

A Fountain of Chesed

An interview with
Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender,
Eli Weiss and the Achiezer Team

By C.B. Weinfeld

When I received an email from my editor asking me to interview Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender of Achiezer for the *Shavuos* paper, I had little idea how complicated it would be to find a time that worked for both of us. For Rabbi Bender, a son of Rav Yaakov Bender of Yeshiva Darchei Torah, currently the president of Achiezer, being on call means being available 24/7 (he sleeps with an emergency phone on) to help fellow Jews in distress. Achiezer, founded as a community resource center for the Far Rockaway/Five Towns area nearly eight years ago, has mushroomed into one of the largest umbrella organizations of its kind, with Jews from around the world taking advantage of its resources.

After finally speaking to Rabbi Boruch Ber, with the assistance of his tireless assistant, Mrs. Elke Rubin, I began to realize how apropos this interview was for our *Shavuos* paper. Indeed, the credo of “Torah im *derech eretz*” is fitting to describe Achiezer. In its few years of operation, Achiezer has earned the admiration of prominent *rabbonim* and community leaders around the world.

What makes Achiezer so unique? Perhaps it’s that Achiezer is an umbrella organization that encompasses dozens of sub-groups, brings all of the existing resources together, and provides so many more unique services conceived by the Achiezer team. To the question of “what do they do?” I’d like to respond with another question: What don’t they do?

During our conversation, Rabbi Bender stressed that this interview should not be a personal one, but a global one about his dedicated team and even more dedicated community. As he expressed, “It’s not about Boruch Ber Bender. This is about Achiezer.”

Q. Can you tell me a bit about why Achiezer was founded?

Yes, but I’d like to start with two stories. The first story happened ten years ago, before Achiezer was founded, while the second story occurred just six weeks ago.

In the first story, an elderly woman in the community was hospitalized for a serious medical condition. She was in the hospital for a couple of weeks, but the hospital was not equipped to deal with her serious medical issues. She was just lying there, getting weaker day by day, without a supportive family to see to her needs. By the time local activists heard of this woman’s situation and arranged for a top doctor to see her, it was already too late. She passed away a few weeks later from

a condition that perhaps could have been cured. As the surgeon told us, “If only we’d have gotten to her sooner.”

I want to stress that we are not playing G-d. There is no way for any of us to know for sure that this woman would have survived had she received the proper care. Yet it’s very sad that this poor woman had to wait so long to be seen by an expert doctor, because no one was managing her case.

Nowadays, as soon as a patient is hospitalized, Achiezer usually receives the first call. There are so many questions. “Are we in the right hospital? Which surgeon should we use?” Achiezer has a network of profession-

als who are ready to work with us, and will usually accept a case based on our recommendation. We don’t take money from any hospital or doctor, because we want to remain impartial so we can make the best decision about what any patient needs.

The second story had a happier ending *boruch Hashem*. Several weeks ago, during *Pesach*, we received a phone call from the father of a young girl who was in the hospital, scheduled for an emergency surgery. “They scheduled our daughter with Dr. So-and-so,” the father said. “I have no idea who he is, or if he’s the right doctor for this procedure.”

Our staff took down the details and said they’d get back to the family soon. We did our research and discovered that while the surgeon on call was good, there was a much more experienced surgeon who had a better track record with these types of surgeries. I put in a call to the surgeon (we usually have direct access), asking him to stop by the hospital and check on the patient even if the surgery will have already taken place. Though the surgeon was not on call, he agreed to do this.

When the surgeon arrived at the hospital, he was told that the patient had already been wheeled into surgery. He called to update us and we thanked him. We felt bad for having bothered this busy surgeon and we appreciated his dedication. We were also quite nervous, hoping that things would go well.

Before he left, the surgeon decided that since he was already there, he would walk past the OR, just to see if the surgery was going well. As he passed the OR, a crisis occurred when an artery was lacerated and the patient began to bleed. The operating surgeon realized that his mentor, the chief of surgery, was outside, and yelled for him to “scrub up” and come help him. Within moments the surgeon washed his hands, put on



his surgical scrubs, and took over the surgery at this critical juncture. Thankfully, the patient recovered and is doing well.

Here I was feeling bad that I bothered a prominent surgeon to come down for nothing, and in the end, he was the catalyst to save the young girl's life. Stories like these give us the strength to go on, to continue dealing with the challenging issues that come up in the course of our days.

