



# Inspiring a Generation of Chessed

By Malky Lowinger

Nobody can deny the importance of doing chessed. Since the time of Avraham Avinu, it's part of our legacy, embedded in our DNA. During the Three Weeks especially, when we concentrate on our actions *bein adam l'chaveiro*, we are encouraged to reach out to our brothers and sisters and help them in any way we can.

While many schools, camps and youth groups offer a chessed program as part of their curriculum, are these programs really inspiring our young people? Will it encourage them to become *ba'alei chessed* years down the road?

Areyvut, an innovative chessed organization, brings this mitzvah to a whole new level.

Founded in 2002, Areyvut works closely with schools, families, and organizations to craft tailor-made chessed programs in a meaningful and powerful way. The goal is to give Jewish youth the opportunity to become

thoughtful and giving members of their community. So far, Areyvut has touched the lives of 35,000 young people in schools and youth groups across the country.

Rabbi Daniel Rothner, founder and director of Areyvut, was a teacher at HAFTR and Heschel Middle Schools when he had his "aha!" moment.

"At HAFTR," he says, "I did a number of special initiatives and programs. Lightbulbs went off in my head when it became apparent to me that chessed and kindness are core Jewish values that should be natural and organic for these students." He realized that no one was addressing this at the time, and yet it was so crucial to the education of the students.

"If I teach my class how the Shevachim were set up in the *midbar*, chances are that nobody will remember that years later. But if you ask them about the carnival we did on behalf of special needs kids, they will certainly remember," he notes. "Experiential learning is a powerful tool and resource for us."

Rothner established Areyvut,

which essentially is a consulting agency and think tank for chessed programs. Rothner is determined to encourage young people who are full of energy and enthusiasm to develop a love and a passion for helping others. According to Areyvut's website, "Our unique, meaningful and tailor-made programs inspire youth to get involved within their communities in ways they have never imagined, while also helping them to realize the immense power they have to make their communities and the world at large a better place."

The key to Areyvut's success, says Rothner, is that programs are customized to the needs of the individual schools. Chessed is not one size fits all. Once a school contacts Areyvut, the primary goal is to assess the needs of its specific student body. "We want to make it meaningful to them so we can determine what their interests are. We ask them about their goals and objectives, and we design the program accordingly. Some prefer a hands-on experience, others prefer fundraising, and so on. A program in one shul

can be entirely different than one in a neighboring shul."

Most of Areyvut's programs, says Rothner, are directed towards middle school and high school students but there are also early childhood and family education programs, "so it certainly runs the gamut." Areyvut also organizes bar and bat mitzvah projects and Israel family tours. From mitzvah clowning in senior centers to donating sports equipment to organizing food drives, there is a large and varied list of options to choose from. Since September of this year, Rothner estimates that Areyvut has already made an impact on over forty organizations. "We are certainly a resource to the community," he says.

"Our objective," shares Rothner, "is to engage people as much as possible in a way that is meaningful for them and their families." And, he adds, to hopefully ensure that these youngsters will continue to do acts of kindness as adults. Rothner is thrilled when he learns that a bar mitzvah boy who did a project with him several years ago is to-

day still connected with that organization and volunteers with them when he comes home for college winter break. That is his greatest nachas.

In order to ensure that chessed projects are engaging and productive, Rothner recommends that they should be carefully thought-out. He advocates for chessed to become an integral part of the educational experience. "We don't highlight it enough, but it's what brings communities together," he observes.

Rothner shares some of his innovative chessed ideas with *The Jewish Home*.

*"The more smiles and the more chessed we do, the better off the Jewish people and the whole world will be."*

### Philanthropy

Philanthropy, says Rothner, is about much more than writing out a check. It's also about responsibility and accountability.

"We developed a teen philanthropy program," says Rothner. "Everyone gets a hundred dollars, and we create a system in which the kids learn to identify various organizations they are willing to fund. They are taught how to evaluate an organization and how to google the percentages and statistics, which is something many adults don't even know how to do. Then they develop the sensitivity to determine where there is a dire need and to whom to

allocate funds. And all this time, they are learning leadership and teamwork skills they never knew they had."

