

Volunteering in Israel

By Esther Herlitz

Israel is regarded by many as the outcome of an immensely successful voluntary movement. Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people, simultaneously rallied political support and engaged in practical work - entirely on a voluntary basis. More than that: the Zionist movement created forms of voluntary self-government as well as voluntary agencies to serve the individual and the community while being under foreign, so called "mandatory", rule. Even the small Jewish community which had remained in Palestine during the 500 years of Turkish rule had its own mutual aid societies, its own school as well as links to supporting voluntary agencies throughout the world.

The fact is that volunteering has deep roots in Jewish tradition.

Abraham's rescue of Lot, based as it was on family-tribe relationships, was nevertheless a voluntary act. The scholars who supervised the "community chest" in Talmudic times were volunteers. The Tzadakah ("charity") tradition which emerged from the injunction to "love thy neighbour as thyself", is one of people voluntarily helping each other - not just the rich helping the poor - in times of difficulty or crisis. Many community services, nowadays

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managed by governmental bureaucracies, were once entirely handled by religiously motivated volunteers. The different forms of Jewish schools known as "Cheder", "Talmud Torah" and "Yeshiva" were wholly voluntary educational institutions, as were the burial societies, bath facilities, brides-aid groups and the like. Most philanthropic aid was handled confidentially and often referred to as "secret giving". In any event, wherever possible, Jewish communities throughout the world were managed by some form of self-government, on a voluntary basis.

In the period leading to Israel's independence in 1948, the Jewish community, then still under British rule, ran its own autonomous institutions. Much of it was based on Israel's Federation of Labour (Histadrut), to this day the biggest and most influential voluntary organisation in the country. As is well known, the Histadrut is unique in that, in addition to being a Trade Union, it also created industries through its own holding company, ran and runs the "Kupat Holim", the biggest sick fund in the country and, until statehood, managed its own Labour Exchange. It still runs the largest adult education organisation in the country. Women Histadrut members constitute the largest women's organization in Israel: "Na'amat", an Hebrew acronym which stands for "Working and Volunteering Women"; it has 700,000 members today.

Since education offered by the British Mandatory Government was considered colonial and sub-standard, the Jewish community voluntarily established its own school system. To fight off Arab attacks on Jewish settlements, life and property, "Haganah", a self-defence organisation, came into being; it later spearheaded the struggle against British rule and ultimately formed the very base for the IDF, Israel's Defence Force.

More than anything else, the Kibbutz and the Moshav stand for the very typical and special Israeli aspect of voluntary action. Both the Kibbutz (collective settlement; plural: Kibbutzim) and the Moshav (cooperative smallholders' village; plural Moshavim) represent an effort by people with little if any agricultural training and tradition to develop agricultural settlements under very difficult conditions. In these circumstances, only a collective enterprise could succeed. Yet, unlike its counterparts in the Soviet Union and in China, the effort was and is to this day totally voluntary.

Other voluntary organisations also had their beginnings in the pre-State days. Mutual aid societies include i.a. Magen David Adom ("Red Star of David"; equivalent to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies), for first aid; AKIM (for retarded children); ILAN (for handicapped children); Zehavi (help for large families); Soldiers Welfare Association; Council for a Beautiful Israel; Anti-Cancer League; Society for Prevention of Road Accidents; Ya'al (Volunteers in Hospitals); etc. There are today Israeli branches of many international voluntary organisations such as Rotary, Lions, Soroptimist, Variety, B'nei Brith, et al.

The largest and most active of all are women's organizations which, in addition to Na'amat (see above), include WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organisation) and the National Religious Women's Movement. Since Israel is a country of immigrants, immigrant associations play a major role in offering mutual aid and represent an important lobby for the interests of immigrant groups. Last but not least, there are significant youth movement organisations, most of them affiliated to one or the other of Israel's major political parties. As elsewhere in the world, the importance of youth movements has unfortunately tended to diminish in recent years.

TRENDS AND CHANGES

Independence in 1948 brought about many changes in attitude and practice. The slogan "from people to nationhood" was taken seriously, and tasks which hitherto had been

performed on a voluntary basis were turned over to the newly-formed ministries. Obviously, the Haganah and other voluntary fighting units had to give way to a regular defence force and to military service by legislation.