Q. Did you envision, when Achiezer was first founded, that this would be an integral part of the organization? Come to think of it, how was Achiezer founded?

Actually, back in 2008, when I had approached leading *askonim* and *ba'alei batim* in the Far Rockaway/Five Towns community to help us found a community-wide resource center, I had no idea to what degree it would evolve in such a short time span.

My father suggested that we name our new umbrella organization Achiezer, after the famous *sefer* by Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski. Rav Chaim Ozer was well known for helping others in need, and the actual meaning of the word is "my brother who is my helper," which is very apropos.

When we first outlined the idea, this community group of local pediatricians and activists shared their vision of one central locale in the neighborhood. This would be the address where people could get help for almost any issue, such as medical, financial, dealing with government agencies, obtaining low-cost health insurance, and so forth. The office would deal with new services and expand on pre-existing ones.

We are a relatively young neighborhood, and this need for a central resource had been felt for a while. Our community had a *Hatzalah* and *Tomchei Shabbos*, as well as a *Bikur Cholim*, but we were lacking one central organization where anyone can turn to with any sort of crisis at any time of day or night. This group of dedicated *ba'alei batim* was committed to setting up the backbone and make things work. A small office of about 100 square feet was leased and the process had begun.

Q. Did you envision how rapidly Achiezer would grow?

In the beginning, I naively thought that this would be a small, part time *chesed* project. At the time, I was busy pursuing other career options. I was in my mid-twenties. I was learning in *kollel* had been teaching special education at two different *yeshivos* for two years, and was contemplating taking the plunge towards becoming a physician. I always wanted to be a doctor. It had been on my mind ever since I was a child. Ironically, one of the things that held me back was the knowledge that doctors are often on call overnight and weekends, which cuts into their personal and family time. Now that I am involved in Achiezer, the doctors I deal with tell me that I am more on call than any doctor or medical professional they know!

with the support of my family and so many community members we moved ahead. Achiezer began in late 2008, and we have never looked back. It's not only a full-time job, but a 24/7 job that you can never leave behind.

I've occasionally wondered about my "would have been" life as a doctor. Yet the satisfaction that we at Achiezer get from being able to help so many different people from various walks of life, day in and day out, is certainly a feeling that is parallel to none.

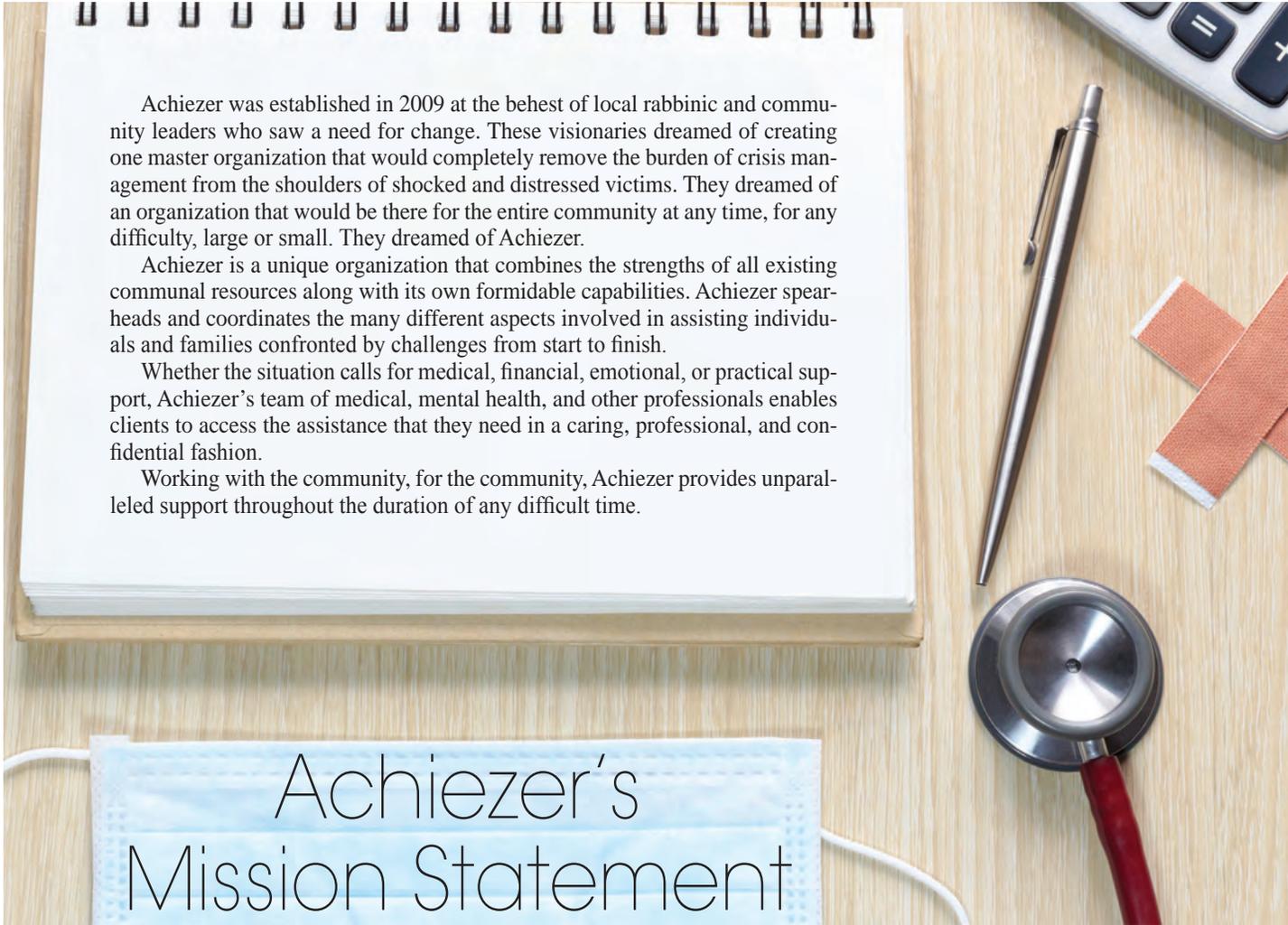
Q. Can you tell us what Achiezer does, in a nutshell?

