



Rebuilding the Galilee and Assisting Sderot and Gaza Perimeter Communities

Implementation Report

June 2007

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With the support of our partners, the United Jewish Communities and the Federations of North America through the Israel Emergency Campaign (IEC), the communities of Keren Hayesod-United Israel Appeal, UIA of Canada and major Israeli donors including IDB, one of Israel's leading investment companies, the Jewish Agency for Israel mobilized its vital resources in the field following the Second Lebanon War to implement wide-ranging programs for Rebuilding the Galilee and providing assistance to Sderot and Gaza perimeter communities.

Thanks to our dedicated partners, the Jewish Agency is the largest non-governmental contributor to the rehabilitation of the North.



Emergency Assistance for Sderot and Gaza Perimeter Communities Under Fire

At the end of May, 2007 the violence escalated in Sderot and the Gaza perimeter communities, with a constant barrage of Kassam rockets crashing into the region with renewed intensity. The Jewish Agency for Israel once again stepped in to provide immediate crisis assistance for beleaguered Israelis. With its dedicated professionals in the field, and its capacity to garner resources and to immediately launch and operate emergency programs, the Jewish Agency for Israel is bringing much-needed relief to the region.

With schools closed the last week of May due to the terror, the Jewish Agency took more than 2,600 children and youth out of the range of rocket fire and brought them to amusement parks and fun activities in central Israel – leaving the trauma behind for a short time.

Fifty-two buses brought these children to Israel's best-loved water parks, to Mini Israel and to the Safari in Ramat Gan. Twenty-five newly arrived young people from Ethiopia participating in the Kedma program at the Friedmann Student Village IBIM near Sderot were also taken to a day of fun. Two hundred and fifty youth enjoyed Israel's soccer cup finals. Although tickets were sold out, the Hapoel Tel Aviv Soccer Club donated these tickets to bring some joy to Sderot's youth.



Over the course of one weekend over 671 parents, children, singles, new immigrants and senior citizens were brought to Jerusalem to see a performance of the Chinese Circus, within the framework of the internationally renowned Israel Festival. Simultaneously, the Jewish Agency took 100 youngsters, ages 10-12, to a three-day scouting camp in Kfar HaHoresh in northern Israel run by the Working and Learning Youth Movement.

The weekend before, another group of 26 children were able to do the same when the Jewish Agency brought them to Jerusalem. They spent hours touring the city's fascinating sites, learning about its rich history and participating in ongoing 40th anniversary of the city's reunification celebrations.

The Jewish Agency, upon learning that a number of bomb shelters were in disastrous condition, provided necessities such as essential sanitary supplies, cleaning materials, fans, emergency lighting, bottled water and canned goods. At two bomb shelters, one of which serves as a youth club in a predominately Ethiopian neighborhood, the Jewish Agency bought refrigerators, board games and a DVD with games in the event that the residents need to stay there for an extended period of time.

Summer Camps for Children from Sderot and Surrounding Areas

This summer, a large number of sleepaway camps will bring almost 8,000 children and youth from Sderot and surrounding areas out of the line of fire. In addition to fun, educational activities, the camps, to be run in the center of the country, will include trauma counseling to help the children deal with the impossible conditions they are living under..

Special Passover Campaign Promotes Tourism to the North

A record 110,000 Israelis and tourists flocked to the North during the two intermediate days of Passover as part of the Jewish Agency's *All Roads Lead North* campaign. The campaign featured an incredible array of free activities throughout the region, including walking and guided bicycle and jeep tours from the Galilee to the Golan; a broad range of children's activities; and major multicultural performances by Israel's top popular performers. The activities, which received major media coverage, brought essential economic assistance to the North's entire tourism industry, which is still recovering from the devastation of the Second Lebanon War.

Transitioning Children from Crisis to Excellence A New Tomorrow – Comprehensive Program for School Children

One of the key elements in moving youngsters from trauma to recovery is their reintegration into formal and informal education systems. A New Tomorrow is a comprehensive program designed to empower northern communities by fortifying children and youth via informal educational intervention. The program assists participants in their quest to return to normalcy, and helps them to overcome tensions and fears as they build their personal potential.

A New Tomorrow focuses on reinforcing the values, now being questioned by those effected by the War, and counteracting problematic extremist ideas that have surfaced. It bridges educational gaps that widened when children returned to normal school environments, and simultaneously helps them deal with personal trauma. The program also provides educational and cultural enrichment as a means of dealing with this trauma.



