



**Transcript:**

**Season 3, Episode 7: Ukraine Dispatch: Healing Meets Humanity**

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Hello, and welcome to “Hadassah on Call,” the podcast where we give you behind-the-scenes access to the doctors at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. I’m your host, Benjamin Cohen. We’ve decided to devote this episode to the unfolding events in Ukraine that we’re all watching, and specifically, how Hadassah is helping. We’ve got three really great guests today.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

First up, you’ll hear from Professor Yoram Weiss. He’s the acting director general of the Hadassah Medical Organization, and he’s really been orchestrating the whole response by sending teams of doctors to the Poland-Ukraine border and so much more. Next up, we’ll catch up with Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel to talk about his experience treating patients on the ground at the Polish border. And finally, you’ll hear from Dr. Rely Alon, who oversees about 2,000 nurses at Hadassah. Not only has she sent nurses to the region, but she’s also helped set up a toll-free hotline for pregnant refugees who need to speak with a nurse or a midwife.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Hello, everybody. Today we have a very special episode to talk about the ongoing situation in Ukraine. Our first guest today is Professor Yoram Weiss. He is the acting director general of the Hadassah Medical Organization in Jerusalem. Welcome to the show.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Thank you for inviting me.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Before we talk about situation in Ukraine and on the Poland-Ukraine border and Hadassah's involvement there, I want to know just a little bit about you and how your medical training and now your leadership role prepared you for this situation.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Well, in my background, I'm an anesthesiologist and intensive care physician. I was trained at Hadassah. I started my career at Hadassah 32 years ago. Spent time in United States as a fellow in intensive care. I came back to Israel. During the beginning of the 2003 Intifada, I ran the surgical intensive care unit, and later on, became the chair of the department of anesthesia. So, unfortunately, I have a lot of experience when it comes to trauma, mass casualty. Actually, some chapters in books are written by me in some major books. So, that's the story.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Walk us through what happened when the situation started to unfold in Ukraine. How did Hadassah get involved? What were those meetings like?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Well, I think that the moment the hostility started... First of all, I think we cannot forget happened in Europe more than 70 years. I think for all of us, this is something that brings us memories that although we haven't been there, but for me, at least for my family, this brought up memories of what happened. I think this made us really feel that we need to have some part in what's happening there. Secondly, Hadassah has been active for many, many years in many disaster areas, and for this reason I think that immediately, when the hostility started, we felt that here, there's really a point where we need to be part of the response if needed. We started looking at where we could place ourselves to do the best help for the people of Ukraine. And very quickly, we realized that to go into Ukraine maybe problematic because of the safety of our staff but sitting just on the border would be fine.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

We got in touch with a large hospital in Poland, in Lublin, and we started talking to them and they were very open and immediately responding to us, asking for our assistance, actually. From there, things started to roll and very quickly we got in touch with them. And being there, we met people from the WHO and the International Red Cross, and this brought us to the border with Poland to this refugee center. This summarizes our response because we have two responses basically at the same time in Poland. One is preparing the Lublin hospital for mass casualty when they need it, if they need it. And on the other hand, having our team sitting on the Polish border with Ukraine, treating the refugees when it comes to internal medicine or pediatrics or anything else.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

So, this is not the first time that Hadassah has sent a medical delegation to another country for disaster relief, right? What other countries has Hadassah helped?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Hadassah has been in Africa. Hadassah has been in Haiti. Hadassah has been in other countries in Asia. So, we had some relief delegations from Hadassah that have been out to the world, either as a Hadassah delegation or part of the Israeli government delegations. So, we have a lot of experience with that.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

As far as you know, is Israel one of the only countries that's sending hospital support to the Ukraine border?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

I don't think that we are the only ones, but I can tell you and I'm very proud about that, that at least for Hadassah, when it comes to Hadassah, we have put at the refugee center a clinic that is working and it is looked at and really appreciated by international organizations, such as the International Red Cross and the WHO for the way our people are doing that. And then, actually, by the way, what they're doing is they're organizing the entire medical response in this very important refugee center for Ukrainians who cross the border into Poland.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

So, you were saying there's different areas. Let's just clarify for our listeners. There is a hospital in Lublin. What's happening at the hospital there? People who need medical attention?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

