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ACHIEZER

Long Island's 311*



BY BLIMIE BASCH

It has been dubbed the “311 of Long Island,” but Achiezer is so much more than a referral organization. In the four years since its establishment, this unique organization has become the go-to number for anyone needing any type of assistance anywhere in the Five Towns and Long Island.

Proud of being a community resource center, Achiezer’s staff welcomes calls twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. On a typical “slow” day, one room will host a couple applying for financial assistance, another will find Achiezer’s founder, Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender, in deep discussion with a family regarding a serious medical situation, and a third room will have a staff psychologist guiding a woman with OCD.

A board meeting at Achiezer’s headquarters, with Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender presiding.



**The telephone number 311 is a special phone number in many communities in Canada and the U.S. that provides quick access to non-emergency municipal services or a citizens’ service center.*

RABBI BORUCH BER BENDER is a man of action, with an encyclopedic memory of medical professionals and information, and a heart larger than Long Island. Meetings, phone conversations, and a constant buzz of activity fill every moment of his days and nights. As an active member of Hatzolah and founder and president of Achiezer, he devotes himself to doing *chessed*, proactively filling the voids he sees in the community and overseeing a mammoth organization that keeps growing to meet the community's needs.

It is a calling in his bones, inherited from his father, Rabbi Yaakov Bender, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshiva Darchei Torah in Far Rockaway. A responsibility to the *klal* pulsates through their veins, propelling them to the side of any Jew in need and to the forefront of numerous initiatives that have made a difference to so many people.

Rabbi Bender's days are hectic and long. During the interview, our conversation is punctuated by numerous urgent calls and instructions to various individuals. His passion for Achiezer and all it accomplishes, and the respect he has for each person, echo in his words and actions.

"About three to four years ago, there was a feeling that there were so many organizations with specific missions, like dealing with at-risk teenagers or helping cancer patients," begins Rabbi Bender. "But 99 percent of the time, when someone had a crisis — like needing a doctor at 11 p.m. for stitches or in the event of a massive car accident — there was no go-to place to call, a central hotline for assistance.

"If someone is transported to a Long Island hospital at midnight, they don't know if they belong at that specific medical facility, if the doctors there are suited to treat their condition; they need kosher food, and a myriad other issues need to be resolved. It would mean so many phone calls and so much information-seeking, and it would have had to wait until morning.

"A few community leaders decided to

consolidate community funds and put everyone under one roof. We would have all the incredible *chessed* organizations working together under one central organization, which people could call twenty-four hours a day and get everything ... taken care of. They could get help whatever, whenever, and there would even be non-Jews on call for situations on Shabbos.

"We went to the Rabbanim of every shul on Long Island, in Woodmere, West Hempstead, Far Rockaway, Bayswater, Cedarhurst — basically everywhere. If we were going to do something for the community, we wanted to do it right and have the backing of everyone. Sixty-two Rabbanim endorsed it, and after much legwork, Achiezer was created. Achiezer has an executive board of twenty members from every neighborhood in the community and a financial board to

something had to be done.

"A woman from Far Rockaway went into a local hospital for a routine procedure, comparable to a root canal. The family was a typical, quiet family from a small shul. They didn't know to call people for help when she was not discharged after a few hours, as is normally the case.

"Two weeks after the supposedly routine procedure, she was still hospitalized because of a minor infection. The hospital wasn't equipped to deal with her. It would have continued that way, but one of her coworkers went to visit this woman and realized that she was dying.

"The hospital had no *frum* liaison, no one from the family was working with the doctors, and the family was struggling just to get rides to the hospital. I found out about this woman,

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ensure that there is fiscal oversight, in addition to a treasurer and an in-house accountant."

A Wake-Up Call

Was there a specific incident that created the feeling that something needed to be done?

"It was a combination of incidents that made people recognize that," Rabbi Bender says. "I was involved unofficially with a medical-based situation that really prompted people to realize that

and with my limited resources did research and made phone calls. We got her moved to a hospital in Manhattan. She had major surgery and passed away four days later.

"Hashem runs the world, and we don't know how or why things happen, but the doctor, a prominent physician in Mount Sinai Medical Center, turned to us and said, 'I wish I had gotten her earlier.' This was a real wake-up call. A family had needed help, and we had no idea how to help them."



Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender, founder of Achiezer, is a man of action with encyclopedic knowledge of medical professionals and other important information.

developed relationships with doctors and hospitals across the country. Any patient who finds himself in the hospital — whether he needs insurance, information on the best physicians, a transfer to another medical facility, rides to and from the hospital, babysitting, medical equipment, or anything else — can have everything taken care of with one phone call. Achiezer has a hospital support system in place for any location on Long Island.

It also has a tremendous warehouse of special medical equipment that it lends free of charge, including IV poles, pulse oximeters, and expensive equipment not covered by the less-expensive insurance policies. Each week, coordinator Eli Weiss receives between ten and fifteen requests for medical equipment.

