

Focus on People

N. Perlman

A Patchwork of Perspectives

When you field over 800 calls for help per week, you inevitably get a unique perspective on the community's needs, as well as the programs that should be put into place to meet those needs. Achiezer's staff, who serve as the Five Towns/Far Rockaway go-to source for any and every type of crisis assistance, share some of their impressions working for a one-of-a-kind organization in a one-of-a-kind community.



The dedicated staff of Achiezer. Not shown: Elke Rubin, Elana Goldstein, Suri Bender, Stacey Zrihen

Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender Founder and President

As founder and president, Rabbi Bender built Achiezer from scratch, and continues to oversee every aspect of its operation and growth.

Can you give us a little bit of background on how Achiezer got off the ground?

Just over four years ago, Achiezer had a grand total of one staff member: me. Many prominent community leaders realized that the community needed a central resource that people could turn to for guidance about any issue, and we had a vision of filling that gap.

We got started by doing medical research. I remember sitting down at my dining room table with a pad of paper and a pen, making a list of doctors: what their specialty was, whether they took insurance, their bedside manner, whether they had cell phones... But truthfully, enthusiastic as we may have sounded back then, even we weren't exactly sure what this organization would become.

What happened after that?

Slowly, it started to mushroom. After a couple of months, we hired a part-time secretary and rented some office space. One week there were thirty phone calls; the next week forty-five. More and more people started to utilize Achiezer for all types of crises and issues. The office on Beach 9th Street, which had seemed enormous when we first leased it, became impossibly small as new staff members and services were added to meet the rising demand.

By now, Achiezer has come a long, long way from being a "one man, one BlackBerry" organization, and there's no way that one person could ever handle it all alone. In presenting these perspectives from our staff, we wanted the community to get to know the real heroes who stand behind Achiezer, fielding crises day and night. Even more, we want to be sure that everyone in the community is aware of our services, so that Achiezer can be here for you too, whenever the need arises.

Chani Weinberger Intake and Triage Department

As part of intake staff, Chani Weinberger is the first person Achiezer's callers meet.

What is your official job description?

My primary job is to take in the calls and messages, send them along to the correct department, and make sure to follow up so that every caller gets a call back within 24 hours. I'll reach out to callers more than once, since I want them to be able to speak to a live person, even if it means chasing down the caller until they finally answer their phone. Often, I'll get a relieved, "Thanks for tracking me down; I've been so busy, but I really wanted to speak to you about..."

How would you describe a typical day at Achiezer?

Every day is different. Some days are insane; everyone at the office is on the phone at once, and you can't breathe between calls. Other days are quieter, and I actually manage to take a real lunch break. Some of our calls are truly urgent; some are very minor. Either way, every caller deserves to know that we've heard what they have to say, and that we're working on it, and I try my best to make that happen.

Hinda Sara Loeb Call Center Manager

A new addition to the Achiezer team, Hinda Sara makes sure that every visitor gets a warm welcome, and every caller gets a timely response. Her presence at Achiezer has already helped ensure that every caller gets the attention they deserve.

As a newcomer to the staff, can you give us some first impressions of Achiezer?

If you want an "outsider's perspective" on Achiezer, I'm a pretty good person

to ask, since I'm relatively new and I've worked in many other places before this. From my vantage point here at the front desk, I get to man the phone lines, direct traffic, and watch the comings and goings from the conference room. I can say that aside from being a very professional group, Achiezer is special in that everyone working here really has their heart in the right place. Across the board, they do their utmost to help the community, and they really care.



Meeting with Achiezer, CAF trustees, and community rabbonim

Sruly Miller Insurance Department Coordinator

As coordinator of the Insurance Department, Sruly Miller helps families navigate through the maze of public insurance regulations, from enrollment to approval and beyond.

Rumor has it that these days, many more community members have been asking for your help in applying for public insurance. Is that a result of the hurricane or some other cause?

The Insurance Department has gotten much, much busier in the past months. I can't say if it's because there are more people in need or because Achiezer has gotten more widespread exposure, but whatever the cause, we've gone from processing 60 applications per month to approximately 80-90.

It is true that directly after Hurricane Sandy, Achiezer was inundated with requests regarding FEMA and other available funding. I was responsible for helping people navigate FEMA regulations, with a lot of invaluable assistance from Jeanie Silver of Dov Hikind's office. Most of that activity has really quieted down, though. I haven't gotten nearly as many hurricane-related requests in the past few weeks.

Are you able to help applicants with anything else besides insurance?

The beautiful thing about working for Achiezer is that many times, my office becomes the gateway for much more comprehensive help. Insurance is a necessity that people can't forgo, and they'll call Achiezer saying that they "only need help with filing an insurance application." But once we start talking about family size and income, I'm often able to recommend a host of other services. Best of all, it all takes place in a non-threatening, stigma-free environment.

