



NO CUPBOARD LEFT EMPTY

The Life-Changing Work of
Alan Rosenstock

By Malkie Schulman

Children who volunteer at the warehouse



Around 30 years ago, Mr. Alan Rosenstock, the director of Rockland Chesed Network in Monsey, learned something that altered the course of his life—the fact that extreme poverty existed in his very own community. “I heard about a local family that was so poor they had nothing to eat,” he recalls. “It boggled my mind. How could there be a family in the United States of America whose cupboards were bare?”

At the time, he didn’t know that their electricity had been shut off as well. He discovered that the following day when he called their rav, and the rebbetzin told him that some of the food that had been dropped off anonymously on the family’s doorstep had spoiled because they didn’t have power, so their refrigerator and freezer weren’t working.

Mr. Rosenstock was originally planning on simply writing out a check and returning to his job, so he began asking around for an organization that took care of such situations. To his surprise, he discovered that although there were

a few heroes in the community who did great work, there was no single go-to address. “A few worthy individuals were putting together food packages and dropping them off at people’s homes, but there was no one in charge making sure that nobody slipped through the cracks.”

He called a meeting of those people and suggested that they band together and form an organization, which became Tomche Shabbos of Rockland County. In the beginning, they delivered food packages to around 20 struggling families. Some volunteers would pack the food boxes, and others would deliver them. The volunteer drivers lived on one side of town and the recipients on the other; they did not know each other. The drivers were given an address and were told to leave the packages at the basement door or behind the house. They never saw the people they were helping. The fledgling organization learned about needy families through people in the community who heard something and passed it along.

“Today, everything is still hush-hush and word of mouth,” Mr. Rosenstock notes. “For example, a while ago a man called the office to tell us about an incident that occurred in a grocery store. He was standing in line behind a young girl who was holding a container of milk. The cashier told her that because of her family’s outstanding bill, she couldn’t buy it. The man took money out of his wallet and paid for the milk. After the girl left and he was given the receipt, he saw that it included the family’s name and the amount of money they owed. The man asked me, ‘Is there any way you can help this family?’

“Another time someone called to say that his neighbor had asked if he could run an extension cord from an outlet in his house that was long enough to reach next door. That told him that their electricity had been turned off due to lack of payment.”

In the early days, a volunteer would

drive to Williamsburg every two weeks to pick up the leftovers from Chevra Tzedoko V’chesed. They also got day-old goods from bakeries and grocery stores. “But very soon, every second week was no longer sufficient,” says Mr. Rosenstock. “And leftovers are leftovers.”

Today Alan Rosenstock is involved full time in his *chesed* organization, but it wasn’t always like that. He grew up in the Breuer’s *kehillah* in Washington Heights and moved to Monsey after his wedding 41 years ago. When it came time to support his family, he decided to go into the jewelry business.

“I was already very busy with my business when I started getting involved in Tomche Shabbos,” he says. “I was manufacturing in Asia and traveling there several times a year.” But the organization starting taking up more and more of his time. Initially, all of the money collected went directly to the needy, but as Tomche Shabbos grew, there were minor items, such as the phone bill and stamps, that had to be covered in order to streamline the effectiveness of the operation.

In 1993, they filed to become an official 501(c)(3) organization. But Mr. Rosenstock was still involved in his jewelry business, and it was becoming increasingly untenable to juggle both.

“It reached a point where my wife and I realized that we had to sit down and make some difficult decisions. On the one hand, I had worked so hard to build up my business that it seemed absurd to sell it. On the other hand, we realized that you only get one shot at life, and dedicating my life to helping the poor was a lot more meaningful.

“It took us four days to decide on the latter, but once we did, I began the process of selling my business and running the organization full time.”

Restoring Dignity

As his involvement in Tomche Shabbos increased, it struck Mr. Rosenstock

Adult night classes



that every box of food delivered was actually a failure of *klal Yisrael*. It meant that the community hadn't fulfilled its responsibility to help someone get a job and stand on his own two feet.

