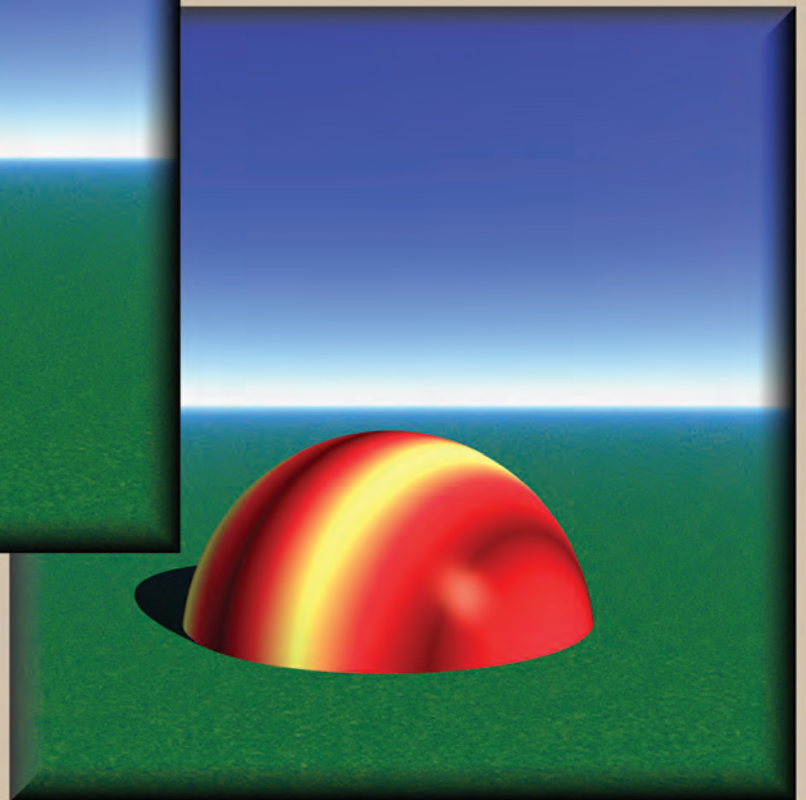


High-Tech C



Chessed

Using Top Military Technology to Help *Klal Yisrael*

BY GAVRIEL HORAN

We don't need to be reminded of the dangers of technology; however, in the right hands, it can be a valuable tool to help humanity. Mr. Michoel Hirsch has spent many years developing innovative software applications that have been used by educational institutions throughout the United States and beyond. He never could have imagined that his programs would one day be used by some of the most elite intelligence agencies in America. Now he is channeling his talents toward helping Klal Yisrael in an unprecedented way.



Advanced Learning

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Michael Hirsch was not a typical student. By the age of sixteen, he had graduated high school with thirty-six science awards and fifteen pre-med college credits. His pre-med anatomy and physiology scores were in the 97th percentile — for students several years older. And he had earned several college scholarships.

Although pursued by Ivy League pre-med programs across the United States, he had his priorities straight. “I realized that if I went to medical school, I wouldn’t have time for serious yeshivah learning for as long as eight full years,” he recalls. “I knew that I couldn’t leave learning for so long at any cost.”

Instead, Michael opted to devote himself to full-time Torah study, foregoing a promising career in medicine. He attended Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin for many years, simultaneously earning a degree in computers and technology from

Brooklyn College in the evenings.

After marrying in 1989, he continued learning in *kollel*. When the couple had their fourth child and their three older ones were all under the age of two and a half, he decided to enter the workforce.

Michael was determined to harness technology to advance science in areas that hadn’t been explored. His wife, who holds a master’s degree in special education, suggested that he look into the field of psychoeducational assessment, which consists of test batteries administered by school psychologists and other

clinicians to measure the learning and cognitive abilities of children and adults.

“Previously validated psycho-educational tests were designed on a very antiquated model that did not fully harness multimedia computer technology,” he explains. “She thought it would be a great area to incorporate new technology to enable the assessment of abilities that were never before measurable with paper-and-pencil tests.”

