

Just a Phone Call Away

Rabbi AY Goldman and his colleague Shaya Halpern have trained over 100 volunteers to field phone calls from those struggling with anxiety, depression, self-harm inclinations, trauma, or who just need someone to listen. It's not a referral service and not a place to get advice, but for those who need to be heard, the HelpLine hotline is a veritable safety net — because no Jew should have to suffer alone

By **Riki Goldstein**
Photos **Chaim Stanton**

It

was 12 a.m. on a Friday night soon after the HelpLine — a UK-based volunteer support line for people in trauma or crisis — was up and running. The volunteer manning the line had already gone to sleep, but when his phone rang on Shabbos, he knew it must be an emergency (the team was given a *psak* to answer the hotline's phone on Shabbos). As he picked up, he heard a girl's voice — she was outside, on a city bridge, on the verge of an act of utter desperation. He listened to her for a few minutes, offering up a prayer while doing his best to calm her down, but not knowing where any of those words of comfort and support would land.

A few days later, Rabbi AY Goldman, the HelpLine's cofounder, received a call: "I'm the mentor of the girl who called in on Friday night," said a woman on the other end. "I had once given her HelpLine's number to call in case she needed support. Thanks to your volunteer, she went safely home."



Rabbi AY and Shaya Halpern, founders of HelpLine: "Speaking it out helps people face their fears. Why should anyone suffer alone?"

While the volunteers very rarely get feedback, Rabbi Goldman says this was clearly his sign from Above that their work was vital and, indeed, lifesaving.

Based in Manchester, UK., with over 100 trained volunteer call handlers located all over Europe, Israel, and the United States, the HelpLine is an anonymous way for adults and even children, to receive mental health support. Through phone or WhatsApp, anyone who is struggling with anxiety, depression, self-harm, or low mood, who feels the lingering trauma of past abuse or who simply needs to talk, can speak to a trained listener from the Jewish community.

The range of calls is enormous, and although Rabbi AY Goldman and Shaya Halpern originally saw their mission as helping teenagers when they founded the line five years ago, the largest demographic of callers has turned out to be those in the 20 to 40 age bracket, followed by teens.

Throughout the past year, with the war and hostage situation raging on in Israel and anti-Semitism surging throughout Europe and even the US, the surge in call numbers — about 2,000 a month — reflects wide-ranging anxiety and fear.

"We got calls from many students in crisis — these were people who were in relationships with non-Jews, people who knew little about being Jewish, but had suddenly encountered hatred on campus," says Rabbi Goldman.







At the HelpCentre, expert therapists from England and beyond help the Jewish community become more aware of trauma and its fallout

What Lurks Underneath

Shaya Halpern and Rabbi Goldman might not look like colleagues — Rabbi AY looks like a mainstream yeshivah educator with his white shirt and trim beard, while Shaya is clean-shaven, with jeans and a black sweatshirt — but not only are they partners, they're old friends from back in elementary school.

"We were part of the same *chevreh* in school here," Rabbi AY says. "We were a pretty rowdy bunch."

"Until someone told my parents I'd be better off without those friends, and they took me out," Shaya puts in. The boys were 11 years old when he was transferred to another school.

"I went to three high schools, away from my home town. Eventually I came back to yeshivah in Manchester, but studying and learning just wasn't my thing. Then I went to Eretz Yisrael, to Torah Ore, Rav Scheinberg's yeshivah, and the American *maggidei shiur* changed my views on learning."

Shaya was 19 when he married Naomi Lachs. Their apartment on Rechov Petach Tikvah in Jerusalem's Romema neighborhood drew "a lot of teens who came to hang out on the couch. And a lot of people who needed to talk." His sensitivity and the coping mechanisms he had created over his own checkered teen years gave him the tools to listen.

A few years later, with two children, it was time to return to Manchester, but although he was officially working in real estate and then as a partner in a meat business, the teenagers kept coming over. Addiction. Substance abuse. Family problems. Trauma. Self-harm. Maybe it's his calm demeanor— Shaya is admittedly difficult to shock. And like someone's responsible but chilled older brother, he seems like someone who can carry a secret.

