

# **Novel approaches to supporting immigrants in emergencies:**

## **The case of SELAH**

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### **Background: Description of a multi-faceted global and local challenge**

The topic of “immigrants in the face of emergencies” is globally important. Effective emergency preparedness and response depend on the ability to adequately address the needs of various groups in a society. The majority of modern societies is extensively multi-cultural and includes immigrant populations. To ensure comprehensive preparedness and response in emergencies it is essential to build and sustain culture-sensitive strategies for immigrants and other groups with special needs.

Within Israel the challenge of comprehensively addressing the needs of immigrants in emergencies is especially significant due to some of the country's unique characteristics. Immigration to Israel (“Alyiah”) - is one of the cornerstones that the State of Israel is founded upon. The ethos of immigration and absorption drove the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and constitutes a central theme in the Israeli experience throughout the years. In addition, since its inception, Israel has faced multiple emergencies due to wars, terrorist attacks, and missile strikes. The fire in the Carmel forest in December 2010 and a wave of significant fires in November 2016 illustrated that there are additional risk factors that may yield emergencies in Israel. There is also a risk of a major earthquake and tsunami, which unfortunately may occur at any time with no currently existing option of substantial early warning. Traditionally, most of Israel's attention to emergencies has been focused on security-related threats. While security risks are obvious, complex, and dynamic, it is important to remember that Israel could face large-scale emergencies of other types and should be prepared conceptually and operationally. The most prominent risk Israel faces, other than war, is a major earthquake. It is

important to recognize unfortunately that a major earthquake could hit Israel in the near future. In the last few centuries, such earthquakes struck the area approximately every eighty to one hundred years, and the last destructive earthquake occurred in 1927 - eighty-nine years ago. Given the possible damage from such an event, it is important to understand that a major earthquake constitutes a strategic challenge for the country that should be addressed in a comprehensive and integrated manner (Altshuler, 2016; Meridor & Altshuler, 2016).

Immigrants in emergencies clearly have unique needs. In the scientific literature there is a consensus that migration in and of itself involves situations of distress and crisis due to the life-altering changes that the immigrants experience on all plains of life- physical, social, cultural (Moshkowitz, 1996; Furnham & Bochner, 1975; Adler, 1986). Shuval (1993) delineates the various aspects of change that are significant and ongoing in the process of immigrating and acclimating to a new country. The physical aspect of change pertains to a change in climate, life-style, eating habits, and more. The social aspect of change pertains to disengaging from the relationships and social networks in the country of origin (although in the era of social media there could be higher chances to keep some of the relationships), and the demands of establishing a new social system. The cultural aspects of change include the demands of learning new norms and values, while facing unavoidable dilemmas regarding how one relates to the values of their society of origin when there are conflicts between the “new” and the “old.”

Many immigrants have few support systems as a result of having disconnected from their country of origin and a crack in the familiar circle of life. This is often expressed in language and communication challenges, a sense of “detachment” and disorientation, and often a lack of traditional sources of support by extended family and friends (Pardess, 2005). In addition to dealing with breaking the circle of life, every new immigrant must cope with challenging tasks upon arrival in a new country, such as intensively learning the language, finding employment, seeking a place of residence, and many more tasks. The crisis inherent in immigration also poses mental health risks (Radomislensky & Grinshpoon, 2009; Bhugra, 2005).

The emotional experiences common to immigration - feeling uprooted, foreign, lacking a foothold - are also known in the professional literature as experiences common to tragedy, crisis or emergency. When immigrants face tragedy, these experiences are often intensified as

they are compounded. With no mastery of the local language or familiarity with cultural codes, hardships and miscommunications contribute to a sense of disorientation. Loss of identity, confusion, and disorientation within one's close environment make it difficult for immigrants to judge and make decisions at times of crisis. Immigrants experience also difficulty turning to local authorities and administrative bodies in order to receive the assistance of existing infrastructures. In general, the various obstacles preventing immigrants from reaching the help they need may be classified into the following categories:

1. Obstacles in using existing services due to social and cultural differences. Cultural variables influence:

- What one would define as a problem?
- How one would explain the source of their difficulties?
- How and where one will seek help?
- How one perceives the "correct" form of coping?
- How one experiences his/her symptoms?
- How and with whom one would share their distress?

