

# Meeting our Community's Needs: During the Pandemic and Beyond

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The current reality has tested each of us in unprecedented ways. But for those in our community who were already dealing with personal challenges prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of difficulty has been compounded exponentially.

In keeping with its mission of strengthening Torah life, advocating for the community, and serving each individual, Agudath Israel of America, represented by Executive Director Rabbi Labish Becker, recently participated in a meeting of The United Task Force to discuss the needs of the Jewish community during this difficult time.

The United Task Force, or UTF, is comprised of a wide variety of mental health and other community-based organizations that serve the Orthodox Jewish community in the metropolitan area and beyond.

The organization is an umbrella group that pools our community's finest resources to make them available to the most vulnerable of our population, including individuals grappling with mental health challenges, addiction, domestic violence or relationship issues, as well as our cherished Holocaust survivors.

Representatives of each of UTF's member agencies meet five times per year to network, compare notes, and brainstorm about the best ways to help their constituents. Agudath Israel feels privileged to be part of United Task Force and Rabbi Becker is a founding executive committee member of the UTF.

Although the most recent meeting could not be held in person due to COVID-19 restrictions, it took place via Zoom videoconferencing, and what emerged from the meeting was nothing short of remarkable. While each agency was challenged by the pandemic on a personal level and limited in the assistance they could provide, they each stepped up with superhuman efforts to assist those who needed them most during this troubled time. These unsung heroes were truly the front-line workers amidst an unprecedented crisis. Their brief reports, from the trenches, offered a heartbreaking glimpse into how our community, particularly the most vulnerable populations, have suffered throughout the pandemic.

Each agency shared how they were able to help during the pandemic and the lessons they learned. "At the beginning of the pandemic, people suffered from loneliness and uncertainty," said Dr. Faye Zakheim, Ph.D. LCSW, chair of the UTF. "As the days turned into weeks, and then months, however, many had trouble regulating their feelings and have turned to unhealthy coping mechanisms." While many of the member agencies pivoted to serve their clients remotely, they reported being deluged with calls for assistance. While trying to keep their own staff safe and upbeat, many of whom were dealing with personal losses, they tried to keep up with the increased demand for their services.

Pesach, always a busy Yom Tov in the best of times, became an uncertain time for many. Unable to join their children for the holiday, the elderly were left isolated and alone. In the younger population, the challenges included keeping children and teens busy when school was not in session for many

weeks. Breadwinners struggled with losses in income and for the first time, many families struggled with food insecurity. The member organizations of UTF assisted with food, monetary donations, health services, therapy, and other resources.

While we are seeing a bit of light at the end of the long dark tunnel of COVID-19, at least physically, much work remains to be done. There is still so much uncertainty, and while the fallout of this pandemic will be with us for a long time to come, thankfully, our community organizations are there for us to help us weather through.

For more information on the incredible work of the organizations part of the United Task Force, visit <https://www.unitedtaskforce.org/>