



Yad EzraH
 Founded by Reb Asher Freund זצ"ל
יד עזרה

Yad EzraH: A Taste of Emunah

Gavriel Horan



Lunch time at the daycare center



Maon Tzivia – Yad EzraH's mother and baby convalescent home



40 tons of fruits and vegetables distributed each week



Delivering food for soldiers during the Second Lebanon War



Yad EzraH's Talmud Torah



Meals-on-wheels on Lag B'Omer

I wasn't sure if I'd come to the right place. There was no door plaque, nothing at all to indicate that this was the headquarters of Israel's oldest and most renowned *chesed* organization. In fact, I'd walked past this simple, unmarked door hundreds of times without a clue as to what lay behind it.

That's exactly the way Reb Asher wanted it. Simple offices. No big lights, no fancy signs, no honor, no glory. All the money should go to the people who need it the most, quietly and humbly. I had come to the right place, all right. This was definitely Yad EzraH.

I was soon going to learn that Yad EzraH is much more than a *chesed* organization.

Yes, they do deliver over 40 tons of produce to some 2,800 families all over Israel in time for every Shabbos and to over 8,200 families before Pesach. Yes, they do provide over 1,100 hot meals each day through their meals-on-wheels and soup kitchen initiatives. Yes, 500 newlywed couples are helped, each year, with wedding dowries, subsidized wedding halls, and low-cost apartment rentals. Yes, they run numerous day-care centers, a *cheder*, and a postnatal convalescent home. Yes, over 20,000 patients a year receive quality dental care at affordable prices at their clinics. And yes, we've barely scratched the surface of the vast network of services of Yad EzraH.

But that is only the **body** of Yad EzraH. The **soul** of Yad EzraH is much, much more, and it renders these numbers and details almost obsolete. To call Yad EzraH a *chesed* organization would minimize the impact that it has had on the lives of thousands of individuals and on Israeli society as a

whole. As I was about to learn, Yad EzraH is not really an organization at all. Yad EzraH is a movement.

Humble Beginnings

To understand Yad EzraH's uniqueness, we must first become acquainted with its founder, the renowned tzaddik, Reb Asher Freund, zt"l. To the masses for whom he was an angel of hope in their darkness, he was known simply as "Reb Asher."

Reb Asher founded Yad EzraH, the first *chesed* organization of its magnitude in Israel, in 1950, blazing the path for what has since become a model for all Israeli *chesed* organizations. His approach of *avodas Hashem*, based on the *derech emunah* of David HaMelech, permeated every facet of the organization, and his message is still going strong, six years after his passing.

Yad EzraH's humble beginning is now the stuff of legends. Reb Asher used to take a baby stroller to the Machaneh Yehudah outdoor market every *Erev Shabbos*, where he would wade through piles of discarded produce in search of anything still edible. When his wagon was full he would deliver his findings to desperately impoverished families, for whom he was their main source of Shabbos food.

When the owner of one of the major wholesale fruit and vegetable distributors noticed what Reb Asher was doing, Reb Asher tried to cover up for himself, wanting to do everything in absolute secrecy. The wholesaler demanded to know why Reb Asher was hiding it, and why he didn't ask for a donation, something he would gladly have given. Reb Asher replied

that he didn't want to ask for help from anyone and he wasn't looking to publicize what he was doing. This wholesaler became one of Reb Asher's main followers and from then on always gave generous portions of his stock to Reb Asher to distribute. Those market visits were the foundation of what would become a "*chesed* empire" and a glimpse of Reb Asher's humility.

Pipelines

The essence of Reb Asher's teachings was *emunah pshutah*, simple faith, brought about by heartfelt prayer and an indepth honesty emerging from one's life's struggles. Reb Asher's aim was to reveal G-d to each and every individual from their life tribulations — through the same source that Reb Asher found Him.

One student, Mr. Elihu Stone, a lawyer from Boston who now lives in Efrat, described Reb Asher as the "quintessential grandfather — with a kind face and twinkly eyes. He gave with a full heart and a smile — no one ever felt like a schlepper. Reb Asher was always quick to judge himself, and slow to judge others. He taught that each of us is a pipeline for Hashem's blessing in this world. If you open your eyes, you see that G-d gives you everything that you need, and it's your job to pass it on. Anyone can talk about it, but Reb Asher lived it."

Even the most ardent chassidim are rarely as attached to their Rebbe's teachings as the Yad EzraH volunteers are to the words of Reb Asher. In his will, Reb Asher requested that his *chaveirim* pray regularly at *mekomos hakdoshim*, and periodically go to the field to pour out their hearts to Hashem in their own words. Everyone was his friend. Yad EzraH was more

than a *chesed* organization; it was — to those touched by Reb Asher — a family. Once someone was helped by Yad EzraH, they became a part of the family, and often went on to help others.

Only when you really understand what Reb Asher was all about, do you realize that for him, *chesed* wasn't about giving for the sake of giving. It was about imparting a spiritual service to connect yourself and the recipient to Hashem. That was all that mattered to him and it is manifest in every branch of Yad EzraH.

