

# THE HESED WELFARE MODEL

## A Community Response to Crisis

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*After the fall of communism there was a socio-economic-political breakdown affecting all areas of life. The JDC worked to provide immediate relief in a way that would foster the rebuilding of a Jewish communal infrastructure. The Hesed centers fulfill those aims and are based on the principles of voluntarism, Yiddishkeit, and a community orientation.*

### KATASTROIKA

The term "katastroika," a hybrid of "pere-stroika" (meaning rebuilding or restructuring) and "catastrophe" originally coined by Zinoviev, (Ellman, 1994), captures the dimension of the social crisis in the former Soviet Union (FSU) following the collapse of communism. The socio-economic-political breakdown encompassed all spheres of life: health and welfare services disintegrated (Field & Twigg, 2000; Leitch, 1997), pensions and salaries were reduced to sums not sufficient to cover food (Ronge, 2000), medications became unavailable or prohibitively expensive, and savings were wiped out by hyperinflation (Rush & Welsh, 1996). Virtually the entire population was left without a meaningful safety net (Field & Twigg, 2000). The blow was particularly painful to the needy and the aged (Papidus, 1995). This led to a drastic reduction in life expectancy (Breev, 1998), widespread poverty, pockets of hunger, increased crime, and a rise in unemployment (Field, 2000). Many viewed the situation that succeeded the collapse of communism as a post-disaster chaotic situation (Field & Twigg, 2000).

Prior to the collapse of communism, the Soviet state provided a relatively stable social safety net. Through an intricate system of entitlements and eligibilities, it 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 its ideological, institutional, and economic foundations, as well as the basic family structure, created a crisis situation in each of these areas, with far-reaching consequences for the population as a whole and the elderly in particular.

### The Institutional Crisis

During the communist era, welfare services constituted a contradiction in terms. A welfare case could not exist in a state that by definition cares for everyone. After the breakdown of communism, the existing health and welfare services, including hospitals, polyclinics, and personal services of the *Sobes* (Soviet welfare ministry), deteriorated rapidly due to a lack of resources and mismanagement. The medical care system was on the verge of disintegration.

### The Economic Crisis

The transformation from communism to a free market economy was followed by rapid inflation and the rising cost of services formerly provided free of charge by the state. While inflation obliterated personal savings, government salaries and pensions became not only insufficient for the purchase of food and other basic services but were also often paid only after a delay of many months. Social retirement funds, which were controlled by the state, were inadequate to meet spiraling needs.

### The Family

During the communist regime, the family was legally required to support its members and played a major role in social welfare (Hegelson, 1989). The aging of the population and the disintegration of the extended family have increased the vulnerability of the elderly. Following *perestroika*, with its accelerated emigration and freedom of movement, the elderly, particularly the Jewish elderly, were left behind while their children migrated to the west or moved from the periphery to big cities.

### INTERVENTION BY THE AMERICAN JEWISH JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE (JDC)

The JDC is an American non-governmental organization (McPeak, 1999) and functions as the overseas arm of the American Jewish community. Since its establishment in 1914, JDC's mission has been to assist distressed Jewish communities throughout the world, and has a long history of post-crisis interventions.

In the Soviet Union, the JDC operated from the 1920s to 1935, when Stalin banned its activities on grounds of its association with the imperialist United States and Zionism. In 1989, the JDC was one of the first foreign organizations to re-establish its presence in the former Soviet Union after the collapse of the communist regime. The main goals of the JDC in the FSU were (1) to

assist in the development of Jewish communal infrastructure, (2) to reconnect the Jewish population to the Jewish people, and (3) to provide immediate material assistance to the most needy Jewish population, particularly the elderly.

In October 1991, in response to the crisis situation and the diverse needs of elderly and disabled members of the Jewish community, the JDC initiated a relief and welfare operation with a massive food distribution program among the elderly of the FSU. The dilemma faced was how to integrate the initial emergency response, which included such material assistance as delivery of food packages, with the long-term goal of capacity development.

It was possible to identify unstructured manifestations of solidarity among the volunteers in the Jewish community. However, it soon became evident that this solidarity derived not only from their desire to assist fellow Jews but also from an unconscious desire to recreate a Jewish community and a Jewish identity. Therefore, immediate efforts were made to create congenial structures for volunteers to develop a sense of community.

The following intervention strategy was formulated:

1. Food package distribution was to be used not only to relieve hunger but also to assess the overall needs of the population, to establish a database, and to map the geographic distribution of the Jewish population.
2. Local groups were entrusted with food distribution, despite their lack of experience. Where no local groups existed, efforts were made to organize them (capacity building). Direct intervention by JDC was to be avoided.
3. The initial food distribution program was directed toward the identification and mobilization of volunteers in order to facilitate the welfare operation.
4. The intervention in general and food distribution activities in particular also aimed to reconnect volunteers and clients to Jewish tradition.