The hospital in Lublin is one of the major centers close to the Polish border. When I say close, it's still a few hundred kilometers. But it's a hospital that is the largest tertiary care, which is the biggest hospital that is close to Polish border. They asked our assistance in order to prepare them for treating mass casualties. Now, unfortunately, as you know, we, Israelis, and especially people at Hadassah, because of our experience with mass casualties during the Intifada, most recently, about 15 years ago, 18 years ago, we still have a lot of people at Hadassah who have a lot of experience how to prepare and how to deal with mass casualties. In general, Hadassah has huge experience in treating traumas, both when it comes to surgery, orthopedics and all other sub-specialties in medicine. So, they asked for our assistance, and we've sent both orthopedic surgeons and surgeons in order to train them, actually also nurses, in order to train them on how to manage mass casualty events.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

So, you have the hospital, and then separately, there is a refugee center. I think I was reading it's inside a shopping mall.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Yes, there's a large shopping mall that is in a village or small city that is on the border with Poland and Ukraine, which was converted into a large refugee center. It's one of the biggest refugee centers. There, we have established, together with an organization that is a volunteer organization, a clinic, which Hadassah is basically running and is receiving a lot of praise from both the WHO and the International Red Cross for the work that our people are doing. We have manned it with two telemedicine physicians, pediatricians and nurses. Actually, over the past week, we've added also clowns, medical clowns. So, we have a medical clown and we have now another medical clown on the way, because we realized that the kids and actually also the adults that are in this refugee center, for them, in a way also psychologically the clowns are doing an amazing job. So, we asked our clowns to come and join us.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

David Dush Barashi is one of the clowns.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Exactly.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Yeah. I met him when I was at the hospital in Jerusalem. He does amazing work.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

And he does there, by the way, an amazing work, because he really helps these kids that are traumatized. He's working with them and it's amazing to see what he's doing.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

I've been seeing Hadassah has been posting some videos of him on their social media. It's really interesting to see what he's doing there. And then I was also reading that there's a third thing that Hadassah is doing is that if Ukrainian refugees come to Israel, arrive in Israel, and they need medical attention, that Hadassah is also helping with that. Is that correct?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Definitely. First of all, we were the first ones to admit patients that were transferred by air ambulance from Moldova to Israel. We received three patients, a mother, a father, and a child that were injured during the hostilities in Ukraine. They're being treated at Hadassah. We are currently also treating refugees that are in Jerusalem that need assistance.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

How does this play into the whole mission of Hadassah of being humanitarian hospital crossing borders, it doesn't matter, religion?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

The mission of treating refugees at Hadassah is something that we do on a day-to-day basis. We have established a refugee clinic for about... First of all, we're treating refugees from the time that I remember myself at Hadassah. Secondly, over the past year, we opened a specific for refugees because as you know, Israel has also African refugees before the Ukrainians. So, we're treating also our refugees that are in Israel in general. These refugees now are just coming into our regular activity, which is activity to treat refugees.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

I can mention one more activity that we added, which is interesting. This is, by the way, by using telemedicine. This is both our physicians, trained Ukrainian hospitals, and also Polish hospitals in how to manage mass casualty through telemedicine, the orthopedic surgeons and the surgeons, and also anesthesiologist and intensive care physicians. The other thing we've done just today is the Department of Ophthalmology opened also a service for refugees to assist them in providing them telemedicine and guidance, if needed, through telemedicine consultation.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

So you're helping doctors and nurses on the ground virtually in those instances.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Yes.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

So, war has been going on for more than a month now. Are you switching out the volunteers who are coming from Hadassah? How often are you sending a new group?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

We're switching people every week, plus-minus. Please understand, these people have their duties, their lives, their families. So, what we're doing is basically, thanks to really the generous donations that we received until now and I should say that all of this activity, which is not very... It's not cheap. It's being carried on, thanks to our donors all over the world, in the United States and really all over the world. It's an amazing thing. This shows you the power of Hadassah, our ability to really have our donors back us and allow us to do this. The teams are being switched every week so that they can both contribute to this important task in Poland, but at the same time, also after a week rotate and come back to the regular duties at Hadassah and to be with their families.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

How did you choose which doctors and nurses to send to the border?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

So, what we did is on the first mission, which was sent about five weeks ago, we sent the trauma team, but we added to the trauma team also specifically, a senior attending in our internal medicine that has some experience with refugee management. When they came, she went with the head of our delegation, which was at that time, Mr. Jorge Diener, who's the head of the Hadassah International. They went to the border. They identified the needs. Based on her analysis and his analysis, we decided how to continue with our response with the refugee center. From there, things started rolling on.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Now, I should say also that for each delegation, we have now an administrator and a medical director. Basically, based on their recommendations, we adapt our response. To give an example, we just talked about the clowns. The clowns came up just about a week ago that the head of the delegation said, "Listen, guys, I think that things are changing. The refugees now stay here, because before, they came in, within 24 hours, they were evacuated. Now, there are no places anymore to evacuate them and they're now staying here for a few days. We have a feeling that we need some assistance with talking to them and cheering them up." So, that's how the plan came up suddenly. So just to give you an example of how we try to accommodate and respond to the needs as we go on.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Yeah. Everything is evolving. The whole thing is an evolving situation.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Definitely.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Is there any particular story that you've heard from the people on the ground there that has stuck with you, like something, an inspiring story where you were able to help somebody?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