“I view the medical referrals we provide as recommendations,” says Rabbi Bender. “When someone calls for a good doctor or hospital, we don’t just give them a referral with the information they request and hang up. First, we try to understand them and pinpoint the full scope of issues and needs. We consult with the patient’s doctors. There is a tremendous rapport we have with local physicians, and we can get timely appointments and make sure the patients’ insurance works. If their health coverage is inadequate, we get the doctor to accept them regardless, or we get them onto another insurance plan.

“People have asked us how it is possible that prestigious doctors at Anderson Cancer Center in Texas and all over America take our calls and respect us if we have only been around for about three or four years. We know less than ten percent of the doctors personally, and we don’t foster any personal relationships with the doctors, and they respect that. They view us as a community resource center, and our connections with them have no strings attached.

“We do that because it helps us retain our objectivity; when there are no

What Is Achiezer?

Initially, when Achiezer was founded, its services were hospital- and medical-related. In four years, it has mushroomed into an organization that has eleven employees and fields between eighty and 150 calls for assistance each day.

“When we began,” says Rabbi Bender, “we established that 311 aspect, that we would reach every resource: private shoe *gemachs*, a database of good doctors,

Chai Lifeline, someone good at budgeting, therapists for suicidal patients, for example. Then, tackling one step at a time, we began to take stock of what didn’t exist for the *frum* community on Long Island, like hospital liaisons. We continually get requests to create new departments to fill needs since we are a unifying force, with the office and infrastructure already in place.”

After much research, Achiezer has

relationships, we won't sway toward specific doctors. Achiezer painstakingly researches every doctor. We have a form in the computer for each doctor with minute details, including the insurance plans they accept, their bedside manner, whether they are accessible at times of emergency, if they're *frum* ... and we log every piece of feedback from people who have used their services. Then we see a pattern, and we can provide someone

“Achiezer painstakingly researches every doctor. We have a form in the computer for each doctor with minute details, including the insurance plans they accept, their bedside manner, [and] whether they are accessible at times of emergency.”



with very specific information — like ‘He is a great doctor, but you may have to wait three hours for him.’”

Crisis Intervention

As Achiezer grew, its creators realized there was a great need for resources in the realm of mental health. Many of the Rabbanim who endorsed the organization revealed that people in the community were spending a tremendous

amount of money on therapy due to unemployment, substance abuse, *shalom bayis* problems, children at risk, and other family crises. Achiezer began to provide referrals.

“The Rabbanim told us to reach out to as many good therapists and psychologists as possible,” says Rabbi Bender, “which is a challenge. We need to have the best mental health professionals who are also hashkafically


sound and will work closely with Rabbanim. But we soon realized that referrals weren’t adequate. If, for example, a woman with a recently unemployed husband and a special-needs child calls a list of six good therapists, it will not necessarily help, especially if she can’t afford to pay for their services. There is a dearth of quality *frum* therapists who will accept insurance, which is a particular challenge.

“We set up a licensed psychologist in our office. Anyone who has any sort of dilemma can meet with her. She will walk them through the crisis free of charge. Some people just need a bit of guidance, and that alone is adequate. For others, the psychologist makes an accurate evaluation of their needs, assesses the whole picture, and finds proper help for them. We will also utilize our connections to get them in at a discounted rate, if need be.

“A large part of what we have been doing is crisis management,” continues Rabbi Bender. “Sometimes a family goes into financial crisis, at which point they need food, winter clothes, jobs, and the like, or there might be domestic abuse, or a mental health or medical crisis like a tragic accident involving myriad medical issues and hospital arrangements — and the family is falling apart. We have two special bereavement psychologists on staff who go to the house or the hospital.

“When we are called to Long Island Jewish Hospital [LIJ] or any other local hospital, our Meals and More program arranges for meals to be delivered to the hospital; the medical advocacy department works out all the details for the optimal hospital, physicians, and procedures for that case; the crisis-management team makes sure that the family is taken care of; and the mental health department ensures that everyone receives any counseling they may need.

“In mental health cases, which are unfortunately becoming very frequent, we work with the children who are out of



(L-R) Rabbi Yissochor Frand, Rabbi Shmuel Bloom, former president of Agudas Yisrael of America; Rabbi Zvi Bloom, host; Rabbi Baruch Ber Bender, founder of Achiezer; Rabbi Yaakov Bender, *menahel* of Yeshiva Darchei Torah; and Rabbi Elchonon Zohn of the National Association of Chevre Kaddisha at last year’s Far Rockaway parlor meeting to benefit Achiezer.

school, the family that is falling apart, and their Rabbanim; we arrange for further long-term care through local mental health clinics, if necessary. The beauty of having so many different departments under one roof allows people to walk into our center with ease as nobody knows why they are there."

