

## News Feature

## Searching for Life in the Rubble of Haiti

*A leading ZAKA official shares memories of an unforgettable relief mission to a ravaged land*

Hamodia interviewed Dovie Maisel, co-chief of international rescue operations for ZAKA, last Tuesday, just hours after he and other ZAKA volunteers returned from a four-day rescue mission in Haiti.

Maisel, along with Mati Goldstein, also ZAKA co-chief of international rescue; ZAKA member Dano Monkotovitch; and Eitan Kraus, an askan in the Mexican Jewish community, were among the first relief delegations to search the Haitian ruins for living victims following a 7.0 magnitude earthquake.

Two members of the ZAKA team and their Mexican counterpart traveled to Haiti already exhausted, having just dealt with the aftermath of the Saba family helicopter crash.

In a riveting account, Maisel describes chaos and misery, the race against time to reach live victims, the global display of compassion and cooperation and the enormous kiddush Hashem.

What follows is a condensed transcript of the interview at Hamodia's office. Some of the content has been omitted due to its graphic nature.

For Hamodia staff, the interview was a visual tour of ZAKA's experience. Many of Maisel's remarks contain his own interjections that narrate the photos and video clips he showed during the interview.

**Let's talk about your recent exploits in Mexico and in Haiti. Once the [Jan. 10] Saba helicopter crash happened, how soon was ZAKA there?**

I got a frantic call seven o'clock in the morning in Eretz Yisrael, from a member of the *chevrah kaddisha* in Mexico: "There was a terrible helicopter crash here."

Moti Goldstein and I instructed them over the phone. They expressed a desire that we should get there as soon as possible, because they didn't know how to deal with something of this scale. We arrived in Mexico at 5 a.m. the next day, davened shacharis at the shul, and went directly out to the scene of the crash. We had arranged for another six or seven volunteers from the *chevrah kaddisha* there to meet us.

The scene of the crash was a very big area, in a ravine inside a forest, a difficult place to get to. Whatever was left of the helicopter was dropped in the bottom of the ravine, in a small stream. The helicopter had come down 300-400 meters, through the trees, crashing along the whole way.

We finished at sundown. We held a debriefing with the *chevrah kaddisha* volunteers who took part in the operation, until about until 11:30 at night. We hadn't slept since the day before, when we left Eretz Yisrael. We went back to the shul, where they gave us a room to sleep in.

Around 2 or 3 a.m. we got a call from headquarters in Eretz Yisrael about a huge quake in Haiti, a terrible disaster, and there were missing Jews. We were the closest ones, so we were told



The earthquake happened, and the country stopped.



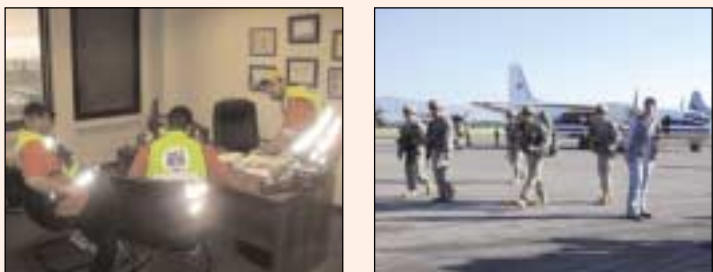
"While we were working, mothers would come up to us with pictures of their kids, begging us to come dig in their houses. It is so ... emotional ... You see the pictures of the kids. ... It doesn't matter, Jews or not Jews. Kids are kids."



Thousands of people were swarming the streets, not knowing where to go.



It was surreal. You could see the beautiful palm trees above a collapsed building.



Clockwise from upper left: On arrival at the airport; The seatless interior of the military plane in which the team spent 12 hours; Fully armed U.S. Marines guarding the volunteers; Getting organized in the airport in advance of the mission; In the airport manager's office in Santo Domingo.

to start getting organized for it. We were literally up all night, on phone calls with the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

#### How many ZAKA members went to Haiti?

In Mexico, we were three people from ZAKA. The fourth [member of our delegation who went to Haiti] was a Mexican from Cadena, a Jewish humanitarian organization in Mexico that is very well connected politically.