"Many people believe that our community is special, but nobody can prove it as clearly as I can." – Eli Weiss

Adina Elefant Insurance Assistant

Achiezer's Insurance Department runs smoothly thanks to Adina Elefant's behind-the-scenes assistance.

How did you get started with Achiezer?

I started off in Achiezer as a call-center volunteer, during the chaotic post-hurricane weeks when we were answering calls from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., including Sundays. Even after things settled down somewhat, the Insurance Department was still impossibly overbooked, and I was hired to work under Sruly Miller. We have appointments scheduled the entire day, back to back. I do the paperwork, stay on top of the phone calls and messages, and handle some of the more straightforward cases myself.

Any recommendations for new applicants?

Officially, an application is a one-time, once-a-year thing. We try our best to avoid having to bring people back for a second appointment, which is easier said than done, given all of the regulations involved. But if an applicant is missing documents, s/he will definitely have to come back a second time. So the one thing that I would recommend to applicants is that they make sure to double-check all of their documents before they leave home – a simple thing that can save them the hassle of having to schedule a second appointment.

Eli Weiss Development Coordinator

From the Transportation Program to the Medical Equipment Depot, Eli Weiss coordinates most of Achiezer's volunteer efforts.

What kinds of programs do you coordinate?

My job is to create, implement, coordinate, and develop programs that include all sorts of chessed, large and small. We have some very large programs, like the Medical Equipment Depot, that are utilized all the time, managing our expansive website and sending out mass community emails; and then we have smaller programs that are created to meet a specific need, like the Purim Megillah Leining Campaign, or specific Yom Tov programs. I recruit volunteers to help with anything and everything, from graphic design to furniture schlepping for an elderly couple who are unable to do so on their own.

What would you say to someone who wants to do chessed but is very short on time?

There are so many real and easy ways to get involved. It can be as simple as adding your number to the volunteer drivers' text-messaging list or dropping off a meal at a hospital. There are mothers who get their entire families involved. There are lawyers and accountants whose five minutes of professional advice change someone else's life. A while ago, we had five volunteers with screwdrivers spend a Sunday afternoon installing a ramp on someone's house. The patient used it for months. It's a small investment, with unbelievable dividends.

Any comments about the volunteers you work with?

Our volunteers are incredible. They will stop everything at a moment's notice and take on tasks that are well below their dignity level, just to be able to help someone else. We are in the midst of planning an Evening of Appreciation to be held shortly after Pesach, and we expect to host a few hundred volunteers. Many people believe that our community is special, but nobody can prove it as clearly as I can.

Dr. Bruchie Lowinger, PsyD Behavioral Health Coordinator

As Achiezer's on-staff psychologist with a private phone extension and private back entrance, Dr.

Lowinger is an invaluable resource for people seeking confidential, stigma-free mental health guidance.

Numerous members of the community have pointed to Achiezer as a beacon of light in the storm of emotional and mental health issues. In your experience, are there still gaps and needs that remain unfilled?

As much as we have been able to accomplish with mental health guidance until this point, we have found that there is a real, unfilled community need for affordable, ongoing mental health services. Our community is blessed with many wonderful organizations and therapists who provide therapeutic counseling, but many people cannot afford these services. When insurance will not foot the bill, or when several members of a family need therapy for an extended period of time, even sliding scale fees can be prohibitive.

Is there any solution in the works?

To meet the growing demand, Achiezer is exploring the possibility of providing more onsite counseling. Sruly Miller, who is a few months away from completing a mental health degree, has been doing some counseling in the evening hours, and we may expand that a bit to include other externs. We are not trying to replicate, compete with, or detract from the excellent services offered by other organizations and professionals. Rather, our aim is to fill the gap for those who cannot be helped in that way.

Is there any message that you'd like to share with the community?

I would like to stress that although talk of Hurricane Sandy has died down,

we are still available to speak with individuals who are dealing with reactions and difficulties. Now that the practical aspects have fallen into place for most, there is more time and opportunity to work on recuperating emotionally as well.

Shalom Jaroslawicz
Project Coordinator
Hospital Support Services

As coordinator of Hospital Support Services, implementer of large projects, and de facto office manager, Shalom Jaroslawicz is Rabbi Bender's right-hand man.

Your job certainly sounds eclectic. Can you describe it?

My primary role is overseeing any grand-scale projects that Achiezer is working on, including all of our hospital support services. I was responsible for construction of Achiezer's respite room in South Nassau Communities Hospital, and I still coordinate the volunteers who stock the room four times a week. I am also responsible in assisting Rabbi Bender in overseeing our 24 hour urgent hotline which happens to be a lifeline for so many.

Any update on the new respite room in Mercy Hospital?

