

# IN Jerusalem

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## Smart Chesed

Breaking the cycle of poverty  
at Lema'an Achai





AN ACTIVITY at Chesed Camp. (Photos: Courtesy)

# Smart Chesed: Breaking the cycle of poverty

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When Rabbi Avroham Leventhal describes Lema'an Achai, the charitable organization he heads, he sounds like a rabbi. He quotes Rambam's eight levels of charity and emphasizes that the highest level is where the donor provides the recipient with the ability to become self-supporting.

"The Shulchan Aruch *poskens* (decides) similarly," he notes. Leventhal also quotes a mishna in which Rabbi Meir speaks of the importance of teaching one's child a trade.

Despite his pre-aliah career as a Jewish educator familiar with Jewish sources, Leventhal hardly spends all day with his nose in a book, Jewish or otherwise. When he made aliyah with his family in 2005, he retrained for a career in hi-tech.

While waiting for his first hi-tech position to begin, he sought out a volunteer role where he could apply his extensive experience with an American charity fund. In May 2006, he started volunteering for Lema'an Achai, then a small organization in Beit Shemesh. Two

months before his hi-tech career was to begin, he was asked to take over.

It was his then-14-year-old son who encouraged him to accept the leadership role, reminding Leventhal that he had been a day school rebbe for 15 years and his family was used to living modestly. Leventhal signed a six-month agreement with one huge condition. "If I'm going to take over, it has to be my way," he declared.

That was more than 14 years ago, and he's still at the helm, running an organization based on what he calls Smart Chesed.

Leventhal doesn't quote only Torah sources. He also quotes Albert Einstein, who famously said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." His 15 years spent working with an American charity fund taught him that once a family became a recipient of community charity funds, they rarely became financially independent and the need for charity often extended to the next generation. "That's how charity works. People perpetuate poverty," he noted.

"Jews are charitable, yet the numbers of poor are

increasing, not decreasing. If you continue to throw money at a problem, you're not going to solve it." That's the core of Lema'an Achai's philosophy of Smart Chesed.

Quite simply, the organization invests in people. "Our goal is a hand up, not a hand out," he explained. Quoting one more non-Jewish source, Leventhal highlighted a saying of the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu: "Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime"

## Services offered

Rather than applying band-aid solutions, Lema'an Achai helps solve the underlying problems that cause poverty by helping clients consolidate debt, manage their finances and train (or retrain) so they are eligible for more lucrative jobs.

"We want to solve the problem, not perpetuate it," Leventhal asserted. "We work to get a person to stand on their own."

The Lema'an Achai approach is comprehensive. They offer financial counseling, vocational counseling



VOLUNTEERS COME together to collect food for the families of Lema'an Achai.

and other social services.

Leventhal told a story of a typical client – a 26-year-old man working in a warehouse, making minimum wage. Despite working hard, he wasn't able to support his wife and their three children on his salary.

If he could upgrade his skills to become a forklift driver, he could increase his hourly wage significantly, but he couldn't afford the fee for the training and he couldn't afford to take a day off from work to participate in the training course. Lema'an Achai paid the NIS 1,800 for him to retrain as a forklift driver and covered his salary for the day of work he missed while attending the course.

Now he makes almost three times as much money. The following Rosh Hashana, the client returned to Lema'an Achai to make a NIS 100 donation. By investing in this worker, he went from needing help to helping others.

A third of Lema'an Achai's clients are new immigrants. The rest are Israelis, living 10% or more below the poverty line. Many are single parents.

"That's who comes to us. Our goal is to help them to stand on their own within three years," Leventhal shared.

Lema'an Achai offers approximately 30 different services in total. Naturally, critical material aid, such as food distribution, immediate assistance with critical bills, free household appliances for needy brides, holiday provisions, dental clinics and more are a priority. Lema'an Achai also works to keep people out of Israel's debtors' prison.

What distinguishes Lema'an Achai from most other charities is the array of additional rehabilitation and empowerment services, such as career and vocational planning, citizen's rights advocacy, social work services and a Single Mothers Support Network. One staff member specializes in helping clients access all the government benefits for which they are eligible.

