

Doing Chesed Smarter

Written by Elizabeth Kratz
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Teaneck—Everyone knows the proverb that we have to teach the man to fish, not just give him the fish. “But, if you don’t feed him while he’s learning, he’ll starve,” said Rabbi Avrohom Leventhal, executive director of Lema’an Achai. Leventhal visited Teaneck and Bergenfield last week in an effort to raise awareness about the 14-year-old Beit Shemesh-based chesed organization, which seeks to turn on its head the traditional notions of charity and tzedakah. Started by Oleh David Morris, Rabbi Leventhal joined the organization when he made aliyah from Baltimore in 2005.

As an example of its “smart chesed” approach, Leventhal shared a story in Congregation Ohr HaTorah about a man named Shmuel, who worked in a warehouse as a stockboy making very little money—certainly not enough to support his family with three children. He came to Lema’an Achai with a massive water bill, asking for tzedakah. “Instead of simply giving him money for the bill, we invested in his future,” Leventhal said.

To enable him to pay future water bills, Leventhal said that Lema’an Achai was able to seek a way for him to train for a better position in the same warehouse as a forklift driver. He needed assistance in changing his hours with his employer and needed funds for training, but today he is not only a forklift operator, but a manager. “We gave him what he needed to reach his potential. He doesn’t need our help anymore. Now, when he comes back to Lema’an Achai, he’s a donor.”

“This is the cutting edge of chesed. Classic tzedakah is handouts, when you give people clothing and money. It helps people for a moment, but it’s a band-aid. It perpetuates poverty,” Leventhal continues.

Using a variety of financial, educational, legal, and social strategies that are part their

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three-pronged approach of direct aid, rehabilitation, and empowerment, “Lema’an Achaim aims to bring people through and out of crisis. It’s a team effort, building long-term treatment plans,” he said.

With 35 programs and projects in place to meet a variety of chesed needs, Lema’an Achai has a professional staff of 14, comprising both part- and full-time psychologists, counselors, financial planners, lawyers, and even a team of dentists. There are also 350 volunteers, a number that grows on a regular basis. In addition to local chesed work, the organization is involved in national chesed projects. They are involved in the homefront command and in helping people who are fleeing dangerous areas. “We were also very involved in the Gush Katif expulsion,” Leventhal said.

Bergen County is a welcoming place for Leventhal to bring his message of smart chesed. “Many former Bergen County residents who have made aliyah are involved as supporters. Some of the organization’s current and former board members are Bergen County expats, including Jack Wimpfheimer, an Oleh who was a longtime president and treasurer of Lema’an Achai.

“And we have been able to assist some Bergen County residents in Israel who have fallen upon hard times,” said Leventhal. While no one should think this could ever happen to them, “it’s good to know there is a safety net.”

Leventhal shared that Lema’an Achai also enjoys strong endorsements from several area rabbis, including Rabbis Sobolofsky, Rothwachs, Stavsky, Pruzansky, and Weinberger. The organization also has close parallels with the work being done locally at Project Ezra, said Leventhal, and he hopes that as Lema’an Achai’s presence grows in Teaneck and Bergenfield, there will be opportunities for Project Ezra and Lema’an Achai to work together.

Lema’an Achai was recently given a parcel of land by the Israeli government to build a building, and is open to sponsorship and dedication opportunities. American Friends of Lema’an Achai is a not-for-profit 501c(3). Learn more at <http://www.smartchesed.org>.

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