Achiezer was established in 2009 at the behest of local rabbinic and community leaders who saw a need for change. These visionaries dreamed of creating one master organization that would completely remove the burden of crisis management from the shoulders of shocked and distressed victims. They dreamed of an organization that would be there for the entire community at any time, for any difficulty, large or small. They dreamed of Achiezer.

Achiezer is a unique organization that combines the strengths of all existing communal resources along with its own formidable capabilities. Achiezer spearheads and coordinates the many different aspects involved in assisting individuals and families confronted by challenges from start to finish.

Whether the situation calls for medical, financial, emotional, or practical support, Achiezer's team of medical, mental health, and other professionals enables clients to access the assistance that they need in a caring, professional, and confidential fashion.

Working with the community, for the community, Achiezer provides unparalleled support throughout the duration of any difficult time.



Achiezer's Mission Statement



Achiezer volunteers, friends and board members at an Evening of Appreciation held on Chanukah of 2015.

I can try, though it would take a while.

Achiezer, as we mentioned, was started in one tiny office with a couple of chairs and two tiny desks cramped against each other. Today we have two active community based offices. Our smaller office is in Far Rockaway and hosts three specific programs. Our first program is one of our most popular and fastest growing programs, our health insurance division. This program enrolls thousands of hard working families, including many *rabbaim* and teachers from our community and beyond, into free or low-cost Medicaid insurance plans. Our team of specialists, led by Sruly Miller, will file the endless amounts of required paperwork, help choose the proper plans, and help anyone obtain medical insurance without ever charging a dime.

Since the beginning of this year we enrolled nearly 1500 families in low-cost insurance through this division. People come to us from Kew Garden Hills, Boro Park and even Monsey. Most of our "clients" don't have access online or are not familiar with the complicated process of applying for insurance. We hold them by the hand and do it with them step by step.

Our second Far Rockaway based program is Meals and More, a program that delivers meals to patients in eight different hospitals. Our meals, which are cooked by nearly 100



At a ribbon cutting ceremony at the *chanukas habayis* at Achiezer's new Lawrence office in September of 2012.

local women, are gourmet, unique and beautifully packaged. Many patients who have no connection to the Five Towns request our food packages. We also coordinate drivers to pick up the prepared packages and deliver them as needed. It's a complicated responsibility, with over 250 volunteers involved in the program.