Pressure to get things done, and done quickly, was great. In those first years, immigrants poured in by the scores of thousands. Nowhere in the world, not even in the United States nor in Australia, was so much ever done by government agencies for newcomers. After all, the "open gate" policy was the *raison d'etre* of Israel. Immigrants expected - and needed - to be helped and assisted, and some of them still do so today, so many years later. Many immigrants came from the lands of the Islam and brought with them cultures and customs different from those of modern Israel. This is the background for what is today commonly referred to in Israel as "the social gap".

ISRAEL VOLUNTARY SERVICE

A Commission established in 1971, by the then Prime Minister, Golda Meir, to study Israel's disadvantaged children and youth, recommended renewed emphasis on voluntary efforts and brought about (in 1972) the establishment of the government-funded Israel Voluntary Service to encourage and coordinate voluntary activities and independent agencies. Subsequently, 14 Volunteer Bureaus were set up, and "volunteer coordinators" were appointed in several ministries (i.e. Education, Social Welfare, Health, Immigrant Absorption), local councils, and in voluntary organisations.

New avenues for volunteers and voluntary organisations are emerging and being developed. The Prime Minister's Commission had pointed to the cultural background and educational weakness of many parents as one of the reasons (low incomes and poor housing being others) for the problems of some of Israel's youth. Both the children and their mothers have since become targets for remedial activities by volunteers. Some kibbutz members, too, have begun to move into Israel's so-called development towns as part- and full-time volunteers. Many of the township's inhabitants are salaried workers in the kibbutzim which they often regard as rich neighbors whose high standards can never be reached - an outlook which could create social tension. The kibbutz volunteers contribute skills and know-how in towns which are ever so short of skilled manpower in all services. Above all, these volunteers slowly build bridges of under-

standing; kibbutz volunteers teach and tutor, run neighborhood "make shift" clubs, make home visits to families in difficulty, aid the aged, help with general management.

EDUCATION

Israel's compulsory education starts with one-year kindergarten at the age of 5 and goes up to age 15. It has been discovered that some culturally disadvantaged children - mainly those from large immigrant families - arrive in the kindergarten class with poor vocabularies and even poorer personal habits and discipline. More than one thousand women volunteers work once a week with such children in groups of three to four. It has been shown that this makes it possible for these initially deprived children to enter the first grade of elementary school well enough prepared for a successful school career thereafter.

Tutoring by volunteers has been introduced in a variety of ways, in class and after school; in the volunteer's own home or in that of the child; in "homework clubs"; and in public libraries. Each of these venues have their own advantages and disadvantages; however *personal* attention seems to be the decisive reason for success. A study carried out by Dr. Y. Peres in 1973 showed that students helped by volunteers made only *slight* progress in the subject *taught* but made *great* progress in *general behavior* in class and at home. Another study, by PORI (Public Opinion Research of Israel, Ltd.), showed that rejection of volunteers by their clients, a well-known phenomenon in some other countries, does not exist in Israel. In other words, families of Oriental background in need of help do not object to the good services rendered by a so-called middle class lady of European origin. *Today, more than 10,000 volunteers are helping the school system in one way or another.*

An effort needs to be made, in Israel as elsewhere, to enlarge the circle of volunteers and to draw not only on women after the child-raising age; at the moment, middle-aged women represent the great majority of volunteers in Israel, too. The Peres study showed that 82% of all volunteers were women, and that 68% of them do not work outside their own homes. Volunteers proved to have an average of 12.4 years of schooling, as against the overall Israel average of 8.5 years. It is with this in mind that two additional groups of prospective volunteers are deliberately being encouraged: the young and the retired. High school students are urged to help younger children and to act as

their "big brother" or "big sister" or tutor. Much discussion is going on at the moment whether to make some form of volunteering compulsory in high school. A contradiction in terms? Well, perhaps not entirely...

