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SELAH offers emergency and long-term practical and emotional support to newcomers in Israel beset by personal tragedies.



Alex Altshuler, originally from Belarus, offers advice and guidance to an immigrant caught in rocket attacks. (Photo: Edward Kaprov, SELAH)

By Avigayil Kadash



SELAH psychologist Eleanor Pardess, a child immigrant to Israel, facilitates therapeutic programs for bereaved immigrants. (Photo: Vladimir Godnik)

Alex Altshuler, 31, and Eleanor Pardess, 50, know what it's like to arrive in Israel from another country, bewildered by the language and culture. Both were child immigrants, he from Belarus and she from England. This insight gives them extra empathy in their volunteer work with SELAH, a national organization established in 1993 to assist and support immigrants hit by sudden crisis or tragedy.

In Hebrew, SELAH means "rock." It's also an acronym for *Siyua le'Oleh be'Mashber*, aid to immigrants in crisis. Police, hospital trauma centers, social workers, absorption and welfare authorities turn to SELAH when there's an urgent need for culture-sensitive practical and emotional support for newcomers who may speak English, Amharic, Russian, Farsi or Spanish.

Some of those who receive help later become volunteers themselves. This was poignantly

illustrated following the massive [Carmel fire](#) in December last year. Olga and Anna, the pregnant widows of two prison guards killed in the fire - both Russian immigrants - received practical and emotional support from Russian SELAH volunteers. One of them, Irena Shremko, had received help from the organization after her son was killed in a 2003 terrorist attack. Now trained as a social worker, she was there for Anna when she gave birth in January.

"In another five years, these same women may become our next volunteers," says Pardess, a clinical psychologist and academic who has been working with bereaved families through the Tel Aviv-based SELAH for 18 years.

Someone by your side

SELAH founder Ruth Bar-On was born in Israel, but became aware of the difficulties faced by new immigrants through her work as head of the Israel Public Council for Soviet Jewry. When the Iron Curtain finally opened wide enough for Soviet Jews to start arriving in great numbers in 1989, she realized that those experiencing any sort of acute crisis felt isolated

and lacked specialized services for their needs. "If Israel is a home, then in times of loss there should be someone by your side," she stresses.

Thanks to Bar-On's initiative, SELAH has so far aided some 22,000 immigrants. With a volunteer force of 120, plus a small paid staff and pro-bono services of lawyers and other professionals, the organization today serves a clientele that is 30 percent Ethiopian and more than 50 percent from the former Soviet Union. The remaining clients are from a variety of places, such as Iran and North and South America.



SELAH volunteers are called on whenever there is an urgent need for culture-sensitive practical and emotional support for new immigrants, whether from Ethiopia, Russia, or North America.

Help for Haitians

SELAH also lends its expertise overseas. When 350 people were killed and hundreds more injured during the September 2004 school siege in the town of Beslan, Russia, SELAH psychologists, psychiatrists and volunteers flew over to train local caregivers as part of the [Israel Trauma Coalition](#) (ITC). Later, it sponsored a summer program in Israel for survivors.

Last summer, Altshuler represented SELAH in an ITC [mission to Haiti](#) sponsored by the [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee](#). He has maintained contact with many of the local psychology and social work students he trained, one of whom expressed a desire to study social work in Israel. Many others want to learn Hebrew and feel a connection to Israel and Jews through their understanding of the Bible.

"Part of my heart stayed there," says Altshuler, a Kreitman Foundation doctoral fellow at Ben-Gurion University studying human perception and preparedness in the context of earthquake and war. He served as a psychological counselor for Israel Defense Forces officers-in-training before earning a master's degree in social work at the University of Haifa.

"From my work with soldiers in need, I realized that I really wanted to be a social worker for individuals and also communities, at the macro level," he says. During his master's studies, he attended a special program at the University of Rome for 40 Israeli, Palestinian and Italian students on humanitarian assistance, public health and intercultural dialogue.

Altshuler participates in SELAH's comprehensive support program for immigrant families from the former Soviet Union in which custodial grandparents raise orphaned grandchildren.