Our third program is a *gemach* for specialized medical equipment, dedicated in loving memory of Yitzchok Isaac ben Meshulem Zalmen, which we lend to patients who are in a rehab facility or at home. Our equipment is in top shape and constantly being updated, with many hard to obtain items readily available. Just last year, during the heart of a powerful snow storm, Eli Weiss and Shalom Jaroslawicz were able to safely deliver a piece of medical equipment that otherwise would have resulted in a patient needing to be transported to a local hospital.

Several weeks ago, well past midnight, we received a phone call that a breathing device had malfunctioned in a private home. It was only because we had this device readily available that we were able to keep this patient at home and avoid an unnecessary and unpleasant situation.

Q. Can you tell me about the main office?

Our main headquarters is located on Central Avenue in Lawrence. In that office, we take care of medical recommendations and hospital support, financial management, crisis intervention and mental health, among many other things. We have over ten divisions, each run by a dedicated team, all working side by side. In total, we have fifteen staff members (who shoulder the load around the clock) and over 350 volunteers. We field approximately 100 calls a day.

Achiezer keeps growing in response to the community's specific needs. When we first opened our doors, we had no idea where we would end up. Today Achiezer is the number to call if you experience any particular crisis at any time of day or night. In fact, representatives from many communities, such as Lakewood, Monsey, Chicago, Cleveland, Baltimore and Monsey, have come to visit our headquarters and implement ideas for their own communities.

Our organization is under the guidance of two dedicated local *rabbonim*, Rabbi Bin-yomin Forst and Rabbi Eytan Feiner, with whom we consult regularly. We also have a board of directors, which meets throughout the year to review our growth, operations and implement new programs as needed. Our financial board, led by our treasurer, Alan Botwinick and trustees Ronald Lowinger and Lloyd Keilson, also meets regularly to make sure that Achiezer's finances are rock-solid and funds are being overseen and spent properly. After all, Achiezer is a community organization, for the community, fully supported by the community. Aside from our salaried employees, every penny is used to help our community members in need.

The beauty of this "Achiezer system" is that it saves money and dignity. It is so much more cost-efficient to have all these programs under one umbrella organization, supported by the community, than for the community to have to support numerous organizations, each with their own niche. More importantly, when a family is in crisis, it's draining and exhausting to deal with so many different organizations and phone numbers at such a difficult time.

A family with a member in the hospital would need to deal with a medical liaison, a *bikur cholim* for meals, a big brother program to help the younger children and an insurance advocate. At Achiezer, we can receive one single phone call for help, and we will then activate all of the necessary services.

A shmooze with Mr. Eli Weiss, the Development Coordinator of Achiezer:

Q. What do you think is Achiezer's crowning glory?

The fact that Achiezer is able to combine dozens of different organizations in one. In fact, it is this *achdus* that makes us such a powerful voice for the community. We have no special interests, and are affiliated with all the *yeshivos* and various organizations equally.

Just this week we held a groundbreaking event, one of the first of its kind, uniting schools and service providers in the field of special education under one roof, to help parents of children with special needs get the resources they need. We had a vendor expo with dozens of booths, a series of lectures, and the opportunity to network. It was so beautiful to see people from all walks of life, from *chassidish* and *yeshivish* to modern Orthodox, sit down at the same table and share insights and inspiration. Nearly 25 Jewish organizations and schools all joined together to benefit the youth and future children of *Klal Yisroel*.

Q. Are you involved in dealing with crisis situations on a daily basis?

Most of my work is done behind the scenes. As the director of operations, I am in charge of every event and every production that is created by Achiezer. Whether it's public relations, maintaining our active website, marketing, or getting Achiezer's message across through the media and other avenues, this is all overseen by my department. I work particularly closely with Milka Keilson on this. *Boruch Hashem* we have been able to produce large scale events such as Eldercare, Special Care and our annual dinner mostly with our internal team.

We have staff members of our various divisions who deal one-on-one with the phone calls. It's gratifying to walk through the office on any given day and to see Mindy Liebhard triaging calls at the call center; Elke Rubin giving a caller a medical referral; Esther Novak, our head of intake, spending nearly an hour with a troubled caller who may not even know what particular service he or she needs; Dr. Lowinger behind closed doors with a mental health client (a private entrance exists); and at the same time Rabbi Bender, who ultimately oversees every department, is sitting with a broken family whose various needs require multiple forms of intervention.

