

The Rescue Show in Ukraine Must Go On!

HILLEL FENDEL

“What? There’s still a war in Ukraine? I thought it was already over ...”

Rabbi Yitzchak Halfon, who, with his wife Hodayah, has organized the rescue of literally thousands of Ukrainian Jews to Israel over the past several months, says he hears this response much too often — and cringes each time.

Most people simply don’t realize how many Jews are still suffering because of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s evil offensive. They have no clue regarding the Jews in mortal danger for lack of heat and water as the below-zero winter arrives, how many are trying to leave for Israel and other places but cannot, and all those who are sick and unable to obtain medical care.

Rabbi Halfon’s nonstop involvement in the rescue of Jews is one of the most inspiring modern-day stories I have ever heard — both in how it began, and in how it continues even now. I spoke with him for over two hours (just an hour and a half more than we planned...), and still barely managed to scratch the surface of what he and his wife are accomplishing — with precious few resources.

Among the names on his very long list of people who have contacted him for rescue and transportation were, until very recently, Mr. and Mrs. Milner. Yitzchak told me, as a sample taste of his work, what happened with them:

“In a bombed-out area in the city of Kharkov, on the fifth floor of one of the buildings, we managed to reach the elderly, sick Milner couple — apparently the only ones who had not yet abandoned the building. Everything around was neglected, the cold was biting, the windows had been shattered during the most recent bombing. We found the woman in serious condition, unable to get out of bed. Her husband is blind, almost dysfunctional, and had been unable to get medicine, food and water for days.

“The ambulance we fought so hard to procure was waiting for them downstairs, and we had to evacuate quickly. With the help of some volunteers, we were able, with great difficulty, to get the heavy woman onto the stretcher and down to the ground floor — with no working elevator, of course — as quickly as possible.

“The ambulance made its way through the bombed-out streets to the hospital in Dnipro. Upon arrival, the hospital staff tried repeatedly to stabilize Mrs. Milner’s condition. But they could not overcome her dehydration and severe neglect, and sadly, she passed away.

“Her husband remained in the hospital and his condition began improving. Within just two days, we heard



that the Milners’ building had been bombed yet again and that its entire central section, including the entrances, had burned down completely.

“We realized with amazement and gratitude that thanks to our rescue, Mr. Milner’s life was saved, and his wife received a proper burial.

“As I write this some days later, we are carrying out the evacuation of about 20 refugees from Kharkov and Zaporizhia, helping them immigrate to Israel, including a mother in serious condition who is hooked up to oxygen and who will hopefully receive life-saving treatment in Eretz Yisrael. ... This is what our lives have looked like since the outbreak of this war, and we simply cannot stop!”

I ask: “What do you mean ‘helping them immigrate to Israel’?”

Rabbi Halfon explains: “With the help of some good people that G-d sends us, we arrange buses — and sometimes ambulances — who take refugees to a transit ‘hotel’ in Kishinev. Among them are also non-Jews who have heard about us and contacted us. Many of them are from Kharkov, where we lived until recently, and especially now, many are from Kherson, and other cities as well.”

He explained that non-Jews and those who are not planning to go to Israel remain in Kishinev for two or three days “until we find a way for them to reach Western Europe; some find their own way. Those who wish to get to Israel remain in the hotel until their flight (often paid for by the Friendship Foundation), while we help

them get through this upheaval of their lives with the documents needed for the consulate, etc.”

Another of countless examples: One of the most recent busloads of refugees included a man who suffered a heart incident on the way. After obtaining the proper emergency care for him and accompanying him to the hospital, Yitzchak spent a few hours with him in the Israeli Consulate in Moldova before escorting him back to the hospital. “We hope he will be medically approved for his flight to Israel next week,” Yitzchak said, “and that in the meantime he will be able to be with us in our Kishinev ‘hotel’ this coming Shabbat.”

This is a hint to the incredible fact that the Halfon family’s help doesn’t end with “mere” rescue work: “We also provide the refugees with Shabbat meals, candles, *tefillin*-laying, dancing/singing, and other inspirational, getting-to-know-Judaism activities.”