There's a few stories. My point of view, I know that all of us... I'll say something that you'll be surprised. As you get, I read also all these cases, where our physicians have saved a child, who helped provide medications to a child that didn't have it and stuff like that. From my point of view, really the big satisfaction is not looking at the specific response, but actually looking at us as an organization and how successful our response is from the point of view as an organization.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

When I hear people that call me and tell me how impressive the fact that we, as a small hospital in the Middle East, are suddenly sitting there in Poland and we are the ones running the show and basically allowing all other medical teams that are sent by the International Red Cross and the WHO and we are the ones who run the show there and giving them orders and they accept it because they see us as really the centerpiece of the medical response there, I think that tells a lot about Hadassah. It tells a lot about the quality of the people we have. That tells a lot about the organization that I'm so devoted to for the past 32 years. To be sincere with you, it didn't change for the years. It's an amazing organization. I think this is the biggest thing that I really admire about our organization. This is our ability to adapt and really to be able to go out of our way in order to assist people all over the world and this is the case where we see now in Poland and in Ukraine.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

How many patients do you think that Hadassah has interacted with during this time?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Oh, by now, I believe we treated more than a few thousand patients, if not more. I will be surprised that it will be in the... About a week ago, it was about 1,500, so we should be now by about 2,500 already, or 2,500, somewhere around 2,500.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

What type of treatments have been needed the most? Is it simply people who didn't have their medicine, they had to run so quickly?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Well, at the clinic, usually the treatments are very simple. Most of the problems that they encounter are people that arrive and don't have their medications, or if they have any acute problems that occurred, like diarrhea. By the way, we had an outbreak of diarrhea, where our physicians had suddenly to take steps in order to control an outbreak of diarrhea, because suddenly there was too much crowds and there was a breakdown of hygiene in the area. So, we suddenly intervened in how to maintain hygiene and how to control the diarrhea outbreak that they had. And obviously, treating also acute cases, where people have suddenly acute problems. The thing is that Poland is a European country. So if the problem is a really acute medical problem, they're very quickly evacuated by the Polish Red Cross to a larger hospital, but still I think our presence is extremely important.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Have you encountered any issues regarding COVID or has there been some COVID outbreaks?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

There were outbreaks of COVID. Actually, also our team was hit by COVID, but our team was never, I would say, debilitated because of COVID outbreak, which I'm very proud of us. Because we know that there's a major COVID outbreak there now and we know also that the Israeli hospital in Ukraine was hit by a major outbreak of COVID. So, I'm very proud that our people were... Thanks to their vaccination and I believe also the precautions they take, we didn't have a major outbreak that brought out our operation to standstill.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

How do you cope? Like I said, you're the general of this operation. How does it affect you personally? I mean, obviously, it's a very stressful situation.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

I should admit, it doesn't... Listen, Hadassah is a huge organization. Although we are very lean for a large hospital, and we are treating... Please remember, today in Jerusalem, we have more than 1,400 beds. We're treating one million patients a year. So, we're a really large hospital, even when it comes to the U.S. standards. But always remember that it's an organization, where we're very organized. I have a deputy director that I nominated, that is responsible for this response. She's working with the people in Ukraine. We have our administrators. Things come to me when there's issues that we need to deal with. I'm very interested in the project, but it's not the only thing that I'm doing. I have many, many other tasks, unfortunately, under my responsibilities that I need to attend to and Poland is just one of them.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

If you could look forward, what do you think the next month or so is going to look like with Hadassah and the situation?

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

It's difficult to know, because just on the way here, I learned on the BBC about some terrible things that happened in Ukraine with some casualties in Ukraine that were killed by the Russian forces. I'm always hoping that hostilities will stop, but it's very difficult to know what will happen. So, it's difficult to know what will happen with us in Poland and it's difficult to foresee whether if hostility stop. If we don't move into Poland in order to assist people in Ukraine, who need assistance. I believe, some areas that are now enclaves or are completely disconnected, that it may come under our ability to assist them directly. So, things may change very, very quickly. In fact, we have a team of trauma surgeons and orthopedic surgeons and also anesthesiologists who are ready to go and be dispatched if we need them, either to Poland or to Ukraine, if things come up and there's an assistance that is needed in trauma care.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

I've been so impressed during this time about how nimble Hadassah has been quickly responding and sending delegations. It's amazing. There's different skill sets. There's the hospital and medical treatment skill set, but also there's that whole operational skill set of sending people. So I've been very impressed with that.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

Thanks.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Well, Professor Yoram Weiss, thank you. I know you're juggling a lot and you're super busy. We're really honored that you can take the time today to chat with us, so thank you very much.