Because Lema'an Achai deals with the whole family, they also offer services for children, such as remedial tutoring, a Big Brother/Big Sister program, bagrut preparation tutoring and summer camps.

To assist with crisis prevention, they offer financial training, therapy, support for individuals and families facing serious illness or loss and more. They even creat-

ed a thrift store where people can shop without stigma because buyers from a variety of backgrounds also shop there.

As a result of the financial impact of the coronavirus, Lema'an Achai created a new service they call the 2-for-1 Chesed Project. The staff identified small businesses, such as restaurants, bakeries and boutiques that were hard-hit by COVID-19, bought their goods and services and redistributed the food and services purchased directly to families who have also been affected by unemployment due to COVID-19.

While some of their services extend beyond their main location, currently, the organization operates primarily in Beit Shemesh. The mayor of Sderot offered them space to open a dental clinic there and they will soon be offering a mobile unit in Rehovot one day a week. The goal is to eventually expand all across Israel.

## The challenge is explaining

The Lema'an Achai model works. However, they face a significant challenge that other charitable organizations don't face. Although Lema'an Achai has helped 3,000 families, very few are willing to go public.

According to Leventhal, "The organizations that show a little girl with an empty soup bowl pull people's

heartstrings. It's so much easier to raise money to buy food or pay a bill than it is to pay for someone to take a training course," he elaborated.

Volunteers with public relations and marketing experience who are willing to help Lema'an Achai tell its story to prospective donors are most welcome, as are prospective new board members.

"It's hard to showcase what we do. Poverty is not sexy, until you meet a family where you really see the difference."

That's why Leventhal likes to tell stories, like the one about a retired couple who were unable to take their pension from their country of origin. They came to Israel and began to struggle financially.

Their adult daughter discovered they had many bottles of pills in their home, despite the fact that they had no significant health issues. The mother eventually confessed that they had little money left and they had secured the pills in order to commit suicide rather than become a financial burden.

Lema'an Achai workers determined that this couple was healthy and vibrant but had no marketable skills and spoke very little Hebrew. However, they did have a passion for a particular food-related business. The organization encouraged them and bought the necessary kitchen equipment to get them started.

"Within nine months, they were making enough to pay their bills. These are people in their 70s. It took an investment in them, but now they are self-sustaining and providing a service to the community around them," Leventhal illustrated.

## Real people with real needs

Nina Brenner is another Lema'an Achai success story.

"When I first made aliyah, I came alone with my son and we moved to Ramat Bet Shemesh," she said. "Lema'an Achai was amazing. They offered financial support and encouragement. They were really helpful in many ways. They were always there for us. I absolutely love the people that work there."

Brenner emphasized the help she got from staff member Meir Jaffe, who retired two years ago, shortly after his 86th birthday. Jaffe would accompany her to appointments in municipal offices.

"I needed that because I didn't speak any Hebrew. I never had to have anxiety about going to any of the municipality places because Meir Jaffe would always come with me. He was known and loved by everybody. He is amazing. Also Meir Crandall was always there to speak to. He's just wonderful.

"They help you with food, they help you with supplies. I mean, honestly, even more than just the actual physical help, they are just really amazing people – really warm, caring, genuinely want to help you.

"I loved going in there and seeing everybody. It was just kind of a second home. They're just super amazing people," she enthused.

Bassi Dubov of Beit Shemesh is another client who



RABBI BINYAMIN MARWICK (left) flew in from the US to run in the Jerusalem Marathon on behalf of Lema'an Achai with Avrohom Leventhal.



LEMA'AN ACHAI Team at the 2019 Jerusalem Marathon.



cannot say enough good things about the organization.

"I'm the mother of five wonderful children and two amazing grandchildren. We made aliyah about 10 years ago. Our marriage was very difficult for many years and we moved to Israel hoping for a new start. We came with a little bit of money from the sale of our home and we bought a little *makolet* (grocery store), which went bankrupt.

"We worked there for about a year, tried very hard to keep it afloat but we went into debt. Our marriage was definitely over. We were living together but apart for about two years.

