

COVID smashes Haredi taboos on mental health treatment to smithereens

Brooklyn Rabbi David Cohen permits the use of a special helpline on Shabbat for community members who are struggling with mental issues, and the response is overwhelming.

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The Jewish world in the age of coronavirus – A special *Israel Hayom* project

Part XVII: Coping with mental health in the Haredi world

The ultra-Orthodox community has had many challenges to tackle since the coronavirus pandemic erupted. It has affected family life, study, prayers, and more.

But it succeeded in breaking taboos about one more significant challenge: mental health.

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Take Haredi Rabbi David Cohen, for example. He is a world-renowned Torah scholar and leader of the Gvul Yavetz community in Brooklyn.

Last April, Cohen permitted the use of a special helpline on Shabbat and holidays for community members who struggled with mental issues and were in need of assistance.

Cohen based his ruling on the words of famous Talmudic scholar Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, who used to say, "I am not lenient with the rules of Shabbat, I am stringent when it comes to saving a life."

These words spread around the community and led to a fundamental change.

"There was an unprecedented jump in the number of inquiries – 10 times more than on normal days," said New York psychologist Dr. Shlomi Zimmerman.

Zimmerman volunteers with the board of directors of the local NGO Amudim, which helps fight various addictions in the Haredi community.

"Two hours before Passover began, we received a flood of inquiries, and we quickly recruited all of our volunteers. I have never seen anything like this. There were calls from everywhere – California, New York, New Jersey, Britain, and Israel. The community has come to realize that mental health is just as important as physical well-being," he said.

Zimmerman expressed hope that these events would lead to a change in the discourse, or lack thereof, about mental health in Haredi society.

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