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Giving Credit Where Credit is Due

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Introduction

We live in a time where people seem to be obsessed with negativism. The secular media often focuses on murders and crimes. They rarely present a story dealing with some good deed or other positive situation. When it comes to Orthodox Jews, both non-Jewish and secular Jewish publications seem to delight in reporting a story that presents observant Jews in an unflattering manner. Headlines about this or that rabbi who supposedly committed such and such a "terrible deed" are not uncommon, despite the fact that in the end many of these accusations turn out to be baseless.

It is perhaps human nature to focus on the bad and take the good for granted. As Rav Avigdor Miller once said, "Did you ever hear a man who won the lottery say, 'Why me?'" One action perceived bad action overshadows a plethora of good deeds. However, it is important for the world to know that there is a great deal that is very right within the Orthodox world. Without flaunting it, we should, from time to time, point out some of the truly exceptional activities in which observant Jews are involved. Indeed, I do not believe there is any other group that can point to such a large number of meritorious organizations as the ones to be found within our communities. Below are some examples.

Hatzoloh

This is life-saving organization that encompasses the entire spectrum of Orthodox Jews, from the Hareidi/Hassidic to the Modern. Its varied Orthodox members work together harmoniously and unselfishly and without hesitation donate their time and money. Orthodox Jews know that if a medical emergency occurs, Hatzoloh is the one to call. Its members respond more quickly than other rescue services, no matter what the time of day or night.

What people may not realize is that some of the non-Orthodox public know this as well. Many years ago my youngest son fell and cut his chin. He was bleeding profusely, so Hatzoloh was called. In what seemed like a very few minutes, they were at our home treating my son. The volunteers who came stopped the bleeding. They then pointed out that, given the location of the wound, it should be stitched by a good plastic surgeon, whom they not only recommended but also made arrangements so that my son could be treated by him promptly. When we arrived, we were seen without delay, and the wound was professionally stitched. The final result was that the wound healed nicely, with almost no scar.

At the time this occurred we had non-religious, Jewish neighbors next door to us. The wife's elderly and sickly mother lived with them. There were times when this old woman needed immediate care. However, each time the city rescue services were called, they had to wait considerable time before someone responded. After seeing how Hatzoloh had dealt with our son, this neighbor told me, "The next time my mother has an emergency, I will call Hatzoloh. Their response was simply unbelievable!" This is exactly what she did when her mother had her next crisis and continued to do until her mother had to be moved to a nursing home.

Bikur Cholim

The various Bikur Cholim organizations that exist in the New York area and in other cities throughout the United States, Israel, and, for that matter, in any city that has a sizable Jewish population in the world, provide unparalleled assistance to the sick and their relatives. In the New York area there are buses that take one to the various hospitals for a nominal charge, people who visit the sick and provide them with whatever is needed, knowledgeable people who recommend specialists for the seriously ill to see, funds to help defray the costs of treatment, etc. There are even apartments near hospitals that are available for relatives to stay so they can be near loved ones who are hospitalized.

A recent ad in the Jewish Press taken out by the Young Israel of Brighton Beach Hachnosos Orchim and Bikur Cholim Program states, "Sleeping and eating accommodations are available for those needing to stay close to Coney Island Hospital or one of the many local nursing homes for Shabbos and Yom Tov. We can arrange to have some of our local volunteers visit with an ill relative on Shabbos, if you are unable to." A phone number and an email address then follow. The ad continues, "Sample our warm hospitality and help us perform these two important mitzvos at the same time!"

All of the above are provided "with no strings attached." The goal is to help the sick and their families through trying times. Nothing in return is expected, only the hope that the sick person will recover fully.

Stemming the Tide of Assimilation

Those of us who live in neighborhoods that are “bastions” of Yiddishkeit may from time to time forget that much of the Jewish world is very different. Unfortunately, the average Jew knows very little about his or her Jewish heritage. Many Jews can barely read Hebrew and are ignorant of even the most basic of Jewish concepts. I see this when I interact with the Jewish students at Stevens Institute of Technology. The same is true at other colleges.

Lack of a proper Jewish education almost always leads to intermarriage and assimilation. Indeed, time is running out for our secular Jewish brethren in America. A pamphlet put out by one Kiruv organization estimated that within 20 years there may well be almost no nonreligious **real** Jews left. Based on the present intermarriage rate, in 20 years the average person who will acknowledge that he or she is Jewish will in fact not be halachically Jewish. Something must be done, and it must be done quickly.

