

# MEIR PANIM

## CHANGING THE GAME

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# THE JERUSALEM POST

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Photo: Marc Israel Sellem

I am delighted to welcome you to Meir Panim, one of Israel's largest food and social service organizations. Since I moved to Israel five years ago, Meir Panim has truly become a second home for me, where I am inspired daily through meeting our patrons and volunteers, and where I can take my boys to give back and learn first-hand about the power of giving.

What gives me so much hope serving in my professional role is the commitment we have to not only supporting those in need, but to breaking the cycle of poverty here in Israel. Since making aliyah, I have learned personally how difficult it can be for the average Israeli family to make ends meet. More than a quarter of Israelis live on or below the poverty line.

Every person who comes into any branch of Meir Panim is treated with dignity and respect as a member of our family and community. We give them the confidence to take on life's challenges, knowing we have their back. Through a warm meal and greeting, we get to know our patrons and craft educational initiatives with tools to help them rise out of poverty, for them and the next generation.

Meir Panim operates programs as varied as our community, including after-school programs and summer camps that give children a stimulating environment, job, and career-building workshops, and even a daily program for Holocaust survivors, allowing them to age in place with a caring community.

When I accepted this job, I knew it would be a challenge and hard work. What surprised me was how much I have learned about being a part of a truly supportive community.

I want to personally welcome you to visit one of our Meir Panim branches to see for yourself the daily miracles that we create together. Thank you for taking the time to learn more about our mission to break the cycle of poverty that is described in this magazine.

With best wishes for a healthy and happy New Year.

Sincerely,  
*Mimi Rozmaryn*  
Director of Global Development  
Meir Panim



Ya'akov Margi, Minister of Welfare and Social Affairs | Photo credit: Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs

# BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

## AN INTERVIEW WITH YA'AKOV MARGI, ISRAEL'S MINISTER OF WELFARE AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

By Alan Rosenbaum

In a wide-ranging interview with the Jerusalem Post, Ya'akov Margi, Israel's Minister of Welfare and Social Affairs, shared his thoughts about how the State of Israel – the government and its citizens – can work more effectively to help extricate those in need from the cycle of poverty, help solve the issues of food insecurity, and allocate additional resources for those in need.

Margi is not content with the current state of affairs. Sitting in his Jerusalem office in the Ministry, he leans forward in his chair and quotes a well-known Biblical verse – “For the poor shall never cease out of the land.” (Deuteronomy 15:11). “Poverty may never be completely eradicated,” he says, “but that doesn't mean that we have to have millions in Israel living below the poverty line.”

According to the most recent report of the Latet NGO, over 2.6 million Israelis live in poverty, which amounts to nearly 27.8 percent of the country's population. More than 680,000 Israelis are living in nutritional insecurity, according to that same study. What can be done to solve this pressing issue?

Margi, a member of the Shas political party that is part of the ruling coalition, first became a member of Knesset in 2003. He served as Minister of Religious Services from 2009 until 2013 and was appointed Minister of Welfare and Social Affairs in 2022.

“According to the most recent report of the Latet NGO, over 2.6 million Israelis live in poverty, which amounts to nearly 27.8 percent of the country's population. More than 680,000 Israelis are living in nutritional insecurity, according to that same study. What can be done to solve this pressing issue?”

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“Poverty may never be completely eradicated, but that doesn't mean that we have to have millions in Israel living below the poverty line.”

In his view, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs cannot solve the issue with money alone. “We are not interested in giving out fish,” he says. “We want to give out fishing rods.” Margi wants Israel's government to develop the tools and ability to solve these problems on a long-term basis. As part of the government's coalition agreements, he explains, a commitment was made for the creation of a special governmental authority to fight poverty. The proposed national authority on poverty would research the issues and causes behind poverty, prepare plans, and recommend action to the government. “The government has the ability to put its finger on the most painful wounds affecting Israeli society,” says Margi. He adds that the proposed authority would be an independent body that would operate through the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services.

Margi says that the bill for the creation of the national authority on poverty recently passed a preliminary reading and will be brought for a first reading after the Knesset returns from its summer recess. He is optimistic that the bill authorizing its creation will be passed in the next six months and is hopeful that the creation of such a national authority will lead to serious discussions and deliberations that will help reduce the level of poverty in Israel.

