

An Interview with

Hatzolah's Heroines

Emergency responders' wives respond

Tuesday promised to be a busy day. Very busy! I inwardly berated myself for making a dental appointment for one child on the day I'd scheduled a pediatric check-up for another, all on a day I had to work. But there was nothing I could do about it now, apart from finishing the laundry, straightening the house and preparing supper so that the hours I'd have to spend away from home wouldn't wreak havoc the following night.

With a surge of energy born of necessity, I plunged ahead. And when the chores were completed, although it was very late, a sense of satisfaction gave me the temporary "high" that convinced me it would be a good idea to sip some hot tea and peruse the latest issue of *Binah*. As I savored the tranquility of the night in my freshly cleaned kitchen, I felt a comforting sense of calm.

And then there was a thud!

You shouldn't know of them, but when you do, you're sure glad they're there!

When I found myself stranded on the kitchen floor that Monday night, having nodded off while reading in my chair, there was no question about whom to call. Within minutes, a bearded Hatzolah man had entered my

kitchen, followed soon by another two. A few minutes later, they found the best way to transport me to their ambulance and onward to the local E.R., after which they (I assumed) went back home to sleep.

Did I give a thought to their amazing self-denial, leaving their warm beds to brave a freezing night, only to be met by

a rather irate housewife insisting they lower their voices so as not to awaken her entire family? And did I think a step further, considering *their* wives and children, who may have been woken up by the father's swift exit from home and who were perhaps whiling away the night until he returned? Did I call them afterwards to express my

Who Was the First Hatzolah Wife?

In the mid-1960s, Rabbi Herschel Weber, a Williamsburg Jew, was taking a walk when he witnessed a friend collapse on the street and die a few minutes later, partly due to lack of immediate response and late EMS (Emergency Medical Service) arrival. Deeply traumatized, Rabbi Weber pledged to get training in basic First Aid and purchase an ambulance to start his own volunteer emergency service, one that would understand and accommodate the cultural and religious needs of his community.

Hatzolah (lit., rescue) was born! It was not a simple process, nor was it without a great deal of opposition from cynics who considered it a foolhardy dream. Today, Hatzolah is the largest volunteer ambulance service in the United States, with over 80 ambulances and 1000-1100 volunteer EMTs (Emergency Medical Technicians), as well as dozens of branches throughout the world. It responds to hundreds of thousands of calls annually and has earned a supreme reputation for its remarkably prompt response, which enables its volunteers to gain precious time in life-threatening emergencies.

And who was the first Hatzolah wife? Rabbi Weber, in a recent phone interview, spoke warmly of the contribution of his late wife, Leah, a *h*, who stood behind him unstintingly in the early pioneering years. “She was a pillar of support,” says Rabbi Weber. “I couldn’t have done it without her.”

appreciation for their noble sacrifice?

If I’d given it more thought, I would have realized the tremendous sacrifice and kind-heartedness of these remarkable women. But as the self-involvement that comes with being needy was thankfully replaced by the self-involvement that comes with being well, I’ll admit it slipped my mind. So when *Binah* contacted me and asked if I could write about “Hatzolah wives” at short notice, I didn’t hesitate to agree, despite my already tight schedule. It was a way of paying tribute to these wonderful women, my way of saying “thank you.”

Gratitude, I was soon to find, is not one of the needs of a Hatzolah wife. This sounds surprising, but it’s true. A Hatzolah wife literally shares her husband with the world of *hatzalas nefashos* 24/7. A call on his ever-present radio (jokingly dubbed his “second wife” by one Hatzolah lady), and he’s

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likely to dive out of the house, leaving her to hold the fort.

And this means more than cold soup or burnt chicken! It means interrupted plans and unfinished conversations; disturbed *Shabbosos* and disrupted *Yamim Tovim*. It means being left to hold the baby and finish preparing for Shabbos on a short Friday afternoon. It means going to a *simchah* alone because your husband is on call, and taking Chol Hamoed outings nearby so he can be easily reached. It's loneliness and uncertainty and waiting for him to return. And all this without remuneration, recognition or renown!

I imagined that a little limelight would be rather tempting to anyone so constantly in the "back seat." Yet not one of the several Hatzolah wives with whom I spoke wanted to be mentioned by name, and some even shunned an interview. "It's all my husband! I don't do anything," each one protested. "Don't say there's anything special about us. There are a lot of people out there doing *chessed*."

But an article had to be written! So while I sincerely admire this modesty, I am equally admiring of — and grateful to — all the ladies who talked with me about what it means to "do nothing," and especially "Estie," "Shani," and "Baila" (names changed), a diverse trio whose thoughtful demeanor and enthusiastic input make their comments and insights particularly valuable to share.