Right now, the hospital only has a small pantry stocked with foods like Tradition soups and matzoh. Achiezer reached out to Rabbi Dr. Glatt, a member of Mercy's executive staff, and with the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Silber of Lawrence, we are in the midst of constructing a full-fledged respite room in the hospital. The room will be fully stocked with hot food, cold food, seforim, a place to rest – anything that can help a patient's relative relax and reenergize.

What can you tell us about the soon-to-be-improved Stay At Home Program?

Certain medical procedures that would require a hospital visit can really be done at home by a qualified nurse, and the Stay At Home Program provides volunteer nurses for that purpose. The program has always been small, and I've been working on expanding it, under the careful guidance of a local medical director. I myself am in nursing school, so I have some very good contacts and background for this project. Of course, patients who really belong in the hospital must be encouraged to go there, but for elderly or terminally ill patients, the hospital visit may actually be more detrimental to their health, and the Stay At Home Program is a perfect solution.

Esther Novak
Coordinator of Intake and Case Management

With an uncanny knack of discerning people's underlying needs, Esther Novak works with callers reaching out to Achiezer with out-of-the-box requests.

What kind of help can you offer to the people who reach out to you?

First of all, I hear them out and try to get a picture of what they really need. If it's something I can take care of myself, I do. Otherwise, I may pass it on to another department or to Rabbi Bender. Either way, I review all of the calls with Rabbi Bender during our daily meeting.

I'm not a social worker, but I can help people get set up with various programs, like Tomchei Shabbos, Ohel, food stamps, social security... I'm also able to help with some of the more typical medical recommendation questions, and I begin the brainstorming process for any out-of-the-box requests that come in.

What are the biggest challenges of your job?

One of the biggest challenges is making sure that Achiezer's resources are used in the best possible way. For example, I manage the food vouchers program in conjunction with Gourmet Glatt, to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars.



Bags of "Meals 'n More" packages prepared for delivery to local hospitals

Much as we'd like to be able to freely give-out vouchers to anyone who calls, the fact is that every dollar that we give out is coming out of a donor's pocket, so we need to be really careful how and on whom we spend our money.

Another big challenge is giving every caller a full measure of sensitivity. When I get a call about a minor issue right after I've spoken to someone else dealing with a life and death crisis, I need to remind myself that for this caller, this relatively minor issue is a very big deal.

How do you maintain confidentiality?

We don't use names around the office, and I never discuss my work anywhere else at all. I discuss situations with Rabbi Bender

privately, in his sound-proof office. In general, none of the members of the staff discuss what they're dealing with. Unless we have to collaborate, I have no idea who meets with Dr. Lowinger and she doesn't know who speaks to me. Of course, callers will also never find out who else I've been speaking to, even if it's a member of their own family.

Elke Rubin
Administrative Assistant

As Executive Assistant to Rabbi Bender, Elke Rubin helps ensure that Achiezer's entire operation runs smoothly

What exactly do you do?

My official role is to work alongside Rabbi Bender, keeping on top of his scheduling and the myriad activities that his long days entail. Although Rabbi Bender is responsible for all medical recommendations and hospital emergencies, he'll often ask me to reach out to a particular doctor, hospital or organization on his behalf to get the job done. I also make sure that all of the big and little things that need to be taken care of actually get done. I get emails regarding new situations from Rabbi Bender all the time – it could be 11 or 12 o'clock at night or 6 in the morning. My job is to follow up on all of these issues during the course of a working day.

Can you give us a behind the scenes look at some of the higher-level operations that Achiezer is involved with?

I am responsible for arranging meetings with higher level officials, and Achiezer works with many of them – congressmen, assemblymen, councilmen, lawyers, physicians, heads of other organizations, hospital directors, police officials...the list goes on and on. With each one, we discuss different aspects of our organization and explore ways that we can work together to help the community.

Elana Goldstein, CPA
Bookkeeper

Elana Goldstein is largely responsible for what outsiders have admirably termed "Achiezer's pristine financial reputation."

How does your work fit into Achiezer's commitment to financial transparency?

My job is to account for every dollar that comes in and goes out of our office. I work directly under our dedicated treasurer, Alan Botwinick, CPA, who reviews every aspect of the finances every single day. I know that the entire board reviews the financials often, but I'm not involved in the actual presentation. I only generate the reports.

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Our volunteers are amazing.
We often come away
with more from helping
individuals than the recipients
get from us." – Stacey Zrihen

What kind of records do you keep?

Every check that comes into our office is recorded in paper copy, as well as in our donor software. Funds earmarked for Sandy victims are kept in a separate account, which is disbursed through the CAF (Community Assistance Fund). Grant monies have their own account as well. In addition to the numerous financial reports that I generate, I do bank and credit card reconciliations every single day. It is a lot of extra work, but it's our responsibility to make sure that nothing – income or expenditure – gets lost in the shuffle.

Adina Hirsch
Bookkeeping Assistant

With the flood of donations that accompanied Hurricane Sandy, additional bookkeeping assistance became essential. Adina Hirsch fills that role.