"A box at the door is not a success," he maintains. "Helping someone earn a living—that's success." He often quotes the Rambam, who writes that the highest form of *tzedakah* is helping someone find employment so that he can become self-sufficient.

That's when Mr. Rosenstock started calling local businesses and companies to ask if they would consider hiring people in need of a job. It wasn't easy. Sometimes the potential employer would respond, "This candidate isn't what we're looking for." If that happened, Mr. Rosenstock would try to get him to reimagine how this person could fit into the company. When an employer hesitated, he would sometimes offer to cover the first 30 days of the person's salary.

"There was one man I placed with a car insurance company," he recalls. "The

When I see an email from a single mother sent at 2:21 a.m., I know she hasn't slept all night.

frum manager called me two weeks later and said, 'This man is unqualified.' I told him that the guy's *shalom bayis* was at stake. Now, between you and me, that's

not a professional thing to say. It's none of the manager's business whether or not he gets along with his wife. All he needs to know is whether he'll be an asset to the company. But I'm an advocate, and sometimes that means pushing.

"The manager, however, didn't give up without a fight. 'You're killing me!' he told me. I said, 'Listen, what's he worth to you? How about you pay him what you'd pay someone with minimal qualifications, and Tomche Shabbos will make up the difference.' This arrangement went on for the next few months, until one day the manager called back and said, 'He's holding his own.' They were satisfied with his work and happy to pay the entire salary.

"There's a sign sitting on my desk that reads, 'Nothing was ever accomplished by a reasonable person,'" he adds. "That's my motto."

Then there was the resident of Spring Valley whose daughter was battling lymphoma. The father was unemployed when Mr. Rosenstock received a call

from a representative of a well-known high-tech company asking if he could help them fill an important position. When he asked the man how they had found out about him, he was told, “We heard that you place good people.”

For Mr. Rosenstock, this was pure *siya-ta dishmaya*. He sent the father to the interview, and he was hired. The job came with an excellent medical plan, which the family desperately needed, and a six-figure salary. “That was a real success story,” Mr. Rosenstock says.

He then shares another incident.

“I often speak in *shuls* around town, trying to get people to donate either time or money, or both. One time a man came over to me and said, ‘Can I speak to you privately?’ When someone says that, it either means that he desperately needs help or he wants to donate a million dollars. I never know which, though, because the facial expression is always the same,” he says wryly.

In this case, the man needed assistance. He had previously run a textile business, but the industry had shifted overseas and he couldn’t compete anymore. He lacked computer skills, and without them he couldn’t get another job. “I realized that there were probably a lot of people in the same boat, those who had started working decades ago and were now trying to find a second career but had no knowledge of computers.”

The following Shabbos, Mr. Rosenstock repeated the conversation in the next *shul* he spoke in. “You might not be able to support this man’s family,” he told his audience, “but someone here has computer skills and can teach him. That is the highest level of *tzedakah*.” A number of savvy volunteers were soon recruited to teach QuickBooks, Excel and other modern workplace programs, and the organization’s free technical skills course was launched.

In time, a separate organization was formed, which Mr. Rosenstock describes as a “sister” to Tomche Shab-

“My advice for avoiding foreclosure is simple—daven hard, plan well and live below your means.”

bos—Partners in Parnosoh. It focuses on job placement and education, all under the umbrella of the Rockland County Chesed Organization, and is headed by Leiby Markowitz, a former manager at

B&H Photo. To date, Mr. Markowitz has placed 763 unemployed people in viable positions.

Seeing so many people come through the program has given Mr. Rosenstock a better understanding of the challenges faced by those seeking employment, especially people coming from jobs where they earned significant salaries. “Older individuals who enjoyed established careers for many years usually aren’t prepared to start at the bottom,” he maintains, “even though that’s often what they have to do if they want to get a job at all. If they’re changing industries, they have to be willing to begin with a lower salary and build themselves up.”

