

AN ARMY OF SUPPORT.

Chai Lifeline Volunteers Confront Global Jewish Trauma, Rising Antisemitism

By Barbara Bensoussan



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Too many parents have seen their lives turned upside down in a single moment after a devastating diagnosis or accident. Chai Lifeline, our community's premier support organization for those impacted by medical crises and trauma, was founded to help these families. But on October 7, the entire Jewish community found their lives turned upside down as the sickening news of death, destruction, captivity, and war spread across the world. The unexpected and brutal attack traumatized not only those who survived the massacre, but those who lost loved ones, endured long hours in safe rooms, fled their homes, and saw their young men called up for dangerous military service. How can our community cope with this level of trauma and disruption?

Chai Lifeline, with decades of experience responding to all forms of traumatic events, responded immediately. “We support at least 6,000 families with sick children on a daily basis,” says Rabbi Simcha Scholar, the organization's Chief Executive Officer. “Our crisis and trauma division is the largest one in the Jewish community, with hundreds of volunteers all over the world ready to help.”

As bombs rained down on towns on Israel's southern and northern borders, Chayeinu, the Israeli division of Chai Lifeline, was faced with the practical challenge of relocating patients who were in hospitals out of high-risk areas. As children were moved, their parents likewise needed to move to be near them. Sometimes the housing offered by the

authorities was not comfortable (imagine two rooms for a family of ten) or far from the treatment center. These families needed Chai Lifeline's help with meals, respite, transportation, and finances while their children continued treatment.

Rabbi Scholar had not anticipated receiving a barrage of calls from Israeli hospitals asking Chai Lifeline to move patients to the U.S. for treatment. “We have relationships with many Israeli medical centers, and they told us many of their doctors and nurses were called to the front,” he says. “It left a void for patients in treatment. We had to transfer these children abroad to allow them to continue receiving the chemotherapy, bone marrow transplants, or other treatments they had begun.” Many hospitals found their staff reduced and overtaxed. Chai Lifeline set up programs to provide respite and relief for healthcare workers as well as for families with a member in the IDF.

Help From the Inside Out “Israel is a small country,” Rabbi Scholar says. “Everyone knows everyone, and outside Israel just about everyone has friends or relatives who live there. When 1,400 people die, over 200 are taken captive, and soldiers and civilians are wounded or killed, it affects many thousands of people not just in Israel but all over the world.”

Immediately following October 7th, Chai Lifeline supplemented its regular crisis line with a dedicated 24-hour hotline for Anglos all over the world—Israel, Antwerp, London, cities across the U.S.—to help those who suffered trauma directly as a result of the war or simply found

themselves blindsided.

People were feeling enraged, shocked, anguished, overwhelmed. Holocaust survivors found themselves reliving the traumas of World War II; others coped with losing family members or feared for the safety of their loved ones. “Help me, I can't function,” some said. “My children aren't sleeping,” said others.

Rabbi Dr. David Fox, who has served as the director of Chai Lifeline's Crisis and Trauma Services for the past 20 years, enumerates some of the symptoms that characterize victims of trauma. “They may have images and thoughts they can't get out of their heads, or somatic effects like feeling restless or paralyzed,” he says. “They may feel rage or sadness. There may be behavioral changes, with former bad habits resurfacing.

“Then there are some who find themselves in spiritual crisis. They think, ‘How can I pray to a G-d who would allow this?’ At the other extreme, there are young men who refuse to leave the bais medrash for a moment.” (His teams don't give rabbinic advice, even if an interventionist happens to be a rabbi or rebbetzin.)

Chai Lifeline's Crisis and Trauma Division, 270 volunteers across the world, organized by teams reaching all segments of the community from Chasidic to Litvish to Sephardi to Modern Orthodox, so the sensitivities of each group are respected. Dr. Fox notes that Chai Lifeline can accommodate for example a Bobover Chasid asks to speak to another Bobover Chasid. On the other hand, “Sometimes a person specifically asks for an interventionist outside his own, he doesn't want anyone to know he called.”

Interventionists are trained to deal with a variety of crises, terrible diagnoses, sudden deaths, missing persons, pandemic-related problems, victims of assault, natural disasters, and war. “We did an intensive in Berlin during the Ukraine war for those running orphanages,” says Dr. Fox. “They were receiving evacuees, children disowned, abandoned or orphaned by the war.” Chai Lifeline also conducts trainings for Hatzolah members, helping deal with mental health emergencies.

To avoid burnout or sub-par service during times of overload, Chai Lifeline places great emphasis on self-care for its teams. Interventionists need to know their limits—when to step back, seek supervision, unload with peers. “It's mental hygiene, like Purell for the brain,” Dr. Fox says. “It keeps them from succumbing to anxiety or depression. We offer breathing exercises, self-awareness exercises, grounding exercises, and Zoom seminars for team leaders to discuss how everyone is doing.” The same self-care tools are offered to people who call for help, so they acquire techniques to self-regulate anxieties and

fears. “Even caressing a pet or a soft cuddly toy can be soothing and grounding for a child or an older adult who is isolated or shut in.”

Chai Lifeline has created a plethora of materials--video clips, online guides, and other resources-- to guide people dealing with trauma. They have been translated into English, Yiddish, Hebrew, French, and Italian and viewed hundreds of thousands of times. Dr. Fox writes regular columns for the Five Towns Jewish Times, NJ Jewish Link, and other media outlets and gives presentations in a broad range of communities. Chai Lifeline avails itself of social media to spread word of its resources and programs quickly and effectively.

Many people want guidance as to how to explain current events to their children. Others are unsure whether they should bring home their children who are studying or living in Israel. “We don't give advice,” Dr. Fox says. “We offer resources, we explore different options, and we tease out what's the most appropriate choice for them. In general we push for self-empowerment, encouraging our callers to be able to function on their own without being dependent on a clinician.”

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The frightening rise of anti-Israel and antisemitic speeches, demonstrations, and media are particularly disturbing to young people. College campuses have become hotbeds of anti-Jewish sentiment, with far-left professors and students chanting such vitriolic hate that students fear for their safety (and have been attacked in some). In response, Chai Lifeline rallied to help students cope, creating online materials to help them and resources for campus rabbis. Students are advised to stay positive, avoid engaging, and seek the guidance of mentors and rabbis, while campus rabbis are encouraged to provide support.

We are all doing our best to cope with the new reality that has taken shape after October 7th. The one spark of light amid the darkness is that klal Yisrael is there for each other more than ever. Chai Lifeline, from its inception a beacon of ahavas Yisrael and succor for the suffering, has risen to the challenge serving on the front lines of practical and psychological help, advocating for the sick and suffering around the clock and around the world.

For Chai Lifeline Israel crisis support and trauma resources, visit www.chailifeline.org/israel. To contact the Crisis helpline, call 855-3-CRISIS.