Meanwhile, AY had settled into the yeshivah world, first in Sunderland Yeshiva, then in Gateshead, and then onto Mir. While a young *avreich* in Jerusalem, he was asked to learn with struggling English bochurim, and soon found himself running an evening program for them. His original career plan was to be a criminal lawyer, but instead, he partnered with a friend, Rabbi Yitzchok Weitz (today the principal of Bais Yaakov Primary School in London) to open a full-time yeshivah for them called Yeshiva Kesser Hatalmud. In 2008, they were asked to open a similar yeshivah for younger boys in the UK, and the Goldmans moved to Manchester.

From 2010, Rabbi AY Goldman has headed a yeshivah in Manchester. "In



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running the yeshivah, instead of aiming for a high level, I lowered the goalposts to accept the boys of this generation. And I kept lowering them," he says. "AY's," as it was known, became a last stop. Over the years, boys who were either expelled or not accepted in the mainstream *mosdos*, not celebrated for who they were, who needed their space, found their way to the place. AY added courses, martial arts, whatever he felt the boys needed.

Slowly, he began to encounter ripples of the underlying causes for the challenging behaviors these boys presented with. Boys sometimes came to him with difficult stories of abuse they'd suffered, and the PTSD was sometimes complex PTSD, because of the disbelief or even blame they encountered. It was unpleasant and sometimes it was controversial, because people didn't want to believe that such things could happen in their community. But Rabbi AY stood up for the protection and the mental health of these victims, and with time, it became a calling. After 13 years of running the yeshivah, and four years after opening the HelpLine, his rav told him to close the yeshivah and focus on helping families of struggling teens. Today, Rabbi Goldman is considered an expert in the complex field of disengaged youth and is a sought-after speaker around the world in helping parents with struggling children.

Face Your Fears

In 2019, the Manchester community was hit by two tragic and traumatic incidents within six months. Standing at the *levayah* of the second teenager, Rabbi AY Goldman and Shaya Halpern decided they needed to do something to support the local youth in dealing with this trauma, and hit upon the idea of opening a support hotline. When they consulted Dayan Chaim Mordechai Zahn, a leading local rav, his response not only greenlighted the idea, but showed his full trust in them. "Do whatever you need to do, and ask all your *sh'eilos* afterward."

Mrs Debbie Gross, founder of the Tahel women's crisis center in Israel, trained 25 volunteers on her next visit to the UK, and HelpLine was born. It was only open eight hours a week, and had separate times for boys and girls. To the founders' surprise, not only teens were calling, but adults too. Then Covid hit, and anxiety — and calls to HelpLine — went through the roof.

There were couples who'd been together for decades, but when forced to remain in close quarters and face the challenge together, could not connect emotionally. There were teens facing inner demons, scars of abuse. HelpCentre was an outgrowth of HelpLine, where Rabbi AY and Shaya have brought some of the most expert therapists from England and beyond to offer courses to the local Jewish community in creating awareness of trauma and its fallout. The center is well-appointed, with a comfortable therapy suite, clearly designed with young people in mind, comfortable lounges with chilled soft drinks, and a few books about surviving abuse and trauma lying on low tables.

I ask if the bombardment of warnings we get about safeguarding our children are just hype, panic- mongering, or are in fact legitimate. Can we really protect our children and make sure they are safe, 24/7? Can I really not go to sleep on a Shabbos afternoon if our child is playing with a friend, in case behaviors become inappropriate?

"Well, it's not possible to protect them 24/7," Shaya says. But he explains that our awareness alone empowers our children. "Silence empowers perpetrators. Awareness empowers children. Parents' willingness to talk openly about personal safety is itself a protection for their children, and also ensures that if anything does happen, the child can speak about it."

He explains that the ones who suffer the most are those who carry their pain around with them for years and years. "It's so important to educate and empower your children to share with you," he affirms. "Use the right language in a refined way, but you are responsible to educate your child. Things can still happen, but there is a world of a difference between a child who can go to their parents and be trusted and believed, and one who can't."

