

'Life in Israel is complex at the best of times, so imagine it in English'

How a new organization is helping English-speaking olim with their daily hardships

• By MOSHE ARENSTEIN

The Kaufmans (a pseudonym), a typical immigrant American couple, were thrilled to be the new parents of twins – until the babies had to deal with an emergency medical crisis. Overnight, the Kaufmans plummeted into the confusing world of the Israeli health care system, unable to decipher Hebrew medical terms. With no family support, the crisis threatened to drown them.

A neighbor suggested they call Chaim V'Chessed.

The brainchild of Rabbi Paysach Freedman, Chaim V'Chessed has a simple goal: to ease the task of navigating life for English speakers in their new country. The organization is staffed by experts who are equipped to provide English speakers with the answers, advocacy and guidance they so desperately need, from the most critical – even life-threatening – issues to the obstacles inherent in just getting through each day.

"It's challenging to live here as an English speaker," says Freedman. "We believe that no one should need to navigate this challenge alone. Now, with advice and assistance available in practically every area of life, it is our hope that no one will."

Freedman has been involved in education, *tzedaka* (charity) and *hessed* (deeds of kindness) activities for most of his 19 years as a Jerusalem resident. His work on behalf of the English-speaking community has provided him with extensive knowledge of the Israeli system and vast experience in dealing with the most sensitive of cases. Rabbi Freedman wanted to create a one-stop hessed organization to service them. In 2014, with the encouragement of community leaders, he founded Chaim V'Chessed.

"Life in this country is complex at the best of times", says Freedman. "It's a country full of red tape and constantly changing policies, confusing medical terms and inflexible systems. For English speakers, these challenges are further compounded: Language barriers, cultural differences and lack of connections make day-to-day complexities all the more difficult. When crisis hits, the challenge can escalate from difficult to nearly impossible."

So when Freedman got the call from the Kaufmans, he sprang into action. "The first thing he did," recounts Mr. Kaufman in a testimonial on the company's website, "was meet us at the hospital with a tray of baked goods." Freedman then set to work arranging for a cadre of medical volunteers to be at their side for the entire journey – explaining medical jargon and diagnoses, advocating for them in the hospital and assisting them with transportation, meals and any and all areas of care that they could possibly need.

Since their launch in July, Chaim V'Chessed has been operating a 24-hour-a-day hotline. The staff is comprised of eight paid professionals and a dedicated corps of volunteers.

CASES ARE varied.

"We have, for example, a woman whose teenage kids have special needs," says Freedman, "and all her documentation from the US is in English. She had to



RABBI PAYSACH Freedman helps a family navigate a late night crisis. (Courtesy)

convince the school in her town to accept her kids, but they refused to accept the English documents. Our expert went with her and appeared in front of the committee to help them get through the process."

"Another case, on the first day of school, a kid was placed in a special education school, but the bus company hadn't been notified by the municipality. The mom was lost in the bureaucracy, so we made phone calls to city council members who took care of it."

Freedman relates another case, where an *oleh hadash* (new immigrant) needed to take a special medication every day. He signed with one *kupat holim* (health fund) only to realize later that it doesn't cover that medication. When he wanted to switch to a different clinic that would cover him, he was told he needed to wait a six-month grace period. He was stuck in a bureaucratic limbo. He called us and we proved that as an *oleh* he can immediately switch without waiting the six-month grace period.

"While many of our clientele have been Orthodox, we serve English-speaking Jews of any affiliation."

Chaim V'Chessed has prepared comprehensive guides on dozens of aspects of life in Israel, from "How to Buy an Apartment" to "How to Obtain a Visa." The company's services include hospital assistance, like last-minute appointments, arrangements for food and lodging for family members; medical assistance such as advice on *kupot holim*; guidance while in bereavement; help with evaluations, testing, therapies, grants and program options in the field of special education; advice for women experiencing complications related to pregnancy and infertility; welcoming a new baby with information regarding *Bituah Leumi* (National Insurance) – and dealings with government offices, such as the Interior Ministry.

Freedman takes pride in recounting how his team prepared before they opened the hotline.

"We had a team of personnel identify every possible area of difficulty. We then set out to research each area

– what the most common issues are in these matters, which existing organizations serve a particular field, etc. We compiled a tremendous amount of information, much of which we are now preparing for publication. But more important than simply compiling data, we learned the ropes of each area, who the go-to people/organizations are in each area and how to navigate them. We established contacts with all the key players.

Freedman experienced some of the hardships himself when he came to Israel.

"I have been living in Israel since my marriage in 1996. Even though I spoke decent Hebrew, issues such as *kupat holim*, *Bituah Leumi* or even dealing with less-than-honest stores or companies were always challenging."

"Living here for 19 years as an Anglo immigrant and being involved in various communal organizations, I witnessed firsthand the difficulties which Anglos – be they olim *hadashim*, veteran olim or foreigners living here for a short time – experience. Life here, and certainly local bureaucracy, is complicated for anyone. Those who know the language less and who are less familiar with the culture are at an even greater disadvantage."

Freedman decided to help those in need. "We realized that a little (or sometimes a lot) of help from people who 'speak your language', literally and figuratively, can go a very long way to making members of this community feel cared for."

Freedman had a long career of communal work prior to Chaim V'Chessed. He established the Center for Jewish Values, an organization that promotes *mitzvot bein adam lehavero* (the Torah's guidelines for interpersonal relationships). He also founded and serves as dean an institute that offers courses for American students in yeshivas here. The courses are recognized for college credit in the US, thus allowing Americans to earn credit towards their degree while studying here.

But now his focus is on Chaim V'Chessed.

Freedman is careful to emphasize the differences between his organization and the Immigration and Absorption Ministry.

"The people from the ministry are there to provide you with information and rights. So, by definition, they are not there to help you. Similarly, *Nefesh B'Nefesh*, does great work, and they can provide lots of information for newcomers. Still, I don't know if they will intervene, physically, or call a municipality for an issue you may have. We are hands-on; we actively lobby and advocate for olim and foreigners here."

Freedman is diplomatic when asked how the local culture is different from the American one, in terms of seeking help. "It's wrong to stereotype, so I won't make any blanket statements regarding any group on either side of the cultural divide," he responds. "But suffice it to say that we have never encountered a skeptical audience when describing our activities. Every Anglo identifies with that feeling of being an outsider, of not knowing how to deal with X, Y or Z, and of having no one to turn to."

We are here to provide an address for them."

<http://chaimvchessed.com/> ★