After School Enrichment Activities

After months of careful planning, in cooperation with 36 municipalities in the North and western Negev, an unprecedented 41,000 Jewish, Arab, Druze and Bedouin schoolchildren are engaged in formal and informal enrichment activities. An additional 6,500 schoolchildren, including over 548 children living in northern absorption centers and children with special needs, are involved in the activities through national projects. The four fields of enrichment are: nature and environment, narrowing the digital divide, sports, and art. The extensive enrichment program is implemented in cooperation with the CRB Foundation, Hapoel Tel Aviv, the Tapuach non-profit association for advancing technology learning among youth, and the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI).

The enrichment programs are taking place within the formal school framework and through informal after school programs in the following municipalities: **Upper Nazareth, Migdal Haemek, Kiryat Yam, Tiberias, Mateh Asher, Shlomi, Peki'in, Gush Halav, Merom Hagalil, Carmiel, Acre, Nahariya, Hatzor Haglilit, Yesod Hamaleh, Beit Jean, Horfesh, Kasra Samiah, Mailiah, El Shagur, Fasuta, Ma'aleh Yosef, Ma'alot-Tarshiha, Misgav, Kfar Vradim, Metulla, Agir, Mevo'ot Hermon, Lower Galilee in the North and Eshkol, Sha'ar Hanegev, Sdot Negev, Hof Ashkelon and Sderot in the South.**

The Jewish Agency has developed an advanced, comprehensive database system to register each child involved in the enrichment activities and to supervise the entire project with the local municipalities and the partner organizations. The data will also streamline the process of compiling tailored reports with specific parameters.

In order to maximize the impact of the enrichment activities, and continue the incredible momentum of this program in bringing children from trauma to recovery and strengthening the social fabric of frontline communities, plans are underway to provide children in the North and South with an extensive summer camp program.



Scholastic Assistance

Summer Semester Matriculation Study

Operating in conjunction with Israel's Ministry of Education, this program provides matriculation assistance to junior and senior high school students in the North and Gaza perimeter communities whose education has been greatly affected by the Second Lebanon War and ongoing Kassam missile attacks.

Eleventh and twelfth grade students will attend an intensive summer semester of study to prepare them for matriculation exams, thus enabling them to take the exams at the end of the summer. In this way, they will be given equal educational opportunities and the maximum number of students from these war-torn regions will have a better chance to graduate high school and continue on to college. This program is expected to reach over 1,000 students.

Raising Matriculation Grades

The Jewish Agency, in partnership with a number of non-profit organizations, has established innovative programs for the educational advancement of youth in the periphery. Through additional scholastic assistance in the Net@ and Pre-Atidim programs, high school students will have the opportunity to raise their matriculation grades. This program will reach about 2,000 students, Jewish, Arab and Druze, in Tiberias, Maghdar, Horfesh, Peki'in, Carmiel and Nahariya.

Master's Program in Psychology

The Katyusha rockets that rained down upon northern Israel during the Second Lebanon War did not differentiate between Israeli Jews, Arabs and Druze. Both Jewish and Arab populations were exposed to the fighting and paid a heavy price in terms of property and lives. All are still struggling with post-war trauma and hardship.

The Master's Program in Psychology is providing 28 Arab students studying for their Master's degree in psychology at Haifa University with scholarship assistance that will enable them to work with post-war trauma victims in their communities. The Jewish Agency and Haifa University psychology faculty members are developing psychology focused empowerment activities for these students to utilize their skills in the field.

Language as a Cultural Bridge

The Language as a Cultural Bridge program, run in partnership with the Abraham Fund Initiatives, was developed with the goal of overcoming the continuing shortcomings of the instruction of Arabic language in Israel. The program is based on a successful educational model that lends itself to nation-wide implementation.

