

For IsraAid

Japan's Trauma isn't Forgotten



Polizer with a little girl in Japan

In a series of short interrupted conversations with IsraAid Relief Program Japan Project Coordinator Yotam Polizer, come responses to interview questions as he rushes off again busy with work in the field. Each time, he again picks up where he left off. "Demand is high," Polizer explains. This is the reality in the field during a humanitarian aid mission.

For Polizer, though, it is clear, that the

reward is great. He explains that he is a true believer in the mission of IsraAid which first and foremost is to provide humanitarian assistance, focused on both development and relief, to people irrespective of religion, race or nationality. IsraAid is fueled by the desire to engage in Tikkun Olam, which is one of the core Jewish values, and which is the responsibility to fix what is wrong in the world. When asked about the importance of IsraAid as serving as

an unofficial goodwill ambassador, a PR agent and creating a positive face for Israel abroad, Polizer admits this is a good result, but not a motivator and instead merely incidental to the aid they are giving.

In Asia alone they have successfully implemented numerous vital aid operations that have crossed many cultural boundaries. They were instrumental in the coordination of aid

following the Indian Ocean tsunami, they sent relief workers to Myanmar to help with recovery after a major cyclone hit and they responded to give aid in the Philippines after massive typhoons struck. They have also been involved in projects in countries that include Nepal, China and India.

IsraAid has a keen sense of awareness of the importance of culture and takes their own mandate seriously to provide aid with full respect to culture and customs of the local beneficiaries. A cultural sensitivity training, specific to each country, is required. In Japan, Polizer explains, their ability to tailor aid to meet local cultural norms has been essential to the success of their mission. There are many cultural differences at play. In Japan one of these barriers includes the Japanese cultural norm of keeping emotions controlled, internal, and guarded. In a post-trauma therapy setting, like the one IsraAid has been facilitating, this provides an extra challenge for the teams. Polizer explained that this closed society culture made it difficult for local people to even allow themselves to be helped.

It has to have been a quick learn for IsraAid's Japan-knowledge, as they first arrived in Japan only four days after the tsunami. Since then, they have focused on a number of different areas of aid. In the immediate aftermath, aid took the form, for example, of responding to a Japanese hospital's request for Altroxin to treat iodine poisoning. Thanks to IsraAid this drug reached 1,500 people. Other aid, like long-term psychological services and therapy, led by Israel's Dr. Gillat Raisch, is more complex and the effect the aid has on people is not immediate, but it is never-the-less invaluable.

But IsraAid is in Japan for the long-haul, now six months out they are still continuously sending aid teams. The Israeli teams are operating in Japan on

two-three week shifts. They then return to Israel and then there is a two-three week gap before the next team arrives. The focus of this work now is mainly post-trauma psychological treatment for children in five towns: Watari, Natori, Yamamoto, Shinchi and Iwanuma. The team, though relying on Israeli knowhow and experience, use creative techniques to reach their Japanese counterparts including the use of origami, a traditional Japanese paper craft, to encourage the expression of deep emotion. Overall, art therapies with adaptations have been very successful in Japan. They also focus

on movement, games and music as techniques for expression when working with children. Polizer talks about the impact, seeing children empowered with paint and brushes, simply painting the word Tsunami in thick bold brush strokes in the weeks immediately following the disaster. While they paint their fear and trauma, they are also helped to paint their hopes and joys.

The IsraAid team trains Japanese educators and social workers to learn to implement all of these techniques. Ultimately, the goal is to give special



Therapy in motion



Group therapy and training

Best of AJL

by Jana Daniels

training to a team of local experts to run a post-trauma treatment center independently.


Mr. Shachar Zahavi, Chairman of IsraAid, like the rest of the team was touched by the experience and summarized, "I'm really happy we could support the Japanese people who suffered so much from both the tsunami and radiation. The Israeli experience in the field of post-trauma is really valuable in Japan where such treatments are rare."

Because of the rarity of this type of treatment in Japanese culture, many of the educators that are being trained have not even dealt with their own reaction to the trauma and require assistance working through their own pain.

Quite shockingly, while the teams are largely focused on post-trauma aid, Polizer explained that for some in Japan, even six months after the disaster, they are still experiencing the trauma on an everyday basis and IsraAid continues to respond to their continuing needs. The road to recovery in these areas still in crisis will be long. In Shinchi, located a mere 60k from Fukushima, residents must stay indoors in order to limit their level of exposure to radiation. Children are only allowed out five minutes a day. The team will also start working in Minami Soma, only 30k from Fukushima. As for how the Israeli team is able to protect themselves, Polizer responded that they have investigated the situation thoroughly and would not be at personal risk due to the limitations on their potential exposure by a shortened stay in the areas.

Other aid recipients are responding well to IsraAid's therapy. Some local teachers IsraAid has been working with and training have expressed tremendous gratitude for what in most instances was the only time they had been afforded the opportunity to express and work through

their own emotions. In addition to fear and trauma, there is an overwhelming sense of guilt that more could not have been saved.

Hailing from Israel, where unfortunately, terror and the resulting trauma are all too familiar to many, the IsraAid teams' skills have been finely tuned and there is perhaps an inherent greater awareness of what the Japanese need to heal. "It's our opportunity to help by sharing Israeli knowledge and knowhow to help as many people as we can," summarizes Polizer. 

IsraAid also serves as a coordinating body for Israeli and Jewish organizations engaged in Tikkun Olam. Many of their member organizations have also provided aid to the region including: Save a Child's Heart, the American Jewish Committee (AJC), The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), Fast Israeli Rescue and Search Team (F.I.R.S.T.) and Tevel b'Tzedek.

For more information on IsraAid, please see their website at <http://www.israaid.org.il/>



Training session



A hug goes a long way