2. Language barriers exist due to a scarcity of professionals/workers/therapists that speak the immigrant's language; lack of materials in preparing for emergencies in the various languages that immigrants speak; lack of translation services.

3. Barriers due to a lack of knowledge of who to turn to and how. Seeking professional help indicates that the immigrant is oriented within his/her new environment, and therefore, turning to therapy is not necessarily an indication of the depth of the crisis, but rather of one's resources to cope. Many immigrants are lacking guidance in who to turn to and/or how.

The immigrants' reality makes it even more difficult for them to effectively cope with situations of tragedy, crisis or emergency. For immigrants to effectively cope with such situations they need an enhanced and adapted source of support. It is necessary to act on various levels in order to improve the readiness and coping of immigrants that are faced with crisis. Research has shown that loneliness is a risk factor for poor coping with crisis, while

social support is a resource that is capable of moderating the negative ramifications of stressful events (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, Pfefferbaum, 2008).

Immigrants usually lack the natural support systems at times of crisis, such as childhood friends and coworkers, etc. Even immigrants who have been living in Israel for many years and have acquired the language often have difficulty deciphering verbal nuances, “to read” the “map” in terms of social codes, and this difficulty adds to their sense of loneliness and foreignness. Social support and social capital can serve as a multi-dimensional resource, including various forms of support - instrumental support, a source of relevant information, assistance in problem-solving, in addition to the support that enables the expression of emotions and reinforcing self-worth.

In addition, there is paramount importance to tailoring intervention programs and activities to be culturally sensitive especially when they pertain to preparing for and coping with emergencies and crises. Culture is a “lense” through which the individual perceives and understands the world, including the meaning of events, traumas, and various stressors. Cultural variables, customs and rituals, play an important role in coping with loss, and can serve as a source of strength in difficult times. Familiarity with the customs of mourning that are acceptable in the original culture is essential to creating a supportive environment in situations of death in the family.

Outreach cannot be overestimated. Immigrants can often be hesitant about turning to authorities (which necessitates outreach and mapping out needs). There is special importance to combining between formal and informal assistance. Special efforts must be made to reach out to the populations that have experienced loss or were injured in emergencies.

In general, to better serve immigrants in the face of emergencies there is a great need for both consolidating and improving available resources and developing novel approaches and strategies. These two aspects will be expanded upon below.

## **Developing novel strategy, practice and knowledge: SELAH's story**

### *Conceptual and historic overview*

Professional psycho-social response in the face of crisis and emergency is provided to immigrants by both organizations that assist to a wide range of populations and among them new immigrants, and organizations that exclusively focus in their activities on immigrant populations. The array of activities of both types of organizations may include, among others, direct practical and emotional assistance and support for immigrants traumatized by emergencies, training and educating professionals and lay citizens as volunteers, publishing professional material, creating inter-organizational forums for mutual professional dialogue and knowledge exchange, providing a hot line for telephone support, and more. Many Israeli organizations that deal with the above mentioned fields are united under the “Israeli Trauma Coalition”. One of the organizations that founded the Coalition and serves as the major organization that assists immigrants in crisis is SELAH – The Israel Crisis Management Center, which focuses its activities on providing supportive, hands-on assistance to immigrants originating from all throughout the Diaspora, who were affected by emergency situations and acute crises and tragedies.

The main goal of SELAH is to initiate, plan, and carry out major activities and influence the public discourse for the purpose of assisting in absorbing immigrants in Israel. Most of SELAH's budget is based on donations.

SELAH was founded in 1993. Its predecessor, The Israel Public Council for Soviet Jewry, was founded in 1976. The Council provided for decades advocacy and activism on behalf of “refuseniks” (Jews refused by the Soviet authorities to get permit to leave the country), prisoners of Zion, and all Russian Soviet Jews yearning to immigrate to Israel. The Council brought the message of solidarity and support on behalf of the Israeli society for the struggling Soviet Jews and promoted breakthrough projects, such as KAMEA program aimed to incorporate Jewish scientists from the Former Soviet Union into Israeli institutions of higher education. The Former Soviet Union gates were at long last opened at the end of 80's, and a massive immigration to Israel follows: Over one million people arrive in Israel, bringing vibrant cultural, academic, and other gifts to Israeli society, but face the daunting challenges of

integrating into a new homeland. Many are forced to cope with a sudden crisis, armed with few resources. It was the background for SELAH's establishment. Since its inception the organization has granted assistance and support to more than ????? immigrants. The organization's activities are carried out by a small staff of experienced and trained professionals and hundreds of dedicated volunteers, spread throughout Israel, from Kiryat Shmonah, to Sderot and Eilat.

