

From The Birmingham Jewish Federation
Nov. 20, 2008

With Follow-up from SELAH

March 2010



‘The Shortest Distance Between Two People’

*From the Birmingham Jewish Federation – Published Nov. 20, 2008 – by Joyce Spielberger,
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TEL AVIV -- I saw a bumper sticker in Birmingham recently that said "the shortest distance between two people is a story."

Little did I realize how significant this seemingly random thought was until I had the opportunity here in Israel to hear the personal stories of those whose lives have been touched, rehabilitated, revived and ultimately saved, by SELAH (also known as the Israel Crisis Management Center).



Ada T., with her three grandchildren, meets with Foundation President Melba Epsman while visiting SELAH's offices in Tel Aviv, Israel.

SELAH, one of 29 agencies and programs funded by dollars raised through the Birmingham Jewish Federation Annual Campaign, reaches out to new immigrants to Israel whose lives have been affected by terror attacks and other forms of tragedy.

Representatives of the Birmingham Jewish Federation, here for two conferences, visited with two SELAH officials, Ruth Bar-On and Micha Feldman, at the organization's modest Tel Aviv headquarters. As our day started, we were met at our hotel and escorted to SELAH by Anna, who in 1994 was the victim of a terror attack when a car exploded beside her.

Now, 14 years later, she volunteers her time at SELAH, which became "her family" during her lengthy recovery, helped care for her 4-year-old daughter and persuaded Anna to "choose life" during this difficult period.

We met in a small room filled with beautiful color photographs of people; people of all colors and cultures, families that SELAH has made whole.

The photos came to life as we were introduced to Ada T., a grandmother from the former Soviet Union, who, along with her husband, is raising her three beautiful granddaughters after her daughter was murdered.

We met an elderly Ethiopian woman, who only speaks her native Amharic, and who is raising her two grandchildren. We also met a woman whose daughter and son-in-law were murdered

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in Ukraine and, who with the help of SELAH, was able to travel back to Ukraine and bring their 4-year-old daughter back to Israel to live.

Fragile Population

All of the storytellers shared one thing in common; they are all olim, new immigrants to Israel. This population in Israel is a most fragile one, for besides dealing with the obstacles of adjusting to a new culture and language, they have all suffered a life-altering crisis of some kind.

Not only was each one in desperate need of financial resources, but each needed tremendous emotional support as well.

SELAH, based in Tel Aviv, is an acronym for the Hebrew words that translate to "helping the newcomer," but the word selah in Hebrew is literally "rock."

SELAH conducts several healing seminars throughout the year; the range of those they serve could be seen by reading the schedule: Bonding retreat for Ethiopian brothers raising younger orphaned siblings, Bar Mitzvah trip to the Kotel (Western Wall), support seminar for grandparents raising their grandchildren.

SELAH serves such immigrants in need throughout Israel, last year touching the lives of over 1300 people.

This year, through the BJJ's Israel-World Jewry Bureau allocations process and also from funds raised in excess of our 2008 campaign allocations target, the BJJ will provide SELAH with \$40,000, slightly over 2% of its \$1.8 million budget.

"We can be proud. Roughly two of every hundred dollars that comes to SELAH to help immigrants in need comes from our small community of 5000 Jews," BJJ Executive Director Richard Friedman told our group.

In her thank you to our community, Ruth Bar-On, who has been to Birmingham, spoke with great emotion as she expressed her gratitude. "You, the Birmingham community, are our partners in this work. Together, we are all partners."

SELAH Follow Up: Continuing care of 'second-time parents'

Ada T., a grandmother in her 70s who has participated in SELAH's support group for grandparents raising their orphaned grandchildren since its inception, has been raising her three granddaughters since 2002, when the girls' mother was killed in a terror attack in 2002 and their father died shortly thereafter in a fire. On Nov. 14, 2009, Ada's husband, Anatoly, a very warm person whom the children adored, died suddenly of a heart attack, and Ada is now bearing this heavy burden alone. All the SELAH volunteers, social workers and National Service "big sisters" who have been working with the family since 2002 gathered around Ada during the mourning period, and we are continuing to extend support. On February 11, 2009, Ada's oldest granddaughter, Sarah, celebrated her bat mitzvah, and SELAH was there.

On March 18, 2010, the National Service volunteer whom SELAH attached to the family in 2002, Racheli Yaakobi, now a nurse in the intensive care ward at Hadassah Ein Karem, was married in Kfar Saba. She had continued to volunteer with the family all these years, following her national service. Racheli arranged to bring Ada and the three girls to her

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wedding, and they were there rejoicing with her during this simcha. At this large, joyful wedding, the new bride danced with her three young charges, to whom she is like a true, loving older sister.

Also at the wedding was another family that also experienced a shattering loss, to whom Racheli was attached, the S. family. A fatal car accident 12 years ago claimed the mother and her daughter, leaving behind a father, three young children, and the mother's parents. These grandparents have also participated in SELAH's support group as they played a main role in raising the children. The three generations – grandparents, father and children – came to celebrate.