Turning his attention to private organizations in Israel, such as Meir Panim, that help those in need, Margi says, “The fact that there are organizations such as these in civil society is a great blessing. These organizations improve our society, make us better, and increase solidarity in the country. They are helping to create a better society.” He added that private organizations are frequently better

positioned to assist quickly, since they are not tied to the government bureaucracy. Many of Israel's poor are confronted with two issues – food insecurity, which occurs when people do not have sufficient quantities of safe and nutritious food – and the inability to break out of the cycle of poverty by finding employment. Which issue should take precedence?

Margi says that both are significant and must be addressed simultaneously. “If Hatzalah or Magen David Adom arrives at the scene of a terror attack, and they locate someone who is bleeding and requires surgery, they don't take them immediately into surgery. First, they stop the bleeding. Food insecurity is an immediate need that must be dealt with, like urgent first aid, and all of the activities of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs to solve issues of food insecurity are joined together with furthering employment prospects.”

He adds that there are many families in Israel where both parents work, yet the family income puts them below the poverty line. “We are attempting to make things easier,” says Margi, “by subsidizing daycare and afternoon daycare programs. We are doing what we can to for those who are working and raising families to make things easier.”

Most important, says Margi, is that those who are in need should never give up hope. “You can stretch out your hand to help someone, but you cannot save them if they don't give you their hand in return. But if they do stretch out their hand, you can pull them up. We can deal with poverty and help those below the poverty line, but we must do it together. We cannot lose hope.”



Photo: Wikipedia



# DEDICATED TO HELPING OTHERS

Nissim Elmakayes Meir Panim's Dimona Branch Manager

Photo: AdobeStock

By Alan Rosenbaum

“Every day, I pray that this place will close down as soon as possible,” says Nissim Elmakayes, Branch Manager of Meir Panim’s Dimona branch. It may seem a bit unusual for the manager of an organization to wish for its demise, but after spending a few minutes with Elmakayes, his point becomes abundantly clear – he longs for the day when an organization such as Meir Panim will no longer be needed, when everyone who wants to work will be able to find employment, and when no one will go hungry. Until that day, Nissim Elmakayes devotes his days and nights providing for all those in need in Dimona.

Nissim was born in Beersheba, and his family moved to Kiryat Gat when he was a child. When his mother became ill and could no longer take care of him, Nissim was raised as a foster child and lived with a number of families during his childhood. He remembers little of his childhood until the age of 14. “As a child, I endured a great deal of deprivation. That’s probably why God sent me to work in a place where we are giving of ourselves all the time,” he says. Perhaps it is a function of his personality, maybe it is the circumstances of his upbringing, or perhaps it is a little of both, but Elmakayes is supremely dedicated to helping others and giving back to society.

At the age of 15, Nissim went to live on Kibbutz Sa’ad, located in the northern Negev, where he joined an educational program for children coming from broken homes. It was there that his life changed. Nissim was placed with a family in the kibbutz that welcomed him and raised him as if he was one of their own. Forty years later, he still maintains a close connection with the family.

After completing his military service, Nissim married and moved to Yeruham, a town in the southern Negev. While working as a gardener, he began to help the indigent of the town. “Many people came to me looking

for used washing machines, ovens, and refrigerators.” Nissim began to collect old appliances and distribute them to those in need, until his yard was overflowing with used goods. Nissim, who was working full time in a cosmetics factory, helped open a branch of Meir Panim’s “Power of Giving” shop (Koach Latet) in Yeruham that collects, adapts, and distributes second-hand furniture and equipment to people in need, volunteering there for several years.

Two years later, he was offered the opportunity to open a branch of Meir Panim in Dimona. Nissim accepted the offer and is now in his twenty-second year heading Meir Panim’s operations there.

What is the “secret sauce” of the dedicated staff of Meir Panim that enables them to help the disadvantaged with such dedication? Says Nissim, “To work at Meir Panim, you must truly be Meir Panim, which means welcoming and kind. Second, you must have a heart, have patience, and care for others.” Lastly, he quips, one shouldn’t count on receiving

a high salary. The greater reward for the good deeds that people do at Meir Panim will come in the World to Come, he says.

Nissim Elmakayes says that he is grateful to God for the successes in his life. “I felt that I have to give back to God, who didn’t let me end up on the street. Someone with my story should have ended up in prison. Thank God, I did not end up in jail. Everything comes from above.”