Rabbi AY explains that just opening the conversation takes the air out of the balloon. He mentions a meeting he had earlier this very day with a pair of obviously terrified parents, whose child was struggling seriously with mental health. He could sense the elephant in the room, and asked them openly whether their son was talking about self-harm and suicide.

"He was," Rabbi AY says. "They had been avoiding the topic out of fear. But just speaking about it and dealing with the situation openly helped them face their fears, and will help them to support their child too."



Shaya, too, has had a busy morning. He's just come from a meeting with someone whose family member is struggling with psychosis, and is going to be hospitalized for the first time under the Mental Health Act. This relative was lost and frightened, and someone had told the family that Shaya Halpern was an address for information.

"I have experience in joining people on their journey through psychosis, and I've been to those hospital wards. I know what's happening and how the system works," Shaya says. "I explained what's going to happen, what it means for someone to be 'sectioned' and held against their will."

Rabbi AY and Shaya also deal with families who are nervous about expected visits from social services, worried that they will lose their children if there are mental health issues in the family. They help the family navigate this frightening scenario with calm and foresight.

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Rock Bottom

Sometimes people call HelpLine but are afraid to speak — they just want to hear someone on the other end. There were repeated calls to HelpLine from a certain number. Nine times, the person called, remained silent, and soon hung up. On the tenth call, the responder tried another track: "I know that you're there," said the responder, Yossi Poznanski *a"h*, who was *niftar* suddenly a short time ago. "I know it can be really hard to talk. If it's too difficult to talk, do you want to press buttons to show that you're safe?"

The caller responded by pressing, and eventually spoke. She said that she was calling HelpLine for two reasons: to let them know that they couldn't actually help anyone by running a help line, and to have someone on the phone with her while she overdosed on meds. She said she didn't want to die alone. Yossi heard her out, and managed to get the young woman's agreement to send HelpLine trustees to her apartment: Shaya Halpern and Mrs. Rebecca Abeles, who works with the HelpCentre providing support for girls in crisis.

When Shaya and Mrs. Abeles left, six hours later, he was holding the bag of pills — he'd managed to gain her trust.

One mother reached out to Shaya, begging for his help with her daughter, a young woman in her mid-twenties struggling with substance abuse that resulted in a string of overdoses. After gaining the young lady's trust over a period of time, Shaya saw that she was willing to seek help and managed to enrol her into a rehabilitation program in the UK. Unfortunately, as with many, she relapsed during her stay there and was left homeless.

"Relapsing is part of the journey," Shaya says, but he doesn't lose hope. After hitting rock bottom and spending time surfing from couch to couch, the young woman — through her own hard work and perseverance — manged to get a bed in the NHS system and her path slowly wound upward. Today, she has been clean of drugs for two years and has reestablished relationships within the community.

Rehabilitation from trauma often needs intense residential treatment, of which there are few in the UK. On more than one occasion, Shaya has accompanied people to the US as there are far more suitable options out there for such sufferers.

"In understanding the deep effects of trauma, we are behind the US," Shaya admits. "And I think there is more religious compassion there, better weather, and more space for rural retreats."

Shaya shows me some very powerful paintings he has received from a particular person currently in treatment – all black and shades of dark gray. In one of them, several fingers point accusingly from different directions at a little girl, huddled into herself, hugging her knees. In another, the little girl is behind thick bars. In a third, there is actually a thin line of blue sky topping the black background, and a ladder goes up from night into day. But the small girl stretching up cannot reach the ladder. She is stuck in the black dust. It's a combination of trauma and the guilt the victim feels when bad things have happened to them.

Silent Scream

The four most common topics raised in HelpLine calls, texts, and WhatsApps are anxiety, depression, historical abuse, and self-harm. "The line is not for advice and not for therapist referrals," Shaya stresses. "People can call RELIEF for referrals. This is a listening line." The policy is that volunteers do not offer advice without asking a supervisor. "Maybe two percent



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of people want advice or referrals. Most callers just want to be heard."