"I knew about Lema'an Achai through my business because I did some charity work for them and I had a tzedaka box from them. I knew I needed some outside help. Being a fairly new olah, I didn't really have so much of a support system. I went to them, and right away I was given a really nice man, Motti (Wiesner), who helped me with my finances and try to figure things out. And then they recommended a therapist for me to help me get through my divorce and some of my childhood trauma.

"Ever since I walked into Lema'an Achai, they've been there for everything. I have a debt from this business and they've sat with me and sent me lawyers and try to help me take care of this debt, which is still not taken care of.

"My children have gone there for the dentist. They help to look for jobs, they give me monthly [help with] food, they helped me with holidays, they give coupons for my children's clothing.

"I never ever felt less than anybody there or anybody in the community. I never felt embarrassed or ashamed to come with my problems. Lema'an Achai really is my extended family. I love going into the office because everybody's always so positive and so full of love. They love me. They respect me.

"It's just an amazing organization. I don't think I would be able to be where I am now, which is in a pretty good spot, although I'm never going to be financially secure, but that's okay. I'm emotionally secure, I'm healthy, I have five amazing, strong children, and Lema'an Achai is and always will be a very big part of

my journey."

Mordechai Yoel's (not his real name) story started out much differently.

"I was an active volunteer with Lema'an Achai and a longtime supporter. I donated money over the years, and the beginning of last year, my business in America collapsed. I was on the wrong end of a \$13 billion bankruptcy. And so, I got at it. I rolled up my sleeves and I started to rebuild my business.

"It just was not rebuilding and things got worse and worse, until the point where, last Pesach, we were so overdrawn, we didn't even have enough money to get on the bus and go anywhere.

"I hadn't told anybody. Finally I pulled Rabbi Leventhal aside. I told him what was going on and that now I needed help. Rabbi Leventhal and the *Vaad* immediately went to work with financial consulting, and they helped me. They gave us money for food and they gave us money for our electric bill. Last Passover, they gave us 2,000 shekels in food cards.

"They helped us and they coached us. It took a few

months and, Baruch Hashem (thank God), I'm okay now. We have a lot of debt, but we're okay.

"You [could be] sitting next to somebody in shul and you think, 'This guy's got his own business. Everything's fine.' But you really don't know.

"I had a very good business and it happened to us. And Lema'an Achai was there, and they continue to be there. And as I rebuild my business, the tzedakah that Hashem enables me to give is going to Lema'an Achai, because of what I saw, even before we needed it, but when we needed it, they were there for us.

"I dream of the day where I can get up in front of a thousand people and tell them that it happened to me. And you don't know who it's happening to. It could happen to you also *chas v'shalom* (God forbid), but they were there for us," Yoel elaborated.

Referencing a form of the Hebrew word meaning to give, Leventhal noted, "NATAN is a palindrome. Sometimes you're on the giving end, sometimes you need to take."

#### Budget

Lema'an Achai's annual budget is approximately NIS 8.5 million. There are 15 paid staff members, many of whom work part-time. Overhead is just 15% of their budget and the organization benefits from over 400 volunteers, including dentists, financial counselors, handymen and others.

A majority of their support comes from within Israel, which, Leventhal explained, is unusual for Israeli non-profit organizations. Their steady pool of donors includes approximately 2,000 individuals.

Although they have no six-digit donors, Leventhal said that, "Some give five digits. In the last couple of years, more people really like what we're doing and we're getting more larger donors. That's where most of the money comes from. We don't get government money. We rely on donations."

Israeli donors may be surprised to learn about another aspect of the concept of Smart Chesed. Since Lema'an Achai has Seif 46 status, Israeli donors can get 35% of their donation back by filling out a simple form with Mas Hachnasa (the Israeli Tax Authority). "Only a third of Israeli *amutot* (non-profits) have this status," Leventhal pointed out.

He emphasized that his organization is "Torah-based. We have a *posek* (Jewish law guide) and a *rav* (rabbi). Nevertheless, our donors are from the whole gamut. Our staff and volunteers make up a kaleidoscope, as do the families we help.

"We have everyone working together for the benefit of the *klal* (community). People feel comfortable when they come in. We have a really nice way of working together," he concluded.

For more information, visit [lemaanachai.org](http://lemaanachai.org).



BEIT SHEMESH Mayor Aliza Bloch (in green) visits the organization.