**Professor Yoram Weiss:**

I wanted to reiterate something and it's really important for me to reiterate it. So, I'll say: I want to thank you, but I want to thank really full-heartedly our donors all over the world who are supporting our activity, both in Jerusalem, in Israel, all over the world, and in Poland on the border with Ukraine. Our donors are really the foundation of this organization, and we thank each one of them full-heartedly for their support. Thank you.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Thank you very much.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

All right. We're going to take a quick break. And when we return, we'll speak with two more doctors from Hadassah about their work in Ukraine. We'll be right back.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

If you're enjoying this conversation, you may want to check out our last episode, where we spoke with both a doctor and a patient about ovarian cancer.

**Dr. Rivka Brooks:**

I think working in Hadassah and also being treated in Hadassah, you feel you are at the cutting edge of medicine. It's the cutting edge, the best clinicians, the best research, amazing people. I find myself very, very fortunate.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

You can find that episode of "Hadassah on Call" on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, or wherever you get your podcast, or on the web at [hadassah.org/hadassahoncall](http://hadassah.org/hadassahoncall). That's [hadassah.org/hadassahoncall](http://hadassah.org/hadassahoncall). And now, back to our special episode about how Hadassah is helping in the Ukrainian region.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Okay. Our guest today is Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel. He is a senior pediatric pulmonologist and a sleep physician at Hadassah Hospital. Welcome to the show.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Hi, thank you for having me.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Thank you so much for joining us today. This episode is all about the doctors at Hadassah, who recently went to the region around Ukraine to help with the refugee crisis. I'm wondering if you could tell us a

little bit about your trip there. First of all, there are so many doctors in the world that are trying to help out. What made you decide to get up and go?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Right. So, interesting enough, this is my first real crisis as a physician that can go. So, Haiti, I was probably too young to volunteer as a medical doctor. I think this is the first humanitarian crisis that I was literally able to participate as an independent physician, but more so I think it felt very personal. I came to Israel when I was 10 from Minsk, Belarus. I speak Russian at home with my parents. Once this war started, it really felt like it hit close to home because this is... Sorry to say, but it doesn't feel like something distant: Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan. It feels really something in your backyard.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

You still have family in the area?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

No. I do have some distant relatives and friends, people I've been in contact with, but not immediate family. Most of them either in the States or in Israel.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

What was going through your mind when you were traveling there? Were you worried? What were you thinking?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Well, at the beginning, it took me quite a while to find a mission because our Hadassah mission organized in about two weeks into this conflict. We were actually the second team. The first team got there a week earlier to scope the premises, to see where help is needed. They went first to some major hospitals in Poland, where they saw that basically the Polish medical system is functioning. So, they did not need any assistance, but at the same time, they found that the border crossings are filled with refugees and there is no medical care given. So, we were coming with the full force of Hadassah physicians and nurses and equipment after the initial reconnaissance mission. Yeah.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

The first, probably, and many times since the thing that I got from the management at Hadassah, from my wife at home, "You are not crossing to Ukraine. You're not crossing to Ukraine. You don't have insurance in Ukraine. You're not going to battle zones. Do not cross into Ukraine if you want to cross to Ukraine." So that was a message that we were very strongly felt that we should keep up with. But a day before we got to the area and the city is called... I hope I pronounce it correctly. It's called Przemysł. It's a small town, probably 10 miles out of the Ukrainian border crossing in Medyka, which is one of the biggest from Ukraine to Poland, since it's located next to the city of Lviv, which is the big city in the west of Ukraine, where many refugees fled after the war started. In any case, there was a huge bombing, I don't know, if you remember this in a NATO base, probably 20 miles from the place that the clinic was located. That was really a day before we got there.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Wow.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

So, it made us a bit worried. The other piece of information, we spoke to a WHO, the World Health Organization, representative on our way in, and her first question was, "Did you take a gas mask and atropine?" For which we kind of raised our eyebrows and said, "Well, why?" And she then told us that-

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Atropine is what? Is it something you would take in case of the chemical attack?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Exactly. Yeah. Exactly.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Wow.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Yeah. We were pretty shocked by this. We asked her, "What's the deal? Why are you suggesting this?" And she said that her last time dealing with the Russians was 2015 in Syria and she personally witnessed the chemical attacks. She was pretty worried the same is going to happen in Ukraine. But this was a general mood. Once we got there, it's a very safe place. It's Poland. It didn't feel at any point that we were in danger.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

