

Helping Hands

The former head of a Manchester yeshiva came to understand the life-changing power of truly listening to someone in despair – Joyce Khan learns more.

Rabbi AY Goldman, known as AY, is the Manchester-born-and-raised co-founder of The Helpline, a charity he started with his childhood friend Shaya Halpern, which offers an anonymous service for anyone in the Jewish community who is struggling. Two shocking suicides of local young people exposed the need in a close-knit, largely observant community for a trusted, confidential place where troubled youngsters could be listened to but not judged.

That same principle reflects the work of Kevin Briggs, the retired California highway patrol man known as 'The Guardian of the Golden Gate Bridge'. During years of patrolling the bridge, he brought hundreds of suicidal people back from the brink through 'listening to understand' – deep, empathetic listening without judgment or interruption which creates trust and opens a connection with the speaker. This approach allows the person in pain to feel heard and valued. By responding with empathy, the listener helps to reduce the sense of isolation, making space for hope to emerge.

The Helpline volunteers are taught active listening – responding in a way that demonstrates understanding – whether by paraphrasing, reflecting what they have heard, or asking clarifying questions. As AY explains: "If people feel alone with their problem, there's a danger of them spiraling downwards. Our volunteers learn how to be with someone in their moment of pain without trying to solve it. It's an underestimated skill, and it can change lives."

AY has worked extensively in 'non-mainstream' yeshivah settings, setting up his own – first in Israel and later in Manchester – for students with challenging behaviour who couldn't cope in a standard framework. He offered them vocational training alongside religious study and many alumni have gone on to successful work as electricians, plumbers, and builders.

As head of yeshivah, AY gained substantial experience in supporting students who had suffered traumatic or abusive childhoods, which lay behind their difficult behaviour. Today he's regarded as an expert in working with disengaged children and their families and is regularly asked to speak in the UK and beyond.

The deaths that shook the community galvanized AY and Shaya into setting up The Helpline with 17 trained volunteers for eight hours a week. It's grown into a 24/7 service, with volunteers in the UK, the United States, and Europe fielding 4,500 calls monthly and serving communities around the world including in New York, Gibraltar, Boca Raton, and Belgium. Many callers are living with the aftermath of trauma, anxiety, depression, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts. Anonymity is key so callers' numbers can't be seen or traced, and every shift is overseen by a supervisor.

Although the service was established with young people in mind, a surprising level of need surfaced among older adults. The largest group of callers is in the 25 to 45 age group. Calls spiked during the pandemic and again following the Heaton Park synagogue attack and stabbings in Golders Green. The phone line is now augmented by text and WhatsApp services and offers face-to-face support from trained therapists at its Salford premises.

Recruitment of volunteers has involved a personal approach, AY explains how he would identify a potential volunteer by observing people in ordinary conversation to see: "whether someone is listening with the reply already formed on their lips – indicating that they're not really listening to what the other person is saying – or listening to understand." The Helpline's work is built on the quiet skill of listening carefully enough for someone in distress to feel, perhaps for the first time, that they don't have to struggle alone.

For 24/7 support, phone 0330 127 3333 or send an SMS or WhatsApp message to 07479 273 333. If you're interested in becoming a Helpline volunteer, call 0303 040 2222.