Walking With Modesty

Reb Asher's reluctance to talk about numbers or to boast about Yad EzraH's accomplishments, was an outgrowth of his persistent dictum, that in life one's role in every endeavor is the struggle and the effort, not the final result — for it is G-d, and only G-d, Who brings about achievement and accomplishment — "*atzas Hashem he sakum*."

"Reb Asher guided Yad EzraH without publicity," one of his main disciples explains. "He didn't allow a single newspaper ad for most of the years of Yad EzraH. His main goal in all the *chesed* he imparted was not just the *chesed*. He didn't look only for money; he wanted everyone in the organization to believe that the *chesed* came directly from the Hand of G-d.

Reb Zvi "Chico" Waldman, a former Ramaz Talmud teacher and Yeshiva University lecturer-turned-businessman, who is one of the managing directors of Yad EzraH, came to Reb Asher straight from a religious kibbutz and the *hesder* system, when the organization was still relatively small. He



A workshop at the rehabilitation center



Provisions for Gush Katif evacuees in Operation Cast Lead

Reb Asher, tz"l, in his lifetime, faced many personal trials and tribulations. His unceasing *avodah*, during these trying times, brought him to embrace the *derech emunah* of David HaMelech, which he then imparted to all those in need



One of Reb Asher, tz"l's, last brachos for Rosh HaShanah preparing us for the challenging times and the Geulah Hakrovah

מסר לשנה החדשה

אנו מודים לבורא עולם על שנתן לנו ברוב טובו וחסדו את ימי הרחמים והרצון ואשר בהם ועל ידיהם נסך בנו נחת רוח. ואכן כל אחד לפי מדריגתו הרגיש באותם הימים את שלות והשראת הנפש אשר זה עצמו סימן טוב שהגאולה מתקרבת. וכך אנו ממשיכים את תקותנו שהקב"ה יגאל בקרוב את עמו ישראל ואל דמי לו יותר על הצרות והאכזבים של הגלות ועל דם ישראל שנשפך כמים במשך כל הדורות. לכן, יהיה נא כל אחד מאתנו בטוח ממש ולא רק בגדר של תקווה בלבד, שהנה הגאולה בוא תבוא במהרה, לא תאחר. ביום ההוא יקבל כל אחד את חלקו שזכה לו בעמל נפשו מן השלימות הרוחנית, ומה מאד יהיה גדול ונורא האושר המופלא של עת קץ הגלות. אהבה, אחוה וריעות תשרור בעולם, וה' מלכנו יוסיף להיות עמנו לנצח נצחים. מאווי לבי וחפץ נפשי, תקותי ותפילתי, שהש"ת ימלא כל משאלות לבכם לטובה, ויחזק ויאמץ את לבבכם לעשות צדקה וחסד ועל ידי זה תזכו להיות עדים ושותפים להגאולה האחרונה, אמנן כן יהי רצון.

אשר פריינד

used to ask Reb Asher why they didn't have a bigger building, more delivery trucks, and machinery. He felt if they were bigger they could help more families. Reb Asher responded, "I am not looking for numbers. Hashem can help better than me. Hashem does *chesed* with *tzniyus* [modesty]. We have to also."

"He didn't want to become THE *chesed* organization in Israel," Rabbi Waldman explains. "He wanted Hashem to be the first 'number' that people call. His goal was to create a *chaburah* of people who realize that Hashem is the ultimate Giver, and our giving is just a means to come closer to G-d."

Food for the Soul

"Yad Ezraah gives food for the body and food for the soul," Rabbi Waldman said. "People come for food, but what they really want is *chizuk* [strength]. Everyone needs *chizuk*. You think you're coming to volunteer, but you really come to get help. You're not helping others, you're helping yourself." The result of this attitude is that there is no stigma to being a recipient. Again and again, volunteers and beneficiaries expressed the same sentiment — they both feel totally equal. "We all need help," he said. "At the distribution, it's hard to tell who's getting and who's giving. We should never feel better than others. Perhaps my problem is bigger than his, I just hide it better."

I asked many volunteers for examples of stories of people who were helped by Yad Ezraah. The reaction was always the same: "There are so many people, where can I begin?"

There's the ten-year-old boy from a broken home, who often visits the home of one of Yad Ezraah's volunteers. The first thing she always does is feed him. She doesn't need to ask. She knows he's hungry. "He's a little lost soul," she says. Yad Ezraah took over his entire existence. They got him enrolled in a special-needs school but he was dismissed because his mother couldn't afford to pay. Yad Ezraah footed the bill.

There was an American family with seven children who were new *olim*. They were suffering from serious poverty and the father started to have a nervous breakdown. His reaction was to lash out violently against his family on a daily basis. His children were terrified and his wife was at her wit's end. When he hit her, she took the kids and fled for her life. They were all physically and emotionally traumatized, and had nowhere to go. Yad Ezraah stepped in to provide immediate social services, including physical and emotional support.