"These children are extremely vulnerable to psychological distress due to the compound stress of losing their parents on top of immigration process difficulties," he explained at a 2007 conference of the European Society for Cognitive Psychology. "Unfortunately, young immigrants can face a higher risk of mental health issues; and grandparents with custodial responsibilities for grandchildren have an increased probability for emotional and physical distress."

Helping the helpers

Pardess, too, pioneered a unique therapeutic mode through her work at SELAH. Primarily

involved with bereaved parent groups, Pardess found that taking clients outdoors provides a setting rich with metaphors for survival and renewal, and often negates the need for a common spoken language.

It's not only clients, however, who benefit from nature. She also facilitates outings for SELAH volunteers to help them recharge their emotional batteries. "This is really very important, because our most important tool is ourselves," Altshuler points out.

Pardess did her doctoral research on secondary trauma, "what we call 'compassion fatigue,' helping the helper and strengthening the resilience of the helper."

It is especially critical for volunteers with personal tragedies in their past. "Trauma survivors who reach out to help others need special support, too, because it opens past wounds," says Pardess. "This is where I come in. I attend to their needs, helping them to maintain the optimal emotional distance and be able to feel a sense of satisfaction of being there for someone else."

SELAH volunteers from all over Israel gathered for two days of emergency training and enrichment in December following the Carmel fire. Pardess and Ethiopian community expert Micha Feldmann were among the leaders of sessions dealing with such topics as preparedness for emergency situations and growth after crisis.

The mother of four children including two in the army, Pardess feels it becomes more difficult to help people in trauma when her own kids are in vulnerable points in life. When she counseled parents whose teens were killed in the Dolphinarium disco suicide bombing in 2001, "I had kids the same age, so I had a sense of deep connection."

"There is a special spirit of kindness in the organization and volunteers also receive important spiritual strength from our activities," adds Altshuler.

Tense times

Volunteering for SELAH since 1998, Altshuler has worked through some tense times: twice in the past several years, he aided traumatized immigrants in his hometown of Beersheva following terror and rocket attacks, and a short time later had to report for military reserve duty in response to those incidents.

The second Lebanon war, in 2006, affected many new immigrants directly or indirectly, he says. "They were the most vulnerable, because they lacked extended family and sources of support," he explains. "SELAH's practical and emotional support during and after the war was critical to some of these people."

Help did not cease when the firing did. "We understood that after the war ended there was a recovery process," says Altshuler. This is no different than in situations involving children orphaned due to terror or other tragedies. "We need to accompany those families for a long time."

At a recent SELAH two-day therapeutic healing retreat near a Galilee kibbutz, 68 bereaved Ethiopian parents and children from all over Israel came together for recreational and cultural activities and bereavement workshops in their Amharic language. Participants included a 74-year-old recently widowed woman who'd lost her two children within a month of each other two years ago; a father of four whose wife and son were killed in a house fire; and a couple raising their three-year-old grandson after their daughter was murdered by her husband.

"You cannot know what will be the next case you'll meet, because we take the most difficult cases from accidents and disasters," Altshuler says.

The definition of happiness

Bar-On runs the organization with the help of donors from the Jewish and non-Jewish world, some state funding, a small paid staff and, most crucially, the volunteers.

"We could use many more, especially people who can speak other languages," she says. "In many cases, we need people who are simply good listeners, prepared to open their heart and to be fully present at very difficult moments throughout a crisis. We also need people to do administrative work, writing, and helping kids close educational gaps after trauma."

The payoff for this difficult work comes in the moments of joy in the lives of those they have seen through hard times. "When we hear of something good that happens to someone we have assisted in a crisis, like an orphan achieving in school or the military, this is like a definition for happiness not only for them but also for me," says Altshuler.

Bar-On agrees that she gets an emotional boost from good news. "Just now, one of our recipients, a paralyzed Ethiopian, became a father to twins and the birth is tomorrow," she relates. "We are involved with a lot of pain and terrible disaster, but also a lot of fulfillment and a tremendous feeling of achievement and of the power of life."