Are you really still busy with Hurricane Sandy?

Believe it or not, I am still sending out thank you letters for the last Sandy donations. At the height of the campaign, Achiezer processed over 5,000 donations that came in online alone. And there are still new donations from generous people coming in. Aside from being properly entered into the system, each donation needs a receipt, letter, and/or acknowledgement, and Rabbi Bender is particular about personally hand-signing each one. So, yes, there is still a bit of a backlog, although it is steadily dwindling.

What do you plan to do once you finish with the Sandy paperwork?

We have begun to discuss the creation of a new database that will contain all of Achiezer's medical recommendation information in one central location. The new database will make the entire medical recommendation process more efficient, and also allow additional staff members access to this information. Ultimately, the database would enable callers to get much faster responses.

Milka Keilson
Hurricane Sandy Program Coordinator

Although Hurricane Sandy has become old news for most, Milka Keilson is still helping local families tie together many loose ends left hanging.

Are there still people asking for help with Sandy recovery?

Even now, the calls keep coming in, and the needs change as the seasons change. For example, we've recently received numerous calls from people who lost all of their Pesach essentials, or whose homes and kitchens will not be livable in time for Yom Tov. Thousands of dollars have been spent helping these families replenish these basics, allowing them to enjoy simchas Yom Tov. Basically, we keep on designing new programs as the various needs arise as well as working in conjunction with other organizations whose excellent programs meet those needs.

Do you also offer financial assistance?

While we thankfully were able to raise millions of dollars for affected families, all of the actual allocations are disbursed through the CAF (Community Assistance Fund) under the leadership of Elisha Brecher, Esq. My job is to help people who are not aware of the resources available to them register with the CAF, so that they can get the help they need.

Suri Bender
Meals 'N More Program Coordinator

The Meals 'N More program is one of the busiest and unique programs that Achiezer runs, which is all the more special because of the over 100 volunteers who actively participate in this program.

So what is this program all about?

Every weekend, starting from Thursday on, Achiezer fields calls from individuals and families of community members who unfortunately have someone



Wheelchair ramp being installed by volunteers

in the family hospitalized for Shabbos. Often, these crises occur without notice. There are several coordinators in place who are each responsible for a different piece of the program.

What happens when someone calls the office for the meal program?

It's a real flurry of activity, especially when the call comes in late on an Erev Shabbos. One email goes to me so that I can reach out to the appropriate coordinators who will arrange delivery of the food to the drop off point. One email goes to Eli Weiss, who will dispatch a request for drivers, of whom 70-plus are on standby for. Another call goes out from the office to the family to ensure that all possible needs of the family will be met for Shabbos, including physical, medical, and emotional.

These packages will contain everything from hot kugel, main dishes, side dishes, magazines, and pre-opened mouthwash bottles; these packages carry it all.

What happens if you receive a call so close to Shabbos that a volunteer can no longer drive?

We have a crew of non-Jews on staff who are available for this specific scenario. In this manner, we can field requests literally up to Shabbos.

All in all, it is amazing to have over 150 people in our community all working together, week in, week out, making sure that someone else's Shabbos will hopefully be enhanced just a little bit.

Stacey Zrihen
Budgeting and Financial Guidance Coordinator

As the primary consultant that oversees this vital department, Stacey has been instrumental in restoring the confidence, financial stability, and proper organization of so many in our community.

What role can you play when it comes to a community member struggling with getting a handle on their finances?

Typically I will receive a call from Rabbi Bender or Esther Novak letting me know that there is a client with whom the office is currently working, and they feel that I may be able to assist as well. With a background in finance, I am able to assist with budgeting and debt consolidation for people in financial difficulties or for those who may be presented with new familial situations. Many times it comes back to the basics of keeping organized files of expenditures and laying it all out and simply prioritizing the important items versus the non-essentials.

Is your help limited only to those who are suffering with poverty and limited income?

Actually, it really isn't. Many times it crosses economic lines, and I have been able to help people who are doing well financially and just need a hand revamping the finances or getting a handle on things.

Are people calling Achiezer because they know that they require this specific service?

They are RARELY calling because they know they need the service. Oftentimes this is something that surfaces during the course of a separate matter which had prompted the call to Achiezer to begin with. Very often people are doing their best and an outsider's objective look is all that's needed to lend some guidance and reassurance to their situation; and we do so with as much sensitivity and privacy as possible.

How has your interaction been with the people of our community?

Our community is amazing. Our volunteers are amazing. We often come away with more from helping individuals than the recipients get from us. I have physically gone with friends to organize people's homes, whether as a result from Hurricane Sandy, illness in the family or in certain cases some who don't have the time or resources available to stay on top of things. A lot of times other external issues may arise and getting them started is all that's needed to potentially help them in more ways than one.