Age discrimination, although illegal, is also a very real issue. Young people right out of school are eager to take a job with a low salary so they can learn a trade or break into an industry. Employers then face the choice of keeping their longstanding, dedicated 58-year-old employee who is paid \$150,000 a year or replacing him with an energetic 20-year-old who is willing to work for \$50,000.



An aerial view of Monsey



Empty boxes attest to the volume of food distributed

“And in recent years things have only gotten worse; an increasing number of companies are letting older employees go and hiring younger ones for much less money.”

Several years ago, Mr. Rosenstock learned that a local family's home was going into foreclosure. They had limited earning ability and hadn't paid their mortgage in months. RCN hired a lawyer and raised the \$700,000 needed to purchase the home, which was then returned to the family to live in rent-free for the next ten years. That was the beginning of Yeshuas HaBayis, another subdivision of RCN, which steps in to buy homes that are going into foreclosure.

“Every deal is tailor-made to the family's needs,” he says.

Some situations are straightforward; others are complicated. In one case, Yeshuas HaBayis bought the house, flipped it and used the proceeds to settle the family in a different neighborhood. “Ba-

A box at the door is not a success. Helping someone earn a living—that's success.

ruch Hashem, we have a number of highly knowledgeable, qualified volunteers on our board, including the owner of a re-

spected CPA firm and a real estate attorney,” he explains. “In many of these cases, if Yeshuas HaBayis hadn't stepped in, the families would have ended up homeless or living in a shelter simply because they had no one to help them.”

Unfortunately, the rise in the number of foreclosures in our community is significant. As the cost of living continues to go up while salaries stay the same or increase at a lower rate, more people are unable to keep up. Many manage by using credit cards to pay their bills. When an offer arrives in the mail for a credit card with 0% interest for the first six months, they grab it, but all this does is kick the can further down the road.

What makes more sense, Mr. Rosenstock suggests, is to sit down with a spreadsheet and chart the past three months of income and expenses. This way, the couple can alter their lifestyle to fit their income, or work on increasing their income to support the lifestyle

they wish to lead. They need to discuss their finances openly and decide how to change their trajectory. They can also explore possible opportunities, like considering whether opening a business is realistic.

“Creating a business plan is vital for analyzing potential,” he maintains. “So is consulting a business coach. What makes *klal Yisrael* so special is that we look after each other. If people reside in Monsey, RCN will be more than happy to connect with a coach. Of course, not everyone is cut out to be in business. In those cases, we'll work together to identify a job with growth potential.”

Sometimes people end up in foreclosure because they take out a mortgage irresponsibly. For example, they may be having an exceptionally good year and buy a house above their means. Mr. Rosenstock urges people to remember that there are no guarantees in life, and the high-paying jobs they have right now might not always remain high-paying, or they may not even have the job.

“Buy a house and put down a larger down payment so the monthly mortgage payment is below what you can afford right now, and one day you'll be grateful. My advice for avoiding foreclosure is simple—*daven* hard, plan well and live below your means.”

The rabbi of a local *shul* recently asked Mr. Rosenstock to share a story about a family in need so that he could talk about it in his Yom Kippur appeal. “I told him about a certain family that was marrying off a child. The father had just been diagnosed with progressive motor conduction disorder, a rare condition that affects the signals between the nerves and muscles. It causes sudden stiffness in the arms and hands, and sometimes the fingers can lock in place.

“The man couldn't work anymore, and the medical expenses were overwhelming. We only found out about it when the family's utilities were shut off. The

mother was doing all she could and kept working, but the money coming in wasn't enough.”

When the rabbi shared this story with his congregation, they responded with remarkable generosity and raised approximately \$20,000 to defray the wedding expenses.

“The rabbi wrote out the check, and I took it to the family. But when I handed it to the father, his fingers suddenly locked and he couldn't take it from me. To cover the awkward moment, I wished him mazel tov, placed the check on the table and left. The *chasunah* took place two months later. I made sure to attend the wedding and brought the rabbi along. When I introduced them, it was a very beautiful and emotional moment.”