When he sees people in dire straits who come to Meir Panim for support, he is especially sensitive to their needs because he once was in their shoes. “When I was a child, I didn’t have what my children and grandchildren have now,” he says. “I want to give back to others and express my thanks.”

Concluding our discussion, we return to the theme of helping others break out of the cycle of poverty. Nissim discusses two recent projects that Meir Panim in Dimona has sponsored that have helped to change the lives of their clients for the better. “We

created a cooking workshop headed by professional chefs, and we taught twenty students the techniques needed for cooking. Of the twenty who enrolled, seventeen are working now, instead of hanging out on the streets,” he reports. Had they not taken the course, says Nissim, they would be coming to Meir Panim to get food. “I see the graduates of this course around town, and they say to me, ‘Nissim – it is all because of Meir Panim.’”

A second initiative called “Don’t Go Alone,” taught practical job skills to women who were sitting at home unemployed. “We gave them the tools to get economic freedom,” he says. Students were given laptops and studied English, driving theory, and computers, and learned how to create their own resumes.

“My work gives me the greatest satisfaction in the world,” says Nissim with a smile. “It gives me the strength to help people, and when I see how happy people become when I help them, it motivates me even more.”

“The goal of Meir Panim is to break the cycle of poverty, and lift people in their moment of crisis.”



Nissim Elmakayes and his family. Photo: Gil & Ron



**“ We took people sitting at home in pajamas and watching television all day, doing nothing... We gave them the tools to get out to and achieve economic freedom. ”**

Photo: AdobeStock

# AMIRA'S STORY

## Breaking the cycle of poverty in Dimona

**By Alan Rosenbaum**

“After my divorce,” says Amira, a resident of the Negev town of Dimona, “I was left with nothing, and my ex-husband would not pay child support.” Thirty-eight-year-old Amira had a four-year-old son with little prospects for success. “My debts kept increasing, and I was very frustrated, sick, and broken. I couldn’t raise my son. I couldn’t continue.

“At one point, I was in such financial distress that I couldn’t even afford to purchase bread for my son. I was forced to accept bread from my neighbor and my aunt.” Amira’s future, as well as that of her young child, was in jeopardy.

“I felt like we were missing something.”

Dimona, located thirty minutes from Beersheba and the southern end of the Dead Sea, was founded in 1955 with a population of 300 people and today has grown to a population of some 40,000.

The Meir Panim branch in Dimona is one of the organization’s most diverse branches and helps thousands of people throughout the town, providing food and support to the city’s residents. Meir Panim in Dimona supplies 1,000 meals daily to clients and offers a variety of programs for the young and old. It operates a Holocaust Survivor Day Center, where older adults can congregate daily, enjoy hot, nutritious meals, participate in engaging programs, and build a community, and offers an after-school program for children during the school year.

Meir Panim in Dimona has numerous partnerships with social workers in the

city and an ongoing relationship with the municipality.

Yet, despite the extensive services offered there, Branch Manager Nissim Elmakayes felt something was missing. “I felt that we were missing something that could take people out of the cycle of poverty,” he recalls.

Meir Panim staff witnessed the day-to-day struggles of women living in poverty. For these women, the path to finding a better-paying job, getting an education, or starting a small business was blocked by endless obstacles.

In 2021, Meir Panim, in partnership with the Dimona municipality and the Oganim organization, launched a life-changing program called “Al Telchi Levadech –Don’t Go Alone” to provide job training and education for 15 women. The program offers one-on-one career guidance, job placement, office etiquette training, and financial counseling and helps participants begin their journey toward a life of self-sufficiency. Meir Panim is currently planning to launch a second version of the program in 2024.

“We took people sitting at home in pajamas and watching television all day, doing nothing,” says Elmakayes. “We gave them the tools to get out to and achieve economic freedom. Many of the women in the program were entering the employment market for the first time and were over the age of thirty-five. Elmakayes adds that they explained to the women that obtaining financial independence and getting a job was worthwhile, even if

they had to pay a babysitter a significant amount of their salary to enable them to work.

Amira learned about the “Don’t Go Alone” program from the welfare department in Dimona and joined the program. “I began to study to become a nail technician, which was supported by Meir Panim.” Amira successfully completed the program and is now employed in two jobs. In the mornings, she works with the elderly, and she works as a nail technician in the evenings.

“I never thought I could do this, to be able to give my son anything he needs,” she says. “Today, I don’t receive child supports or donations from anyone. I live independently,” she says proudly.