Rothner adds that once the organizations are decided upon, "we always try to do a hands-on chessed project with that program or volunteer for that agency. This teaches the kids that while the funding is important, it's not just all about the money."

### Mitzvah Clowning

Mitzvah clowning, says Rothner, is a really powerful program because it teaches important communication and role-playing skills which "will impact these kids for the rest of their lives." The best mitzvah clowning programs, he adds, are the ones in which parents and children participate together.

Rothner explains that this program differs significantly from Lev Leytzan, an organization that sends highly trained mitzvah clowns to visit hospital patients. "Their training is more intensive," he points out. Areyvut also trains its clowns, but they generally visit senior centers where the children learn how to be sensitive when interacting with the facility's staff as well as its residents.

Mitzvah clowning, he cautions, is not for everyone. But for those who do it, "it's a higher level of engagement as well as a wonderful opportunity to learn basic people skills."

### Chessed with the Family

Chessed is powerful, says Rothner, but it can be even more powerful if families work together. "Every family gives tzedaka," Rothner points out, "but how many parents engage their kids?" He encourages parents to include their children when delivering food packages, visiting hospital patients, or organizing an upcoming event.

Parents might also want to consider involving their children in the decision-making process when fifty tzedaka envelopes come in the mail. "Sit down with them and say, 'Which ones should we give to? A large organization? An individual family? A special program where our donation would make a more profound impact?' Let them feel empowered."

### You Matter

Sometimes chessed isn't about the time or the money. Sometimes it's



The check presentation from the H.O.P.E. Teen Philanthropy program



Individual canvases designed at a recent Paint for a Purpose event



Areyvut has partnered with Billy's BASEballs to send baseballs with messages of hope to soldiers overseas





The clown band with Daniel after this year's Celebrate Israel Parade



Messages of kindness

about letting someone know that they matter. Literally.

That's why Areyvut has intro-

duced "You Matter" cards to be distributed by schoolchildren to brighten up someone's day. Cards can be

given to a teacher, a bus driver, a classmate, even a random stranger – basically anyone who needs a quick pick-me-up. "It's a vehicle to spread cheer and *hakorat hatov*," Rothner explains. "The impact is so simple but also so powerful and inspiring."

### *Inspiring a New Generation*

Areyvut is all about encouraging and molding youngsters into becoming caring and giving adults. "We can take a thousand dollars and send it to a food pantry," says Rothner, "and that's fine. But what if we did an educational program that taught kids what it means to be hungry? What if we developed a *yom iyun* about hunger? Then that thousand dollars is a real investment in the future."

Rothner remembers when a principal called him a few weeks after his school had participated in a program about hunger. "He told me that the students saw a homeless person in Grand Central Station and offered him food." These youngsters developed a sensitivity and will probably never look at hunger quite the same way again. "Lots of school and organizations do a food drive," says Rothner. "But we do one: 'What does it mean to be hungry?'"

Are today's youngsters up to the challenge? Many consider this new generation to be self-absorbed and

overly focused on their electronic devices. Rothner disagrees. "There's an unbelievable amount of chessed being done," he says. "And that should be celebrated."

Having worked with young people for so many years, he has a different perspective. "Kids today are facing challenges that most adults cannot begin to understand," he says. "The pressure and anxiety are tremendous. Even the most popular kids are dealing with stuff that none of us dealt with because the world is so radically different today."

That's why Areyvut's chessed programs are so crucial. "If we can build these kids up – especially those who aren't necessarily academically inclined – if we can give them an opportunity to shine and to show them that they can make a difference, that's tremendous!" he affirms.

Rabbi Daniel Rothner may be a do good-er but he's no Pollyanna. He recognizes the real issues and challenges of the world we live in.

"The world is a fragile place and there's lots of genuine need out there," he says. But he prefers to focus on the solutions, one act of chessed at a time.

"The more smiles and the more chessed we do," says Rothner, "the better off the Jewish people and the whole world will be." ▲

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