

# NATAL – Shedding Light on Israel’s Silent Victims

## (Mickey) Dobner

volunteer of the Israeli Division

It was a calm and cool evening in Beer Sheva on the evening of Monday, December 29, 2008. Sapir was preparing for the next school day, but nothing prepared her for the deafening sound that suddenly broke the silence. A Grad rocket just exploded in a nearby house, without any advanced warning and for the first time in Beer Sheva. Sapir did not suffer physical injuries and she did not make it to the list of casualties published by the likes of CNN and BBC, but Sapir was a real victim. She joined a list of 584 people in Israel who suffered from shock and anxiety syndrome during Operation Cast Lead and hundreds of thousands of such victims as a result of the ongoing Israeli-Arab conflict. Sapir's trauma was so severe that she could not stay in her house and had to be moved to her aunt's house. She clearly needed help.

As early as late 1990s, war and terror traumas were not getting great attention and support in Israel and victims were afraid to come forward for fear of being ridiculed and criticized. But it all changed in 1998, when Dr. Yossi Hadar and Judith Yovel

Recanati established NATAL: "Israel Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War". Judith is a member of the well-known Recanati family who is best known as the founders of Israel Discount Bank (in 1935). What is less known

is the great tradition of charity work of this family in Israel. Judith has continued this great tradition by personally pushing the idea of NATAL after Dr. Hadar, who conceived the idea, passed away from leukemia two weeks before NATAL opened its doors.

On June 8, 2009 Judith, and the Executive Director of Natal and Orly Gal, met with volunteers of United Jewish Appeal (UJA) Israeli Division, an arm of the Israeli Forum. The Israeli Division's goals are to support the Israeli community in Toronto and promote integration of Israelis with the Jewish community. This would create a more inclusive and stronger community that will help in preserving the Jewish identity of Israelis and increase

support to the local community, as well as the State of Israel. To help achieve these goals, the Division is also involved in raising funds among the Israeli community.

If the Israeli Division's volunteers needed any more motivation and support for their important activities, there could not be a better choice than Judith. She is one of the wealthiest people in Israel but you would never figure this out. She is humble, dressed modestly and speaks to you at "eye level". When she describes NATAL you can feel that she really cares and in her unpretentious manner she somehow makes you feel that the ideals on which the State of Israel was originally established are still alive and cynicism should not dominate our feelings towards these ideals.

Judith personally finances all the administration of NATAL in Israel and the United States and owns and maintains the building that houses the head office of the organization in Tel Aviv. Thus, donations received by NATAL are spent exclusively on treatment and help to victims.

Judith explains that since its establishment the organization treated approximately 70,000 people in Israel. More than 200 volunteers and professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and expressive arts therapists) work at NATAL and its satellites all over the country. The activities of NATAL's staff are mostly done without publicity, in clinics, community centers, schools, kindergartens, day care centers and factories around the country. It has a hot line, which receives a large number of inquiries on a daily basis, especially when the security situation is tense. NATAL treats also those indirectly affected, as it recognizes the pain and suffering of family members and friends of trauma victims. The community out-

reach unit of NATAL provides psychological first-aid in the field to communities across Israel, sometimes under fire.

In eleven years of activity, NATAL has increased public and professional awareness of the term "national trauma". One of NATAL's important functions has been to work for a change in the attitude towards victims of national trauma. One measure of their success is that every report from the field now makes routine mention of the number of individuals suffering from anxiety.

NATAL's services are provided to all parts of the Israeli society, including Israeli Arabs who use its services. Although not part of its mandate, Judith believes that reaching out to Arabs through these services can help to strengthen the trust between Arabs and Jews and instill a sense of belonging in the Arab community.

NATAL has been a catalyst and world leader in developing trauma studies and treatments. In October 2007, NATAL launched the Interdisciplinary Center for Trauma Studies, affiliated with Tel Aviv University Medical school, the first of its kind in Israel. It offers in-depth, comprehensive training, both theoretical and practical, in several fields of therapy and treatment. As a result, countries and organizations around the world are increasingly seeking cooperation with and assistance from NATAL. Beside the important humanitarian aspect of this activity, it should also help to improve the problematic image of Israel in the world, in a more effective manner than any other orchestrated campaign. But more importantly, victims of national trauma in Israel have now the support they need and as result, Sapir has been able to receive help, overcome her trauma and go back to her house and normal life.

After her presentation to the Israeli Division volunteers, I spoke to Judith and she expressed her gratitude to the warm Jewish community in Toronto and especially the UJA that has been there to support the work of many important organizations in Israel, including NATAL. True to its philosophy of working to strengthen the relatively weak parts of Israeli society, the UJA cooperated with NATAL in various projects in Israel's periphery (Sederot, Acco and Hazer). Judith feels that the goals of the Israeli Division are admirable and, if successful, will act to further strengthen the relationship between Israel and Diaspora for the benefit of all Jews and Israelis where ever they are.

NATAL's website is: <http://natal.org.il/english/>



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