You were at a medical tent basically in Poland, near the border. So, when the refugees crossed, if they needed medical attention, you guys were there.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Exactly. So, we were working with the Red Cross, the Polish Red Cross. We based our clinic in the department store, at Tesco department store that was evacuated for the purpose and filled with field beds and the clinic and transportation facilities and lots of food, like World Kitchen volunteers. What happened is the refugees would cross the border. They would get on a bus. If someone was in a critical condition, he would be evacuated immediately by the Polish medical authorities to the nearest hospital. But if they were okay, they were transferred to this transit center, which housed anywhere between 2,000 to 3,000 people a day. They would change every day or two, because it was a transit center. These are people who just fled their homes. They fled the war. They spent time under the bombings and underground often with no running water, food, pretty much shaken by the experience. A lot of them needed either their medications they had forgotten, or they contracted some acute illness on the road, a lot of small kids, because these were mostly women and children fleeing. Yeah, these types of first aid medical assistance.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Your specialty is pediatrics. And so, I'm wondering, so you saw a lot of children. I assume that, obviously, they're experiencing a lot of trauma and maybe repressing of emotions. What were some of the things you were seeing there?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Yeah. So, as I said, kids are resilient. As a pediatrician, you get to learn this. They get these experiences that we take very difficult. They often manage to live and not suppress, but basically deal with them seemingly well. So, we haven't seen any emotional trauma from kids. You would go around the place and you'd see kids playing and riding their bicycle. They were pretty much in a good shape from that sense. Once in a while, you'd see a shaken kid with a stressful situation from all the experience, but kids were not really traumatized, at least as far as we could see. What we did see is the trauma of the adults. The adults were really in a bad situation. Most of them, since I speak Russian, even if you come with a broken finger, I would ask, "Where you coming from? Where are you going to?" Because in some cases, we facilitated their transit. So, if the people didn't have anywhere to go, we help them find somewhere to go, but they would start talking almost immediately about their experience, about what happened to them, about the shellings.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

We began a couple of days ago, disseminating, how should I say, health assessment needs survey. Since we are the main medical authority on the ground and we're the first one to see these refugees in coordination with the World Health Organization authorities, we wanted to see what are the things that going forward would be important to address, so if these people are coming with, I don't know, cardiac condition, renal conditions, trauma, whatever. We actually encountered quite a problem with delivering these questionnaires, since people raised a lot of issues from the recent trauma. It was very hard for them to fill out those questions. Some of them dealing with the personal distress. Some of it asking about violence they had experienced. I mean, these people are really in a traumatic state.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

With the children, was there a memorable patient you had of a medical need that you were able to help out with?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

There were so many. I mean, the stories are all pretty memorable. I'm trying to pick a few. I mean, there was this story of a kid with a pulmonary condition that I'm treating in Israel. There are a couple of hundred kids with that condition in Israel and few hundred of kids with this condition in Ukraine. Somehow this kid found me during this whole havoc. I was able to treat her, and it was very special.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Is this like there were so much chaos as they were leaving their house, they weren't able to bring all the medicine, or they only had enough supply for a certain amount of time?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Yeah. So, they were on the road. They were on the road for quite some time, and they weren't able to treat her condition as should be treated. This was really very simple when you're located in a pulmonary clinic at Hadassah, but for her, it was really something special. But maybe I want to tell another story because really this struck something very deep. One of the first days in the clinic, two girls, probably 15, 16 come in with a five-year old-boy and he is like many other kids. He's vomiting. He has fever. I examine him, he seems to have a throat infection. The natural question, as every pediatrician, I asked, "Where are the parents?" And the answer is the parents are in Kyiv. I'm like, "What?" I was pretty shocked.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

The story I got from the girls, the responsible ones, is that they're a family of eight children, from five to 17, and they're accompanied by five additional children and a young adult, 24 years old, who's the responsible adult for the group. They were sent there to go to Spain, where they have some friends, relatives, I'm not sure what it was, because the father has died a few years back and the mother remained in Kyiv with the older brother who can't leave the country because of recruitment obligations. I actually spoke to the mother because the girls were smart enough, when I asked them if he could get a specific antibiotic for his throat condition, I asked, "What is the allergy?" And they called the mother in Kyiv. For them, it was really something two hours back. For me, it was like a different planet. It was really amazing, the courage of these kids dealing like adults with this horrible situation.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