Recounting her difficult life before she successfully entered the workforce, Amira says, “I would look at my son and say, ‘What type of world did I bring you to – what can I give you?’” Meir Panim’s innovative “Don’t Go Alone” program gave her the ability to overcome her difficulties. “Even though it may seem like all is bad and the world is against you, and you have no money, it is possible to get out of this situation. It is not easy, but it is possible.

“There are good people along the way. There are people who do these things and receive nothing in return. They do it simply because it is the right thing to do. Without the help of Meir Panim, I couldn’t have done it.”

# FOR ITS SUPPORTERS, HELPING MEIR PANIM IS THE GREATEST SOURCE OF PRIDE



Photo: AdobeStock

By Jerusalem Post staff

One of the main reasons Cantor Aaron Cohen deeply connected with Meir Panim's mission to feed the hunger with dignity was witnessing what food meant for his father-in-law, a Holocaust survivor.

"His mother and two siblings died in Auschwitz, while he, his father and another brother managed to escape from the place they were held and hid in the woods in Poland," Cohen said. "We can all imagine what life was like."

"Later on, my father-in-law came to America and became very successful," he continued. "However, in addition to a kitchen full of food, he also kept an extra freezer and refrigerator in the basement, and he had the habit of holding on to the last piece of bread from the meal almost until the following meal, rolling it between his thumb and index. He knew what hunger meant."

For the past ten years, Cohen has sat on Meir Panim's board of directors. He explained that he first got involved through some of his colleagues.

"When they first reached out and suggested that I also joined their endeavors, I did some research on the organization and I felt incredibly honored to be able to do my part," he said.

Among other initiatives, Cohen has participated in cantorial concerts organized to raise money for Meir Panim.

Also for Elan Vogelstein, 17 years old, assisting Holocaust survivors is one of the reasons he felt so drawn to Meir Panim.

"According to the most recent statistics, almost one-third of Holocaust survivors in Israel live below the poverty line," he said. "I find it staggering that after surviving the Holocaust, these people are still struggling to find food. Especially with Rosh Hashanah and the Jewish holidays approaching, I believe that everyone should take these issues very seriously."

The young man first heard about Meir Panim while attending a fundraising concert with his family several years ago.

"It was not long before my Bar Mitzvah," he recalled. "At the time, I was looking for a project to pursue to celebrate it and I felt that helping Meir Panim would be a perfect fit. On the one hand, it was connected to Israel, which I am very passionate about, and on the other hand, it meant helping people fulfilling their most basic need, the need for food."

Vogelstein also highlighted that the theme presented a deep connection with the weekly Torah portion of his Bar Mitzvah "Behar," focusing on the laws of the sabbatical year, when agricultural work on the land needs to cease, and its produce becomes free for the taking for all, man and beast.

Vogelstein celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in America, asking his friends and family to make a donation to Meir Panim instead of giving him a gift.

The following summer, he, his parents and his seven siblings traveled to Israel where they spent a day volunteering at one of Meir Panim's Restaurant-Style Soup Kitchens.

"I was really inspired by the way the facility was run," Elan recalled. "I have volunteered in soup kitchens here in the US, and I have often felt that the system and the way people are treated is somehow degrading for them. At Meir Panim however, the patrons are served like in a restaurant and everyone is approached with respect and dignity. It did not feel like just giving charity."



Cantor Aaron Cohen. Photo: Courtesy

Some of the conversations Vogelstein had with the patrons during his time volunteering remain very memorable for him.

"Some people had very interesting stories to share," he said. "For example, I recalled speaking with an old man of Russian origin and discussing everything about boxing."

The organization always highlights that its efforts of creating an ethos of dignity and respect drive the atmosphere of its facilities and characterizes the way staff, volunteers and donors as well as patrons are treated.

This is key to offering each person who enters the doors - in whatever role - the ability to provide a helping hand or receive in a truly special environment, especially in a country that can be particularly tense.

For Cantor Cohen, the first in-person visit to Meir Panim facilities in Israel still needs to happen.

"I was supposed to go during COVID, and then we had to cancel the trip because of the pandemic," he said. "I am hoping to be able to travel to Israel next summer with my wife, who is also very committed to Meir Panim. We cannot wait to roll up our sleeves and give a hand."