In 1995, Hirsch founded Assessment Technologies, an assessment company whose corporate mission was to do just that. Because his tests were completely



Michael Hirsch gives a demonstration of his assessment software at a military location. With him is “Butch,” one of the best commandos in the Special Tactical Units of the Air Force Special Operations Command. Butch was stationed at Fort Bragg Air Force Base and completed many life-threatening missions behind enemy lines. The only reason Butch was allowed to have his picture taken is that he had retired from Special Forces just before this event took place.



computer-administered, they were given exactly according to protocol, thereby precluding the potential for examiner error, a common occurrence with standard written psychoeducational testing materials.

A professional test-publishing company in Texas was the first to market his innovation. As soon as they listed the new computerized tests in their catalogue, many other companies began calling him, asking him to design similar products for them. Soon, Sylvan Learning, which has almost one thousand learning centers across North America, integrated one of his products into their program. They subsequently used it to test over two million children across the nation.

Wanted by the Military

Michael Hirsch's next major project was to create a fully interactive assessment tool that involved sight, sound, real-life simulations, and professional voice actors. The project involved a team of one hundred top psychologists in all fifty states. They tested thousands of children who constituted a sampling of the entire American population, including certain minority populations that had never been tested before.

A group of psychologists even landed a small plane on remote Alaskan ice to test native Eskimos there, while another team loaded a van with computers and crisscrossed Oklahoma to test Native

saying he represented the U.S. Special Forces and agencies within the U.S. intelligence community. "If you're willing to work with a certain level of ambiguity, we're willing to use this product in the military," the officer said.

"He couldn't tell me his affiliation, and I soon learned not to ask," Hirsch recalls. He has since met with members of every intelligence and defense agency in the country, but is never allowed to ask any identifying questions. "I could never have approached these agencies on my own because no one knows who works there or who they are. They find you rather than the other way around."

Thereafter, Mr. Hirsch's program was implemented by the U.S. military and

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Americans on reservations. This was also probably the first time yeshivah and Bais Yaakov students were included in such assessments.

Hirsch received seven international patents for this project in the United States, Israel, and Australia, and he has another twenty-six patents pending in Europe, Canada, and Japan.

At the very first public demonstration of the new product, a high-ranking military officer approached Mr. Hirsch,

intelligence agencies at the highest levels. It assists them in selecting special commandos for life-and-death missions and in determining which positions are best suited for each commando on the assignment.

"The military spends as much as \$100,000 to train each man in these top units — and selecting the right people for each secret mission is a life-or-death decision," Hirsch explains. "They need to be incredibly careful whom they select



and ensure that they are placed in positions where their specific strengths can really shine.”

The program uses fifteen different test formats to measure cognitive abilities, social and emotional strengths, processing speed, distractibility, situational awareness, task focus, and stress tolerance. The tests utilize three-dimensional computer simulations, biometric sensors to measure physiological reactions, and multisensory imagery.

During one testing session, Mr. Hirsch was able to tell a colonel that a certain commando was especially afraid of him; whenever the colonel entered the room, the commando’s physiological response readings went sky-high. During another commando’s test, a call from the man’s wife had the same result, setting his nerves on high alert, whereas for a third commando, who apparently had a better domestic relationship, a call from home had a calming effect.

“It’s amazing how these physiological sensors can instantly show you what’s going on inside the heart and mind of a person,” Hirsch says.

Top-Secret Jew

Since his first meeting with the military, Michael Hirsch has made countless trips across the United States and is often the only Orthodox Jew for miles around. He has also gotten used to dealing with people who live with an extraordinarily high level of secrecy — to the point of never even mentioning the name of the purchasing agency over the phone or in e-mails.

“They told me that if we can hear each other over the phone, that means the ‘bad guys’ can, too!” he says half-humorously.

On his first trip to a classified military institution, he noticed that there were no windows in any of the secure military

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buildings. When he asked about it, he was told that an enemy spy can actually eavesdrop on conversations in a room by shining a laser at the window pane and listening to the vibrations on the glass from the reflections of the light.