### *Volunteers at SELAH*

Many studies show the advantages of volunteers' involvement in social organizations. Drihem and York (2002) claim that volunteers expand the human resources of volunteer organizations and strengthen the connection between organizations and the served communities. They are also likely to reduce one's feelings of estrangement in relation to the establishment and contribute towards better personal service. Similarly, the researchers claim that often volunteers find it easier to form interpersonal relationship with the clients, due to the fact that they offer less formal and more symmetrical relationship compared to professionals.

The volunteers arrive at SELAH from all walks of society- native Israeli born and immigrants; they are of different age groups (19-90); some are more affluent and some less. Some of the volunteers were once beneficiaries of SELAH themselves who decided to volunteer and help others to cope (for example, bereaved parents of fallen soldiers). The fact that volunteers arrive from all walks of society makes them more approachable to various groups of people, making the communication easier, it enhances the efficacy of the suggested solutions, and increases the willingness of people in crisis and emergency to receive help. The volunteers reach the families in groups or individually, depending on the type of assistance that is being provided, the family's situation and needs, as well as the volunteer's abilities. Similarly, based on the understanding of the importance of providing culturally sensitive support, and of dialogue with the patient after a crisis in their mother-tongue, SELAH recruits a rich "mosaic" of volunteers, who in addition to their mastery of the Hebrew language also speak various languages spoken by the immigrants in Israel. This topic is continually on the agenda, and the organization is

constantly seeking out volunteers who speak different languages to be able to reach as many diverse immigrant populations as possible.

The volunteers undergo extensive training, including meeting with professionals, experiential workshops, analyzing case-studies and processes for drawing conclusions. They also receive ongoing accompaniment and caring guidance by experienced professionals. Trainings and educational meetings take place throughout one's volunteer period. They provide an important resource for volunteers and assist them in coping with emotional overload and complex feelings that may arise as a result of meeting with very complicated crises SELAH patients are exposed to, and provides the volunteers with confidence in actions they take to assist (Altshuler, 2006; Pardess, 2005). The process of training is based on the volunteers "natural" abilities, such as empathy, compassion, pro-active coping style, attentiveness, common sense, life-experience, and internal resources. The primary topics of volunteers' training at SELAH include enhancing interpersonal communication skills, providing volunteers with applicable tools for crisis and emergency intervention, raising awareness of one's own self-response to trauma and loss, and emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity (Pardess, 2005).

One of the central characteristics of SELAH volunteers is their degree of perseverance and diligence, which many of them display over years and even decades of volunteering. The scientific literature presents various explanations for this phenomenon. Drihem and York (2002) claim that the dedication and perseverance of volunteers often correlated to the degree to which the organization "invests" in them. The concept of "investing" includes preparing, advising, paying attention to the multiple needs volunteers have, as well as physical and spiritual compensation for their time and efforts. SELAH significantly invests in its relationship with the volunteers, in providing an ongoing feedback, and compensation through appreciation and well-prepared training sessions. Another factor that may explain their dedication to the organization is the high level of independence they are granted. The more independence a volunteer is granted, the greater is the degree of personal investment and sense of personal responsibility they feel towards the organization (Drihem & York, 2002; Bettencourt, Dillman & Wollman, 1996). SELAH volunteers are given a significant amount of independence and involvement within the decision-making processes, while at the same time being in an ongoing system of updating and consulting with the management of the

organization. This model stems from both the nature of the work, which embodies a great degree of outreach and decentralization, as well as an ideological framework of creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and a sense of personal responsibility.

