

# THE HESED MODEL

## Jewish Community Welfare Centers in the Former Soviet Union

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*First developed in 1993 by American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, there are now 145 Hesed Centers throughout the Former Soviet Union that provide a wide range of social services. Founded on the pillars of community, voluntarism and yiddishkeit, the Hesed network is the largest and most effective of all welfare services in the FSU, whether governmental or private.*

The word "Hesed" was officially added by the Russian Academy of Languages to the Russian language in March 2000. It is defined as the "provision of social services with special compassion." This addition testifies to the profound impact of the network of Hesed Centers not only on the Jewish community but also on the general social services and communal landscape in the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

First developed in 1993 in St. Petersburg by professionals of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in response to the multifaceted unmet needs of elderly and disabled Jews, the Hesed model has grown and multiplied into a movement. From Murmansk on the Barents Sea to Vladivostock on the Sea of Japan, throughout the European countries in the West to the former republics of Central Asia, there are no Jewish communities of any size that are without a Hesed center. Such centers exist in the cities with which we are all familiar—Kiev, St. Petersburg, and Minsk—as well as those that very few have heard of: Taganrog, Tcherkesk, and Yesintuki. The Hesed network constitutes the largest and most effective of all community welfare services in Russia and its former republics.

Hesed centers are ethnically based non-profit welfare services and, like many services of this kind, have their roots in religious traditions. Charity, tzedekah, has always been a central aspect of Jewish communal life. Assisted by donations from their more affluent members, Jewish communities for centuries maintained an elaborate network of voluntary services, such as free loan societies, burial societies, home visiting for the sick, and orphanages. A similar network provided social services to the Jewish settlers prior to the establishment of the State of Israel and the development of state welfare services (Spiro et al., 1997).

Social services in Eastern Europe also originated in voluntary organizations, but following the 1917 revolution a social net was created by the state in the Soviet Union. It functioned as a highly compartmentalized system of social control, as non-government organizations were either nationalized or closed down. In some cases they managed to continue clandestinely. Only after Perestroika did they begin to re-emerge (Solovyov, 1998).

Hesed centers were established as a part of this awakening. Like other non-profit organizations, Hesed centers complement and sup-

port services given by the state. But while in other countries such organizations develop in the course of a gradual process by which established welfare concepts and strategies are transferred to the nonprofit sector with partial state funding, Hesed centers were established in a social, economic, and professional vacuum. The first Hesed centers stepped in when the state collapsed and was practically incapable of providing for its needy citizens. No state funding was available, social work as a profession did not yet exist in the FSU, nor did advanced welfare provision models. These circumstances render the Hesed model especially interesting.

The aim of this article is to describe the Hesed model in the hope that other welfare communal services can benefit from its experience. Taking Hesed Avraham in St. Petersburg as an example, we point out the socio-political circumstances in which the model came into being, delineate the principles on which it is based and its development, and review its status at the present.

This study is part of a larger research effort undertaken by a team of JDC professionals and faculty and students of the Social Work Department of Ben-Gurion University (BGU). The senior author launched the Hesed model when in charge of the JDC welfare program in the FSU, and the other JDC professionals were involved in different aspects of its development. The BGU partners acted in this project as researchers and participant observers.

### **THE NEW SOCIAL DISORDER IN THE FSU**

The "Russian Revolution" of December 1991 brought about the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new social disorder. The rigid political, economic, and social order that had prevailed until that time collapsed in silence without giving birth, as Marxist theory might have predicted, to a new social order (Yergin & Gustafson, 1993). Instead, the former Soviet Union entered a state of chaos, which left the population without any meaningful social safety net (Yakovlev, 1996).

Prior to the collapse of communism the state had provided a relatively stable social service system that took care of virtually all the physical needs of the population, more or less effectively, from birth to death. The collapse of the totalitarian state and the disintegration of the ideological, institutional, and economic foundations left a serious vacuum in each of these areas, with far-reaching consequences for the population as a whole and the elderly in particular.

The fall of communism brought about the end of an all-embracing ideology and created a spiritual void. For many Jewish elderly, who in their youth willingly or unwillingly, had converted to communism and rejected or abandoned their Jewish religion and traditions, the void was particularly acute. Many of them also became isolated, physically and socially, when their children immigrated to the West or moved from the periphery to big cities. Health and welfare services—delivered from hospitals, polyclinics, and social security departments—deteriorated rapidly, and the state was no longer able to provide social protection and medical care (Barr & Field, 1996; Borodkin, 1997; Chernichovsky & Potapchik, 1999). Rapid inflation and the rising cost of services formerly provided free of charge followed the transformation from communism to free market economy. Inflation obliterated all personal savings, and government salaries and pensions were insufficient and paid late as a rule. The elderly were hardest hit by the economic crisis (Avgar et al., 1997; Papidus, 1995).