We had bought tickets to fly to Miami, then to Santo Domingo [in the Dominican Republic], then to drive to Haiti. This guy from Cadena, said, "I know the Mexican military is sending an official delegation from Mexico City. You might be able to join them on their military plane." Israeli volunteers, on a Mexican army plane, going directly there? But surprisingly, he got approval.

We got to the [Mexican] air force base around midnight. By around sunrise, we were flying in circles over Haiti because the airport there was closed. It was jammed with planes — no fuel to get them out. Chaos. Nobody's controlling the airport. No one could land. We were circling, circling in the air, for almost five hours.

At a certain point, [they decided] we're going to Santo Domingo. On the runway there, another 15 or 20 delegations in army planes [from different countries] were landing.

We ended up sleeping on the runway there, literally on the floor under the airplane, for a couple of hours, until about three

in the morning. We were then the first plane out of Santo Domingo.

We landed in Haiti right before sunrise. As we approached to land, we could see the devastation from the plane. It's not looking for one house that fell. You could see huge piles of rubble, throughout the city.

The airport terminal was all cracked up, and the tower was broken. The airport was like a beehive. You see helicopters taking off and landing there, every second. These huge planes, all full of equipment. Military planes are lining up right and left of you. Because of all the [traffic, the crews] couldn't get off the planes. Pilots were coming down from planes on ropes with equipment that was brought in.

We organized ourselves with the Mexican delegation and unloaded the plane. We were escorted by heavily armed U.N. soldiers that were Jordanian and Egyptian, guarding us, with the Mexican delegation. The whole situation was very surreal.

The United Nations, together with various humanitarian organizations, opened up a [makeshift] camp inside the airport, at the end of a runway, on the dirt and the grass. They were building tents and everything, because the airport was secured.

We rode in the back of a truck to the camp. As we drove by, we could see thousands of Haitians outside the gates of the airport, trying to escape from the country. American soldiers were blockading the airport.

We got to the camp but didn't set up; we dropped our bags, put

our vests on, and were off to the first site.

#### How did you know where to go?

There is a coordination center there, coordinating the U.N., the Red Cross and all the search parties. They get information from the population, from surveys they've done, where they know the biggest concentration of living people is, and they designate the missions.

We received a mission to go to a university that supposedly had a lot of live people in it. It was a seven-story building that collapsed into a sandwich. And in the basement, there were survivors.

#### This was how long after the quake?

The quake was Tuesday evening, five p.m.; this was Friday at neitz.

We were one of the first delegations in — the third or fourth — and this was two days later already. We were there almost alone.

#### And anyone living who you can get to, could have minutes or seconds to live...

As the days go by, their chances of surviving get lower and lower. So we didn't want to waste any time.

It was gehinnom. There was no water. No electricity. No communications. We couldn't contact anyone. No cellular, no nothing. The only communications out of there is satellite phones. [ZAKA] didn't have a satellite phone, but the overall delegation had one. But half of the satellite phones weren't doing a good job. Baruch Hashem, on Motzoei Shabbos I managed [with the help of the IDF team that had arrived] to send a message to my wife.

As soon as you leave the airport you smell death. The streets are full of bodies. This is tropical weather; it must be 100 percent humidity, and the heat accelerates the decomposition process. The city is full of smoke from fires, and the terrible, terrible stench of bodies. Houses are collapsed into the street, left and right.

Sewage is flowing through the streets.

Everyone's outside, because you can't be inside [due to widespread structural damage]. Thousands of people swarming the streets, not knowing where to go. Everybody's going, but nobody knows where. They're all sleeping in the streets.

#### There were reports of children just wandering without parents.

Yes. And nobody cares. It's something that I cannot understand.

The people are still silent; they're still in shock at this point. There's a gas station that collapsed on top of a bus there.

Buildings just down to nothing. We're talking about thousands of sites. And all these buildings have bodies in them — a lot of bodies you just can't get to.

At 6 a.m. it was boiling hot and humid. You could see the people all walking around with cloths over their faces [to block the odor of decomposing corpses].

