

## Around the Community

# Achiezer at 13: Achiezer's Groundbreaking Financial Management Program

### Part 13 of a Series

By Rabbi Yitzchok Hisiger

Those who have read the recent series of articles marking Achiezer's 13<sup>th</sup> year are familiar with the many and varied departments of this truly remarkable organization, whose programs and efforts touch virtually every aspect of contemporary *frum* life in the Five Towns, Far Rockaway, and its environs. But there is perhaps no department or undertaking at Achiezer that is as important or far-reaching as its Westwood Financial Management Program.

And it's not because of the hundreds of thousands of dollars given out each year. Indeed, it's not just about handouts. Far from it. It's about so, so much more.

"There are times when families come in just to budget," says Mrs. Aliza Wartelsky, who leads Achiezer's Financial Management Program. "They may be earning a *parnassah*, but they need help organizing their finances. We provide that guidance – and so much more."

Hundreds of families have been helped through the Westwood Financial Management Program since its inception. Whether it's a father of six who is unemployed, a couple unfamiliar with budgeting, or a breadwinner earning a respectable salary who desires financial direction, Achiezer's Financial Management Program is there to help.

Newlyweds who are seeking advice on how to begin their marriage on a proper financial footing and prospective retirees looking to leave the workforce in a responsible fashion also find the advice they need at Achiezer.

The process begins with Aliza conducting a brief interview to get acquainted with the applicant's challenges. She can then assess the best approach to help them. Aliza pairs the families up with a financial consultant, who helps applicants gain the skills necessary to achieve and maintain financial stability and

independence for the long term. Budget counselors and certified accountants are available to guide families in maintaining control over their finances.

"The focus here at Achiezer is bringing financial planning to the forefront of the *frum* mind," remarks Stacey Zrihen, Achiezer's Senior Financial Advisor and a Certified Financial Planner. "Our services are not just for those who are struggling. We provide investment planning and retirement planning, too."

"Those who are struggling financially sometime hesitate to contact Achiezer," says Achiezer President Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender. "They say, 'I'm not making ends meet. What's the point of meeting?' But they often realize their error when they finally do come seeking advice from Achiezer. Our fabulous team of experts offers clarity, encouragement, and guidance that can be life-changing. The families learn – very often for the first time – that they are not the only ones in this situation. There are others like them. Just hearing this makes a colossal difference."

Rabbi Bender recalls one particular case of a breadwinner who was struggling to make ends meet. Achiezer met with this applicant, learned about his situation, and considered various ideas to alleviate his financial burden. After breaking down the numbers, it was determined that the person needed a few thousand dollars annually to cover his shortfall.

"We reached out to this person's boss," remembers Rabbi Bender, "and we explained the situation, negotiating a raise on his behalf. It was a true *nachas* to have been able to help someone in this fashion."

Confidentiality is of utmost importance at Achiezer, ensuring that an applicant's privacy is not compromised at any time. As a result, Aliza carefully interviews each family, learning about where they live and what they do, so that they can be paired up with a consultant who is



not from their social circle, making it a more comfortable fit.

The advice that is offered is as varied as the people seeking it. Some people may need budgeting help. Others might be looking for investment planning, as mentioned. Yet others may require assistance finding more lucrative employment or even debt negotiation. There's nothing Achiezer won't do to find some solution for each applicant.

"It's really all about empowerment," remarks Aliza. "We empower people to analyze their circumstances and have the courage to work with us to find answers. When Covid hit, many were hit hard financially, no one was embarrassed to talk about their finances, because seemingly everyone was struggling. Our goal is for people to always feel that comfort level, not feeling any stigma when it comes to receiving financial guidance and assistance."

On that note, Stacey comments that Achiezer has been devoting time and resources toward getting advice to younger clients.

"We want financial education to reach young marrieds, and even single young adults, so that they approach this stage of life prepared and informed," says Stacey. "We don't want people to be caught off guard. As a community and a nation, we prepare and educate for so many things, but somehow, so many are getting married and raising families with no knowledge of budgeting and finances."

How do people find out about Achiezer's Financial Management Program?

There are many ways. "Some have read articles about the program," says Rabbi Bender. "In other cases, a *rav* will call Achiezer and inform us of a family in his *kehillah* that is struggling mightily and can benefit from our services. Sometimes, a wife will call us and tell us what a toll her family's financial situation is taking on her beleaguered husband. For a husband and father, there's nothing harder than being unable to pay his bills.

"Achiezer is there to say that there is so much we can do to help. Indeed, there's so much that can be done through a program like ours, working with our world-class financial advisors."

Those who receive direction and counseling from Achiezer often benefit in unexpected ways.

"When a person organizes his finances and has a clearer idea of how his earnings are being spent, he can approach a tuition committee differently, knowing with greater certainty what he can and cannot afford," says Stacey. "We've seen how schools are more willing to accommodate those who have an accounting of their finances."

"All in all, Achiezer's Financial Management Program is literally changing lives on a weekly basis," says Rabbi Bender. "Financial stability impacts every component of family life, including *shalom bayis* and *chinuch*. We recognize how important *parnassah* is and will thus continue to do all we can to assist families, one at a time, with the personalized approach for which our staff is famous."