this remarkable organization. For Week #9, we spoke to Shalom Jaroslawicz of Achiezer's Zichron Dovid Chesed Shel Emes Division.

What is the role of the Zichron Dovid Chesed Shel Emes Division?

This division serves as Achiezer's landmark community-wide *chevra kadisha*, comprised of local community members who avail themselves on a moment's notice, whether to assist in disconnecting medical equipment from a *niftar* in a hospital, to perform a *taharah* for a community member, or to ensure that a *niftar* is sensitively attended to with the utmost respect. This team is on-call 24 hours a day, 6 days a week, with coverage in place by a non-Jewish staff member for Shabbos and Yom Tov. In addition to performing *taharahs*, arranging burials and so on, we also send volunteers to complete *minyanim*, whether at a gravesite or in *shivah* houses.

Who typically reaches out to the Chesed Shel Emes Division for assistance?

Anyone from a person whose relative has passed away, to a *rav* dealing with a congregant's loss, to a Hatzolah member calling from the scene of an accident. I've even had an attorney call me and relate that a Jewish client of his who had passed away had requested a Jewish burial, but he didn't know how to go about it. We took care of the *taharah*, getting a burial plot, arranging a *minyan*, and so on. We are also contacted from time to time on behalf of those who don't have family. Achiezer steps in to take care of all the funeral and burial arrangements.

Walk us through the process that follows the initial phone call.

Once we have the basic details, we

put together a team for the *taharah*. We have two groups with about 10-15 men and 10-15 women who volunteer their time. The *taharah* is either performed by our volunteers or by the funeral homes we work with, both locally and in Brooklyn or even beyond. Depending on the case, we may be working at that point with medical examiners, district attorneys or police officials who we have strong relationships with. Whether it is to prevent an autopsy or simply to expedite the process, our relationship with the medical examiners specifically has proven crucial and important.

How did this division of Achiezer come about?

Several years ago, we realized that while some local *kehillos* had their own *chevra kadisha*, there was no central communal *chevra kadisha* across the Five Towns and Far Rockaway. Along with Boruch Ber Bender, we put together teams of men and women and had them trained in doing *taharahs*. In fact, as we speak, we're in middle of constructing a *mikvah* to allow for *taharahs* to be done locally, which will save a lot of time, ensuring that local *levayos* can be held in a timely manner and that those flying to Eretz Yisroel can do so without extra delay. Boruch Ber has made it clear that anything we can do to enhance *kavod hameis*, can, will, and must be done.

Our volunteers who perform *taharahs* have undergone extensive training, coordinated by Achiezer with Rabbi Elchonon Zohn of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha. We've also done other additional training with his *chevra kadisha*, under his auspices.

Talk about your response to scenes of accidents and other times when your services are needed.

We have a team of about 20 volunteers who are available to go to accident scenes to ensure *kavod hameis*. Thanks to the Misaskim and Chesed Shel Emes organizations,



they are trained to work hand-in-hand with the police, fire departments, detectives, medical examiners and other agencies. For incidents in Nassau County and the Rockaways, we are contacted directly by the aforementioned organizations to respond to the scene.

It's hard to imagine how the community dealt with these important matters prior to the formation of Achiezer's Chesed Shel Emes Division.

There's no question about that. People used to call their *rav*, who would often put them in touch with someone in Brooklyn. With our division operating right here in our community, there's much less traveling for the *niftar* and much more *kavod hameis* all around. It is no wonder that we have the strong support of all the *rabbonim* in the community, who have recognized how vital these services are.

Someone remarked that we've become "a *rav's* best friend." Indeed, the *rabbonim* will often tell people to do whatever Achiezer recommends.

How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect this division?

We definitely felt it. There was high risk all around. We helped out with some of the Brooklyn funeral homes, expediting the process and removing *niftarim* from their premises. Some of our volunteers who went to Brooklyn to help were doing 20-30 *taharos* a day. Because of what was going on, we unfortunately had to prepare for whatever might come our way and we quietly had a makeshift morgue set up right here in our community.

Any final thoughts?

We must express our gratitude

to the Adest family, who dedicated this division in memory of their beloved father, Mr. David Adest, z"l. I remember when the family called us at 3 a.m. from a Manhattan hospital when their father passed away, unsure of what to do and what the next step should be. They recognized then that there was a void and threw their support behind Achiezer's Chesed Shel Emes Division, which, today, is an incredible resource. When they saw that there was a need, they pushed us to put it into place as a real, concrete program.

Finally, we must thank our volunteers and their families, who give up their time for this true *chesed shel emes*, no matter what the case might be. It is inspiring to watch how people respond to do pure *chesed*, with no ulterior motive. Many outsiders might not realize what's involved. We have people traveling in the wee hours of the morning to do *taharahs* or respond to a desperate call for help. There's so much going on behind the scenes, being carried out with such care and sensitivity. And that's what Achiezer is all about.

Did you know?

The average cow produces enough milk each day to fill six one-gallon jugs, about 55 pounds of milk.