

Just an ambucycle ride away



United Hatzalah volunteers are based in the field rather than at dispatch locations and are more often found on motorcycles than in bona fide ambulances. (Photos: Courtesy United Hatzalah)

Staffed by volunteers, United Hatzalah offers a first-responder model that has been replicated internationally

• By EITAN AROM and ERICA SCHACHNE

There's a group of people on the front lines of the recent violence in the capital who, in their daily lives, are barbers, accountants, wedding singers and the like – normal folk. But at any instant, they could be called upon to drop what they're doing and try to save a life.

Take Danny Ben-David. A photographer by day, he lives a couple of blocks away from the Bnei Torah Synagogue in Har Nof, where in November two terrorists perpetrated a brutal attack on congregants who had gathered for morning prayers.

"I was sleeping [at the time]," he said. "It was seven in the morning."

Ben-David is a volunteer for United Hatzalah, an emergency response service that relies on a nationwide network of more than 2,300 volunteer medics, with 24/7 services that are free and universal. Like all the organization's voluntary first responders, his telephone is equipped with an app

that alerts him immediately when a distress call has been made in his vicinity.

So at approximately 7 a.m. on November 18, his phone lit up and he rushed to the scene, the first emergency responder to arrive.

The organization prides itself on being quick – extremely quick. United Hatzalah volunteers are based in the field rather than at dispatch locations and are more often found on motorcycles than in bona fide ambulances.

For these reasons, they were the first on the scene at both of last month's run-over attacks at Jerusalem light rail stations, arriving within a minute at each one and helping to stabilize the victims until ambulances could arrive.

On a recent Thursday, United Hatzalah founder Eli Beer, a genial Canadian in his late 30s, invited two reporters to the organization's headquarters.

Unlike traditional dispatch centers, which send out ambulances from a centralized location, United Hatzalah headquarters in downtown Jerusalem are more a nerve center than anything else. The field-based volunteers come in only to restock medical supplies – and to chat, joke around and let off steam with other volunteers.

Standing in the small underground room where supplies are kept, with volunteers popping in and out, Beer pulled up a GPS view on his smartphone of the stabbing attack earlier that day in a Mishor Adumim supermarket.

The hive mind that directs responders in their mad dashes across the country is a command-and-control system called Life Compass, built by

NowForce, a hi-tech company headquartered in Jerusalem. At all times, it logs which volunteers have used their smartphones to indicate that they are on duty, where those volunteers are and what type of transport they have access to. When a distress call comes in from a phone or a smartphone panic button integrated into the system, it sends out a round robin alert until it finds the volunteer most likely to arrive the fastest.

"This is a current screenshot of the GPS of the incident in Mishor Adumim at the Rami Levy [supermarket]. You can see the three ambucycles and a volunteer's car," said Beer, pointing to his smartphone. "You see that? Three ambucycles: one, two, three."

Beer used the term "ambucycle" as if it were a word out of the dictionary. In fact, it's a term United Hatzalah invented – a combination of "ambulance" and "motorcycle."

As such, when United Hatzalah went to the Health Ministry to certify its vehicles, the ministry wasn't sure how to classify them, said Daniel Katzenstein, the organization's chief of international relations. The Texas-born Katzenstein, who is also a volunteer, spoke quickly and with enthusiasm – particularly when extolling the service's virtues.

"They said, 'Okay, what is an ambucycle?'" he recalled, standing at the busy Yirmeyahu Street corner where United Hatzalah is headquartered. He walked over to a nearby motorbike and mimed jotting notes on a pad. "This is an ambucycle," they told him.

These motorcycles – halfway between Magen



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David Adom vehicles and pizza delivery bikes – are at the heart of the organization’s philosophy of emergency medicine.

“After volunteering for two years in an ambulance when I was 15 years old, I realized that ambulances don’t save lives – people save lives,” Beer said.

And indeed, the United Hatzalah system he invented is responsible for placing volunteers where they’re needed within three minutes – last year’s average response time for 245,000 emergency calls. By contrast, Magen David Adom, which uses traditional ambulances from a network of dispatch centers, averages eight minutes. That time, quite literally, can be the difference between life and death.

“If you get to someone within the first two minutes of a cardiac event, you have a 90 percent chance of saving them,” Beer noted.

Beer explained his “Aha! moment” that helped catalyze the idea for United Hatzalah in a TED Talk that attracted international attention. (Parallel organizations inspired by the Israeli model now exist in Sao Paulo and Panama City, with plans for Ukraine, India and Rwanda.)

In the video, which has been viewed close to a million times, he tells the story of working as an EMT and receiving a call about a seven-year-old child choking on a hot dog.

Stymied by heavy traffic, when he eventually arrived on the scene and began to perform CPR, he was stopped by a doctor who lived down the block but arrived only after the ambulances showed up. The doctor pronounced the child dead.

“At that moment, I understood: This child died for nothing,” Beer says in the video.

United Hatzalah differs from other emergency medical organizations in almost every way. Prominent among those differences is that it charges its patients exactly as much as it pays its responders: nothing.

“Sometimes we treat the same person three times, and we never charge one cent,” said Beer. “We’re the only ones. All ambulances in Israel charge money for medical service. We are the first and only ones who know that nothing comes after our service – only goodbye, shalom, be well.”

As an example of how United Hatzalah consistently goes the extra kilometer no matter the cost, Beer pointed to the bone-injector guns developed by Israeli start-up WaisMed that are part of every treatment pack. It costs only NIS 2 to use a standard IV, while the bone injectors cost NIS 250 a pop; but the advanced devices enable medics to bypass sometimes hard-to-find veins and penetrate the tibia within seconds, administering vital injections to critically injured patients.

“It’s all about saving lives,” repeated Beer. “We’ll absorb the cost.”

With this in mind, it’s hard to know how to

characterize the entirely donation-supported enterprise that grew out of Beer’s brainchild. It’s certainly an emergency medical organization, just like Magen David Adom, but that description doesn’t do it justice.

“You know what it is?” said Katzenstein. “It’s a family.”

Standing in the cramped supply bay with men of all stripes (haredi, modern Orthodox, secular – one Ra’anana-based volunteer is the head of Israel’s Professional Golf Association), Katzenstein pointed out a tall, broad-shouldered man with a long beard and felt kippa. He was Naftali David, the head of United Hatzalah in Netanya.

“Naftali is a professional singer,” said Katzenstein. “So who do I go to for my daughter’s wedding, who do I call to be the singer? Naftali!”

For Katzenstein, United Hatzalah is a bit like a secret society of emergency responders; they look out for one another. Katzenstein’s daughters have benefited from this kinship more than once. When one daughter needed an apartment in Afula, he picked up the phone and called a United Hatzalah volunteer in Afula.

“The next daughter wants to live in Ofakim – I call the guy in Ofakim,” he said.

Somehow, even patients seem to fit into this unusual, convivial extended family.

“I tell the guys, ‘Think about every single patient in Israel like he’s your own mother or father,’” Beer said. “‘Run to him like he’s your own son.’”

Katzenstein described responding to a call and finding a woman in distress, with her husband and infant child standing by. When first responders were preparing to transport the woman to the hospital along with her husband, the question arose of how to deal with the child.

“What do you do?” said Katzenstein. “You pick the kid up, you say, ‘Here’s my phone number,’ and you take him home.”

And that’s exactly what he did.

“My son’s name is Shmuel, and the child’s name was also Shmuel,” Katzenstein smiled. “So we called them Shmuel Alef and Shmuel Bet.” •

To learn more about United Hatzalah, visit israelrescue.org.



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