A time proven antidote to assimilation is the strengthening of Jewish education among the Jewish population at large. One organization making a concerted effort to do this is Partners in Torah, a division of Torah Umesorah. Similar programs are run by Aish HaTorah. Any Jew who wants to study Judaism fills out a questionnaire about what he or she wants to learn and about his or her background. Based on this, Partners in Torah finds a “mentor” who will study with the applicant. Usually, the Torah study takes place over the telephone for about an hour a week. The two people involved are called telepartners.

Partners in Torah makes it clear that no religious pressure is to be put on the people who study with their mentors. The goal is simply to intensify the Jewish knowledge of those who participate. However, more often than not, this leads to a greater commitment to Judaism. The mentors are all unpaid volunteers. Partners in Torah even covers the expense of the phone calls made by the mentors. However, many mentors gladly pay for the phone calls themselves. From personal experience I can tell you that participation in this program is well worth the effort. Anyone interested in becoming a mentor in this program should go to <http://www.partnersintorah.org/index.php> for further information.

Gemachs Galore

The number and range of Gemachs that are ready to help people are truly astonishing. The classified ad pages of a recent issue of the Hamodia listed ads for over ninety Gemachs! They list such well-known services as providing clothing for simchas at reasonable prices, use of chairs and tables to enhance your simcha, and, of course, interest free loans. However, there is much, much more. One Gemach advertises “All Alzheimer patients who want to have a car ride to go to the park, the water or to lift their spirits call ...” and three phone numbers are given. Another provides “over the counter medications needed in the middle of the night.” There is a “support group in Monsey for mothers and grandmothers of hearing impaired children,” as well as a Gemach that

advertises, “X-rays - Ladies, do you need a second opinion on the report of your x-rays? Save yourself from unnecessary biopsies at no charge.” I could go on and list them all, but let me conclude with this one: “Audio Visual Video Gemach – Live hook-ups to hospitals/home for sick relatives that cannot attend the simcha.” Can any other group of people come close to matching such a range of chesed activities? I think not.

The Clothing Store That Is Not a Store

The tale of Bobbie’s Place actually did make the newspapers. It was reported in the New York Times on March 22, 2002. The article related how one family runs a very unique children’s clothing store. Before Yom Tov a family can go to Bobbie’s Place to get lovely dresses for girls and fine suits for boys. The racks are stocked with items that any youngster would want to wear. There is only one “hitch.” The customers do not pay for anything! Less affluent families can come to Bobbie’s Place several times a year and outfit their children so that on Yom Tov they are dressed just as well as their more affluent friends. This is such a remarkable endeavor that even the New York Times realized that it is newsworthy. While those who run the store do it for the mitzvah, a byproduct is the marvelous Kiddush Hashem that the article certainly created when it was read by Jews and Gentiles.

Private Chesed

There is also the myriad of private chasodim that individuals do day in and day out without any fanfare. The members of the various Chevra Kadishe come immediately to mind. There are neighbors who supply meals for weeks to a family on their block that has undergone a tragedy. There are those who help out a family when the mother gives birth, and on and on, seemingly without end. I know of a family that davens Vosekan on Rosh Hashanah to finish davening fairly early. The father and his sons then go throughout a hospital asking Jewish patients if they would like to hear shofar. They have been doing this for years.

This summer I met a couple whose children are grown. They decided to volunteer as “surrogate” grandparents to the children of a family who do not have any grandparents. In addition, the husband goes to a local yeshiva k’tana and tutors boys who are having difficulty keeping up with their classes. All of this is done without and expectation of nothing more than the best of rewards – the fulfillment of mitzvos.

A few years ago I heard a story about a husband and wife who saw an ad taken out by a man seeking a kidney donor. Dialysis was no longer a viable option for him. His doctors told him that unless he found a donor and underwent kidney transplant surgery, his days were numbered. Without conferring with each other, the husband and wife had themselves tested. The wife turned out to be a suitable

donor, and now there is a man walking around in good health who otherwise would have faced tragic consequences.

Ignored Activities

The spectrum of activities listed above is by no means complete. There is Tomchei Shabbos, Karen Anyim, and organizations that send clothes to Israel, etc. The sum and breadth of these activities are truly extraordinary. However, they often go unnoticed or are simply taken for granted by the general public. Those who are involved in Chesed are not looking for recognition. Their approach comes from their commitment to Torah and mitzvos.

When the spotlight is shined on an Orthodox Jew, more likely than not, it is for something that is not complimentary. While it is true that all is not perfect in the Orthodox world, to focus exclusively on the negative actions of some is to present a distorted picture. Nonetheless, this lack of perspective by the media in no way diminishes the marvelous accomplishments of the Orthodox community. Truly, credit should be given where credit is due.