I'm sure it helped that you were able to speak the language with them.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Yeah, exactly. I mean, again, it felt really personal because it feels like my own family.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

How has this changed you, this experience?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Well, I don't know. I would like to say it has changed me. Probably, it has not changed me much. When you look at these occurrences on your television, you read about them in the newspaper, it always seems so distant. You shake your head. It's such a pity what happens to these people. After hearing hundreds of the same type of story weeks under bombardments, uprooted from their homes, taken away, the husbands and fathers staying back, I mean, now I feel really attached to this situation. I think, if anything, this really made me think about maybe the fragility of where we are, becoming philosophical a bit.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

This is really an experience of like when you take the Hippocratic Oath, and I mean, I don't know what you were thinking when you went to medical school, what kind of work you were going to be doing if you were just going to be in the hospital, but this is really the true manifestation of the Hippocratic Oath, just medicine without borders, going places and taking care of the people in need.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Yeah. Actually, this is how my medical career started. I went on a medical mission with my cousin, who's now an anesthesiologist in Philadelphia. He went with his medical school buddies to medical mission in Kenya. I was, back then, a soldier in the army. He told me, "Come join us. You'll see what it's all about." This was probably the first time I started considering medicine as a career and I think today maybe was the fulfillment of this beginning. Yeah.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

What was the biggest challenge you had on this mission?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Well, the challenges were, as I said, they were not medical because it's not as if ... you think of earthquakes or tsunamis, people are in a horrible condition, you have mass casualties, you have shortage of resources, whatnot. This is not that. This is a very typical pediatric clinic in a place where you have a lot of kids. You have a lot of adults. The challenge was probably psychological, if you want to say it, dealing with this, not taking it too much to heart, because when you see a 40-year-old woman younger than me, who had a heart attack probably two weeks earlier and she's trying to flee with her two children from Ukraine, you can take it personally.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Did you have trouble? I know you're a sleep doctor. Did you have trouble sleeping afterwards?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

No. Actually, we worked a lot. The time I had to sleep, I slept. Yeah. But this was one of the problems people described to us when we asked, "What is problematic?" Sleep problems are pretty good manifestation of stress.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

I know you mentioned the children were pretty dealing with it okay. You mentioned some kids were playing with a soccer ball. Do you think they're going to have long-term issues, trauma-related or something?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

No doubt. I mean, no doubt because... Well, first of all, it depends on what happens to them here on because they had experienced a pretty traumatic experience up until this point. Some are getting into very friendly places in Germany and the Czech Republic. Poland is taking a lot of people. Some have actual family in these countries. So, they will have a place where they can cope with this experience and deal with it. But we know that traumatic experiences in childhood are associated with a plethora of health conditions down the road: depression, obesity, even mortality. So, hopefully, it all depends what happens to them next, but if this situation continues, this would have horrendous consequences 10, 20 years from now.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

How does your work at Hadassah, how did it prepare you for this, or how does this compare to other things you're doing at Hadassah?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Well, it hasn't. I never dealt with the refugees. On the other hand, these are kids and I work with kids, and I work with the urgent care conditions, vomiting, fever, breathing problems. We had one, I don't know, peculiar case, which I was not prepared and probably will not be prepared in the future, but there were a lot of animals there. People took basically their children, their underwear, their phone and their dog. That was what people had with them. And some took cats. There was actually a volunteering veterinarian on the spot who helped these animals. Some were injured. They got medication. But at the same day, this veterinarian got sick, and an elderly couple brought their beloved cat who was having seizures because of low sugar. He was diabetic. So, we had to put an IV and intravenously administer glucose. We actually consulted the veterinarian over the phone because we had no idea what to do. He told us, "Think of it as a three-kilo baby."

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Yeah.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Yeah. But this was not our day-to-day.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

You had to find a vein and everything, like that.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Actually, it was really like a baby.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Wow. Is the cat okay now?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It took him about 10 minutes to get back to himself and then he meowed and went back to his usual self.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

So you're back in Israel now. Do you plan on going back to Ukraine at all?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Currently, no, basically because it's really hard to get out of your daily routine. I have three little kids. My wife is a university professor. So, it's really hard to get away from your regular obligations. I'm trying to help where I can. We're still in contact with the organization in Poland. I volunteer with kids who are refugees in Jerusalem. So, there's couple of hundreds of refugees in Israel and some are in Jerusalem.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

These are Ukrainians who have arrived in Jerusalem?