*The unique net of support provided by SELAH*

SELAH assists immigrants who experience crises and emergencies, including the following groups:

- Children who were orphaned and are being raised by their grandparents, older siblings, or other family members.
- Individuals physically hurt and/or psychologically traumatized in war and terror attacks, and their families.
- Victims of family violence.
- Individuals who were injured in car accidents, at their work-place, or individuals in severe crisis situations.
- Families whose loved ones perished in a fire, by drowning, or other tragedy.
- Parents who are mourning their children who fell during their military service or in other events.
- Individuals who suddenly fell ill with a severe disease.

SELAH's activities are expressed in a variety of support programs. The central programs are as follows:

- Seminars for enhancing coping abilities provided to specific groups, including bereaved families, trauma or injury victims, adult siblings coping with raising their younger siblings after becoming orphaned and grandparents coping with parenting their orphaned grandchildren. These 2-3 days seminars offer experiential activities and workshops, as well as supportive and caring accompaniment by SELAH's volunteers and staff, with an emphasis on mutual support among group members. The seminars are built and continuously developed and

updated by SELAH's professionals and highly-qualified volunteers, who specialize in therapeutic work and community support for traumatized immigrant populations.

- Ongoing and comprehensive support in times of crisis and emergency. The support is multi-disciplinary, and continues throughout the entire multi-dimensional recovery process. SELAH's volunteers and staff usually meet the effected person at the funeral, at the hospital, or in their home, and will be present at any point they need. The staff and volunteers deal with providing emotional support as well as support with day to day tasks, reaching out to both individuals and families. SELAH also provides financial assistance to supplement the funding of treatments that are not included in the health coverage plan and assists in funding additional and urgent financial expenses related to the crisis and emergency situation. Additional assistance is granted through reaching out to other institutions and shortening bureaucratic processes.

Since 2006, the State of Israel has experienced several events of wide-scope security escalation - the Second Lebanon war in summer 2006 and three escalation rounds between Israel and Gaza: in winter 2008-2009, in autumn 2012 and in summer 2014. In addition, in the Southern region, and primarily in Sderot and the Jewish settlements surrounding Gaza, residents have been continuously exposed to rocket attacks since the year 2000. This region is significantly populated by new immigrants, and SELAH has been very active in assisting on a wide-scope throughout the security conflicts and during the recovery processes following all the above emergencies.

SELAH's activities at the times of a nationwide emergency could be comprehensively illustrated through the case of the Second Lebanon War. SELAH was particularly active in assisting individuals who were in the line of fire, and assisted in removing individuals who were home-bound and other families with increased vulnerabilities outside the attacked areas. When the war ended, SELAH immediately began seeking out those who were hurt physically and emotionally from the war and assisted them in their multi-faceted recovery. Within this framework, SELAH's volunteers and staff visited over 1,000 families throughout the North with special emphasis on the areas that are close to the Israel-Lebanon border. In addition to SELAH's ongoing outreach efforts, individuals contacted SELAH requesting much needed assistance. SELAH also worked in collaboration with hospitals, community health clinics,

local social services in Northern communities and with the Department of Social Work at the Tel-Chai College in order to expand the outreach to the most vulnerable immigrant groups and enhance community recovery processes.

Special attention is given by SELAH to the families with special needs and a history of previous traumas (grandparents raising their orphaned grandchildren, adult siblings raising their younger siblings, bereaved families, individuals with physical and emotional disabilities and more). Each of these groups need appropriate response to its practical and emotional needs, both in the short-term and in the long run, during routine and especially during crisis and emergency. In crisis, naturally the needs of these families intensify. Due to pre-existing vulnerabilities, the emergency situation is especially painful for these families and SELAH is actively reaching out to them. The organization developed comprehensive methods and intervention techniques to accompany these families during the most stressful times.

### **Summary**

In sum, immigrants are usually more vulnerable in times of crisis and emergency due to pre-existing and current susceptibilities that make them more at risk for challenging coping and challenging recovery. Furthermore, certain groups of immigrants - those with special needs or a history of trauma or loss, may be at an even higher risk and for them an especially comprehensive net of support is essential.

SELAH focuses its activities on providing assistance to immigrants that have been hurt in crisis and emergency. Its activities are based on many years of cutting-edge multi-faceted know-how, experience and development, combined with continuous learning and adaptation processes. SELAH's approach uniquely integrates and constantly nurtures cultural sensitivity, compassion, situational awareness, trauma expertise and humility as its core value and daily practices.

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