

A Doctor IN THE House...

And in the office,
the shul, and
the community



Dr. Lightman with Chaim Leibtag,
president of the White Shul.

BY MIRIAM BIRNBAUM

The waves of Hurricane Sandy were followed, as we know, by wave upon wave of chessed. In Far Rockaway, the medical office of Dr. Hylton (Chaim Yitzchok) Lightman was swallowed by an eleven-foot storm surge and then spit out, an irretrievable jumble of destruction. Dr. Lightman has nonetheless maintained his practice and has been giving back to the community, both battered and blessed by the opportunities that have unfolded. His story – both pre- and post-Sandy – is an inspiring and multifaceted one.

Beyond Devoted

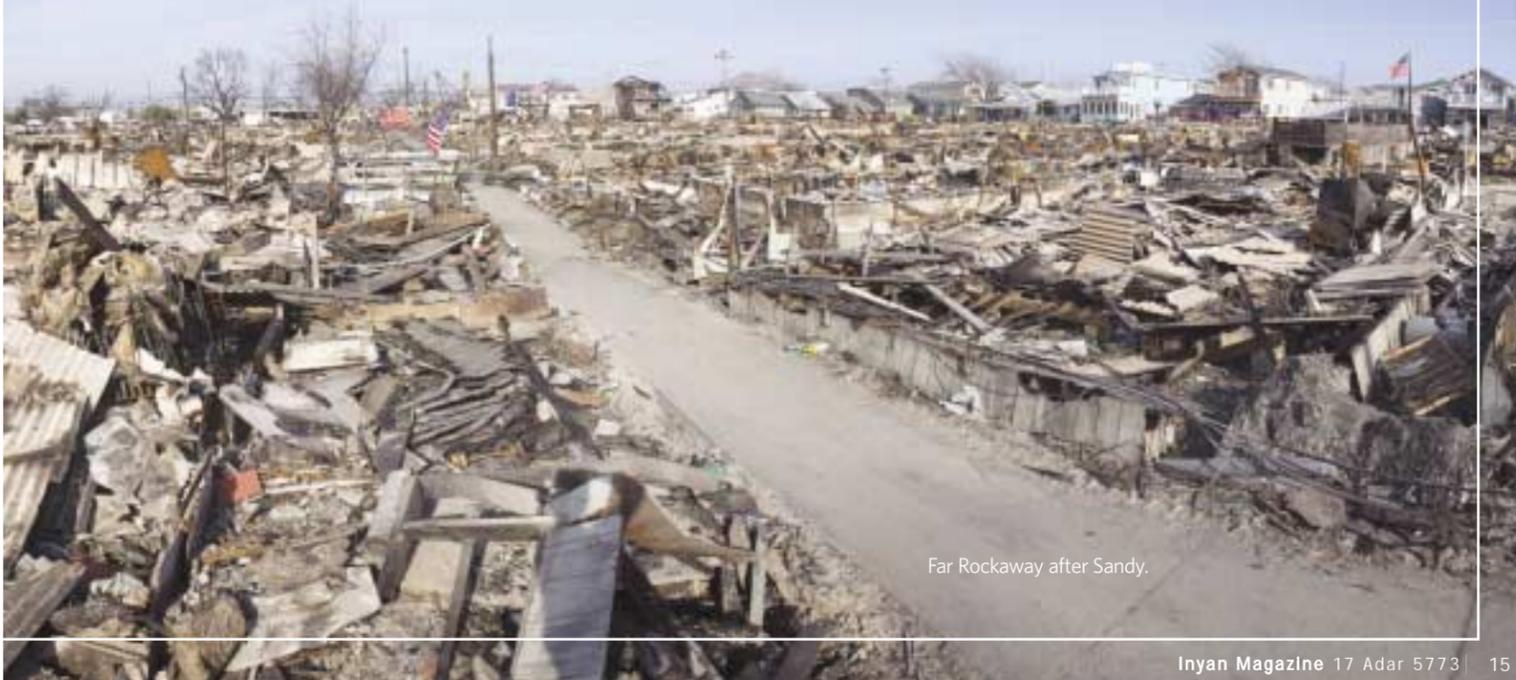
It might have seemed reasonable for the Lightmans to simply close up shop when the practice was destroyed by the storm; examination rooms, supplies, infrastructure, records, equipment and more were ravaged by Sandy. Sort through the rubble, salvage what little was possible, take months to reestablish a semblance of sanity, and then, finally, reopen so the children and families who called Dr. Lightman their own could resume treatments and visits.