### THE HESED MODEL

Using the experience gained from the food distribution activities and based on local conditions, the Hesed model was developed as an attempt to foster local community infrastructure in the area of welfare. It is based on the following assumptions:

- Welfare and welfare structures must serve as vehicles for community building.
- All other community structures should be viewed and if possible mobilized as levers for the promotion of welfare.
- Welfare and welfare structures must serve as vehicles for the promotion of voluntarism.
- Welfare activities should be based on Jewish values and traditions (*Yiddishkeit*). Jewish content must be incorporated into all activities.
- The provision of welfare services must be conducted according to high professional standards.

The Hesed center was thus developed as a multifunctional outreach service organization, based on three principles—*voluntarism*, *Yiddishkeit*, and *community orientation*.

The services provided by Hesed relate to all aspects of the human condition. They include health and medical services, feeding, winter relief, home care, social clubs, emergency assistance to individuals in crisis, activities for volunteers, educational activities, and intergenerational programs encompassing elderly, young mothers, and children. Services are provided on the premises, as well as on an outreach basis.

#### Voluntarism

The Soviet regime crushed virtually all forms of voluntarism. The absence of civil society and grassroots organizations was characteristic of the state-controlled society. During seventy years of communism, voluntarism was reduced to *subbotniks*—"voluntary" forced public works.

Following *perestroika*, it became apparent that within the Jewish community, as

often occurs in a crisis situation, the manifestations of voluntarism increased dramatically. The Hesed model was based on capturing these new energies.

The principle of voluntarism manifests on one hand a fundamental dimension of Jewish tradition, and on the other the mobilization of untapped human resources for the provision of services during and following a crisis situation. Voluntarism has become the catalyst for the creation of informal social networks and safety nets. It provides a framework for the impoverished and socially isolated Jewish volunteers to congregate, affiliate, and engage in self-help activities. It also offers both material and spiritual compensation.

The Hesed model's emphasis on voluntarism breaks down the distinction between clients and volunteers. Clients are encouraged to volunteer while receiving assistance. Hesed provides volunteers with a wide array of tasks and rewards. It grants them a sense of belonging and provides opportunities for involvement in activities that the volunteer feels are significant for the community and the clients. It is a vital source of meaning in a crisis situation. The material rewards, such as food packages and clothing, supplement a volunteer's salary or pension. Volunteering for Hesed is also perceived as a sort of insurance in a crisis situation: just as I serve the community and the clients now, the community will give me the same care when I am in need.

#### Jewish Traditions and Values (*Yiddishkeit*)

The Hebrew word "*Hesed*," which denotes lovingkindness, compassion, and mutual aid, is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and has profound Jewish connotations. Welfare institutions and values have always been the cornerstone of Jewish tradition. Following the elimination of these traditions under the communist and Nazi regimes, Hesed has revived them as a lever for Jewish renewal.

In the context of the Hesed model, the concept of welfare was broadened to include

a comprehensive response to the physical, communal, and spiritual needs of the client population. Thus Hesed, with its Jewish orientation, linked the material and spiritual-social dimensions of the crisis.

Hesed's Jewish character is reflected in its internal structure, as well as in the nature and content of its services, its staff training, the composition of its board, and, of course, its client population. The *mezuzza* at the entrance tells all visitors that this is a Jewish home. The "Jewish corner of Hesed" holds exhibits of major Jewish artifacts that remind staff and clients of Jewish traditions and practices long forgotten. Frequent exhibitions of Jewish artists manifest Jewish revival, and Hesed's library of Jewish and Israeli themes responds to the thirst for Jewish learning.

Jewish content is an integral part of Hesed services. Food packages are provided around Jewish holidays and include relevant literature and Jewish articles: matzah at Passover, menorahs at Chanukah, and a Jewish calendar at Rosh Hashana. The packages are often distributed by Jewish schoolchildren and other volunteers.

Communal dining facilities serve kosher or kosher-style meals and include activities with Jewish content, such as group singing, lectures, and Shabbat services. Whenever possible Hesed sponsors dining facilities that are located in other Jewish institutions such as schools and synagogues, thus enriching the service with Jewish content, strengthening the host organizations with additional resources, and promoting interorganizational cooperation.

### Community Orientation

Under the Soviet regime, which bred mistrust and discouraged cooperation, groups and organizations operated under the premise of a zero-sum game: one's gain was the other's loss and vice versa. The Hesed system, by contrast, fosters trust and cooperation among co-workers and volunteers, as well as between clients and workers. In addition, the principle of trust is expressed in

collaborative ties with other communal organizations and in the notion that every communal organization is a lever for promoting welfare. In this context, a school with dining facilities might lend its premises to a Hesed-sponsored food distribution program on Sundays, a summer camp might host elderly volunteers and grandparents of the campers, and a school library might serve the elderly with the assistance of young volunteers. This normative orientation generates a win-win situation.