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Right. Right.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Oh, wow. Okay.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

So, naturally, they're not in the system yet. They haven't gotten all the rights. They're staying in this transit center. So, I try to help where I can. Yeah. And then speaking in places like this to raise awareness. It can be forgotten because naturally, the public interest loses at some point, but I'm following the news from the place, and nothing has changed. People are still fleeing, are still refugees. I just want to say, we're very lucky. I mentioned in the beginning, it took me about two weeks to find a mission that was able to fly me there, to pay my expenses and whatnot. It really is an honor that

Hadassah decided to help in this situation. I think this is a fantastic feeling that... People like to say that at Hadassah, we go above and beyond. We do above and beyond. I think really this is an excellent example where Hadassah is actually doing above and beyond.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Doctor, thank you. I really appreciate, I know you're all recuperating from returning from the trip, so I really appreciate you taking the time to chat with me and our audience today.

**Dr. Alex Gileles-Hillel:**

Thank you, guys, for having me.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

As you're hearing on today's episode, Hadassah has been on the ground, helping on the border of Poland and Ukraine since the war began. You can help these efforts continue by making a donation to our Ukraine mission. Simply go to [hadassah.org/ukraineresponse](https://hadassah.org/ukraineresponse) and click on the donate button. While you're there, you can also make a contribution to our Youth Aliyah program, which helps shelter refugees from the Ukraine war. Again, that website is [hadassah.org/ukraineresponse](https://hadassah.org/ukraineresponse). That's [hadassah.org/ukraineresponse](https://hadassah.org/ukraineresponse). Thank you so much for your support.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

And now, back to our special episode about how Hadassah is helping in the Ukrainian region.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

We are joined right now with Dr. Rely Alon. She's the director of the nurse's division and health professions at Hadassah. Welcome to the show.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

I'm very excited to be with you.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

I want to know before we get started talking about Ukraine, why did you decide to become a nurse?

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

It took me many years ago. I decided to be a nurse because I want to be a part of a life of people that they need someone to hold their hand, to listen to them, or the other things that nurses do professionally and from all the heart.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

We're dedicating this episode to what's going on in Ukraine right now. So, tell me, just walk me through what was going through your mind when you started seeing the news coming out of Ukraine at the end of February.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

Okay. When the war started, my first reaction was, "What can we do?" Because Hadassah, for many years, the organization stays wherever they need to be in the world. Their vision and the goals was to be when it were necessary to be a part of someone that needs help. That's what the vision of them and I'm continue the vision of Hadassah organization. Because Hadassah nurses, even now or anywhere, any part that they can take part and help people all over the world, we can do that and we're doing that, because my nurses knows that goals and the vision of Hadassah, as it was always, is to be there in the places all over the world that the people will need you. We help the people. When the war began, we know what is war. We are Jewish. We are Israelis. We know while there is war and your house is ruined, and there's no place to eat or to drink or to sleep and the little kids are out of the house in the freezing temperature of Ukraine, and we feel that we need to do something.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

My nurses every week, every 10 days, nurses from Hadassah is part of a delegation of nurses and doctors that are going to the border of Ukraine and Poland and help people. It doesn't matter if they're Jews or not Jews to help people whatever they need, even they need a soup or they need tea, or they need someone to talk to, or they need a bandage. I can tell you something, from this morning that there was a family with hypothermia. There was no place. It was out of the house. They didn't come to a shelter. They were out of their house in the freezing temperature. They lost the temperature, the temperature of the body. They were freezing outside. We took them inside our place, and we give them hot soup, somewhere to be a safe place to be in until they can continue on the journey that they have to do.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

How did you decide which nurses to send, or which would be most effective? Are they native Ukrainian speakers or native Russian speakers?

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

That's a good question. Yes. Of course, we need only Russian speakers or Ukrainian speakers. To tell you, I was excited because some of my Ukrainian nurses said, "I want to go. It's my family. I was born there. My family was there. I went there to school." We sent only nurses who speaks Russian or Ukraine. We're trying to do the best nurses that most of them went from the ER or from the pediatric division. They went there. The other thing that I said, I don't know if you know about it, I opened a hotline for Ukraine women who are pregnant. They're talking with my midwives in both hospitals in Mount Scopus and Ein Kerem 24/7 about any problem that caused them during the pregnancy and what we can help them and advise them. Every day we get something around 10, 20 calls from women who is pregnant in Ukraine.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

So, they're calling. These are people in Ukraine who can call you, call your nurses and ask them any questions they need regarding their pregnancy?