Instead, we find the irrepressible Dr. Lightman, whose dedication to his patients is exceeded only by his devotion to his family, busy reconnecting. Without skipping a beat, he was seeing patients in his home — which, in addition to suffering roof

damage, was without electricity and heat.

How, one may wonder, does a physician without electricity see patients? Enter the littler (but still bright!) Lightmans — two Lightman children who held flashlights and provided general assistance in the improvised home office, continuing a family habit of helping and *chessed*.

Their labors were not long needed, for within days, Dr. Lightman had conferred with Rabbi Eytan Feiner, *mara d'asra* of Far Rockaway's White Shul, and Mr. Chaim Liebttag, the shul's president, and arranged for the temporary and astonishing re-creation of the Total Family Care medical practice in the White Shul, an institution that had already established itself as a bulwark of community outreach and services in the Sandy aftermath.



Far Rockaway after Sandy.

Cubicle partitions replicated discrete examination rooms, *sukkah* tables became examination and work tables, and computers were borrowed and jerry-rigged to create a full-fledged doctor's office. With the reassembly of his loyal staff, Dr. Lightman resumed (or rather, continued) his practice. Patients were scheduled, seen, and tested, as they would have been in his now-shattered office. Good humor and gratitude prevailed, and the Lightmans — Mrs. Lightman is the practice manager, a more demanding job than ever — were ubiquitous.

And so they remain, maintaining the practice in the White Shul until the destroyed office is reconstructed, a several-months-long project.

Homogeneity, Hard Work, and Lots of *Hashgachah*

Dr. Lightman's accent readily identifies him as a South African. An only child, he grew up in the insular Jewish community of Johannesburg, benefiting from the privileged economic status that most Jews, a cultural elite, enjoyed in the 1950s and '60s. Education was prized and opportunities were plentiful.

While most readers are familiar with the ugly presence of apartheid during that era, fewer may realize that South Africa was, in fact, a police state. The very real possibility of being banned or placed under house arrest for harboring a black worker who lacked the requisite pass infested every corner of life.

Dr. Lightman recalls his parents hiding a black maid — virtually all white families had black maids — in the shower when policemen came to search the neighborhood. Had she been found, his parents would have suffered dire consequences. He remembers, too, the black-leather-clad policemen who, merely by standing on a street corner, imposed palpable fear throughout South African society.

Dr. Lightman attended public school — there were no yeshivos — but, drawn from the local Jewish community, the student body was nearly 100-percent Jewish. No one, he reports, ever dared to misbehave; the prevailing strict social constraints, a product of the British-Dutch Reformed governing class as well as the police-state mentality, fostered a generation of polite, well-behaved South Africans who conformed to all social expectations.

What was called "religious education" took place in the school itself, between

the challenges of living as a Torah-true Jew in such an environment could not be ignored. It wasn't until the early 1970s, when Adas Yeshurun, the *Yekkishe* shul, imported ten *bachurim* from Israel to Johannesburg, that the Orthodox community began to flourish. Dr. Lightman, already in medical school at the University of Witwatersrand, had taken on *mitzvah* observance after an anatomy class, during which, while dissecting a cadaver, he fully perceived that, given the complexity of the human

body — *nekavim, nekavim, chalulim, chalulim* — there had to be a Creator, Who, with infinite wisdom, had shaped man. Although there was no ArtScroll library in that era, Dr. Lightman hungrily read whatever he could, purchased his first pair of *tzitzis*, started going to shul, and came into closer contact with a few religious Bnei Akiva campers who had a profound impact on him.