We drove through the city and everywhere the car was stopped

[by people pleading], "There are live people here. Maybe you can help us." And there were these foreigners yelling to us in English, "Come here. There's a three-year-old child here, alive, crying under the rubble. Come to us and help us." We tried to talk to the [mission] commander — maybe they'd stop — but he said, "Unfortunately, we can't, because, we know there are more live people [at the university]."

The most difficult thing was, while we were working, there were mothers coming up to us with pictures of their kids, begging us to come dig in their houses, because they thought their kids might possibly be alive. As a parent — I have three kids — it's so emotional. And you're supposed to tell them, "We can't. We can't." You see the pictures of the kids...

There are no words to explain it. It's devastating, emotionally. You see them walking away, understanding that whatever hope they may have had, seeing the foreigners that came in, is lost to them.

Even if everybody brought everything that they could the first day, and transportation and the time difference weren't issues, it's still impossible. The magnitude, the devastation is so intense, so widespread, there's no way to do this.

There were bodies in middle of the street, and people just walked by.

(He points to the picture of a collapsed seven-story building.) See how the floors just stuck to each other? There are hundreds of bodies in here. Here are bodies squashed between the floors.

#### There are obviously things between the floors, yet there's no space between the floors. Everything is pancaked.

One of our translators was saying that there were six people alive in there, and around 30 bodies around them. They were in little pockets, under beams. There was no chance for anyone to survive here.

#### Did you have equipment of some sort? Scanners, sensors...?

The [Mexican delegation of our team] had simple equipment and dogs with them. Heavy equipment they didn't have, because they were just the "go" team. It takes all the countries time to organize these delegations. This is also before the Israelis got there.

#### And Haiti itself doesn't have sufficient means to cope with this.

They don't have any infrastructure. The earthquake happened, and the country stopped. There was no one to deal with it. No one could land in the airport. We would have been there 12 hours earlier, or more, but the only airport was shut down! It just collapsed, and everybody ran away.

#### How did you search through the rubble?

First of all, a lot of ancient-style work — hammers and chisels. And the Mexicans have [specialists] called "the moles." They find weak points and create tunnels, crawl under the rubble, under the beams.

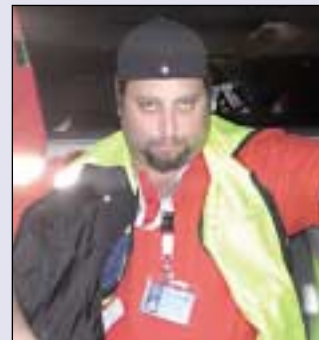
#### That must be dangerous.

There was not one home that wasn't damaged. They're all cracked. Even the ones that are standing, you'll see significant cracks in the building. And the buildings weren't modern. One small shake, even a secondary shock wave, would just knock them down.

#### Did more buildings fall?

Many did. While we were working there, there were three

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Maisel in Haiti.

## Dovie Maisel, ZAKA Veteran

Most people flee disaster. Maisel runs toward it.

He's an emergency management and disaster relief professional who responds to traumatic events around the globe.

"I come from an emergency service background. I'm a trained paramedic. When people ask me what I do, I say 'I live in the worst-case scenario.' But not on the scale of Haiti! Nothing would prepare me for something like that."

Maisel has been chief of international operations for ZAKA for nearly two years. Before that, he held a number of different roles in the organization. For many years, he was part of senior management of Magen David Adom, and was also with Hatzolah.

In addition to his grueling work with ZAKA, Maisel is chief of operations for Isracare, a global, Israel-based company that provides training, consultation and medical services for mass casualty preparedness and mass disasters.

The Isracare database states that Maisel is "a senior paramedic with national-level EMS management experience in all aspects of emergency medical service, first response, hospital-level strategic planning," and toxicological terrorism management.

"Maisel also serves as a company commander in the IDF (reserves) Home Front Command specializing in mass disasters, rescue and recovery in the civilian and military arena and weapons of mass destruction, as well as being a NDRT-RDRT member of international Red Cross."



See how the floors just stuck to each other? There are hundreds of bodies in here.