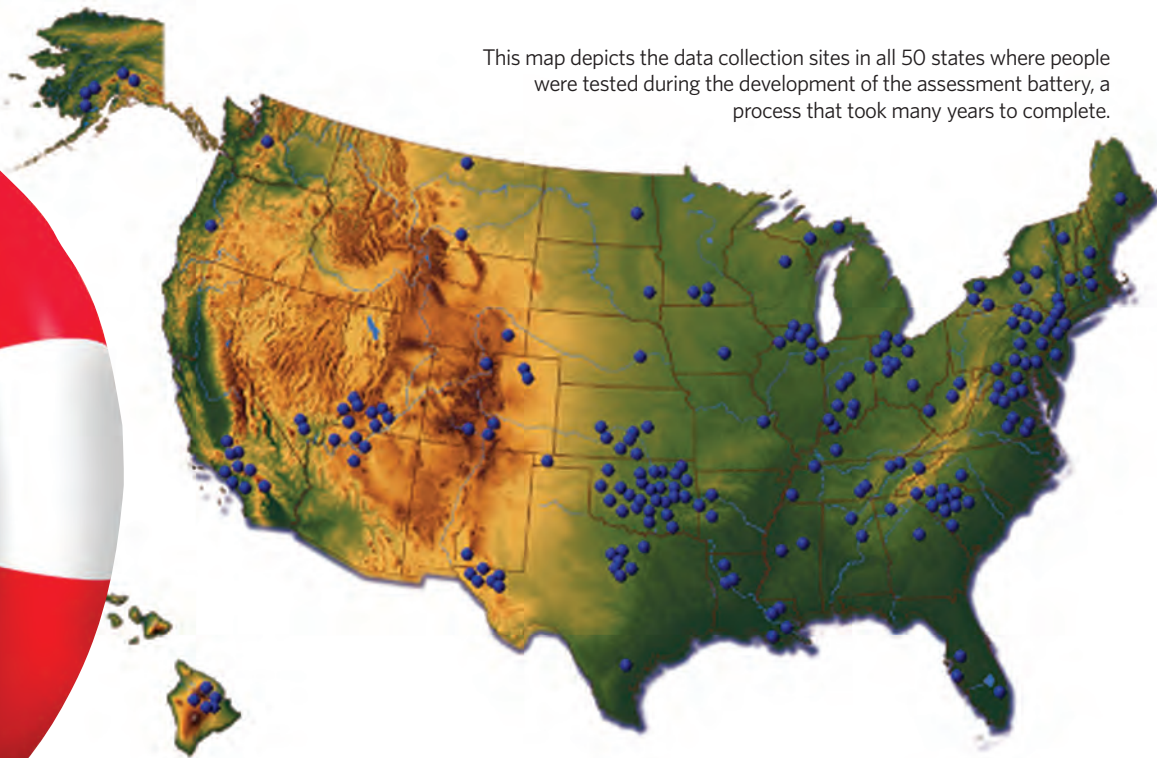
One night, on a secure military base, Hirsch realized it was the last night he could recite *Kiddush Levanah*. He walked

outside in his hat and jacket and began to recite the prayer. Suddenly a security patrol pulled up, shining high-powered flashlights in his face. They saw someone dressed in strange clothing talking to the sky and assumed he was beaming information to an enemy.

Another time, Hirsch declined to eat at a catered meeting with many high-



“If IBM and AT&T are harnessing this technology to increase revenue from their global operations, there is no reason the chessed needs of our own community should be addressed with systems that are any less capable.”



This map depicts the data collection sites in all 50 states where people were tested during the development of the assessment battery, a process that took many years to complete.

ranking officers, explaining that he had a supply of kosher food in his suitcase. Hearing that, all the officers rose, giving him a spontaneous standing ovation. To them it was a sign of strength that he was living off of “kosher pickles” all week — the only kosher food they knew about.

iCare Chessed Directory

Throughout his work with the military, Michael Hirsch always did his best to harness technology to assist Jewish causes around the world. Among other projects, he helped customize the database of Israel’s premier *chessed* organization, Ezer Mizion, and he computerized the “Friends Who Care” hospital visitation service and the entire operating system of the Vaad Refuah. He did all this with the help of significant grants from non-Jewish companies.

“Although my work with the military stimulated me on an intellectual level, my heart has always gotten the greatest satisfaction from helping *Klal Yisrael*,” he says.

