

Gaydamak the Generous?

Ashdod's ultra-Orthodox fete Gaydamak for donation after gov't fails to come with the funds

By Yair Ettinger

Arcadi Gaydamak – oligarch, philanthropist or opportunist? In the ultra-Orthodox community, at any rate, the Russian-Israeli multi-millionaire has earned himself a new and distinguished title: Gaydamak the Generous. The ultra-Orthodox community of Ashdod applied the designation to him a few days ago during a festive ceremony where he pledged NIS 500,000 toward building a new medical center in town.

The center is meant to serve all residents, but it is the initiative of

the Gur Hassidic sect. In funding it, Gaydamak has forged a connection with a very powerful man, Rabbi Yaakov Aryeh Alter from the Gur sect.

He has never met Alter, nor is he likely to meet him in the future, because the rabbi refrains from meeting anyone who desecrates the Sabbath.

Nonetheless, one of the followers of Alter's sect, MK Yakov Litzman, contacted Gaydamak and requested his help with the project.

Gaydamak was happy to oblige. During the ceremony, attended by

mayor Tzvi Tzilker, Gaydamak even added that the check for NIS 500,000 was only the first course. He said he might donate more in the future.

So how do the Gur sect rabbi, Gaydamak and the fair port-city in the south all connect? Part of the answer lies in the fact that the population of Ashdod comprises many ultra-Orthodox and many Russian immigrants.

It was during the 70s that Ashdod's veteran mayor, Tzilker, began to promote efforts to secure government funding for a hospital in his city, Israel's fifth largest

with a population of 220,000.

Smaller cities have hospitals, but the people of Ashdod need to travel to the Barzilai Medical Center in Ashkelon, or to Kaplan Hospital in Rehovot. The two cities are not very near, and in urgent cases the distance could certainly cost human lives. To answer this need, the Knesset passed a resolution in 2002 to build a state-funded hospital in Ashdod. A timetable was prepared, but the resolution was never applied.

This vacuum was then filled by the Gur sect, whose largest congregation outside Jerusalem

and Bnei Brak resides in Ashdod. Rabbi Alter has heard the stories of women forced to give birth in ambulances. He was made aware of the cases of children who had drowned in the bathtub to receive critically delayed medical attention. This prompted him to instruct his followers to seek private funding for the much-needed hospital, which is intended to serve anyone insured with one of Israel's HMOs.

After the Ashdod municipality supplied three dunams of land, construction finally began last year. The new medical center is

expected to include emergency facilities, a pediatrics department, clinics and an imaging institute.

The municipality and the Gur sect's Refuah VeYeshuah Association (the medicine and salvation association) formed a partnership on the construction of the new center. For the second phase of the operation, the two partners plan to raise more donations for a 70-dunam hospital complex for overnight patients, to be built nearby.

This is where Gaydamak, along with other public figures and

prominent business men, steps into the picture. However, Gaydamak's donation constitutes a mere fraction of the total cost of the project, estimated at \$32 million. The Gur sect nonetheless decided to emphasize Gaydamak's donation, and use it to lambaste the government. "Gaydamak and Litzman are doing the government's job," they said during the ceremony.

A prominent figure in the sect said afterwards that the donation by Gaydamak was "only the beginning of a cooperation aimed at bringing down the government."