"The stench is so strong. It's called the smell of death."

## An Organization That Enters The Fray

ZAKA is "the predominant rescue, life-saving and recovery non-governmental organization in Israel, working alongside law enforcement and emergency personnel in responding to incidents of terrorism, accidents or disasters," according to the organization's database.

Dovie Maisel, ZAKA co-chief of international operations, said that ZAKA volunteers are trained in first aid, *chevrah kaddisha* work, and forensics.

In collaboration with the IDF, ZAKA responds to mass casualty security situations.

"They have a motorcycle ambulance unit, a divers' unit, a canine unit ... It's a very diverse operation, all volunteer-based," except for a handful of administrative personnel, Maisel explains.

The organization has about 1,600 day-to-day volunteers in Israel, and about another 3,500 in times of emergency or war.

ZAKA sometimes helps deal with crises in countries where diplomatic relations prevent the Israeli government from sending an official contingent.

An international ZAKA network is being formed in Jewish communities in order to create what Maisel calls a "sort of Jewish Red Cross." The goal is to bolster Jewish readiness for and response to, *chas veshalom*, wide-scale disaster.



## Haiti

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or four tremors a day. Everything would start shaking again, and buildings that had a tilting wall would start falling down, right behind you. It's scary.

**So then people who were entering a structure to retrieve somebody...**

... Were risking their lives.

(Pointing to a picture) Here's a body just squashed between the floors. And you know what the worst is? They won't get that body out until it's rotted, because they don't have the equipment to lift these cement things.

You see the side of the building? Here you have 15 to 20 bodies, half sticking out. And there's nothing you can do about it. They're gone. You want to first tend to the living. While there's still a chance to save them, you don't deal with the dead. Once all the chances of saving the living are gone, then you deal with the dead.

But the amount of dead there! It's hundreds of thousands. This building alone has hundreds.

**Was your work concentrated in this massive structure?**

The first day, it was in this structure. At the end of the first day, ZAKA, along with the Mexican rescue party, pulled out six men from here, alive.

At some point, when we saw that a certain team was enough to work there, we went to different sites where people were saying there are live people. They'd send the dogs in and they'd come out, with the signs they use, to say, "There are bodies, but they're not alive." So whatever hope they had, [was gone].

**In what condition were the six men pulled out?**

They were alive and walking, but dehydrated...

**What did they say to you?**

They were grateful. They were crying. They were of course very fatigued, and dirty, and scratched and bruised. But this was from the front part of the

building. It was amazing.

During the day, at the site right next to us, they pulled out a victim from under the rubble there also. We treated her medically and took her to the local hospital.

But from the building next door, we pulled out a woman who had her legs absolutely broken. They'd likely be amputated, if they got to her in the hospital in time. The number of injured people there is overwhelming. If you have 100,000 dead, you must have 200,000 injured or ill.

From the side of the building, we pulled out another girl. The following morning, another girl was pulled out from that side of the building.

An American team started working the next day. They pulled one out of there and brought her to us.

In our [assigned] building, our Mexican volunteer, Eitan, heard this girl. He crawled in from the side. He speaks Spanish. He's shouting there, and he hears voices from the side. So once the rescue unit excavators dug through enough, they pushed in a seven-foot long pipe and were slowly pouring water into it, so she could drink a little, and have oxygen from it, so the air in the pocket wouldn't get used up. Eventually they managed to get them out. They were injured, they had broken limbs, etc., but they were alive.

**What did you have with you to provide medical attention once you took someone out?**

We had basic equipment...

**Like what Hatzolah would show up with at a call?**

Yes, basically. There's only so much three people can take.

That's mainly the idea of the Israeli military hospital. They did what nobody else did. The Israeli hospital opened up operating rooms, with big divisions, and you name it.

The IDF landed with 10 jumbo jets and took over a huge fenced-in soccer field in the city, minutes from the airport. Within eight hours they had a hospital going. They had top doctors there, doctors from Tel Hashomer, from Hadassah, from

Shaarei Tzedek.