The innovative educational curriculum is based on the teaching of conversational Arabic, supplemented by the teaching of Arab language phonics and exposure to Arab culture through experiential learning. The educational program is currently being taught to 6,000 fifth and sixth graders in 66 Jewish schools in the following localities: **Haifa, Carmiel, Upper Nazareth, Gilboa, Acre, Menashe, Afula, Ofek, Emek Yisrael, Misgav, Zichron Ya'akov, Migdal Haemek, Nahariya, Kiryat Tivon, Ma'alot-Tarshiha, Kfar Vradim, Mateh Asher.**

An evaluation carried out by the Abraham Fund Initiatives since the inception of the project, focusing on Haifa, Carmiel, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, found that sixth grade students who have studied Arabic for two years in the program have more positive attitudes towards Israel's Arabs than fifth grade students who have only studied in the program for one year. Findings include: 57% of all sixth grade students believe that studying Arabic will contribute or contribute significantly to improving relations between Jews and Arabs, in contrast to 51% of fifth grade students; 20% of sixth grade students claim that Arabs are enemies, in contrast to 26% of fifth grade students and 78% of all the students studying Arabic language and culture are happy or very happy to be studying these subjects, in contrast to 15% who report that they are not happy.



Youth Resources for Recovery – Values Education

Youth Resources for Recovery is a values-based educational opportunity for high school age students throughout northern communities designed both to move them past the trauma of the War and to inspire, encourage and give them the resources to become socially responsible civic leaders.

Operating in cooperation with Israel's Ministry of Education, the program, which began at the end of March 2007, was implemented within formal and informal educational frameworks. The program incorporates lectures, workshops, tours, seminars and volunteer community projects focusing on strengthening the participants' connection with their community, their region and their country. Participants explore subjects including: the moral issues of war, the connection between the citizen and the state, the periphery and the center of the country and young leadership. Over 3,500 children are participating in this program.

The program is run by five operating partners in approximately 30 schools in the following localities: **Kiryat Yam, Nahariya, Carmiel, Ma'alot Tarshiha, Safed, Tiberias, Mevo'ot Hermon, Ma'aleh Yosef, Merom Hagalil and Hatzor Haglilit. Extensive evaluation will be conducted during the program and presented at the end of the year.**

Student Scholarships

Students Called-Up for Emergency Reserve Duty (Tsav 8)

To date, 9,025 students have received a Tsav 8 scholarship that covers up to 50% of their college tuition. Due to their unexpected military service during the Second Lebanon War, many of these students were unable to work during the summer to earn money they would have used to pay for their college tuition and living expenses.

These scholarships have helped many of them return to their studies while alleviating some of their financial concerns. The scholarships were distributed to recipients from all over Israel at a special event sponsored by the Jewish Agency honoring these soldiers' dedication to their country.

Students Studying in Northern Israel Colleges

Following the War, registration at northern colleges significantly decreased. These colleges play an important role in the Galilee's social and economic development. 4,157 students received scholarships to study at colleges in the North. As a result of these scholarships, registration for the school year was higher than expected. All scholarship recipients volunteer in northern communities for four hours each week.

Educational Intervention for New Immigrant Children

Close to 1,500 new immigrant children and youth living in the Jewish Agency's thirteen absorption centers located throughout northern Israel spent their entire summer vacation in bomb shelters, seeking refuge from the horrors of being on the frontline of a war. The Jewish Agency was able to implement a variety of educational enrichment programs for immigrant children during the school year by building additional computer rooms and upgrading sports fields and playgrounds at the absorption centers.

The computer rooms provide a framework for teaching Hebrew and English, preparation for first grade and computer courses for youth. The sports fields and playgrounds give children and youth a place to release energy in a positive manner as well as develop their emotional and physical well-being.





The Jewish Agency Fund for Victims of Terror

Over 150 individuals, civilians and soldiers, lost their lives and thousands more were injured during the Second Lebanon War. Each incident leaves behind victims and family members who have trouble coping both physically and emotionally with their losses. The suffering of terror victims does not end when the details of each victim's terror attack is no longer in the news. Physical, emotional, economic and psychological rehabilitation is a long and strenuous process.

Sadly, the recent emergency situation forced the Jewish Agency to reopen the Fund for Victims of Terror in 2006; it was necessary to provide much needed emergency support to the Israeli victims from 2006 and after. Presided by a judge, the Fund operates as it did in the past, with advisory and professional committees that meet periodically to review cases. The Fund for Victims of Terror operates under the supervision of Jewish Agency committees, chaired by Judge Kama, and made up of representatives from government ministries, UJC, Federations and Keren Hayesod. The principle document was drafted and approved by representatives of the Jewish Agency and donors.