Hesed is an instrument for community building that promotes cohesion among workers, clients, and volunteers. It serves as a focus of Jewish communal life where welfare activities promote collaboration with and interaction among local Jewish organizations. The trust that develops is based on common values and Jewish traditions—primarily those of *tzedakah* (charity), justice, mutual help, and strengthening Jewish identity. The Hesed Board of Directors, which comprises representatives from other major local Jewish organizations, aims to serve as a local governing body and to promote reciprocal relationships between Hesed and its Jewish organizational environment.

Hesed attempts to combat the divisiveness that characterized Soviet organizational culture and that continues to prevail among post-Soviet Jewish organizations. Since welfare is by far the most dominant issue facing the emerging Jewish community in the crisis situation, it serves as a unifying concept, and Hesed has thus become a unifying force in the community.

It is common knowledge that after a crisis, the victim's level of dependency on outside services and resources increases sharply. Assistance from the outside can be given in two opposing modes. The first is direct intervention whereby the assisting organization maintains control and the recipients remain passive, without an opportunity to participate. The second can be referred to as institutional or capacity building, whereby the recipients are mobilized to increasingly take control over the new developments. Par-

adoxically, the first approach reinforces dependency and thereby lengthens and strengthens the crisis. The second approach, although it may be slower, is by far more effective in the long run, as it allows for indigenous development.

The Hesed model follows the second approach. With its community orientation, Hesed was intended to become a vehicle for community development. The emphasis on volunteers increased local involvement and facilitated the mobilization of local resources. Similarly, the *Yiddishkeit* orientation addressed the missing dimension that the local population was seeking in either an articulated or unarticulated fashion. It facilitated the community's identification with the imported model and allowed them to internalize it and view it as theirs, thus participating in its development.

As a comprehensive community-based response to material and social-spiritual crisis, Hesed took root rapidly. In 2001, eight years after the first Hesed was opened in St. Petersburg, there were 164 Hesed welfare centers serving 272,525 clients in 2,640 locations throughout the FSU and utilizing 14,100 volunteers (see Table 1). The Hesed network reaches from Murmansk in the Arctic Circle to Yalta in the Crimean Peninsula; from Tashkent, Tbilisi and Almaty to Khabarovsk in the Far East and Orenberg in the Ural Mountain region. The network of Training Institutes that was developed concurrent to the establishment of the Hesed centers was a major force behind this growth.

The most significant recognition of the Hesed model as an effective institutional response to a crisis situation that benefits the most vulnerable population, particularly Holocaust survivors, was the decision of the U.S. District Court in its ruling regarding the plan of allocation and distribution of the Swiss restitution funds (U.S. District Court):

It is recommended that \$90 million be set aside for up to ten years to help fund the humanitarian assistance programs described below and in greater detail at Section III(B).

Table 1. Services provided by Hesed Centers during 2001

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|                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
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| <i>Food Packages</i> —More than 1,599,215 food packages were delivered to 266,135 clients.                                                                                                           |
| <i>Communal Dining Rooms</i> —4,779,695 meals served to 28,040 clients.                                                                                                                              |
| <i>Meals-on-Wheels</i> —4,040,220, cooked meals were delivered to the homes of over 17,725 needy elderly.                                                                                            |
| <i>Medicine Distribution</i> —109,720 needy elderly received medicines at no cost or subsidized prices.                                                                                              |
| <i>Home Care</i> —28,390 elderly clients received 6,303,230 hours of homecare service, provided during 2,439,005 home-care visits.                                                                   |
| <i>Loan of Rehabilitative Equipment</i> —40,705 pieces of assistive and rehabilitative equipment, including canes, walkers, and wheelchairs, were distributed to 20,100 needy elderly.               |
| <i>Winter Relief</i> —79,740 needy people in 1,797 localities received winter relief, including heating and cooking fuel, blankets, and home repairs necessary to withstand harsh winter conditions. |

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Up to 75% (67.5 million) of the 'looted assets' allocation for Jewish Holocaust survivors should be designated for the augmentation of the JDC-Claims Conference "*Hesed*" program, which provides food packages, medical care, winter relief and other direct assistance to impoverished and ill elderly Nazi victims in the former Soviet Union.

### THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

The development of the Hesed model in the FSU was initiated by outside social entrepreneurs (Schachtman, 2001). In light of the crisis and the absence of a local welfare model, the role of the outside entrepreneur as a change agent was critical (Paneyakh & Uryupina, 1989). His or her intervention began by diagnosing the situation, identifying potential key players and mobilizing them, and designing a tailor-made model for confronting the needs of the community. In this respect, the social entrepreneur acted as a

change agent, imparting new ideas and technologies and adjusting them to a new situation.

The intervention following a crisis is a complex process, requiring critical decisions to be made along the way. The most critical decisions are those related to using the crisis as an opportunity and the new directions and/or developments that are created in its aftermath.

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