**How many patients can the IDF facility handle at a time?**

Five hundred a day. They came with close to 250 people: doctors, paramedics, nurses. They were being bombarded with people — people who had been going around for two or three days with chopped off limbs, wrapped up in a t-shirt. It's inconceivable.

We went to the general hospital of the city. It was overcrowded to an extent that you can't even imagine.

Most of the buildings there were struck, so [the medical centers] are not in the buildings; they're out in the courtyards. And there's no real treatment there. Also, from the [other temporary hospitals set up by the U.S. and the U.N.], anyone that needs surgery is transported to the Israeli hospital.

But don't forget, besides the devastation, this is a city of four million people. People have heart attacks, strokes — regular things that require hospitalization without a disaster.

**Did you work together with the IDF in Haiti?**

Yes. As part of the cooperation with the IDF, we had two [ZAKA] volunteers who are medics fly in with them, to be positioned in their hospital and assist with anything that has to do with lifesaving. And, of course, to deal with all of the dead, and the limbs, and whatever goes on in the hospital.

Once [the original ZAKA crew] left Haiti, more ZAKA members went there, because we didn't want to abandon the situation. There are six ZAKA volunteers

there now (as of last Tuesday).

**What was the delegation's camp like?**

The airport was where the camps were for all the different delegations except for the Israelis and the Americans. We didn't have sleeping bags or anything. We slept outside on the dirt, literally.

**What did you eat and drink?**

When we left Mexico, a Mexican Yid gave us a bag with a few cans of tuna and a bottle of grape juice. In the Dominican Republic, I bought like \$80 worth of candy bars with an OU on them in the duty-free shop. We were literally living on candy bars. We didn't have any food.

On Friday afternoon, around *shekia*, we were totally dehydrated, wiped out. We did *Minchah* and *Kabalas Shabbos* when we got back to camp. Then I go, "Guys, I have a surprise for you," and I pulled out the grape juice. The guys flipped! We had *kidush*. We had the tuna, and some pitas, dried for like three days already. And we sat on the grass singing *zemiros*.

We weren't really so hungry. It was just so hot, and the work was so hard. You don't really think about food. You just drink your water. I lost maybe 10 pounds there.

We got some food once the Israeli hospital got set up. We walked into the kitchen there dying of hunger. Every Israeli army delegation has a *Rav*, so he had portions of *mehadrin*, *glatt* — everything.

The Israeli army is very *mesudar* (organized). They were self-



"There are no words to describe it. It's devastating, emotionally. You see local residents walking away, understanding that whatever hope they may have had is lost to them."

secured. They all came armed. The Israelis and the Americans were the only ones that came armed.

#### Compare the Haiti tragedy to other events you've seen.

I think the closest you can compare it with is the tsunami, [when ZAKA went to] Thailand. Also there, there were 200,000 people dead in Malaysia and all over. The difference is that [following the tsunami], there were a lot of bodies, but there wasn't infrastructure demolition. There wasn't a situation in which there wasn't water or communications. The magnitude of [Haiti] is that you're in no man's land, disconnected from everything.

They put us on water rations [in Haiti], and then the people came to us begging for water. A child comes to beg for water. Could you refuse him? So you give them water, knowing it's on your *cheshbon*.

#### Isn't there any sign of a government or an authority in Haiti?

Absolutely nothing. The only coordination being done is by the international forces there, and the Americans, of course.

#### Anarchy breeds disorder. Did any violence break out while you were there?

As the days went on, there was more violence. On the second day already, more delegations had come in, and we got information that there was gunfire, and rescuers were being shot at a few different sites.

Because the situation there is not stable, the security rule is that

at sundown you leave the site and go back to base. So as sundown comes, we're driving in the street, and it gets pitch black. There's no electricity. At a certain point each day except for the first one, security [forces] said, "Everybody stop and get back to the airport."

Canadian delegations had worked there, but there were no signs of life.

So we're working on a diplomatic level, with the army and all the different connections that we have, to get the body from there. Our volunteers were on the site.



They put us on water rations in Haiti, and then the people came to us begging for water. A child comes to beg for water. Could you refuse him? So you give them water, knowing it's on your *cheshbon*.