How did your husband become involved in Hatzolah? Was it a joint decision?

From the Teachings of Rabbeinu Yonah

"It is highly desirable that there be, in every city, a group of volunteers from among the enlightened who are prepared and ready for any situation in which a man or woman from Yisrael must be rescued (*hatzalah*) from distress" (*Sharei Teshuvah, Third Gate 71*).

(A small correction: An oft-quoted story attributes the naming of Hatzolah to the Satmar Rebbe, *zt"l*, based on the above teaching of Rabbeinu Yonah. When asked about this, Rabbi Weber said *he* actually decided upon the name. The Satmar Rebbe gave his approval to the name and to the organization at a time when it still had many critics.)

ESTIE (*Boro Park; Hatzolah wife for 16 years*): For us, there was no decision to be made. My father was a long-time Hatzolah volunteer and my husband was very attracted to it. He actually joined Hatzolah before we married, against the "good advice" of those who warned it wasn't appropriate for *shanah rishonah*. He later began dispatching as well as going on calls, which practically doubled the time he spends on Hatzolah.

SHANI (*Lakewood; Hatzolah wife for 5 years*): It was his dream to help other people in a health-related way. When the chance to join Hatzolah arose, he grabbed it. He didn't exactly ask me first, but then again, I didn't really need to be asked.

BAILA (*Lakewood; Hatzolah wife for 21 years*): It really all began with a C.P.R. course that was being offered. There was no talk of joining Hatzolah until completing the C.P.R. course made it

almost inevitable. I can't say it's something my husband always wanted; it's something that evolved continuously until we both wanted it.

Are you saying you have no complaints? Don't you ever feel lonely or resentful?

ESTIE: No! (*She extends this monosyllable so distinctly, I get the feeling I asked the wrong question. And it seems I did!*) I feel a tremendous sense of pride about my husband's Hatzolah work. All the children feel it. When Tatte goes on a call and we know a child is involved, *Rachmana litzlan*, my children go to a special lollypop bag and retrieve a small treat for my husband to take to the victim. Imagine if it was your child or your parent in danger, *chas veshalom*; how can you feel upset or resentful when you know your husband is saving lives?

SHANI: Resentment never enters my mind. Hatzolah work is tremendously dear to my husband, and

Confidentiality is the immutable law of Hatzolah. I'm often awed by my husband's tznus about his work.

if he's happy, then so am I. I always have plenty to do when he's away, whether it involves the children, the laundry, or the cooking. I work all day, so when I'm home, I'm never bored.

BAILA: Pride is surely the optimum word. This doesn't mean it wasn't hard when I had young children and needed my husband to help out. There was also a period when I was nervous at night without him. Even now, I can't say I don't worry when he's been out for hours and I don't know when he'll return. Then there are the regular training sessions that keep him away from home even more. But we view Hatzolah as a family project, although this runs the risk of our children becoming overly excited by the heroics involved and immune to the real tragedy that often lies beneath it. To prevent this, we introduced the idea of saying a *kapitel Tehillim* whenever my husband goes out on a call.

But don't your children sometimes feel they'd like to have a "regular" household with a father who is home when they need him?

ESTIE: Since I come from a "Hatzolah home," I know how children thrive with a father they look up to and admire. When my husband rushes from our house to a call, he's not only their hero; he's the hero of the block. When he has to leave shul, all the young children follow him to the door and watch him with adoring eyes. It's a tremendous boost for my children.

BAILA: Hatzolah is very natural to

my children because they've grown up with it. Even though they may not voice the sentiment or even be fully aware of it, I think they know subconsciously that, as a family, we actually *get* as much as we give to this cause. A child whose father does *chessed* on a daily basis has a perfect role model. From a young age, he develops as a *giving* person — and this greatly enriches his own life and makes him a better person.

SHANI: I can't really comment on this one, because my children are still very young. But I'd like to think that, in addition to the spiritual benefits of having their father volunteer, my children develop good health and safety habits from their proximity to Hatzolah emergencies.

For example, Erev Shabbos and Yom Tov are times when a disproportionate number of emergencies are brought to the ER, as a result of parents not watching over their children carefully enough at those times.

And I don't know when your article is coming out, but I'd like to cite teenage drunkenness on Purim as another example of the terrible behaviors the community actually encourages among our adolescents if we offer alcohol when they come collecting in our homes. They simply can't handle it! The enormous amounts of alcohol they imbibe become toxic in the body and literally threatens their lives.

Imagine what it looks like at the hospital. An underaged drinker who needs his stomach pumped. And who gave him the alcohol? It's such a *chillul*

Hashem! There are also cases of outrageous behavior under the effects of alcohol, such as running into the street and drunken driving. We have to stop this! It is pure recklessness, playing with human lives. And in addition to the terrible danger, excessive underage drinking is also a terrible *chillul Hashem*.