No Such Thing as a Typical Day

“We never know what to expect,” Mr. Rosenstock says. “It doesn't stop. People walk through the door all day long. When I check my email in the morning and see a message from a single mother sent at 2:21 a.m., it tells me that she can't sleep. Her difficulties are consuming her.”

The problem is rarely that the person simply isn't trying hard enough to find a job. Sometimes he or she is being misguided. Other times, a therapist or a business coach needs to get involved. There are so many variables.

“In my view,” he says, “there are two types of *aniyim*—the kind that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* makes and the kind whose problems are self-inflicted, whether knowingly or not. For people in the first category, we raise money and do whatever we can for them. For those in the second category, such as people who are living beyond their means unnecessarily, we try to get them to see that there are other lifestyles that don't have to come with such high expenses. I al-

ways tell them, ‘I'm looking for a partner. You're my partner. I'm here to help you as far as you will go with me.’”

At that point, if they're still not interested, RCN won't provide them with money. “That's the *psak* we got. They have to put in the effort,” he asserts.

However, if a person's mental instability or other limitation prevents him or her from working, that might be another story.

One especially painful situation involved a seven-year-old boy who arrived in *yeshivah* one morning looking disheveled. His *rebbe* noticed and took him aside to speak to him. The little boy began to cry. “They shut off the electricity in our house. I'm scared,” he said. His father had serious emotional issues but refused help.

“We had to get creative,” Mr. Rosenstock says. “We found a utility bill dated a few years earlier, which gave us the account number, called the utility company and paid the \$4,000 to have the electricity turned on within an hour.”

The boy also shared that his baby sister was coughing a lot and no one was taking her to the doctor. “The *rebbe* told me that the little boy said, ‘My heart is cracked in pieces.’ We arranged for a therapist for the child and did what we could. Who can hear a story like this and remain unmoved?”

Mr. Rosenstock insists that his entire staff is just as invested in this work as he is. Sometimes a worker in the office will need to step away from her desk after speaking to someone so she can cry and then pull herself together for the next call. “I myself often cry when I hear about the *tzaros* these families are dealing with,” he admits.

A few months ago, someone called the office from Eretz Yisrael and said that her friend had been evicted from her apartment in Monsey and had been living in her car for the past six months. “We knew nothing about this situation before

the call,” Mr. Rosenstock says, shaking his head. The woman was divorced and unemployed. Because she had no job and no place to live, she was denied even partial custody of her young daughter.

RCN contacted the woman, and they met that same day in the office. They found her a job (which she still has) and challenged her to find an apartment to rent. If she could do that, RCN would cover the first month’s rent and the security deposit. “It took her only a couple of hours to find an apartment. As per our agreement, we gave her the two checks.”

Before she left to settle into her new residence, Mr. Rosenstock suggested that they load her car with food. “I took her to our food warehouse and told her to pull up so I could load the car. But she wouldn’t let me near it, saying that she would take the food to the car herself. I realized that she was embarrassed to let me see what it looked like inside.”

As a postscript, this woman now has joint custody of her daughter. “Stories like this are what keep us going,” Mr. Rosenstock says. “What can I say? RCN is my life. I eat, drink and sleep it. Many of our donors have become my friends. Sometimes when it becomes too much, I’ll reach out to one of them and we’ll talk, not about any of the cases we’re working on but simply as friends. That’s very important to me.”

Shifting Values

One challenge Mr. Rosenstock identifies that has no simple solution is the rising standard of living in our communities. “We keep raising the bar. Today’s *beinonim* live more extravagantly than yesterday’s *gvir* ever did. It isn’t healthy or sustainable. It has reached a point where many people expect a certain standard of living whether they can afford it or not, which is how some families end up on our doorstep.”

“How could there be a family in the United States of America whose cupboards were bare?”

The irony, he notes, is striking. “People think that their neighbors are living in the lap of luxury. There are four families on the same block who, over a two-year period, came to me, unbeknownst to the others, and said, ‘My neighbors are all wealthy, but I’m broke.’”