In light of all these problems there was an urgent need for a social safety net and grassroots structure to meet the economic and social needs of the deprived, impoverished, and socially isolated Jewish elderly. The American Jewish community, through its overseas arm, the JDC, met this challenge.

### **JDC IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION**

JDC has a long history of involvement in the territories of the FSU both before and after the Communist revolution. It was evicted during Stalin's rule and then officially invited

to re-enter the Soviet Union 50 years later, in 1988. Its first contributions were nonsectarian: a contribution of 750,000 syringes for insulin and a gift of \$10,000 to the Soviet Children Fund in 1988. A year later, in 1989 when a disastrous earthquake shook Armenia, the JDC donated \$530,000 to the Soviet government to create a rehabilitation center for children in Leninakan, Armenia. In addition, it flew 61 amputee victims to Israel for rehabilitation treatment. These contributions were made well before systematic planning and implementation of welfare projects within the Jewish community began (Elishevitch, in press).

JDC's welfare strategy within the Jewish community was derived from its overall mission and was based on the following principles. Welfare assistance was perceived as a lever for community building and Jewish revival. Its aim was to establish and strengthen local institutions, mobilize volunteers, and develop training frameworks and activities. Although in principle, the JDC assistance was aimed not at short-term relief but rather at long-term community recovery, the immediate needs were too pressing to be ignored, and by the end of 1990 JDC decided to implement food relief programs.

In anticipation of the winter of 1991–1992, thousands of food packages were shipped from Israel to St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa. A great incentive for the further development of Jewish welfare services in the FSU came when the JDC received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to deliver 550,000 non-sectarian food packages in Moscow and St. Petersburg. JDC was the most successful of all non-governmental organizations involved in food distribution in the FSU. Compared with other organizations it had no logistical problems and a much lower rate of food loss.

JDC undertook this project after the USDA agreed to allocate 10 percent of their shipment for distribution within the Jewish community. Not only did Moscow and St. Petersburg Jews receive 55,000 extra food packages but also a hidden agenda was achieved. The food distribution became an excellent way to organize

and strengthen the local Jewish welfare organizations. Twenty-five thousand names of needy Jewish elderly in Moscow were recorded from the USDA project and the database was started. Food became a vehicle to gain access to homes of elderly Jews and assess their needs. It became evident that elderly people lacked not only food but also many home services and were suffering from terrible loneliness. JDC therefore decided that community-based social welfare services for the elderly should be developed. These services would be able to reach people in their homes and become a vehicle for re-engaging them and their families in Jewish communal life.

### **HESED AVRAHAM AND SARAH: THE MODEL AND THE BEGINNING**

“Welcome to Hesed Avraham, the largest non-government welfare service in Europe” was the greeting that one of the Hesed executives extended to our group of students in Spring 2001. Indeed, with over 42,000 clients (almost all the Jewish elderly in St. Petersburg), 900 volunteers, and 300 employees on its books, Hesed Avraham may rightfully claim this title. But the beginning was much more modest.

The development of the Hesed model entailed the introduction of new concepts and values into the social reality of the FSU. Deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition of tzedekah and social justice, the model promoted social responsibility and mutual support. Contrary to previous Soviet patterns it addressed not only material and instrumental concerns but also psychosocial needs of the clients. The model was also novel in that it was client-oriented and emphasized the Western social work values of clients' participation and empowerment. Because of the revolutionary nature of these concepts, it was decided that an exemplary service, a Hesed center, should be built by the JDC in St. Petersburg. It was hoped that once the success of the model was demonstrated in St. Petersburg, it could be replicated in other communities.

**Community, voluntarism and yiddishkeit** are the three pillars of the Hesed model. Its *raison d'être* is to provide care within and for the community, and since its inception it has incorporated a communal outlook into its welfare programs. It is aimed at strengthening the local Jewish community in that it belonged to it, not to any of its specific sectors and not to the JDC.

Volunteers are recruited from the community and from among the potential clients themselves. Under communism, voluntary organizations were disbanded, as they did not fit with the ideology that the government provided for every citizen's needs. Those who grew up under the Soviet regime had no notion of the positive change they could affect, for the less fortunate and for themselves, by joining forces with others and donating their time and efforts. Voluntarism and community orientation are now recognized by FSU specialists as a basic tenet of welfare provision (Borodkin, 1997), but most charitable organizations in the FSU continue the paternalistic approach of distributing material aid to passive recipients of help. Only a few base their strategy on the assumption that "people can help themselves" (Pshenitsyna, 2000).