To date, four professional committees and two advisory committees have convened and awarded funding to 227 families for rent, purchasing household appliances and furniture, and tuition assistance. Thousands of civilians and soldiers will receive assistance from the Fund. The reestablishment of this Fund plays a vital role in meeting the needs of families and individuals injured by the War and other acts of violence against Israel that were not fully met due to various limitations or where other types of funding fall short.

Direct Assistance for Frontline Populations

Student Villages

Student villages are harnessing the power of idealistic young people to serve as volunteer agents of social change and to strengthen Israel's underdeveloped areas. Two northern communities in Haifa and Acre, and one community in the South, Yachini, are building new student villages. Kiryat Shmona's existing student village is receiving additional resources to expand its services for residents. These villages are located in close proximity to colleges or universities. Some 240 students will live in these four villages, receiving scholarships, living accommodations, and leadership training in exchange for their participation in local communal programming.

Village residents will serve as informal educators and tutors for over 2,000 neighborhood children and youth that are recovering from their traumatic summer; facilitators for afternoon enrichment activities through assorted venues; and as role models and a positive influence on the general community. Ultimately, the hope is that these students will take up permanent residence in these regions and communities. In this way, there will be a strong cadre of motivated and well-educated people who will contribute to the rehabilitation of these communities.

The villages are established and operated in conjunction with both government and private authorities.



Go Galilee

Go Galilee mobilizes talented, young adults from overseas and brings them to Israel to study, experience Israel, and volunteer to reinforce northern Israel's population through diverse initiatives including: programs to teach in schools, working to renovate and repair bomb shelters, facilitation of informal educational programs and study in Northern Israel's colleges. By living in the region for a period of one semester to one year, Go Galilee participants will become a part of the Israeli college/university atmosphere, thus strengthening their relationship to Israel and its people.

Following an intensive mapping process, the Israel Ministry of Education recognized this initiative as an integral part of reinforcing the northern regional infrastructure and directly assisting students and residents in need. Toward this end, the Ministry has appointed its deputy director general to oversee the program's implementation.

Students will participate in a two-week orientation during which they will study Hebrew, learn about the Israeli education system and about the geographic area in which they will be working. After orientation, participants will be paired with families in the local communities where they will volunteer several hours a week. Through our many municipal and local partners, we have been able to secure volunteer placement opportunities for the Go Galilee participants. The program aims to reach 2,100 young Jews from around the world.



The Fund for Lone Immigrant Soldiers

A campaign for the Fund for Lone Immigrant Soldiers recently implemented by the Jewish Agency on Russian-language Channel 9 yielded great interest among the Russian-speaking community in supporting these soldiers. Funds raised through this pilot campaign will provide lone immigrant soldiers, many of them from the FSU, with calling cards to speak with their families still living in the FSU, electrical appliances and a preparatory course for returning to civilian life as their discharge date nears.

Fund for Families of Fallen Soldiers

The Jewish Agency for Israel, in cooperation with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, granted \$5,000 to each of the 124 families of soldiers killed in Israel's Second Lebanon War to memorialize their loved ones. The thank you letters received from the families were deeply moving. In the words of one bereaved family, "Our pain cries up to the heavens... We thank you for your support."

Supporting Immigrant Soldiers that Fought in the War

Transition from life in the military to civilian reality is a challenge faced by all soldiers upon discharge from active service. Following the trauma of war, this transition is more difficult than ever. The Jewish Agency is helping lone immigrant soldiers who fought in the Second Lebanon War adjust to civilian life by providing them with a one-time grant to assist them in rent payments.

Flak Jackets for Emergency First Responders in the North

The Jewish Agency recently distributed 1,250 flak jackets to Israel's brave, emergency first responders in the North. In the event of another crisis situation, these essential, lifesaving jackets will allow first response teams to enter the field feeling protected and confident. Local municipalities and the IDF's Home Front Command oversaw the distribution, ensuring that the jackets reached those who were most in need.

New Playgrounds in Kiryat Shmona

In a show of solidarity with the war-torn city of Kiryat Shmona, bnei mitzvah from Toronto and New York contributed their bar mitzvah money to establish playgrounds for children in the city. These committed youth came to Israel with their parents to participate in a moving dedication ceremony.



Training Municipal Professionals

In direct response to a request from the Office of the Prime Minister, the Jewish Agency will operate a program to train senior professionals from local municipalities in the North in project implementation in emergency situations.