The Emergence of an Expert Doctor

His current community knows Dr. Lightman as a highly disciplined medical practitioner, an expert diagnostician and extremely dedicated pediatrician and family doctor whose hours regularly expand to accommodate the needs of his largely *frum* clientele. Those traits and that phenomenal expertise were being cultivated long before he arrived on American shores. Dr. Lightman's six years of medical schooling in South Africa saw him focusing on

the broadest range of medical specialties. Because of his superior grades on the exams in both surgery and internal medicine, he was given his choice of hospitals and selected the prestigious Johannesburg General Hospital, where he would serve a largely Jewish population. Not only did the hospital provide kosher food, he was able to avoid writing on Shabbos by making advance



Sandy's devastation. One picture is truly worth 1,000 words.

seven and eight a.m., when secular Israelis provided instruction in Hebrew language and "culture." In addition, as boys neared bar-mitzvah age, after school they would go to learn how to *lein*. The Jewish community itself was homogeneous — most kept kashrus to a degree, no one ate on Yom Kippur, all ate matzah on Pesach.

There was no official anti-Semitism, but

arrangements with the cooperative non-Jewish medical staff.

Discipline is an inbred quality, not only for a professional but also for one in the military. After completing his medical training, Dr. — aka Lieutenant — Lightman began the military duty compulsory in South Africa. Although every other military posting had provided kosher food and consistently accommodated his Shabbos observance, he found himself stationed for one three-month stint in Grootfontein, a major base in Southwest Africa, where an anti-Semitic commanding officer assigned him to patrol the war-torn Angola-Namibia border. Dr. Lightman recalls wearing a white shirt and khaki pants to conduct danger-ridden Shabbos patrols. His next posting to a German missionary hospital in Rehoboth was, by comparison, idyllic; he even managed to make a one-day trip, with a round-trip flight, into Johannesburg to celebrate Purim.

After completing his military service, Dr. Lightman returned to his hometown and the halls of Johannesburg General Hospital, where he sought and found opportunities to be *mekarev* the Jews who came under his care, ensuring, for instance, that they be served meals only from the hospital's kosher kitchen. In one striking incident in 1978, Dr. Lightman secretly treated a young man who was septic and comatose; all the other doctors expected the man to die and had withheld treatment. The patient came out of his long coma one night shortly after Dr. Lightman, with the cooperation of the patient's family, placed pigeons on his abdomen to cure his jaundice. The family committed to keeping Shabbos and kashrus, and today the former patient is the father and grandfather of a *frum* family.

It was, in fact, thanks to *hashgachah pratis* and this patient, who lived next

door to Rabbi Avraham Tanzer, *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshiva College of South Africa, that Dr. Lightman emigrated to the United States. After meeting his neighbor's doctor, Rabbi Tanzer arranged for Dr. Lightman, who had previously spent several months in Israel, to assume a summer position as a camp doctor in the Catskills. It was only upon his arrival there that it became evident that, lacking American malpractice insurance, he could not serve in the intended post. Disappointed, he made his way to



Dr. Lightman examines twins before the *bris*.

Brooklyn, where new friends and continued *hashgachah* helped him acquire the necessary insurance, pass the requisite exams, and establish the fledgling practice that over two decades has burgeoned into a premier community resource.

A Community Partner

While he is the personal physician of hundreds of residents in the Far

Rockaway-Five Towns vicinity, Dr. Lightman is also a consummate community medical professional who not only treats his individual patients but weaves a critical and complex web of unique data on the medical conditions that prevailed before, during, and after Sandy swept through the community. This important compilation will provide, for instance, information on post-Sandy medical conditions such as allergic reactions to mold, afflictions from airborne toxins, incidences of pulmonary distress, and other medical effects that will need to be reviewed and evaluated in order to prepare, understand, anticipate, and treat future incidents, *chas v'shalom*.

An attending physician at Long Island Jewish Hospital and at Winthrop Hospital on Long Island, Dr. Lightman will be working with these institutions to formalize a means of capturing, tracking, and evaluating the data with which his practice is uniquely rich. To be sure, partnering with the community infrastructure comes naturally to Dr. Lightman; he testified before the 9/11 Commission in Washington, D.C., regarding the condition of Hatzolah members who responded after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Members of the White Shul and Shaarei Tefila, the Lightmans are also actively involved in Shalom Task Force and in programs such as Project XTreme that help teens at risk.

Rooted in the Far Rockaway-Lawrence community for more than a dozen years, Dr. and Mrs. Lightman and their children remained during the worst of times — Hurricane Sandy — when so many had left due to less threatening challenges. They will, *b'ezras Hashem*, remain there, relocating to the rebuilt office, to continue sharing the best of times with growing numbers of friends, neighbors, and patients. ■