OTHER TYPES OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE

In Israel - again: as elsewhere - the number of skilled retired people is on the increase. With the help of the Civil Service Commissioner, careers as full-time or part-time volunteers in the Social Services are being encouraged prior to retirement. Some experiments have been made with pensioners "in residence" in poor neighborhoods and in development towns.

University students are being encouraged to work with underprivileged teenagers for four hours a week, against a stipend-grant of 1L2000 - a year. Some 1000 students are volunteering on this basis. This scheme is controversial in Israel, since the amount offered the students is not insignificant and thus may tend to blur the voluntary nature of such services. All other volunteers are reimbursed only for actual out-of-pocket expenses.

Much effort is being made to make members of voluntary organizations more than mere fund raisers. Thus, Wizo now reports that 400 of its women members work with new immigrants, 500 with deprived families, 400 with war widows - all of them on a "one-to-one" regular weekly basis. Na'amat lists 150 women tutors; 160 active on its kindergarten projects; 150 working with bereaved families; 100 helping in Mother-and-Child centers. B'nei Brith Lodges are specializing in making custodial volunteers available where courts call for the appointment of a custodian; in an immigrant country where not everyone has relatives, the 2500 volunteer-custodians are of great importance.

Pensioners run advisory services for the retired, attached to branch offices of the National Insurance, the Israeli equivalent of such institutions as, for example, the Social Security Agency in U.S.A. Guidance services are greatly needed in a country with much bureaucratic red tape and many new citizens. "Citizens Advice Bureaus", staffed in part by 150 volunteers, have been successfully started. Help to new immigrants is being tried in a variety of ways. The most promising form of such help is that practised by groups of volunteers, many of them teenagers, who offer to assist with Hebrew homework, thus

rendering a service which not only answers a real need, but at the same time establishes contact with the newcomers' family. Immigrants themselves often make excellent volunteers and, in so doing, simultaneously achieve status in society.

TRAINING AND ENCOURAGING VOLUNTEERS

Efforts are under way to train volunteers and staff. The relationship between them is usually rather uneasy. One experimental course for volunteer coordinators has taken place at Bar-Ilan University. More study and work needs to be done in the field of volunteers and professionals, as well as in the field of enhancing the status of volunteers. To encourage voluntary efforts, the Government of Israel passed the "Volunteer Insurance Bill" of 1975, offering compensation in connection with any accident incurred during volunteering. Also in recognition of the role of volunteers, a special volunteer postage stamp was issued in February 1977. Moreover, the President of Israel presents a special award annually to outstanding volunteers.

Israel's defence needs provide additional roles for volunteers. More than 100,000 men and women above the age of 17 are joining the ranks of the "Civil Guards", to patrol and guard Israel's streets against terrorist attack. Also women do stints of ten days as volunteers in military stores while men similarly volunteer their services in maintenance workshops.

It is often said that voluntary work helps citizens to find a place for themselves in community life. This is perhaps even more true in Israel, a country in which there is great identification with a national goal. To become a volunteer also means to acquire a sense of belonging in an immigrant society and to overcome one's loneliness. The Peres study (Voluntarism in Israel, August 1975) shows that 77% of all interviewed volunteers said that "they wanted to help"; 14% wanted "to improve society"; 12% wanted to use their leisure time; 5% wanted to meet new people.* The desire to make friends was particularly marked among the young (up to 20 years of age) and again among those of 41 years of age and older, where it was mentioned by 55% of all those interviewed.

There is in Israel undoubtedly still much of the "Great Dream", and because of that fact, there is a certain uneasiness about the backwardness of some members of the community. This may explain why, according to Dr. Peres, 60% of all volunteers chose to

deal with various social problems; 40% engaged in medical services, including services to the old and disabled; 25% chose immigrant absorption. In times of war-time emergency the wish to volunteer appears to become almost overpowering. Volunteers evidently have a need to share the burden with those in the fighting lines. During the Yom Kippur War (1973), hospitals actually had to take drastic measures to turn volunteers away!

Volunteering is thus regaining its place in Israel's society as well as in the thinking of the nation's social planners. As Jewish sages said long ago, "if I am only for myself, who am I?"

*The figures add up to more than 100% because of overlapping.