Economic Development

Emergency Grants to Small Businesses in the North

Many small businesses in the North were devastated during the War. Some 2,700 businesspeople received an immediate grant of \$1,000 to get their businesses back on their feet. This assistance was invaluable to small business owners.

Economic Development Fund

This Fund provides loans and consultation to small businesses that have the capacity for growth, but lack access to capital markets. The Fund's activities support the revitalization of northern Israel's war-devastated economy. The Jewish Agency has embarked upon a campaign to promote the Fund and offer businesses the opportunity to apply through the Jewish Agency's website. Information concerning the Fund is also available via the Jewish Agency's Global Call Center. To date, 423 loan applications have been approved.

Building Vital Communal Infrastructure

The Jewish Agency's goal in the North is not only to rebuild, but to go beyond. At the end of the day, its objective is to create vibrant communities with a quality of life that exceeds that which was destroyed. In building vital communal infrastructure the Jewish Agency is focusing on three distinct areas: rebuilding northern hospitals, renovating and equipping schools and upgrading community buildings.

IDB Group Projects with Matching Funding

Leading Israeli investment company IDB Group committed \$25 million for critical physical projects for rebuilding the North, contingent upon matching funds from our partners around the world. To date, five of the 23 projects have been completely funded: building a new cultural center in Ma'alot Tarshiha; upgrading the cultural center in Kiryat Shmona; building a new seminar center at the Ravid Educational Kibbutz; building an additional hydrotherapy pool in Mevo'ot Hermon; and building a new daycare center in Hatzor Haglilit.

Hospitals

To date, the Jewish Agency is expanding and equipping the Emergency and Trauma Center and the Women and Birth Center at Western Galilee Hospital in Nahariya. We are renovating the Birth Center and Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and reequipping and renovating the surgical facilities at the Rebecca Sieff Hospital in Safed. Both of these frontline hospitals were directly hit by Katyusha fire during the Second Lebanon War, yet managed to overcome the devastation and continue to play a vital role in saving lives during the War. Rambam Hospital in Haifa also played a major role in caring for war casualties as over 40 missiles fell in close proximity. The Jewish Agency is expanding the hospital's Emergency and Trauma Unit.

Schools

The Jewish Agency is providing essential equipment to upgrade schools throughout the North. Thus far, assistance has been given to 14 schools in Hazor, 16 schools in Safed, seven schools in Acre and two schools in Kiryat Shmona. This includes fully-equipped computer stations and internet services, advancing science laboratories and modernizing school libraries.

Community Buildings

At the Jewish Agency, ensuring the renaissance of Jewish and non-Jewish communities across the North is a primary focus of our activities in the aftermath of the War. Over the past eight months the Jewish Agency has been revitalizing community life through restoring community buildings. Over 25 projects have been implemented, from the renovation of bomb shelters into local clubhouses to upgrading community centers and local playgrounds and rebuilding absorption centers directly hit by Katyusha rockets.

Assistance to Sderot and Gaza Perimeter Communities

Student Scholarships for Sapir Regional College

Special scholarships in the amount of some \$1,000 each were awarded to 1,121 students studying at Sapir College in the western Negev, where Kassam rockets continue to terrorize students and local residents.

Respite for Children and Families

During last December's Chanukah vacation, 4,500 children and youth enjoyed one-day trips to educational and cultural events in central Israel, away from the falling Kassam rockets. At the same time, 1,295 families were treated to a weekend respite in hotels out of the line of fire and tens of thousands of people participated in Chanukah Happenings held in the Eshkol region.



Emergency Grants to Very Small Businesses in the South

Following the success of this program in the North, small businesses in the South facing deep financial difficulty due to the ongoing hostilities are receiving emergency assistance. To date, 611 applications were processed and 524 small businesses received assistance. Each business received a grant of \$1,000.

Responding to Trauma at Friedmann Student Village Ibim and the Calanit and Barnea Absorption Centers

This program, which commenced in mid-February, provides new immigrant young people living at the Friedmann Student Village Ibim near Sderot and two Jewish Agency absorption centers Calanit and Barnea, with assistance to deal with trauma and the uncertain security situation that persists. Activities include support and psychological treatment, workshops and outdoor challenge activities for both new immigrants and professional staff. Forty young people at Ibim completed special workshops designed to cultivate emotional strength and teach stress management skills during emergency situations.