During his work with these and other *chessed* organizations, a master plan began to form in his mind. He wanted to develop a super *chessed* database to serve the needs of *Klal Yisrael* on an unprecedented level. After receiving

grants from four major technology companies, Hirsch got to work on his brainchild, a revolutionary new *chessed* program known as iCare.

In short, iCare is a comprehensive high-tech directory of every major *chessed* organization in the world. It is operated by trained volunteers twenty-four hours a day to help people find the organizations best able to fill their needs.

Over the past few years, Michael Hirsch has put teams of volunteers to work making thousands of calls to *chessed* organizations everywhere. Together they’ve compiled the most up-to-date list of organizational contact numbers and capabilities in existence, and he constructed a highly sophisticated computerized system to organize the information.

“iCare has been a dream of mine for years. ... It harnesses all of the technological platforms that I had been utilizing for previous *chessed* organizations I have worked with and combines them into one seamless high-tech system that functions on the same level as platforms utilized in Fortune 100 companies,” he says. Many of the non-Jewish donor companies said it is the most beautiful project they have ever been involved in.

The iCare platform works off an advanced computer-based phone system. This system has been integrated with a sophisticated database so that every incoming call automatically retrieves all previous cases from the same caller. The underlying database platform is capable of storing millions of cases. It can also tie together support volunteers on several continents, as though they are all sitting in one office. Volunteers can log in from their home computers anywhere in the world and instantly have the ability to answer calls from around the globe.

“Calls can be automatically directed to specific volunteer call agents based upon fluency in English, Yiddish, or Hebrew, or even based upon the specific expertise required for each case,” Hirsch explains. Additionally, some prestigious *chessed* organizations in Israel and Australia have teamed up with the Vaad Refuah office in New York to handle the overflow calls coming into the system when the full-time operators are busy.

iCare’s staff members will thus be capable of providing twenty-four-hour coverage simply by working typical nine-to-five shifts in their respective time zones. And the sophisticated computer platform will help them tie everything together into one seamless operation.

“If IBM and AT&T are harnessing this technology to increase revenue from their global operations, there is no reason why the *chessed* needs of our own community should be addressed with systems that are any less capable,” Hirsch says.

The Need

People with a hospitalized loved one are often stressed and overwhelmed, faced with additional responsibilities at home while they struggle to make countless calls to arrange kosher food, medical equipment, and other services for the patient. Although there are many printed lists of *chessed* organizations available, these registries are often significantly outdated — and none are comprehensive.

Much precious time and energy is wasted in the process of trying to track down the right *chessed* organizations to fill



Screen shots depicting some of the various subtests of the test battery, which includes the assessment of communication skills, visual memory, visual closure, logic and reasoning, distractibility, abstract reasoning, processing speed, auditory memory, social skills and stress tolerance. All subtests incorporate full sight-and-sound.

a patient’s many needs. In addition, it is not uncommon that several friends and relatives of the same patient each contact different *chessed* organizations to handle the same need. They may approach three different entities to arrange for the one wheelchair required, each unaware of the others’ efforts, while the patient’s other needs remain unaddressed. Aside from the unnecessary stress and frustration involved, unwarranted delays in reaching organizations and initiating services can sometimes have a serious impact on the family as well as on the patient.

Another issue is that an organization may not have the ability to address all the patient’s needs, yet out of its sincere desire to help, it may end up assisting in ways that exceed its resources — preventing it from being available to other patients.

“As long as each organization can be in one area, they can’t do everything,” Hirsch says. “One organization may have dozens of volunteers willing to deliver kosher food to the hospital, but [it may only have] access to two gently used wheelchairs. Another organization might have twenty-five brand-new wheelchairs to lend but does not have volunteers to supply kosher food. No one organization can do it all.”

Instead of duplicating an organization’s existing services, this new service will help maximize everyone’s resources by calling on their strengths.

How Exactly Does It Work?

Initially, iCare will offer an information service in which its operators will help callers find the *chessed* organization they seek and automatically connect them. The second stage is an international *chessed* coordination service that will actually assist in making arrangements for emergency cases.

