

GTA Jews do grassroots Israel fundraising

JULIE CINAMON

SPECIAL TO THE CJN

One of the heartwarming outcomes of Operation Protective Edge has been the reminder of the Jewish community's strength and generosity.

As soldiers risk their lives and Israelis are holed up in their homes, Jews in the Diaspora have wondered how they can help, and many were moved to provide aid.

The Beth Chabad Israeli Community Centre in Thornhill, led by Rabbi Yisroel Landa and his wife, Rachel, is one example of what a community can accomplish when it bands together.

Rabbi Landa said shul members raised money to send 300 families from Be'er Sheva on a three-day retreat to the North – a Shabbat free of sirens, one eight-year-old Be'er Sheva boy told him.

They also raised money for a playground in Ashdod built next to a shelter, and may fundraise for a Be'er Sheva hospital next. Approximately \$7,000 to \$10,000 was raised for each campaign.

Rabbi Landa described the isolation Israelis feel. "[Residents] have 35 seconds [to seek shelter] after a siren, so people don't leave their houses."

The new Ashdod playground gives families not only a place for children to play, but an opportunity for people to meet again, he said.

Sagit Milshtein-Sadi, a mother of two young children and a resident of Kibbutz Mefalsim, located two kilometres from Gaza, described the same isolation. Sagit, who has a number of relatives in the GTA, is spearheading a campaign to raise money to convert the kibbutz's underground bomb shelter into a play area for children.

Her efforts began after the last Gaza conflict in 2012, when "we were imprisoned in our own houses," she said.

"Our kids were afraid and in emotional crisis," she told *The CJN*.

Daily life in Mefalsim is restricted due to ongoing rocket attacks. Her initiative is backed not only by Israelis, but also Jews in the Diaspora and has garnered international attention thanks to social media and fundraising initiatives in the GTA. She has raised approximately half of her goal of \$23,000 (US) to date.

Other organizations are trying to help Israelis deal with the trauma of ongoing conflict.

Bonnie Jackson, director of communications for OneFamily Fund Canada, a

non-profit that helps Israeli families affected by terror, says her group focuses on providing therapy and respite to people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

OneFamily's ongoing campaign to give victims of rocket fire a weekend of respite in the north away from daily missile attacks has become particularly pertinent since the beginning of the Gaza war.

Counselling services are also provided on the retreat. "Almost every victim has PTSD... With each new attack, they are brought back to their event."

Much of the money raised in Canada goes toward this cause. Summer fundraising in the GTA also includes the annual JNF and OneFamily Pitch for Israel softball tourney, set for Aug. 24.

OneFamily also raises money through other annual events, including the OneFamily Fund Cross-Israel Hike in Israel each fall, during which Canadian families hike alongside Israeli victims of terror.

Rabbi Mendel Kaplan, Rabbi Yossi Sandhaus and eight members of the Chabad at Flamingo Family Shul in Thornhill can attest to the power of a personal visit to Israel.

The community raised more than \$25,000, and the group travelled to Israel



Sagit and Yoni Milshtein-Sadi with daughters Gal and Yuval

for three days last month following an impassioned sermon by Rabbi Kaplan. They personally distributed donations to victims of terror and poverty-stricken individuals in Sderot and visited wounded soldiers and shivah houses.

Rabbi Kaplan described the extraordinary journey in an online video that's been viewed by more than 350,000 people worldwide.

"The people of Israel appreciate you being there in a way I have never seen before," he said. "We came to give. We came to help, but we received so much and we were helped in ways that we never could have imagined." ■