Tsafona

The Company, which was set up last summer in order to prepare a strategic plan for the Galilee, is currently in the start-up phase. The Company has held a series of meetings with key figures in the Galilee: heads of local councils, businessmen, members of academia and government workers who are active in the Galilee. As a result of these meetings, work was begun on establishing professional frameworks for planning in the following areas: development of infrastructure, employment, demographic growth, education and community.

“We live in a time when individual benefit is valued more than the whole... In my opinion, the gesture of solidarity that your organization expressed to the student reservists (a population of people who shoulder the responsibility for Israel’s future from every perspective), strengthens us and gives us a sense of Jewish unity that is glorious. It enhances my belief that the Jewish people, despite it all, are still a united people.”

**Guy Taib, Technion student, Haifa
Jewish Agency Scholarship Recipient**

Personal Stories



From Devastation to Opportunity: Immediate Assistance to Shattered Small Businesses in the North

Stefany Egozi

"After the misery of the war in the summer, the grant from the Jewish Agency was an unexpected bonus. It was not only the financial compensation but the morale-boosting feeling that we are not alone and have so many good friends in the Jewish world."

Stefany Egozi, 30, first opened her jewelry studio in Shavei Zion, near Nahariya, in 2003. But last summer she was forced to close down her business as her world fell apart.

Stefany makes distinctive jewelry from silver and gold with precious jewels embedded. Her creations are characterized by contemporary solid designs with clean lines. To increase her income, Stefany also gave jewelry-making workshops, revealing the secrets of her innovative techniques - skills she learned from a goldsmith while living in Australia.

But Stefany was forced to abandon her business in July when missiles began falling around her home and nearby workshop. Eight months pregnant, her husband was drafted into reserve army duty and she fled south to stay with her sister. With no customers for her studio, she shut down the premises and after the War she discontinued the lease; she had no funds for the rent and could not continue maintaining the space.

"I was feeling very low when I heard about the Jewish Agency grants," she recalls. "And suddenly, within a week of applying, I had a check for nearly \$1,000 in my hands. That and the birth of my baby boy gave me new energy to start working again."

Stefany has invested the Jewish Agency grant in new materials and is currently looking for a new and larger studio to rent.



From Devastation to Opportunity: A Small Business Owner in Sderot Gives His Thanks and Shares His Anguish

Sderot hair salon owner Ehud Edri is thankful for the small business grant he received from the Jewish Agency to help him cope with the mounting debt he faces. However, the unending terror is taking a terrible physical and emotional toll.

"The situation is terrible. Just terrible," says Ehud Edri, the easygoing 30-year-old owner of a hair salon in the center of Sderot.

"Trying to run a business in Sderot is not easy," says Ehud. "For seven years we've lived in the shadow of terror. But lately, times have been very hard. When rockets fall, customers don't come. Checks bounce. Every day I don't work puts me back a month. I still have to pay my taxes and my bills. No one cares that I'm not earning enough to pay."

Looking around his almost empty salon, on a day when over 20 Kassam rockets hit Sderot, Ehud talks of his optimism of a few weeks ago, when he received an unexpected gift from the Jewish Agency through caring donors from around the world. A gift that truly touched him. "My accountant told me that the Jewish Agency was giving grants to small businesses and I might be eligible. So I applied," says Ehud in his friendly, outgoing manner. "And what do you know, I was given \$1,000."

"This is the first time that I've ever received anything for free. The first time people in Sderot were given something without strings attached. The whole town was talking about it," he says, still a little surprised at this generosity. "It was an amazing feeling and it helped me to get out of debt a bit. Every penny counts."

Ehud, the son of Moroccan immigrants, grew up in Sderot. He loves the place and opened his salon five years ago because he wanted to invest in the town. He and his wife, originally from Ofakim, have a 2 1/2 year old daughter, Or. "She is the light of our lives and if anything happened to her, I don't know what I'd do. We think about leaving Sderot, but where would we go? And what about my clients? I couldn't leave them."

But Ehud says that the situation in Sderot has gone beyond physical fear. "Emotionally, we've been deeply scarred by the situation. No one lives a normal life anymore, and I am afraid that the children here are lost. What kind of childhood can they have when they can't play outside, when they are trained to run for cover the minute they hear the warning siren of impending rockets. It takes a tremendous toll."