At Achiezer, there's no such thing as saying, "it's not my job." When the need arises, we all pitch in to help one another. I also spend considerable time manning our urgent line, open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, which ensures that no call and no situation goes unaddressed.

food, several meetings with people who are in need of financial counseling, urgent meetings regarding family crisis in the community, helping families of special needs children with school placement, etc.

When you're working for the *klal*, there are no off hours. Most of our staff, several of them mothers of young children, carry their cell phones and answer phone calls late into the night. Just yesterday we worked side by side with the police department in helping a troubled community member who was threatening to end her life. Situations crop up without any warning and we just try to deal with them as best we can.

Q. I remember that there were many write-ups about Achiezer's response to Hurricane Sandy. What do you recall about that time?

Though the hurricane struck three and a half years ago, the memories are still very fresh. Hurricane Sandy hit the heart of the Far Rockaway/Bayswater/Five Towns community and devastated thousands of families. People lost their homes, their cars, their properties... Many families who had been financially self-sufficient suddenly needed everything: clothes, food, shelter, the basics. Some didn't have insurance or family members to take them in.

Achiezer was overwhelmed with dealing with the fallout. We marshaled hundreds of volunteers to clean waterlogged basements, help recover valuables, find families a place to live, etc. Rabbi Yechiel Kalish was instrumental in coordinating the disaster recovery

At Achiezer's CPR training series for men.



es. Achiezer continues to work closely with existing organizations, utilizing the services they provide. The group behind Achiezer spent nearly a year going to the various organizations, making sure they were on board with the idea and finding creative ways to work in tandem without needing to reinvent the wheel.

Q. What does a typical day at Achiezer look like?

A typical day doesn't really exist. Each day brings a new crisis, another development or a specific urgent situation. We're on call twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Shalom Jaroslawicz, our urgent line coordinator, and I always sleep with our phones at our side, in case of emergency.

Just a few days ago, we received a phone call from a middle-aged man who had been rushed to a local hospital. This man was a

hardworking and successful member of our community, who is used to being on the giving end. The only contact he had with Achiezer was joining at our annual dinner, participating as a regular community member.

On that day, he was involved in a devastating accident, and suddenly his world crashed. He was stuck in the hospital, overwhelmed, with no idea which doctor to use, where to get kosher food, or what type of therapy he would need. His wife was sitting at his bedside, while their children needed help with homework and meals round the clock. With one phone call, Achiezer took over, providing medical advice, meals, arranging babysitting services, mental health guidance and whatever else they needed.

A typical morning can have us dealing with families of patients in local hospitals who need information, guidance, and kosher

effort, and along with Rabbi Dovid Greenblatt from the Davis Memorial Fund helped raise millions of dollars. Organizations such as Chabad, our local JCC's, and *shuls* like the Young Israel of Woodmere and the Young Israel of Bayswater did tremendous recovery work in their respective areas. It took us over a year to recover, and we're still busy with some hard hit families.

Q. Are there ever situations when despite your best efforts, you can't help someone?

Of course. We are not *malochim*. We try as much as humanly possible to do whatever we can to help callers, and if we can't help them, for whatever reason, we do our best to connect them with someone who can.

Let's not kid ourselves. Dealing with people can be very challenging, especially if

2,000 community members attended a *Tehillim hakaros hatov* event one year after Hurricane Sandy.



At a recent Achiezer board meeting.



they require more help than an organization can humanly provide. It's simply impossible to satisfy everyone all the time. Still, when we can actually step in and provide *chizuk* to a family in distress, which happens 99% of the time, it's an incredible feeling that can't be described in words.

I often tell our dedicated office personnel, led by our senior members Dr. Brucha Lowinger, Esther Novak and Elke Rubin, that there will be frustrated callers who will have particular struggles and not to take it personally. It's important to remind ourselves that *nobody* wants to be calling for help. Most people would rather be on the giving end than the taking end. Whether it's calling about an ingrown toenail or avoiding an autopsy of a loved one at the medical examiner's office, our callers are usually under a lot of stress. We can't lose sight of that.

Q. How do you deal with the constant pressure?

It's not easy. *Boruch Hashem* for my family, who make life itself worth it all. My wife has been working in law firm for more than 13 years, but before all is a dedicated mother to our boys. She holds down the fort many a time when urgent calls and crises arrive, sometimes in middle of the night, or even in middle of a *Shabbos* or *yom tov* meal. Despite the crazy hours that this job demands, my family knows that they come first. It is a real juggling act, but my father, Rav Yaakov Bender, is a role model when it comes to this.