Sadly Waving Goodbye

I look at this very unassuming, even shy, Israeli-born Lubavitcher Chasid, and try to hide my incredulity as I ask, “How did you get involved in this work?” He well understood my skepticism, and answered, “I also never quite expected to be the one to do something like this, nor did my wife expect me to. ... It began when I made my way with my family out of Kharkov just before the war started, with the certainty — unshared with our neighbors — that we had no choice but to quickly leave. I tried to plan the safest route in terms

of where the Russians might bomb, with just ourselves, including three children, one suitcase, some food and a few supplies, and an extra tank of gas.

“We arrived first in Vinnytsia,” Yitzchak continued, “and I helped my family, and then others, to find refuge in the *mikveh* level beneath a Lubavitcher school. In the morning, I knew we had to leave Ukraine altogether, and as we drove away and I saw Jewish children waving sadly goodbye to us, tears welled up in my eyes as I thought of what awaited them. I knew right then that, as Queen Esther felt when she realized that her moment had come to help the Jewish people, I had to do whatever I could to get as many Jews out of there as possible.”

Fear and Suspense at the Border

Surely the Halfons’ next experience only cemented and strengthened their resolve to devote themselves to this cause: They arrived at the Ukrainian border with Moldova, where the border police took one look at their 18-year-old son and said, “He’s not going anywhere, other than to the army to fight for the homeland!” The Halfons sought to prove that he was Israeli and not Ukrainian, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. All around them, people were sobbing and weeping as husbands and sons were separated from wives and children and taken to the recruitment offices to become fodder for the Russian onslaught. With iron resolve, strong faith in G-d, and a stubborn refusal to accept that fate, the Halfons underwent several hours involved in

a nail-biting showdown with the Ukrainian border guards, including fruitless phone calls to various officials outside the country, until finally and abruptly, without prior warning, the entire family found themselves over the border and safely in Moldova. Further details have been withheld on request...

But back to the nitty-gritty of their rescue work: The Halfons and their newly-formed Kanfei Emunah (Wings of Faith) association have been in cooperative contact with entities such as the Jewish Agency, the Israeli Consulates in Kishinev and Warsaw, Zaka, Vaad Hatzalah, and many more too numerous to list (though they all deserve mention).

Their activities are divided into three main parts:

1. EVACUATION

In Yitzchak's words: "As of today, we are the only entity that perseveres and rescues Jewish refugees from Ukraine. The Jewish Agency, the JDC, and the Friendship Foundation all ask us to rescue people who contact them. Rabbis in Germany refer people to us whose relatives have remained in Ukraine and want to leave, and many inquiries come from social media groups and the like that we have created and managed since the beginning of the war, while other groups have heard about us through social media, Israeli municipalities, and word of mouth.

"Especially now, with the truly freezing Ukrainian winter approaching, and the lack of electricity, water and basic supplies due to the constant and targeted Russian bombings, it is of the utmost importance to rescue as many Jews as possible. It is a case of mass *pikuach nefesh*! Another coat or blanket is not what they need — they need to get out of there!"

2. ASSISTANCE AT A CROSSING POINT SUCH AS KISHINEV OR WARSAW

"For several months now, there has been no volunteer activity for refugees arriving in Kishinev! We take care of and assist them, including assistance with baggage, transportation especially for the elderly and disabled, and accompaniment and help in all matters concerning immigration registration with the consulate. We also run meals and Shabbat activities, including candle-lighting, *Kiddush*, singing, festive *Havdalah*, and maintaining a traditional and joyous Jewish atmosphere. Similarly, we talk with them about Judaism and Israel, help them put on *tefillin* — most of them, for



3. ASSISTANCE IN ACCLIMATIZATION

"We receive calls for assistance from those who have already arrived in Israel or other countries. We stay in touch with them when they



get to Israel and try to help find solutions for those who wish." And to top it all off, what Yitzchak sees as a "clearly Divine process of returning Jews to their Land" obviously also includes bringing them back to Judaism:



"We're also planning activities — in Israel — to bring the rescued Jews closer to their tradition, with meetings, conversations, activities — all based on and thanks to their first meetings with us when we helped them go from refu-

gee status to new immigrant."

To contact the Halfons with names of Jews who need assistance or rescue in war-torn Ukraine, or to help in other ways, please send them a message at +380 67 768 6222.