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READERS' FORUM

Much More Than Chairs

Misaskim is a relatively new organization that assists people at the time of bereavement. It is now very common in Brooklyn to see chairs, *siddurim* and other religious objects needed in a *shivah* house with the Misaskim name on them. However, Misaskim does much more than this. A friend of mine who is involved with Misaskim told me the following story:

He is a Misaskim volunteer and is on call one night a week. This means that when a person passes away in Maimonides Hospital in Boro Park and it seems likely that this person will not have a Jewish burial, he is called. The goal is to convince the relatives of the deceased to allow the *niftar* to have a proper Jewish funeral and burial.

Not long ago my friend, Reb A., got a call. He and another Misaskim volunteer went to the hospital. The woman who had passed away was an old Russian woman. The relatives there were also Russians. "They knew nothing about *Yiddishkeit*," Reb A. told me. "When we mentioned to them the idea of giving the woman a Jewish burial, they said

that they were planning to have her cremated. They would then bring her ashes to Cleveland, where a son lived, for burial."

Reb A. and the other Misaskim volunteer took aside two of the relatives who seemed to be the spokespersons. Each spoke to one of them about the importance of not cremating the deceased and making sure that she had a proper Jewish funeral and burial. Finally, after half an hour, they were told, "Okay, do whatever you have to do."

Immediately, they called a funeral home, and told them to come over right away. They explained what was going on. "You'd better get here as soon as possible. These people might change their minds!"

"The funeral home's vehicle was there within fifteen minutes," Reb A. told me. "The body was taken to the funeral home and everything was done according to *halachah*."

Reb A. and the other volunteer decided that they should attend the *levayah* the next day. "Who knows what the relatives would think when they saw a plain box wheeled out instead of

an ornate casket," Reb A. told me. When they got there, there was almost no one present. Reb A. and the other Misaskim volunteer, as well as some of the funeral home workers, were needed to complete a *minyán*.

Shortly after they got there, the son of the *niftares* said that he wanted to say a few words. He got up and said, "Mother, you were born a Jew in Stalin's Russia. You were not able to live as a Jew there. However, today you are going to be buried as a Jew. Everything is being done according to Jewish law."

Reb A. told me that this is the second time he was involved in such a situation. One can only imagine how many other times Misaskim volunteers have been able to insure that a person has a Jewish burial. This is truly a marvelous *chessed* organization.

Donations can be sent to Misaskim at 5805 16th Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11204.

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