Yiddishkeit is the third pillar upon which the Hesed model is built. To achieve JDC's overall goal of returning Jews to the Jewish people, Hesed services and activities accentuate Jewish heritage, culture, and traditions; for example, food packages contain items related to major holidays, and the cultural activities of the Hesed are centered on these holidays. This emphasis on ethnicity, religion, and the return to traditional roots is another revolutionary notion of the Hesed. However, the Jewish community is by no means the only one to be revived in the post-Soviet society, and many other ethnic and religious groups are now thriving in the FSU (Markowitz, 2000).

The uniqueness of the Hesed model—the community solidarity, the blurred boundaries between volunteers and clients and its Jewish spirit—is perhaps best illustrated by the following account of a recent volunteer in Hesed

Avraham.

Olga brought her mother to the Hesed for help. When her father died, the two women were ill provided for and depressed. Olga was fired from her job, their economic situation deteriorated even further, and she would "sit home doing nothing and crying all day long." Her mother was eligible for food assistance and started visiting the day center, which she enjoyed very much. But Olga was still home crying until her mother asked the day center coordinator whether Olga could volunteer at the Hesed. Now Olga volunteers at the Hesed once a week. She says, "We both love it here and mother says that the Hesed was sent to us by God. People are nice and friendly." When asked about what keeps her going, Olga answers: "The results. A woman broke her leg. I helped her get all the medical documents she needed and she received a walking cane. It felt so good to participate in helping someone. The elderly people here are very lonely, they suffered a lot, some have lost their children—their situation couldn't be worse. But, when they come to the Hesed they forget their troubles a little and feel well." Olga is now looking for a job, and would like to work for a Jewish organization. "I am glad to be helping Jews; they are my people. Once I thought that all Jews are kinder than others. Now I realize that maybe not all, but I still think there is a special concentration of kindness among the Jews."

The first Hesed was established in St. Petersburg in 1993 in a hastily restored building with five employees and twenty volunteers. Food programs were a primary vehicle for development of the Hesed, but since many of the first volunteers were physicians they offered to call on the ill and disabled patients in their homes. Medical consultation and home care came to be a part of Hesed Avraham, and subsequently of all other Hesed centers. An Israeli organization, Yad Sarah, donated desperately needed rehabilitation equipment for the elderly, which was rented out to the disabled. One of the founders recalls: "When we rented out the first wheelchair, the daughter of

the woman who needed it objected furiously. She said that her mother was bedridden for eight years and now she would be able to move and would be in her way. We managed to convince her and when the mother sat in the wheelchair, there were tears on both sides."

Later, a number of retired engineers offered their services, giving birth to the home repair service and a rehabilitation equipment production center that now serves all Hesed centers. Over time the services expanded to include a variety of educational, religious, and cultural activities. Everything was done to create a warm and informal Jewish atmosphere in the Hesed, in contrast to the grimness and stiffness of the state social services.

The first director of the Hesed was an Israeli, but by the end of the first year a local director was appointed from among the original five employees. He received ongoing mentoring from JDC professionals and has grown with the Hesed to become one of the prominent leaders of the Jewish community in St. Petersburg and the FSU. To initiate a process of community partnership and eventual transfer of responsibility for the Hesed to the local community, a board of directors was created that drew its members from various sectors of the community. One of the JDC professionals recalls: "The first chairman of Hesed Avraham board was the late Prof. Lev Gulo, a renowned specialist in geriatrics. He was not only a representative of the Jewish community but also contributed to the Hesed his extensive professional experience. His death was a great loss. But, now we have a Gulo on the Hesed board again, his son, also a physician, who is continuing the family tradition."

#### **SERVICES PROVIDED BY HESED AVRAHAM**

The centrality of voluntarism is striking on one's very first encounter with the Hesed. Volunteers are the first Hesed representatives that new applicants encounter since they staff the reception desk and are involved in the intake procedure. Volunteers even sit in on the eligibility committee that decides the ser-

vices for which the new applicant is eligible. And those on the feedback committee keep in touch with the new applicants to make sure that they receive the services and are satisfied.

Ongoing economic hardships have diminished little since the establishment of the Hesed and make food provision a central part of its activity. In St. Petersburg the Hesed runs 14 communal dining rooms where hot meals are served to the elderly every day; 178,000 meals were served in these dining rooms during 2000. Food packages that are distributed several times a year and winter relief, which includes heating and cooking fuel, blankets, and arm clothing and footwear, are still indispensable. In 2000 over 128,000 food packages were distributed.

As in the beginning, food distribution goes hand in hand with strengthening the community. For example, food packages are distributed around Jewish holidays and include food and other articles related to the holiday; for example, apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah and matzoh on Pesach. Picking up their packages, clients arrive at the Hesed and receive information about it. Their children are encouraged to collect the packages for them, which is an opportunity to draw younger people and children into Hesed activities. Volunteers and pupils of the Jewish school bring packages to the home of elderly who are bedridden.