When we grew up (I'm the sixth of eight children, seven of them boys), my father was constantly busy with the *klal*. As a Hatzalah member, one of the founders of Hatzalah of the Five Towns, and the *rosh yeshiva* of Darchei Torah, most of his waking hours were spent taking care of others. My mother, Rebbetzin Bryna Benda was not only supportive of all this, but truly an active participant. Still, we always knew we were a priority in his life.

Rav Elya Boruch Finkel *zt"l*, my *rebbe* in the Mir Yeshiva, was also my role model and shaped the course of my life in so many ways.

Q. Can you tell me about the financial management program you mentioned?

Of course. It's our pride and joy. The program is staffed by a group of financial experts, overseen by Mrs. Aliza Wartelsky and Mrs. Stacy Zrihen. This program is multi-pronged, giving people in need food on the table and a plan for the future.

It's similar to *Mesilah* in that we both work with families seeking financial guidance, but with one major difference: When

people come to us for financial help, they are often not in a position to work on their finances. They're hungry, frustrated, out of work and in over their head in debt. First they need emergency assistance just to put bread on the table. After reviewing their case and making sure they are truly in need, we provide grocery cards from Gourmet Glatt (Achiezer works closely with Gourmet Glatt) to make sure that the basic needs of these families are met. Nobody should ever need to lose their basic dignity. They can shop in a store like a *mentch*, without begging for handouts.

It is important to mention that we don't just give people in crisis a blank check, because that won't help them stay solvent. There are strings attached. If you want to receive the grocery coupons and other forms of help, you have to commit to sit down with a financial counselor who will review your situation and help get your life back on track.

Achiezer's financial experts will review all the couple's finances, including credit card debt, tuition debt, foreclosure warnings, car loans, student loans, etc., and help figure out a plan. The couple has to be committed to continue to work on their finances and stick to a budget if they want to keep receiving assistance. If they follow these guidelines, there are additional interactions, such as coupons at a toy store to buy their children a toy before *Chanukah*, and a check before *yom tov* to help cover additional expenses like new clothing, a new *sheitel* or other basics that can make or break their *simchas yom tov*.

This program is one of our biggest breakthroughs, with hundreds of families currently enrolled. The beauty of this program is based on the saying, "Give a man a fish, help him for a day. Teach a man to fish, help him for a lifetime."

Q. Is there a stigma to coming to Achiezer offices to accept these items?

The beauty of Achiezer is that there is no stigma. Remember; all our offices are under one roof. Dozens of people come through our doors each day for all sorts of reasons. When you walk into Achiezer's office, people have no idea whether you've come to volunteer, to drop off a check, or meet with a financial expert or get some medical advice. At Achiezer, we are all brothers who want to help each other.

Q. What is your goal for Achiezer ten years down the line?

Actually, I hope we close down and go out of business due to lack of need.

A couple of questions for Mrs. Aliza Wartelsky, coordinator of the financial management program:

Q. How does the financial program work?

We deal with three types of families. The first type are those in immediate crisis, such as breadwinners who have lost their jobs, families going through health crisis, etc. These people need immediate financial assistance to buy food and pay their rent. After meeting with them and ascertaining that they are legit, we provide food cards at Gourmet Glatt and other financial assistance. Once they are fed and their basic needs met, we can take things to the next step.

The second type of person is someone in financial need who is putting bread on the table, but just barely. For this type of family, financial counseling is a must. The parents meet with one of our professionals on a steady basis to work on a budget and learn financial skills. We also provide training in various fields if they want to change careers, etc. and are there to help them with larger expenses.

A third type of family is the typical middle class earner, who manages most of the year, but feels a little choked before the *yomim tovim* or when making a *simcha*. They have a hard time covering camp expenses, paying for a *bar mitzvah*, etc. We help them with both resources, such as interest free loans, and guidance in making a budget and putting aside an emergency fund.

Q. What is the most common situation?

I have been heading this program for three years now, and we receive about seven new applicants each week. Most of the families who apply for assistance fall into the second or third category, people just like you and me who need some help with unexpected expenses. It is very gratifying to help people make a budget and learn how to stretch their income further. In fact, *Chazal* teach us that this is the highest level of *tzedokah*. I'm incredibly grateful to Achiezer for giving me this opportunity.