#### The looting is unbelievable. Did you find any Yidden?

No, all the Yidden were accounted for. But yesterday (last Monday), we got an email to ZAKA, saying, "We're Jews from Canada, our son is in the [name omitted] Hotel, and we know for sure that he was there, because we spoke to him 10 minutes before the earthquake."

We knew that the French and

They got pictures of him from the family and everything. He's 36. I spoke to the mother; she's devastated, obviously.

#### Has the plight of Haiti fostered worldwide *achdus*?

I've got to tell you, this is a tremendous thing. There are always wars around the world. You see here the world brought together. You see the Jordanian

soldiers guarding the Israelis who are with the Mexicans. Sweden. Iceland. England. Germany. Russia. Qatar. Chile. I think every country sent a delegation. It's unbelievable.

There was a tremendous *kid-dush Hashem* between ZAKA and the IDF, and the delegation of First, which is another Israeli delegation that went there with doctors and whatever. This is really, really *ohr lagoyim*. Knowing that there are no Jews there, you're going to help the gentiles.

We were standing there davening, putting on our *tallis* and *tefillin* in the middle of the Mexican camp, next to the Germans. Everywhere we went, we said that we're Israelis, that we're Jews, and the response was amazing.

#### Despite the good will shown by Israel, accusations of organ harvesting in Haiti have already surfaced from anti-Semites. Can anything be done logistically to ward off such accusations?

It's ridiculous, repulsive. We should just ignore it.

#### As someone familiar with disaster, when you reflect on your Haiti experience, what ultimate message comes to your mind?

It strengthens my belief in *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. We believe everything is done because of, and for, the Jews. Maybe it's bringing Mashiach closer, preparing the world.

Also [the message is] to appreciate what we have, because it's so fragile.

The thing that kept running through my mind through all four days there was *Unesaneh Tokef*,

where we say *mi bara'ash, umi bamageifah*. Through the years when there were a lot of terrorist attacks, 2002-2003, when I'd get to *Unesaneh Tokef* on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, it would hit me then. The whole year, everything we went through... *mi bacherev umi bachayah*; and now, *mi bara'ash*.

This is the ultimate *ra'ash*, for 200,000 people. Two minutes of shaking!

#### You're working on an international relief network.

The mission is to be a sort of international Jewish Red Cross, a Jewish humanitarian organization that will volunteer in India, or in Mexico, or in Yerushalayim, or in London, or wherever, speaking the same language, with the same training, and devoted to the same mission.

We've been doing it since the Mumbai attacks [in November 2008]. Many Jewish communities around the world contacted us and said they want some training, some skills for dealing with a terror incident, with disaster. We put together this amazing program, and now we're going around the world training communities for disaster preparedness: some aspects of mass casualty incidents, a lot of aspects of *chesed shel emet* in not-natural deaths.

It's training communities, and plugging the volunteers we train into our network. If I have volunteers who are nearby, I don't need a deployment from across the world.

#### How many communities have implemented this system?

Eleven [so far], and we're lined up until June with the U.S., Mexico, Paris, Singapore, Hong Kong, England.

#### How long does it take to conduct this training?

We do it in a week. It's usually a full Sunday and then another four evenings, so that you don't have to miss work. It costs, obviously, to fly the instructors over, and the equipment.

#### So ZAKA relies on donations? One hundred percent.

#### And grants?

We haven't gotten any grants. We're an Israeli organization, so we can't apply for American grants. We rely on the good will of people.

You can be sure of one thing. It doesn't matter what will happen and where in the world — ZAKA will be there. It always is. Whether in Mumbai, or in Puket when the airplane crashed, or in the tsunami, or in Hurricane Katrina, when ZAKA recovered six bodies and six *sifrei Torah* from a shul there, underwater.

I wasn't there for Katrina, but Isaac Lieder, our North American rep, was. There's a famous picture of ZAKA with the *sifrei Torah*. Isaac Lieder also came down with us to Mexico. He drops everything and runs.

#### We appreciate your time so much. You've had an exhausting schedule.

Yes. I'm waiting to get back home for Shabbos.