If someone in Israel finds out that he

Chessed for Those at Risk

MICHOEL HIRSCH'S *CHESS*ED ACTIVITIES don't begin and end with medical assistance. When he was recently asked by those working with at-risk youth to design a psychoeducational screening tool for use in yeshivos and Bais Yaakov schools, he immediately agreed to help.

Hirsch developed a cutting-edge screening program that can identify children's specific learning strengths and weaknesses. Available for both Yiddish- and English-speakers, it has already been implemented in over sixty Bais Yaakov and yeshivah schools. Although the program has only been available for six months, it has already garnered the highest praise from educational professionals across the community.

"Mr. Hirsch's assessment battery is clearly one of the most exciting and innovative developments in psychometrics that I have been exposed to in my entire professional career," commented Rabbi Dr. Martin Schloss of the Board of Jewish Education, a psychologist who has trained countless special-ed clinicians. "This is the trailblazing product in the field of assessment."

"So many of the crises we see among our youth today come from children who were frustrated by their school failures," Hirsch explains. "If we can detect the problem before they fall through the cracks, they can have a better chance of succeeding. One of the psychologists I've worked with used to say, 'Every child is determined to succeed; however, there is a limit to how long they will continue to be 'bad at trying to be good' until they begin to be 'good at trying to be bad.' Properly identifying each child's strengths and weaknesses in order to help them taste success can literally save lives."

Mr. Hirsch is also developing a special version of his military stress tolerance test to be offered to the *frum* community as a medical-screening tool known as the S.T.R.E.S.S. (Stress Tolerance Rapid Evaluation Software System). It will help people understand how they deal with stress and flag those who might be medically at risk for developing stress-related illnesses such as a heart condition or stroke later in life, G-d forbid.

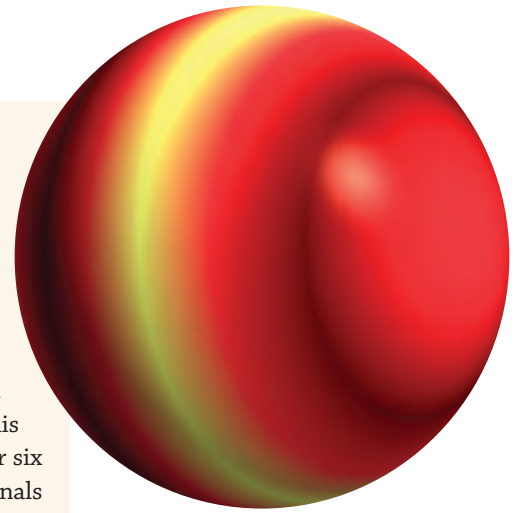
has a serious illness, G-d forbid, and needs to fly to America for emergency treatment, he can call iCare late at night in Israel. His call will be automatically transferred to the receptionist in Australia. This Australian iCare representative will then enter his case into the system.

While he's asleep, the office in New York will get to work contacting all the organizations that can best meet his needs. They will make sure he has a wheelchair waiting for him at the airport, kosher food at the hospital, volunteers to help him around the clock, and a Shabbos apartment for his family near the hospital. When he wakes up the next morning, he gets a call from the Israeli branch telling him everything is ready and that all he has to do is get

on the plane.

iCare's very first trial ad immediately brought in fifty calls. Today iCare is putting the finishing touches on the advanced technology and is training call-center volunteers and staff members for the planned launch of the service this winter.

"We're not replacing or competing with any *chessed* organizations, but rather helping them connect to the specific patients and specific needs that they are best equipped to handle," Mr. Hirsch explains. "The system has the potential to maximize the unique skills, resources, and strengths of each existing *chessed* organization by incorporating them all into a dynamic international system that is far more powerful and efficient than



While the patient is asleep, the iCare office will make sure he has a wheelchair waiting for him at the airport the next day, kosher food at the hospital, volunteers to help him around the clock, and a Shabbos apartment for his family.

any organization can be when working alone. The patient won't need to run around to get updated phone numbers for the half-dozen organizations that he or she needs. One call does it all. That's the iCare dream." ■

If you would like to volunteer for the revolutionary new iCare service, please e-mail L.Krausz@VaadRefuah.org.