Insurance and Government Aid

Achiezer's beautiful headquarters house the only *frum* office with an insurance facilitator and enroller in the area. Anyone who has any sort of problem with health insurance coverage can have the issue resolved expeditiously. There is an astronomical number of families, many of whose breadwinners work as teachers and *rebbeim*, who cannot make ends meet. They cannot afford health insurance and need to enroll in Medicaid.

When a family needs to enroll in a government-subsidized HMO (health insurance plan), they visit Achiezer's office, where Sruli Miller, the insurance coordinator, meets with the family and ensures that they receive the necessary coverage. This year, 450 local families availed themselves of this service, and the numbers are rising steadily.

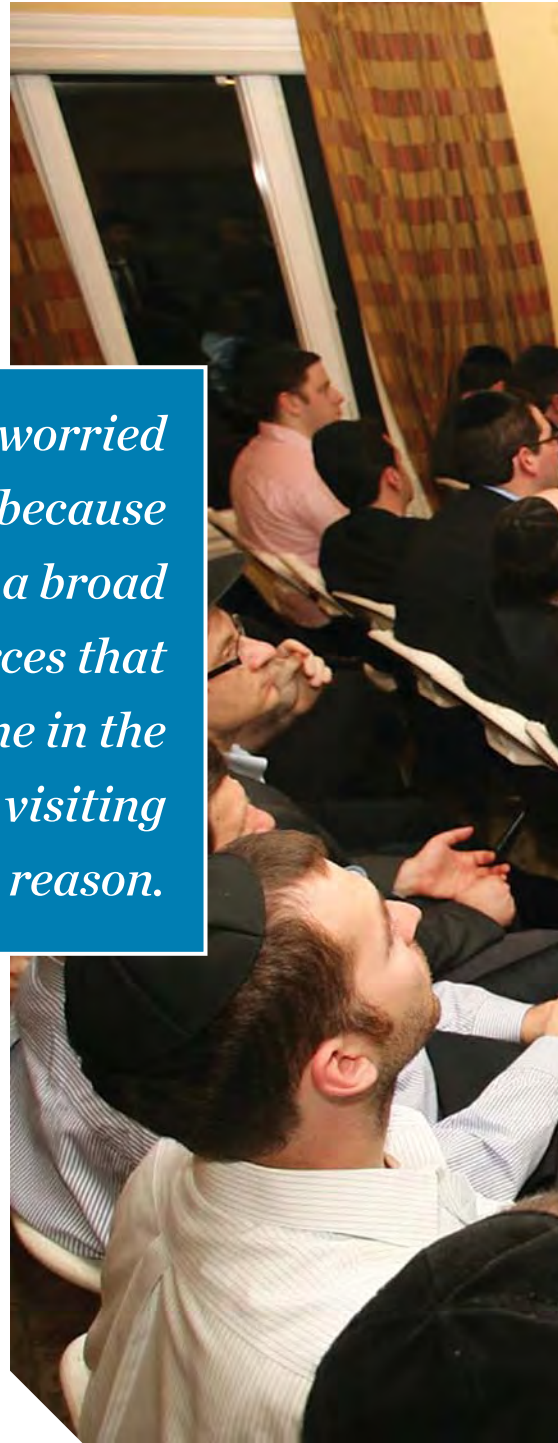
Achiezer's offices are dignified and pleasant, and recipients' confidentiality is protected. Individuals are not worried about stigma because Achiezer is the address for such a broad array of

resources that almost anyone in the community can be visiting for some reason.

Additionally, Mr. Miller will sit with the family and screen them for every government-subsidized program for which they are eligible. The family, if eligible, can leave Achiezer's office with insurance coverage (sometimes government connections are used for

Individuals are not worried about stigma because Achiezer offers such a broad array of resources that almost anyone in the community can be visiting for some reason.

immediate coverage) and the assurance that in a few days they will be receiving EBT (food stamps) benefits, HEAP to cover their heating and electric bills, and WIC checks for food and baby formula, among other services.



Sruli Miller, insurance coordinator at Achiezer, assists families with enrolling in government subsidized HMOs, in addition to facilitating any type of medical insurance assistance or crisis that may arise.

If the family needs immediate medical attention, Mr. Miller will approach Rabbi Bender, who will arrange for a doctor to see them pro bono. They will be given gift cards to local supermarkets until their food stamp account is set up, if need be, so that they can retain their dignity.



Rabbi Yissocher Frand speaks to an overflow crowd at Achiezer's Far Rockaway reception last year.

Achiezer will also connect them with people who can assist them in all areas, including budgeting, debt consolidation — even a plumber or electrician from a pro bono team of handymen to make repairs that had been neglected because of their financial crisis, such as fixing a toilet or boiler.