Someone once put an Alcoholics Anonymous sobriety coin in the Tomche Shabbos *pushka* by mistake. Mr. Rosenstock keeps it on his desk. Engraved on the back is the Serenity Prayer: “G-d, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” He says that although the craving for wealth in our society is something he cannot change single-handedly, he and his wife have tried to instill old-fashioned values in their children, along with the philosophy that even those who are wealthy can still choose to live with simplicity.

But despite his strong belief about the damage caused by excessive materialism, “I stand in judgment of no one,” he says. “I do my best to appreciate everybody’s point of view.” In fact, at his Shabbos table, which he calls his “ultimate board of directors,” he’ll sometimes present a case anonymously and ask his family to discuss the best course of action. “But only if they can see both sides of the situation; otherwise they’re not allowed to give their opinion.”

One such case involved a family whose breadwinner was talented but irresponsible. He’d get jobs and then lose them because he came late or didn’t show up at all. The question was, should RCN help this man or give the money to *almanos* and *yesomim*? One side argued that he needed to get his act together before receiving help. The other side pointed out that maybe this man’s poverty had been decreed for him and that it wasn’t laziness or irresponsibility.

“In the end, we presented this situation to Rav Chaim Kanievsky, *zt”*, who quoted the Chofetz Chaim: ‘Sometimes, when the *ani* tries to work, Hashem pours lead into his bones so he can’t. He’s destined to be an *ani*, and we’re obligated to help him.’”

Quiet Chesed in Action

Sometimes families are struggling but are too proud to accept monetary help. In one case, a family had a sick child and their medical expenses were overwhelming, but they still wouldn’t accept a penny.

“We had to be resourceful. We discreetly raised over \$80,000 for them. They were making a *simchah* for another child, so we covered part of the caterer’s bill. When they went to pay him, the caterer presented them with a bill for a smaller amount. We arranged things that way so



they wouldn’t realize they were receiving a discount. We did the same thing with their supermarket bill. For situations like this, we build a profile so we understand the family’s needs. If their rent goes up, they never know. It’s a *bkavodike* way of helping people.”

There was another fellow who kept losing his job. RCN paid for a business coach behind the scenes, but the guy never knew about it, assuming he’d just acquired a new friend. In another case, there was a family going through a hard time, and the children hadn’t been to school. RCN found a *rebbe* who was out of work and paid him to learn with one of the boys.

“These are all Hashem’s ideas coming through,” says Mr. Rosenstock. “The question is, when we hear about something like this, what do we do about it? Do we say, ‘Oy!’ and go back to eating our muffins and drinking our lattes, or do we

stop and say, ‘I’m calling RCN to see how I can get involved?’”

He often says when he speaks in public, “I don’t know any great people; I only know regular people who do great things. Everyone has talents, and everyone can do something that benefits the *klal*. That has always been the secret to our survival throughout this long *galus*.”

“There’s a story in the Gemara about a Roman general who asked Rabbi Akiva, ‘If Hashem loves the poor, why did He create them?’ Rabbi Akiva’s response is seared into my heart. He replied, ‘Hashem created the poor to save the rest of us from the judgment of Gehinnom.’ Giving money to help impoverished families is the ultimate return on investment!”

He insists that what’s being done in Monsey can be done in every *frum* community. Although many communities have organizations that make food deliveries, other services like job placement

are often missing. Mr. Rosenstock says that he is willing to travel to any community to help set it up.

The conviction that this is the obligation of every single one of us is what drives RCN’s staff and volunteers. He illustrates their devotion with one last story.

This past Chol Hamoed Sukkos, a therapist called about a family whose house faced foreclosure unless the outstanding mortgage payments were paid immediately. Even though the RCN office was closed and everyone already had plans for the day, several staff members came in, raised the necessary money and wired it to the bank, saving the home from foreclosure.

In a world where need never sleeps, neither does the need to give. And as long as there are people who give, there is hope fir *klal Yisrael*. What matters is the willingness to see someone else’s pain and say, “This is my responsibility.” ●