Surprisingly, Ehud holds no ill feeling toward the Arabs in the Gaza Strip. "Like us, they need their government to invest in new infrastructure. They need hope for a better life. I truly believe that if both sides are economically stable we will have a better chance for peace. We need to live side-by-side. Their hatred is not getting them, or us, anywhere."



From Devastation to Opportunity: The Jewish Agency Fund for Victims of Terror

Yair Cohen

For Yair Cohen, the past seven months have been an encounter in dealing with what life can offer. From fighting a war and watching comrades die, to experiencing the birth of his first child and recovering from his own war wounds, this 26-year-old medic reservist has dealt with a gamut of emotions and events and is more than grateful to have emerged intact.

It was during Cohen's rehabilitation after the Second Lebanon War last summer that he was told about the Jewish Agency grants being given to reservists who had fought and been injured during the War. The Cohens applied for and received a grant from the Jewish Agency's Fund for Victims of Terror, using it to buy equipment for their newborn and to help with Yair's last year of college tuition.

"The money is for people who need it," explains Moshe Vigdor, Director General of the Jewish Agency. "What happened to Yair was something that halted his life, his studies. Our purpose was to give in order to help him out."

Last July, Cohen was finishing up his third year of studies as a student at the Ra'am Lipschitz Religious Teachers College, where he is studying to be a history teacher, when the Second Lebanon War erupted. As a medic in a paratroopers unit, he was called at 1:00 am just one day after the conflict began, reporting for duty seven hours later. After spending a week in training with his unit, Cohen's unit was called to go into Lebanon to destroy the Hizbullah's missile launchers, a painstaking job that had to be handled by ground troops.

The troops planned on walking by night and sleeping by day in order to avoid detection, but got off to a late start and found themselves still walking at daybreak, having not yet reached their final destination. After finding several abandoned houses in a Lebanese village, the troops settled themselves for the day. Cohen's unit took over the storeroom of one house which was filled with piles of drying zaatar.

Cohen had just settled himself on top of the pile of zaatar when a missile fell on the house, crumbling walls and sending bodies and equipment sprawling. "You don't know if you're alive," says Cohen, remembering the scene. "It's unclear. You're just looking to see if you can breathe."

When Cohen got outside, the scene was grim, with soldiers wounded and calling for his attention. His good friends were writhing in pain on the ground. When a second missile hit the area, the soldiers headed for the cover of a nearby olive tree grove, waiting for help. It wasn't until five hours later, when the unit was evacuated to the border, that Cohen realized his helmet was full of blood from a head injury.

Cohen suffered from a blood clot and post traumatic stress disorder but was able to return home fairly quickly to Eli, the community outside Jerusalem where he lives with his wife Liat, who was seven months pregnant at the time. They had moved to Eli after getting married in August 2005 because Cohen's army friend, Gilad Zussman, also lived there. But Zussman was killed during the battles against the Hizbullah.

The last months have been complicated. The Cohens are mourning their friend and rejoicing in the birth of Adi, their daughter who was born in November and was named for Gilad. The financial help from the Jewish Agency, says Cohen, was invaluable, helping them just when they needed it. "We're with her," said Cohen, who has also returned to school for his last year of studies. "We're growing with her."



From Devastation to Opportunity: Scholarships for Students Studying in Northern Colleges

Ilanit Sigati

"I've been living in the North for four years. I love the region. But the War made me question whether I wanted to stay. The scholarship to study at Tal-Hai College has erased any doubts that I had. The Upper Galilee is where my future lies."

Ilanit Sigati, a 27-year-old, third-year student at Tel-Hai College in the Upper Galilee spent a nightmare summer in bomb shelters. Originally from Dimona, Ilanit moved to Kiryat Shmona after meeting her partner Yair, who is from the Upper Galilee. Throughout the War, Ilanit remained in Kiryat Shmona. Yair was serving in a combat unit in Lebanon, and she wanted to remain close to him.

When the Second Lebanon War ended both Ilanit and Yair, who will be studying electronics at the Jezreel Valley Regional College, planned to continue their college education. But the financial situation was difficult for both of them.

"As a student in Israel it's always a struggle to make ends meet," says Ilanit. "I have to work to pay for my tuition and living expenses. This year it is harder, as both of us were unable to work because of the War."