Even for those callers who are in therapy, sometimes a week between appointments can be excruciatingly long for someone who is suffering, and therapists across the UK working with Jewish teens have told Rabbi AY and Shaya that they actually advise their young clients to call HelpLine when they need support. "We call it spreading a safety net. We want to be there as a safety net for anyone who is in need," Rabbi AY says.

The volunteers are also trained to support silent callers, people in pain who do not have the emotional wherewithal to speak. "Once a caller was silent for ten minutes, while I waited," Rabbi AY says. "She then thanked me for not interrupting her. She said that people know it's hurtful to interrupt stutterers, but not everyone knows how to wait for someone with an emotional stutter to talk."

HelpLine has a website, but the team decided to remove its presence from other social media platforms in order to reduce calls from non-Jewish callers. If a non-Jew calls in distress on Shabbos, volunteers may listen and help. Yet for a Jewish youngster in distress or in the middle of a mental health emergency on Shabbos, they will talk "as if it's a Tuesday."

"Before the recent three-day Yamim Tovim, several rabbanim told us that they had given our number to people in need," Shaya says. One person, embittered about some aspects of Yiddishkeit, told her rabbi, "If I would have felt that the responder was cutting me short because of Shabbos, it would have triggered me. But I never felt that way."

He explains that for some sufferers of addiction and trauma, Shabbos and Yom Tov alone can be triggers of distress. Phone dependency is also a major issue today. For a severely anxious person, the knowledge that there is someone available for them to call in case of need, actually reduces the need to call. The very knowledge that HelpLine is there for people over Shabbos can help reduce anxiety and depression.

Not everyone who calls is in crisis. But going through a hard time alone can increase the suffering.

"I'll tell you about a call I took when we first started," Shaya, who generally no longer takes calls himself, relates. "It was Yom Tov time, and a frum mother was crying on the phone. She said her oldest



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daughter had married, and the son-in-law was manipulative. He was pulling the daughter away, and the daughter wasn't speaking to her anymore. She'd even had a baby and didn't tell her. This woman's husband was throwing up his hands and taking his pain to his seforim, but who could she talk to? Her neighbors and friends? Of course, she didn't want to share her agony about her daughter's marriage — it was too shameful. For an hour, she talked and cried. I gave no advice and no referrals. How could I? When you listen to someone you don't know them and their situation. But I listened to her pain, and when she hung up, she was calmer and had shared the burden."

What about prank calls? "Well, there are testing calls, but not prank calls," says Shaya. "Even if a few teenagers are giggling together making a call, we're pretty sure that one of them is just testing out what happens when you call HelpLine."

Over 120 volunteers take two two-hour shifts a week to answer phone calls. A form is filled in after each call for the benefit of the volunteers, to be reviewed by a therapeutic supervisor, and in case of emergencies, a trained supervisor is always on call. Callers may request to speak to a responder of the same gender. In order to secure anonymity, volunteers may not tell anyone besides their spouse that they are taking HelpLine calls.

One 12-year-old girl called to say that after her mother had remarried, she felt unsafe in the new husband's presence given certain behaviors toward her, and she didn't know what to do. The volunteer was an experienced and trained woman, who, over a few conversations, empowered the girl and role-played with her how she could speak to her mother or another safe adult. It was not long afterward that the mother herself called in through heavy sobbing: "Thank you for saving my child from years of anguish."

Rabbi Goldman has recruited several dozen call handlers from the US as well, which helps cover night shifts, and helps with anonymity too.

"We're looking for good listeners, and then we can train them," he says. "One mother whom I knew via Kesher Nafshi became a HelpLine volunteer as a *zechus* for her struggling teen. The next time we met, she told me that training in supportive listening had transformed the way she related to her own family. One Thursday night, as she cooked for Shabbos, her son was sitting in the kitchen and started to cry. He told her that he was really feeling low, because his non-Jewish girlfriend had broken up with him. Because of her training, she had the ability to really listen to his pain and support him without any kind of judgment."

Shaya mentions that the tagline, "Never Struggle Alone," is not just branding. "It's really what we want, our mission. We hope to expand our safety net even more, because no Jew should ever feel alone in their suffering."