I asked one of Yad Ezraah's volunteers, Leah Farkash, for an example of normal poverty that didn't include mental or emotional duress. "There's no such thing as 'normal' poverty," she said. "Where there's poverty, there's emotional pain. Yad Ezraah seeks to give them hope and support, not just food. It's all about, 'How can I make a fellow Jew feel good?' That's how Yad Ezraah is different. The food solves the immediate need. How many meals we provide is irrelevant. The problem is that the person feels like a loser because they are needy. The emotional pain needs to be addressed above everything, but first give them some food and make them feel good. If their mental and emotional state is balanced, their financial state will improve." People who are lost and who are needy are in emotional pain. Yad Ezraah knows how to deal with emotional pain — since each of Yad Ezraah's volunteers can identify with these pains."

Shifting Focus

I spoke to a mother of two. One child has Down syndrome, the second was in and out of hospitals his whole life and recently passed away. She said, "We all have things to be happy about, and things to be sad about. The question is where we put our focus." Yad Ezraah is all about shifting the focus. That is where volunteering comes into play. Reb Asher used to match people suffering from different problems — someone with depression would help distribute food to the impoverished; someone struggling to put food on the table would help someone physically or mentally ill. Over time they all realized that everyone has problems and there was nothing for them to be ashamed of. It took away the stigma. After they receive help, they become part of the Yad Ezraah family and are able to help others in turn. One of the major donors from America who wished to remain anonymous said, "It's a very charitable way to give charity. Those who need help, help others. It's a great way to spend your money. There's no overhead. Every penny goes to help someone."



Dedicated volunteers in action



Perhaps Yad Ezraah's most unique program is the mental health rehabilitation center, Ohr Yerushalayim. Its large building in Jerusalem presently provides occupational therapy for 130 mental-health patients; the facilities include a printing press, bookbinding factory, computer room, carpentry shop, food-packaging center, as well as sewing and embroidery workshops for women. "We are probably the only rehabilitation center in Israel with such success that people with mental problems go on to get married and build families, even to become the future counselors of others," Rabbi Waldman said.

Several years ago, a young man suffered a severe mental breakdown after his father passed away. He was unable to speak despite taking powerful medication. He joined Ohr Yerushalayim and started working with the printing press producing brochures and pamphlets, even though he was unable to interact with others. Today, not only is he married and raising a family, but he is one of Ohr Yerushalayim's print shop supervisors.

From the Four Corners of the Earth

I visited the Yad Ezraah warehouse outside of peak hours. Wednesday night, this place will be unrecognizable, swarming with volunteers who discreetly help ship the products off to locations across the country in their own cars. On my visit, there were only four men working, cutting and bagging large chunks of pumpkin. It's not often you see such a diverse bunch of people. There was a chassidish *yungerman*, a middle-aged man with a knitted yarmulke, a litvishe *bochur*, and an elderly Sephardic man. People from the four corners of the

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earth were drawn to Reb Asher to help him in his mission. One of the *chaiverim* who grew up on a kibbutz in the Bnei Akiva world commented that his best friend is now a Satmar chassid! The two would have never met if not for Reb Asher.

In the soup kitchen I met an elderly woman who has been volunteering there for years. She comes late at night after the closing hour and cleans the pathway outside the soup kitchen. I asked her why she comes. "I get an inner *simchah* that touches my *nefesh* from being here," she said. "I have merited to be a part of Yad Ezraah." Once again, those who are coming to give, get as much, if not more, than the recipients.

If Reb Asher's whole message was *tzniyus*, helping people quietly and modestly without boasting about numbers and accomplishments, how then, did Yad Ezraah agree to this article? "There are so many people and families suffering today. We cannot desert them, but we no longer have the means to help every needy family or individual that comes to us," Rabbi Waldman said. "It's an *'eis la'asos l'Hashem* — a time to do for Hashem." Drastic times call for drastic measures. With today's economy everyone is feeling the crunch. Donors who gave generously in the past are unable to give as they used to. But no matter how hard it is for the benefactors, the recipients of Yad Ezraah feel it more. They have nothing but their pain.

"Maybe someone reading this article will hear the pain of these families and will want to join us in easing their afflictions." Maybe someone will hear the message of Reb Asher and will identify with him and will want to join the movement.

YAD EZRAH ACTIVITIES

Food

Shabbos food distribution
Simcha catering
Meals-on-wheels
Pesach food distribution
Soup kitchen

Life Cycle

Hachnassas Kallah grants and loans
Wedding dowry
Three wedding Halls
Apartment rentals
60-bed postnatal center
Day-care centers
Talmud Torah and special ed programs

Health

Dental clinics
Rehabilitation and guidance
Occupational therapy workshops
Recreational club
Supervised living quarters
Hospital visits

Times of Distress and Crisis

First-aid networking and directory
Acheinu Gush Katif
Aid to Lebanon War victims
Sderot-Under-Fire program
Kids at-risk