

THEY ANSWERED THE

CALL

Four people  
whose chesed  
is changing people's lives

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## BARUCH LIBERMAN

Bnei Brak, Israel

Making medication accessible for those who need it

By Motti Wilhelm



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## The Chesed That Changed Israeli Law

From the age of 16, Baruch Liberman was always involved in *chesed* initiatives. One day, while sitting with a friend, they decided to establish an organization to “help those who aren’t being helped.” That idea snowballed, and today, Baruch leads Haverim L’Refuah, a groundbreaking non-profit that has established the world’s largest volunteer pharmacy and even influenced Israeli legislation.

“From a young age, I took leadership roles in various *chesed* organizations. At one point, I was involved with a non-profit that unfortunately ran into issues and had to close down. As I was figuring

out my next steps, I sat down with my friend Yechiel Landman (who has since passed away). We said to each other, ‘Let’s create an organization that helps those who aren’t being helped.’ Our vision was to find individuals falling through the cracks of existing *chesed* organizations and provide them with the support they desperately needed.”

Their first initiative was to help people access the medications they needed. This new *chesed* organization didn’t have medications on hand, so they assisted patients in other ways. They taught patients how to create fundraising campaigns among family and friends to cover medication costs. This approach was essentially crowdfunding, long before the con-

cept became commonplace. It was a novel idea at the time.

One day, a man whose wife had recently passed away approached Baruch. He brought a box of medication that their organization had helped him purchase. The man asked, “What do I do with the medication?” It was an expensive, rare medication, worth 25,000 shekels (approximately \$5,600 at the time). Yechiel told Baruch, “Just yesterday, someone asked for that exact medication.” This moment marked the beginning of their medication recycling initiative, and the start of Haverim L’Refuah.

The story was picked up by *Yediot Acharonot*, and, in no time, hundreds of medications began arriving at their office



from individuals across Israel.

“I quickly realized that this needed to be much more organized. I started looking for pharmacists to help us run our operations, and to sort and dispense the medicines,” Baruch says. “You have to understand, at that time I didn’t even know how to read a prescription!”

As word spread, the organization saw a surge in requests for both expensive and basic medications. It became clear that many people, especially those with chronic diseases, were facing severe financial distress due to medication costs. Some were even forced to choose between food and essential medications for chronic conditions like hypertension and high cholesterol.

To address this growing need, the organization began soliciting medication donations from individuals and pharmaceutical companies. However, they encountered a regulatory hurdle: to receive donations from pharmaceutical companies, they needed to operate a legal pharmacy. The Ministry of Health initially rejected the idea of a voluntary pharmacy, stating it didn’t exist within their framework.

Undeterred, Baruch lobbied key figures in the ministry. Their efforts paid off, resulting in the world’s first license for a voluntary pharmacy—one without a cash register, simply distributing medications for free.

With this breakthrough, Baruch approached pharmaceutical companies again. Eli Hurvitz, CEO of Teva, agreed to donate once they had an organized facility. This opened the floodgates, with more companies following suit, dramatically expanding the organization’s ability to help those in need.

But then, in 2014, Israel began to overhaul its entire Pharmaceutical Ordinance, introducing significant changes in how medications were regulated. One of the proposed changes was to criminalize the possession of medications by un-

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authorized individuals. This would have a crippling effect on Haverim L’Refuah, by making their work shift from a legal gray area—where it wasn’t explicitly allowed but not strictly forbidden—into something that would be entirely illegal.

So, Baruch decided to change the law...

He approached the committee responsible for the revisions and reached out to MK Rabbi Yaakov Litzman, the minister of health at the time, and his team. He explained, “If we don’t pass a law permitting the collection of second-hand medications, the heads of every *gemach* in the country will end up in jail. We need to push to make this legal.” Litzman agreed, and over the next two years, countless hours were invested to get the law passed.

After a lot of political wrangling, many hours spent in committees, and countless meetings and discussions, in 2016 the Knesset passed the “Haverim L’Refuah Law,” an amendment to the Pharmaceutical Ordinance that grants the organization the official authorization to receive medications.

Today, Haverim L’Refuah has close to 80 employees, including three salaried pharmacists and 30 volunteer pharmacists. They also work with 1,200 social workers and 2,400 volunteers across Israel, six volunteer lawyers, one full-time lawyer and a retired judge.

Over one million boxes of unused medications are sent to Haverim L’Refuah every year, and they are then sorted, stored and dispensed.

“Nearly every person in Israel—and across all Western countries—has medicines at home that they aren’t using or no longer need,” Baruch says. “Often, these medications expire and end up in the trash. We are working to change that equation.”

Haverim L’Refuah, which is still led by Baruch, helps over 7,000 individuals each month who require basic medications, as well as those who require costly rare medications or trial drugs. “We find solutions for approximately 75% of patients in Israel needing expensive treatments that are not included in the health basket or are not approved for use. We distribute medicines worth over 100 million shekels every year,” he says.

“Just last month we helped 630 oncology patients—a number that exceeds the capacity of the largest oncology hospital in Israel! And that is just one of our divisions....”

