

Defining Moments...

Rav Lau Responds To Medical Crisis In Ashdod

By STEVE K. WALZ

For the first time in his illustrious rabbinical career, former Israeli chief rabbi, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Lau (who is also currently serving a second term as chief rabbi of Tel Aviv), has taken personal responsibility for fast-forwarding a long overdue medical facility in Ashdod.

Responding to an imminent medical crisis in Israel's fifth largest city, Rav Lau, together with an influential lineup of Israeli medical professionals, Knesset members and Orthodox rabbinical leaders, has formed the equivalent of a rapid response team in order to accelerate construction of the new Ashdod Emergency Medical Center.

"This is the first time I was ever asked to be directly involved with such a project, which I see as nothing less than a holy mission. We're talking about preserving the sanctity of life, and I am honored to be a part of this effort," Rav Lau told The Jewish Press.

Within the past 10 years, Ashdod (located 50 min-



Rabbi Lau (right) and MK Rav Yaakov Litzman.

utes south of Tel Aviv) has transformed itself into a regional melting pot based on a huge influx of new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, North Africa, Ethiopia and most recently, France. Ashdod is also home to the country's second largest port facility (after Haifa), as well as sensitive IDF military installations and many other industries, including hi-tech.

Despite Ashdod's population boom, government bureaucrats have repeatedly torpedoed efforts to fund the construction of a full service hospital in the region, jeopardizing the lives of nearly 230,000 citizens. Unlike most central and northern Israeli cities that possess a wide range of hospital facilities, Ashdod has none.

Recent statistics show that there are 28 emergency rooms throughout Israel. Only three are located in the entire southern portion of Israel. This

area holds 64 percent of the Jewish State's territory (from Ashdod southward to the Negev and Eilat).

Shockingly, Ashdod doesn't possess a single emergency room facility even though 100 people a day in Ashdod require emergency services. Children are also unable to receive pediatric emergency care. In addition, Ashdod doesn't have the capability to handle victims of terror attacks. The city's busy port facilities and sensitive military installations have already experienced several terrorist incidents, during which trauma victims had to be evacuated to hospitals that were at least 40 minutes away, greatly increasing the risk of permanent injuries or even death.

Since the IDF's withdrawal from Gaza, Palestinian terror groups have also been working to secure long-range Kassam rockets that would put the entire Ashdod region within reach. Ashdod is located less than 20 miles from the Gaza Strip. Imagine Philadelphia, America's fifth largest city, without relevant medical facilities.

Refuah V'Yeshuah, an Israeli non-profit organization, recognized that a medical catastrophe was only a matter of time. So they marshaled the support of top business, medical, political and rabbinical leaders to create the Ashdod Emergency Medical Center. This will be a 160,000 square foot state-of-the-art emergency medical center that could provide the community with a wide range of vital medical services.

Recently, the project's board of directors, trustees and management team formally met for the first time to discuss the facility's accelerated building program. The names of the participants read like a "Who's Who" of Israeli society.

The board of directors and trustees is led by Rabbi Yisroel Meir Lau; along with Isaac Herzog, minister of tourism; Shimon Peres, vice prime minister; Ron Kobrovsky, president of Coca-Cola, Israel; Natan Sharansky, former Knesset member and minister; Professor Saul Shasha, director, Western Galilee Hospital; Professor Zeev Rotstein, director, Sheba Tel HaShomer Hospital; Professor Jonathan Halevi, director Sha'are Zedek Hospital; and Professor Joshua Shemer, director general, Maccabi Health Services (HMO). The medical center's management team is top-lined by Nachman Widislavski, CEO; Dr. Abraham Ofek, project manager; and Yonatan Bornstein, director.

Also in attendance were several representatives of the Ashdod municipality, including the city's long-time mayor, Zvi Zilker, as well as former Brooklyn, New York resident and influential Knesset member Rabbi Yaakov Litzman.

The group reviewed the progress on the \$32 million dollar facility, which is slated to serve its first patients in late December 2007. Based on the recommendations of the committee members, the medical center will feature a first-class emergency and trauma center, women's health center, pediatric emergency clinic, gastroenterology institute, eye clinic, ambulatory surgery center, imaging center, dialysis center, physiotherapy services and an institute for preventive medicine.

"We have found and funded a way around the politics, so we can get things moving forward. Even with this private initiative, it has taken us four years to get all of the proper licenses to erect this facility. We had to start from somewhere. And because the needs are so acute, we were able to get some of the most renowned people in Israeli medicine to assist us with our project," said Widislavski.

Professor Shasha, whose Western Galilee Hospital in Nahariya treated 1,871 casualties during last summer's war with Lebanon, compared Ashdod with the situation that exists in northern Israel. "The Ashdod region absolutely resembles the Galilee region where we are located, because Ashdod will soon be within range of Kassams or Katyushas from Gaza. And it is extremely important that Ashdod possess an emergency room that can handle a mass casualty event."

Said Rabbi Lau, "Medical facilities such as the Ashdod Emergency Medical Center represent a challenge and an opportunity for Diaspora Jewry. It's very easy to commemorate a wing, or a piece of sophisticated medical equipment that will become a part of the Ashdod Emergency Medical Center. Without the generosity of Diaspora Jewry, many of Israel's medical facilities wouldn't even exist.

"We are not talking about a donation for a library or something at Yad Vashem, which as many people know, is a holy place for me. But in this case, saving lives is even holier. And donating charitable funds towards saving lives is in our blood."

To learn more about the Ashdod Emergency Medical Center you can visit their website at www.ashdodmc.com.



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