A major Hesed service is home care, which is offered regularly to disabled elderly by 300 employees. Volunteers also visit these clients to keep them company. Other services include (1) a repair workshop where volunteers repair small electric appliances and do house repairs, (2) medical consultations, and (3) subsidized medicine, eyeglasses, and hearing appliances. Meals are delivered daily to confined clients in the "Meals-on-Wheels" project. A "Club-on-Wheels" is a social program for those confined to wheelchairs. Once a month they are driven to the Hesed day center for activities or tour the city and its numerous museums.

A project that perhaps exemplifies best the Hesed model and impact is the "Warm Homes" program. To bring the Hesed atmosphere to

those who cannot come to the center, mini-Hesed centers were created in volunteers' apartments. At the present 47 warm homes operate in St. Petersburg daily; 20 of them serve hot meals and thereby make food assistance accessible to elderly who are not strong enough to make a daily trip to a community dining room. The food is a vehicle for creating a support network and community spirit: members keep in touch with each other, visit each other, and care for their ill peers. Shabbat and Jewish holidays are celebrated in the warm houses, as are birthdays and other personal anniversaries. Many members bring their grandchildren and children to these celebrations. Thus, warm homes not only make essential services accessible to needy clients but they also enrich and strengthen Jewish community life.

#### **ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Hesed Avraham is still the largest of all Hesed centers and the originator of many of the services offered in them. The rapid and successful dissemination of the Hesed model is truly amazing. Within the first year of its existence the one model Hesed center grew in 1994 into a network of 8 centers, 16 in 1994, and 34 in 1996. From 52 centers in 1997, the network kept expanding to include 88 centers in 1998, 121 in 1999, and 145 in 2000 (Avgar & Avraham, 2001; Barasch, 1999). On the threshold of the new century Hesed centers provided assistance to 235,000 Jewish elderly spread through 2,100 cities, towns, and *shtetlach* of the FSU. In 2000, 1,481,000 food packages were distributed, and 101,500 needy elderly received winter relief support. Almost 22,400 clients enjoyed 4,290,000 hot meals in communal dining rooms, and 13,500 needy elderly had 3,306,500 cooked meals delivered to their homes. More than 10,400 elderly participated in 820 warm homes, and over 20,600 clients benefitted from more than 2,023,000 homecare visits. Close to 31,000 pieces of rehabilitation equipment were rented out and 25,000 medical consultations given.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The key to the success of the Hesed model lies in its ability to deliver desperately needed assistance to a population in deep economic crisis. The JDC's work in developing the Hesed network has been carried out on behalf of and in partnership with the Jewish federations throughout North America and particularly the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. Hesed welfare programs have also benefitted from substantial ongoing support provided by the Weinberg Foundation, World Jewish Relief (UK), the Abraham and Sonia Rochlin Foundation, and scores of additional contributors concerned with the well-being of Jews in need in the FSU. Local philanthropy is also starting to develop in the Jewish community in the FSU; Hesed Avarham now raises 10 to 15 percent of its budget from local donors.

Yet, its success goes beyond meeting basic human needs. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a spiritual void and led to a search for meaning. The Hesed model not only satisfies material wants but also responds to the often unarticulated needs of the Jewish population to develop a community and return to their traditions. These needs are reflected in the clients' openness for assistance and communal life, and they are embodied in the extraordinary dedication and motivation of the local employees and volunteers. This dedication is supported by the professional expertise, tutoring, and training introduced by the JDC through a network of Training Institutes for Communal and Welfare Workers.

A Hesed center in any given city in the FSU is like an oasis surrounded by sands threatening to reclaim the desert. Hesed's Jewishness, community orientation, and volunteers guard against destructive forces. The human potential of Hesed employees, volunteers, and clients has been unlocked through the introduction of new concepts and values. It is essential to continue, in a systematic and organized fashion, to nurture the spirit and the Jewish *neshama* (soul) of Hesed staff, volun-

teers, and lay leaders. It is also important to maintain the initial enthusiasm and sense of purpose. Ongoing professional development, training, and supervision are essential for both employees and lay leaders. The challenge of the future is to strengthen the defenders of Hesed—the volunteers, staff, and Yiddishkeit, the forces against the sand—so as to ensure that the oasis will continue to provide the renewing source of life, dignity, and spirit to hundreds of thousands of clients, volunteers, and workers.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) and for that we are grateful to FSU department director, Asher Ostrin and to the other JDC employees who helped us with this project. We are grateful to the students who participated in data collection: Daniela Drori, Yasser El-Amor, Michael Mandel, Danny Vaks, Michal Yakubovitch-Dagan, and Neomi Zeevi. Above all, we are grateful to our interviewees—Hesed employees, volunteers, and clients—who opened to us not only their offices and homes but also their hearts.

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