

The Art of Making the Impossible Possible

By Rabbi Avrohom Birnbaum

A LESSON LEARNED

I am not a Satmar chossid by any means. I am far from it. Being stranded with some 80 Jews, among them several Satmar chassidim, atop Killington Mountain in Vermont last week, however, gave me reason to become a chossid of at least one aspect of their worldview, an aspect that I would like to share with my readers. Not just as a token of hakoras hatov to them for all that they did for my family and the 18 other stranded families, but rather because I think that there is much that we, as a community, can learn from them.

KOL HASHEM SHOVER ARAZIM!

Boruch Hashem, our rendezvous with Hurricane Irene ended with our arrival home early last Wednesday morning, absolutely exhausted, but exulting in Hashem's kindness after witnessing the absolute devastation and destruction wrought on the state of Vermont.

It is impossible to describe what we saw as we left central Vermont, other than that it looked like a war zone. Roads were literally "bombed" out, with massive chasms along both sides of every road, and ripped-up, twisted pavement and metal guardrails spilling into raging rivers. We drove in the middle of those roads on what had once been the two yellow lines, terrified that one wrong move, one turn of the wheel or shifting of the already puckered pavement, would bring us in direct contact with those raging rapids.

We saw houses and cars floating downstream. It was heartbreaking to see local residents sitting outside what had once been their houses or farms, shell-shocked as they watched their possessions, their life's work, literally swallowed up before their eyes. They were helpless.

Nothing they could have done would have prevented that.

Kol Hashem shover arazim!

ACTION, NOT HANDWRINGING

Let us, however, return to our Satmar friends. They were by no means the majority in our group. They were just a few families, but as soon as it became clear that the situation was dire and it was conceivable that we would not be leaving for a few days, they sprang into action.

While the rest of us were engaging in handwringing and speculation as to what our plight would be and when the authorities would release us, they were working the phones.

"Look, we don't have enough food," one of them told me. "We have to figure out a way to get food flown in. We can't very well let families, especially families with small children, have little or nothing to eat."

About two hours later, while I was contemplating how to stretch some oatmeal and peanut butter to last a few days, they told me with a sense of pride that "by tonight, a helicopter would bring us *'kol tuv.'*"

That is exactly what happened.

CHANGING THE FOCUS FROM IF TO HOW

How did they do it?

It was a combination of factors. Perhaps the first crucial factor was a deeply ingrained devotion to *chessed*. They have been hardwired to do whatever possible for those in distress. It is their default button, almost part of their very DNA.

The second factor is a different approach to life and serving the public than that which we are accustomed to. The basic working premise that my newfound Satmar friends displayed as soon as the problem crystallized was, "There is a solution to the problem." End of sentence.

We will solve the problem with Hashem's help. The question is only how and how much money and work it will involve.

Their phone calls led them to the Chessed Shel Emes organization, which has connections to the Coast Guard and FEMA. They worked government channels and got permission to fly to Vermont and land a helicopter on Killington Mountain. When it became clear that they could not get a government helicopter, they simply paid for a private one.

How did they accumulate enormous amounts of food in a matter of hours? Simple. Chaverim of Kiryas Yoel and others circulated numerous businesses in Kiryas Yoel, Monsey and Brooklyn, seeking donations. The special *Yidden*, the proprietors, gave *beyad rechavah*, with a generous hand.

"People are stuck? Of course we will help them!"

Again, their hardwired DNA kicked in.

The entire effort, from beginning to end, was donated. Chessed Shel Emes, Reb Isaac Lieder and Chaverim did not ask for a penny. They did not want anything in return. They just saw a need and filled it.

They transformed what we saw as impossible to possible. Why? Because for them it was never impossible. The question was not, "*Can* we do it?" but rather, "*How* can we do it?"

About 40 miles away from us, there was a *frum* camp that was also stranded for two days due to Irene. Although the camp was not a *chassidische* one, they, too, were eventually in contact with Chessed Shel Emes as well.

According to Rav Yaakov Yosef Rosenberg of Chessed Shel Emes, if not for the fact that they got out the next morning, Chessed Shel Emes would have brought them food too, no questions asked.

THE QUESTION: WHY?

The reason is that their default button is set to make possible the impossible. Those communities have entire networks of organizations in place to help with such eventualities. Why, when you are a recipient of their *chessed*, do they give you the feeling that they are happier to be performing the *chessed* than you are to receive it?

Perhaps the answer lies with the great *gaon* and *tzaddik*, the Satmar Rov, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum *zt"l*. One of the foundations that he literally hammered into the mindset of his *chassidim* is that *chessed* must be done, no questions asked.

It does not matter who the recipient is or if his ideology is different or even opposed to yours. If he is a fellow *Yid*, you must drop everything to help him. The Rebbe insisted that young children and *bochurim* go around collecting funds for *tzedakah* so that they will understand how it feels to collect and they will be imbued with a culture of giving. There is still no Bikur Cholim organization that can compete with the size and scope of the Satmar Bikur Cholim. That deeply ingrained feeling of responsibility for Jews, especially Jews in difficult situations, is where so much of their creative energy is channeled.

The amazing results, as well as the contrasts with other cultures, are clear.

DEALING WITH THE HOW...AND MAKING IT WORK!

Even with regard to *mosdos* and educational institutions, Satmar, as one of the fastest growing populations, possesses many of the same demographic challenges that other *frum* communities experience. They have a burgeoning population and the *mosdos* have a hard time keeping pace with the demand for classroom space. Again, the question is not, "Can we keep up?" The answer is already a resounding, "Yes!" The only question is, "How will we do it?"

Recently, a friend related how a family he knew moved to a certain New York community and the school that he wanted would not accept his son, not because he was unqualified, but because there was no space. The child was out of school for the first few weeks. He tried everything, but all doors seemed closed. Eventually, someone put him in touch with a principal of a Satmar school.

"Your child is out of *cheder*?!?" he asked incredulously. "Come down right away!"

The father came down with his son and the principal greeted the child with a wide smile.

"Hello Moishle*!" he said.

Without even going to his office, he walked Moishle to a classroom, opened the door, and exclaimed, "*Kinderlach*, there is a new *yingele* in *cheder*!"

He did not even check if there was an extra desk in the classroom. That detail could be worked out later. First and foremost a child had to be in *cheder*. Only later did he accompany the father to the office and take down his information.

To that *menahel*, the question was *how*, not *if*.

Perhaps it is time to emulate this Satmar approach to public service and *chessed*. Perhaps it is time to train our youth - and adults - to give unconditionally, to love to give, to desire to give, to take pride in giving.

You don't have to be a Satmar *chossid* to be a *chossid* of Satmar *chessed*. Let's try it!

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