Shani, you seem to have a good idea of what Hatzolah calls involve. Do Hatzolah men discuss their calls with their wives?

All three women state categorically that their husbands never disclose any information about their work, but each adds her personal insight.

ESTIE: I'm always the last to know what's going on in the neighborhood. People sometimes call me to find out what happened at such-and-such a place, or to find out how so-and-so is doing. And the irony of it is, that's often how I find out there's been a problem at all.

SHANI: People often stop me in the street and thank me for what my husband did for them. This is the only time I get to find out what he's been doing.

BAILA: I can be anxiously waiting for hours for him to come home, and when he finally does, he gives me no real indication of what he's been doing. A Hatzolah wife must be supportive on one hand but non-intrusive on the other (and that's probably good advice for *any* wife)! Confidentiality is *the* immutable law of Hatzolah. I'm often

“It’s such a zechus to know my children are doing chessed,” she gushed through her tears. “I’m so proud of you!”

awed by my husband’s *tznius* about his work. Unless it’s someone he obviously knows, he harbors no curiosity about whom he’s treating. He can be compassionate and yet impersonal — it’s a real art!

By this point, I was already giving up on finding any cracks in the armor of these modern-day heroines who embody the very essence of the eizer kenegdo (ideal helpmate). While I certainly wasn’t aiming to trick them into confessing any misgivings, I was eager to understand their uncanny resilience. And there was still one area which I was sure would have them cornered.

What about Shabbos and Yom Tov? A wife invests more than her physical strengths into her preparations; she infuses her inner core. She wants things to be perfect. Can you honestly say you’re not disappointed when your husband doesn’t even stay for Kiddush?

ESTIE: Disappointed with what? We all know my husband could be out there saving a life, and a person who saves a life saves an entire world. We hope this merit will spill over to the whole family.

Practically speaking, it may be a little inconvenient, especially since on Shabbos and Yom Tov we don’t have the luxury of being in contact via cell phone about where he is and when he’ll return. Those situations are full of doubts — should we continue? Should we wait? It really depends how far we’ve proceeded in the meal. If we’re close to *bentching*, if it’s getting past the kids’ bedtime, or if we have guests who are restless, we may go ahead and

complete the meal.

But no matter what we decide, a call never detracts from our *kedushas Shabbos*. While I can’t say that we’re used to the fact that my husband drives a car on Shabbos, we know that it’s his *mitzvah* to do so, just as singing *zemiro*s and saying *divrei Torah* are ours.

SHANI: We spend *Yamim Tovim* with my parents or in-laws. They both host many family members and guests, so they can’t be expected to wait. I’m never fazed when my husband leaves the Shabbos table, because I look forward to him coming back and resuming our beautiful Shabbos meal. My husband may be going to the hospital, but he’ll also be leaving it soon after. How many women every day have husbands who won’t be coming home!

BAILA: I remember one occasion when I did feel a trifle unnerved. It was *Seder* night, and we had my new son-in-law as well as my elderly mother-in-law with us. My youngest son was about to say the *Mah Nishtanah*, and we all felt his excitement. Suddenly — “*rrrrriing!*” My husband’s radio alerted him, and in no time, he was out of the door, still dressed in his *kittel*.

I was a little jittery. What would my son-in-law think? Would it be hard on my mother-in-law, a Holocaust survivor? Did we have the right to inconvenience her? As it turned out, my fears were unfounded. Everyone remained cheerful and patient until my husband eventually returned.

The best part was when my

mother-in-law joined me in the kitchen the following morning. “It’s such a *zechus* to know my children are doing *chessed*,” she gushed through her tears. “I’m so proud of you!”

I finally throw out a whimsical question and am deeply inspired by the answers.

Can you recall your best moment as a Hatzolah wife?

BAILA: Being part of Hatzolah has been a series of good moments. It makes me so proud to be a *frum* Jew. My husband has left me with newborn babies and sick children and my own bouts of flu. He’s left me in a grocery store with a full shopping cart and no money. He’s left me waiting for a ride from work when I have no other way to get home. *Baruch Hashem*, I’ve never, never been let down. There’s always another Jew who is more than happy to do a favor and help me out.

And a worst moment?

ESTI: Knowing my husband was buried under rubble from the collapse of the first World Trade Center tower on September 11, 2001, was most definitely the worst moment of my life. The tears, the *Tehillim*, the sheer terror! Yet my “worst” moment became my best moment when, an hour or so later, I heard he’d survived. I will never forget the joy. Being a Hatzolah wife offers many opportunities to thank Hashem for good health and a peaceful life. But I have never, ever been so appreciative of His Infinite Kindness as on that fateful day. **B**