“It’s meshing all their possible needs together,” says Rabbi Bender. “Families get all the help they need from each of our departments. If they had to go to the many specific organizations that deal with each issue, that would have been demeaning. Everyone at our office is trained to provide callers with courteous

assistance, but our biggest focus is to maintain people’s dignity during their fragile state.”

An Endless List of Services

Achiezer’s list of programs and departments is lengthy, and new scenarios arise on a daily basis. Its staff

In one case, a couple ended up at Nassau County Hospital at four o'clock on a Friday afternoon when Shabbos started at four-fifteen. Two non-Jews on staff delivered Shabbos packages to them at the hospital.



Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski addresses the crowd at an ElderCare symposium, one of Achiezer's many community initiatives.

uses their connections with doctors and local medical examiners to have rules bent and get bodies released for *kevurah* in a timely fashion. The organization assists with *shivah* and burial arrangements, and because of its close proximity to JFK Airport and its relationship with airport officials and Port Authority personnel, Achiezer is able to facilitate arrangements when a body is being flown to Israel.

Achiezer's Meals and More program is set up to provide anyone in a Long Island hospital with a gourmet Shabbos package. They work with the local Bikur Cholim and ninety women who volunteer. Packages are prepared every week, and there are even packages ready and waiting for last-minute emergencies.

The Shabbos package includes three full Shabbos meals with more than the basics: dips, pastries, desserts, hot kugels, even flowers, tablecloths, and kosher magazines, so that Shabbos can be pleasant even in a drab hospital room. Should there be no calls close to

Shabbos, the leftover packages are distributed to poor families.

In one case, a couple ended up at Nassau County Hospital at four o'clock on a Friday afternoon when Shabbos was starting at four-fifteen. Achiezer has non-Jews on staff who picked up the packages and delivered them to the hospital.

Achiezer serves people of all ages. It recently began hosting ElderCare symposiums and programs to educate the public on the many issues involved in caring for elderly parents. Achiezer has an educational advocacy department that provides guidance for parents who have any type of educational concern about a child, and it also offers assistance in getting children into schools.

Its diabetes support network provides support groups, educational programs for parents, entertaining

programs for children with diabetes, guidance for those in *shidduchim*, a program in which those who are newly diagnosed are paired with a buddy family in which someone has diabetes, and a supplies *gemach*.

Achiezer has a pro bono legal office with fourteen attorneys who volunteer their time even though they would stand to earn a great deal of money doing regular work. These lawyers deal with those looking to modify their loans or those in foreclosure who can't afford legal assistance, and anyone else in need of legal help. Two attorneys advise Achiezer on all legal cases.

Out-of-the Box Chessed

All of the individuals involved in Achiezer work together to fill any out-of-the-box situation that may arise. Since

Achiezer is *the* number to call for any sort of assistance, these situations arise more often than not — and as they surface, Achiezer is prepared to take on the challenge.

Esther Novak, the intake coordinator, says, “Our large database of more than 220 local volunteers insures that with one call to Achiezer, anyone can get the help they need. Because our volunteers cover so many different specialties, it allows us to assist in an amazing variety of ways. For example, we have one volunteer who outfits homes for the handicapped [who would otherwise not be able to afford it].”

“Just recently,” says Rabbi Bender, “our urgent hotline received a call at eight minutes to *shekiah* that there was a family traveling from Baltimore with three young children, including a three-week-old baby, that was lost in an area where there is nothing but highway for

miles. Our two non-Jews on staff, who help in medical situations, were sent to assist. One drove the family in their car to their destination, and the other followed to bring him home.

“Another Erev Shabbos we got a call from a woman who was serving on a grand jury in Long Island, and they were not going to dismiss her to return home. She called us, and we used our connections with someone in the Nassau County legislature to have her released.”

“It’s especially heartwarming to see how people care about others,” says Mrs. Novak. “We also match up people looking to donate things like furniture to others who could use it. Just yesterday, someone e-mailed me, looking to donate a used laptop. These things seem minuscule, but in the scheme of things they make big differences to families.”

During Hurricane Irene, Achiezer’s

office became a command center that fielded fifteen to twenty calls every ten minutes. Staff members transferred more than fifty elderly, medically dependent individuals to safety and provided them with medical equipment.

“Things don’t fit into boxes. Achiezer doesn’t have official hurricane or jury-duty departments,” says Rabbi Bender, tongue-in-cheek, “but we have the mechanism in place and the ability to respond. We are there to help, no matter what the need.”



As the Jewish community on Long Island grows, Achiezer expands along with it to provide unconventional *chessed* with warmth, dignity, and boundless *ahavas Yisrael*. ■

The Achiezer office can be reached at (516) 791-4444.

(L-R:) Achiezer board members Mayer Krengle, Michael Fragin, Nassau County legislator Howard Koppel, Rabbi Baruch Ber Bender, and board member Moti Hellman.