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

We're advertising something, a note that it's all over the groups in Ukraine letters, like a letter. We offer them a free call that they can call 24/7 to my midwives, who are sitting in their delivery room in Hadassah. They can ask any questions that they want to ask about the pregnancy.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

And so, the people in Israel who are answering the phones are Ukrainian and Russian speakers.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

Of course. It's my midwives.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Yeah.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

I have 20 midwives. They can get the calls from all over Ukraine. Yeah.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

So, the double crisis of COVID-19 pandemic in the Ukraine has revealed not just in Israel, but around the world, a nursing shortage. What is Hadassah doing to help recruit nurses or also to lend support to the current nurses to make their lives easier or less stressful?

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

It's two different questions.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Okay.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

I have very high standards to my nurses. I need them the best quality, the best safety and the best patient satisfaction. I want the people... We know that they want to come to Hadassah because we are taking care of them, and we listen to them. We're giving them a special treatment, not only by medicine, also by really seeing them as a mensch, we said in Hebrew, in Hebrew, a mensch. We see them as a person by he has family. He has brother, sister, children. That's the difference that makes Hadassah. I said always, there are nurses and there is Hadassah nurses. My nurses are different because they're different quality. Most of them works from values, from values from home and they really make it different. We are a bridge for peace because working in one hospital is Arabs and Jews and Christians. To recruit them, I don't have a problem because nurses want to come to work with me and work in Hadassah. We don't have a problem.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

And then the second part of the question is how do you lend support to the current class of nurses? I was reading somewhere that you offer yoga classes or something.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

Ah, okay. Yeah. It's not only yoga. We are doing mindfulness. We are doing groups of nursing while sitting together. For example, it's called NATAL in Israel. It's a company that's coming into a lot of unions and they're giving them to speak about the problems that they have to take out the pressure. I'm sending all my nurses to vacation now, and we are doing a lot of... I'm taking them out, for example, to a place that they can be outside at the weather, or to see something, to do something for them, for the group, for the staff of the nursing. We are doing also a lot of... I will tell you, my vision. I'm not sitting in

my office and waiting to things to happen. I'm going out. I'm going out. I have 2,000 nurses in both of the hospitals.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Wow.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

I think I might say that I know half of them by name and I'm going out to the department every day. There is no department that... I said, "Okay. Today, there's a problem in the emergency room." I went down to the emergency room. Yesterday, I have a problem in the operation room. I went down and speak with the staff. The staff knows I'm with them. I have also meetings once a week with nurses. They are coming here for coffee. I set a coffee table. We are sitting together and talking for the staff nurses. So, it makes a difference that you see the people that they are not working in organization. They're working at a place that is a family.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

People, when they say that someone sees them and someone listen to them, that's make the difference, because people should know that if someone sees them, they will work harder. They will work from the bottom of their heart, because I worked from the bottom of my heart. If there is a nurse, for example, in the emergency room and I know that I'm going down to the emergency room, and she knows that I will be there until I see that she gets the full treatment and the best treatment. Because I see people, so my nurses see people.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Is that what makes Hadassah unique, you think?

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

First of all, Hadassah is unique. The other thing is, I think... That makes Hadassah unique, but I think people are making the heart of the hospital and my nurses is the heart of the hospital. I always say, people forget what you told them, but you never forget how you make them to feel.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Right.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

It's all about heart.

**Benjamin Cohen:**

Like I said, it's been a very stressful couple years for nurses in general. Like you said, you oversee almost 2,000 nurses. How do you cope? I know you're extremely busy. How do you cope with the pressure and stress of that?

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

How do I feel?

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Yeah. Does anyone ever ask how you feel?

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

Yeah. Actually, yeah, not a lot, but I think Colin Powell said, "The captain is alone." Yes, I'm alone most of the time. I have Hadassah women that I speak with them abroad, in the States. I have few members of Hadassah that I'm speaking with them every week. I know that Hadassah, the organization, it's a lot, a lot of women all over the world, especially in the States, and in Venezuela, in Mexico, in Australia. Well, it's a hard time, but I'm strong. I'm Israeli. I think leaders should never show the weakness of them. I have my family and my friends. I just came back from two days off and I get 500 emails. I don't know how I can handle that until the next time. We are good. We are Israelis. We are Hadassah. We have to be strong.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Well, Dr. Alon, thank you so much. I know you're very busy with everything, and so I really appreciate you taking a few minutes to chat with me and our audience today.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

It was my pleasure. I want to say, everyone that can hear this podcast that it's a pleasure, it's an honor to work in a Hadassah. I'm proud of the place that I'm working in and to be a part of this big family and this organization. I hope the next time we talk, there was no COVID, no war in Ukraine and we can happily living in peace.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

Amen.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

Amen. That's it. Okay. We pray together. You're welcome.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

All right. Have a great day. Take care.

**Dr. Rely Alon:**

Thank you. Bye-bye.

**Benyamin Cohen:**

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