One high-profile case the organization recently handled involved Liora Argamani, the mother of Noa Argamani. Noa was captured by Hamas on October 7 and became one of the faces of the hostage crisis after video footage of her brutal abduction circulated worldwide. Liora, who was battling brain cancer, shared several videos pleading for a chance to see her daughter before she passed away. Against all odds, Noa was rescued by the IDF from Gaza and was able to spend her mother’s final three weeks with her.

Haverim L’Refuah had been helping Liora since her diagnosis, some two years

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“Whenever a call is put out for help, people respond. And of course, there is the siyata dishmaya. When you are fully engaged in helping another Yid, Hashem will make sure you are taken care of.”



At the volunteer pharmacy

prior to October 7. After her passing, the remaining unused medications from her treatment were then passed on to other patients in need.

Baruch emphasizes that everything Haverim L'Refuah does is fully legal and carefully monitored by a team of doctors and pharmacists.

“We maintain a close working relationship with the Ministry of Health, which is fully aware of and supports our activities. Every step of our distribution process—from receiving prescriptions to delivering medications—adheres strictly to health regulations. Not a single medication is dispensed without a valid prescription and doctor’s approval.”

When asked about the possibility of Haverim L'Refuah opening a branch in America, Baruch said that it is a dream of his, but he noted that it is currently not feasible due to several factors.

“Firstly, there’s the technical aspect.

In America, most medications are dispensed in bottles, and once the seal is broken, the contents cannot be reused or redistributed. In contrast, in Israel, the majority of medications are packaged in what are known as ‘blister packs.’ Since each pill is individually sealed, any unused pills remain viable even after some have been consumed.

“Then there’s the legal aspect. The law that we passed in the Knesset that allowed Haverim L'Refuah to legally collect and redistribute medications was the first of its kind anywhere in the world!”

Could such a law be enacted in America as well?

“In theory, we would be thrilled to establish a similar organization in the US. In fact, when the law was passed in Israel, Professor Eyal Schwartzberg, the Chief Pharmacist of the State of Israel, published an article in the National Institutes of Health (NIH) journal, a pres-

tigious American health policy publication. The article highlighted Israel as a model for how medications can be repurposed to save lives instead of being discarded,” Baruch explains.

“However, we know that if such a law were proposed in America, pharmaceutical companies would do everything in their power to ensure its failure, viewing it as a threat to their profits.

“Israel has a public healthcare system, allowing the government to impose its will on pharmaceutical companies, while the US government does not have that same authority. Big Pharma in the US wields tremendous lobbying power and would fight against any similar initiative tooth and nail, despite the fact that the potential beneficiaries—unable to afford these medicines—are not current customers, and providing drugs at no cost wouldn’t impact the companies’ existing profits.”

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Baruch with one of the pharmacists

Nevertheless, Baruch has plenty of opportunities to help American citizens.

“At least four or five times a week, I receive calls from abroad. ‘My daughter and son-in-law traveled to Israel, and they need this medication,’ or ‘My son is in *yeshivah* in Israel and has fallen ill; is there a way to get him this medicine?’ We assist many Americans who are in Israel for seminary, *yeshivah*, *kollel* or even just on vacation,” he says.

“I want to speak about the miracles we see,” Baruch says. He can’t help but let a note of excitement slip into his voice as he shares the following story.

“There was an individual who needed a specific rare and expensive medicine. I called our pharmacy, but they told me they didn’t have it in stock. I didn’t give up. The next day, when I came to the office, I asked the pharmacists to double-check if we had any of the drug.

“Just as I finished speaking, an elderly man approached the counter with a bag in hand. He handed it to the receptionist. Inside was the exact medicine I had been searching for!

“The man explained that some time ago, his wife had fallen ill and needed this very drug, but her insurance wouldn’t cover it. Haverim L’Refuah provided the medication at no cost and worked with our legal department to get the insurance company to start paying for it. Eventually, the insurance began covering the drug, and his wife received it for over a year, until she passed away.

“‘I owe you a year of my wife’s life,’ the man told me. ‘As soon as *shivah* was over, I came here to return the unused medicine so it could help save someone else’s life.’

“We see stories like this every single day, without exaggeration. We see miracles on a regular basis. I frequently tell

“If there is someone who has doubts in *emunah*, he should come sit in our office for two hours, and he won’t have doubts anymore.”

people that if there is someone who has doubts in *emunah*, he should come sit in our office for two hours, and he won’t have doubts anymore.”

After working for decades in the world of *chesed*, Baruch has some advice for those looking to go into the field.

“The key is surrounding yourself with good people. There’s a strong desire for volunteerism, and whenever a call is put out for help, people respond. And of course, there is the *seyata dishmaya*. When you are fully engaged in helping another *Yid*, Hashem will make sure you are taken care of.

“One question I get a lot is what we do when there are financial problems. I always reply, ‘If there’s a financial problem, it’s a sign that you’re not doing enough. It can’t be that you’re doing what you have to do and *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* doesn’t take care of His part.

“I tell people that if you want to succeed in anything, focus on how to do more and how to really help—focus on what truly needs to be done. Don’t worry about how to raise money first. The more you think about doing, the more Hashem will give you what you need.” >>

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