The young couple heard about the Jewish Agency scholarships on the radio and applied. "It's very moving to know that Jews around the world care about us. It gives me enormous incentive to succeed," says Ilanit.



From Devastation to Opportunity: Responding to Trauma at Friedmann Student Village Ibim

The Jewish Agency Friedmann Student Village Ibim is a warm, nurturing community for new young immigrants who come to Israel without their families, and will soon face the complexities and perplexities of heading out on their own. The pastoral, campus-like atmosphere of Ibim, located near the Gaza perimeter city of Sderot, however, does not reveal any of the harsh realities of Kassam rockets falling in the near distance.

"It was hard, when we first came to Ibim in September and suddenly we would hear a warning siren of an impending attack," says Roman Vaizman, an 18-year-old immigrant from Kazakhstan who came to Israel on the Selah pre-academic program. "Now we've gotten used to it, but it is a problem."

With the support of its partners, UJC and Federations of North America, through the Israel Emergency Campaign, the Jewish Agency has instituted a program combining psychological treatment, workshops and activities to help students and staff deal with trauma and the uncertain security situation that persists.

Nearly 40 students have already completed special workshops designed to cultivate emotional strength and teach stress management skills during emergency situations. Groups of 10 to 15 students meet for four sessions of 2.5 hours each, engaging in discussion, role playing, and activities that cultivate coping skills. "The reactions from the students are very good," says Anat Savion-Avni, Ibim's social worker. "Participants said the workshops gave them the tools they need to look to the future with confidence."

According to Dr. Bilha Noy, director of the psychological counseling service for Israel's Ministry of Education, studies show that most children who suffer post-traumatic stress experience "natural healing" after war ends and things return to normal. However, for the people living in Gaza perimeter cities and communities, the ongoing war of attrition has no end in sight.

"This new program is excellent," says Anat. "For six years we have been in a situation of uncertainty." She stresses that despite the rocket threats, not a single student has left Ibim.

After the Passover holiday another 10 student groups will participate in the workshops. Additionally, one-on-one psychological counseling is available for anyone in need. Staff members also take part in workshops, meeting for a total of 21 hours over the course of three days. They learn not only to deal with their own concerns, but also how to help and support students.

Recently a day trip to Caesarea was arranged for the students. The participants took part in confidence-building group activities and sports competitions. "It was excellent. We really enjoyed ourselves," said Roman. Larisa Pogossova, 21, an immigrant from Lithuania, echoed this sentiment. "We had a lot of fun and did interesting things. This day really helped me." Another trip to the Carmel region is scheduled for April.

"These workshops and fun days give students the tools for coping, not just with the Kassams, but also the challenges of everyday life," says Anat. "They provide welcome relief from the situation in which we find ourselves."

More than 200 new immigrant students, primarily from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union, live at Ibim. It is here that they receive the essential support services they need to successfully adapt to their new homeland and develop the skills necessary for independent living. Programs including Selah and Ofek involve intensive Hebrew language study and prepare new immigrants for army service, college studies and employment opportunities. New immigrant students studying at the nearby Sapir Regional College also live at Ibim.

A New Tomorrow: Language as a Cultural Bridge

Ahlam, a teacher from Haifa

Ahlam lives in the town of Shfaram and teaches in two public elementary schools in Haifa. He is now teaching Arabic to Jewish schoolchildren in the "Language as a Cultural Bridge" program.

"As a result of teaching Arabic to school children I really feel connected to the country. Until now I felt that Israel is my country, but at a deeper level I felt different. This project gives Arab citizens a sense of pride in our language and culture."

"The elementary school children I am teaching are very curious about the Arabic language and about our culture. They ask so many questions, and I take great pleasure in answering them. They love to sing the songs they learn in Arabic. I feel that this project is enriching both me and my pupils."

Makiko, a 6th grade pupil in the program (as told by his teacher)

"Makiko and his family made aliyah from Ethiopia. At the beginning of the program Makiko did not participate at all in the Arabic lessons. However, he started to open up and pay attention. Now, he raises his hand all the time. He participates, answers questions and has really deepened his understanding of the language and Arab culture. The minute I walk into the classroom he asks me new questions. He loves to practice speaking and contributes so much to the positive atmosphere in the class."