Cohen explained that as a grandfather, the idea of children going to bed hungry is very difficult to fathom.

"So many Israelis live in poverty and so many of them are children," he said. "It rips my heart. This, together with my love for the State of Israel, is the reason why I have decided to devote my time, my energy and my resources to Meir Panim."

The cantor emphasized that the organization is lean, with very limited staff.

"This way, we have minimal expenses so that the money we raise goes to those in need," Cohen said. "I am immensely proud of the work we are doing and I ask that everyone who can, joins us in our mission."

Cohen, Vogelstein and their families represent just two instances of the vast network of Meir Panim's supporters.

"There's no such thing as a stereotypical Meir Panim donor," Rena Ben-Ezra, Director of Special Projects at American Friends of Meir Panim, explained. "We have donors from around the world (49 countries), of all ages, religions, races, and giving abilities, but at the end of the day, these differences are overshadowed by the common goal of giving back and helping those less fortunate."



Elan Vogelstein. Photo: Courtesy

**"I was really inspired by the way the facility was run. I have volunteered in soup kitchens here in the US, and I have often felt that the system and the way people are treated is somehow degrading for them. At Meir Panim however, the patrons are served like in a restaurant and everyone is approached with respect and dignity."**



## FROM HIGH-TECH WORKERS TO TOURISTS, MEIR PANIM DRAWS VOLUNTEERS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE

By Jerusalem Post staff

Josh Varon moved to Israel from New York in 2021. Shortly after, he started working as an Enterprise Product Consultant at Monday.com, one of the most exciting companies in the Israeli tech scene, offering a platform that allows users to create their own project management software.

After making such a successful landing in the Jewish State, Varon feels he has a lot to be grateful for. For this reason, he was very excited to be offered the opportunity to volunteer at the Jerusalem branch of the non-profit Meir Panim with a group of his coworkers.

“Through work, we have had a great opportunity to come out and volunteer,” he said. “I moved to Israel about two and a half years ago and I am always looking for new opportunities to give back. We found this amazing organization and we figured that we would come and spend some time here giving back and volunteering.”

Meir Panim is one of the largest organizations in Israel dealing with the question of food security. It runs five Restaurant-Style Soup Kitchens in Tzfat, Jerusalem, Tiberias, Dimona and Or Akiva. Those who come to eat are served sit-down style, as they would be in a restaurant.

The group of Monday.com employees visited Meir Panim as a part of a team-building retreat.

After a brief introduction to the organization’s values and mission, they headed into the kitchen and got to work chopping vegetables, preparing soup and meats, welcoming and serving the patrons and clearing tables with efficiency and joy.

Asked whether something surprised her, Einat Strizevsky, Senior Account Executive at Monday.com said that it was the feeling of normalcy.

“Those who come here to eat are just very normal people,” said Strizevsky. “I guess I wasn’t expecting that. Before coming here, I had a different demographic in mind.”

For Einat, it was hard to see how common food insecurity is in Israel.

“I would have never thought that the wonderful people who come here do not have food to eat tonight,” the volunteer said. “It makes me feel really thankful. And at the same time, even if it’s very cliché, it reminded me that we should never judge a book by its cover. We never know where people are from, what they’re going through and what resources they have to support their families and themselves.”

“It was a very special day and we enjoyed working with all the wonderful employees. They are committed, polite, and treated the people with dignity.”

According to the “Alternative Poverty Report for the year 2022” by NGO Latet, some 830,000 Israeli households were living in poverty in 2022, or 27.7 percent of Israel’s population - over 2.6 million people, about half of whom are children. Before the pandemic began in 2020, the number of families living in poverty was 699,000.

In addition, a recent report by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy found that over half of Jerusalem’s children live below the poverty line.

According to a 2023 report from the National Insurance Institute (Bituah Leumi), the Arab and ultra-Orthodox sectors present a higher level of people dealing with food insecurity than the general population.

Meir Panim helps people in need from all backgrounds, Jewish, Muslim or Christian, religious or secular, young and old, no questions asked.

Those volunteering at Meir Panim also come from very diverse circumstances, whether they volunteer as individuals or as part of a group.

Recently, the Jerusalem branch of the organization also received a group of police officers.

“It was a heartwarming experience,” said Lior, one of the officers. “I believe it is essential to help people who need our help.”

“I considered the experience of volunteering at Meir Panim a great privilege, and it reminded me of the importance of putting things in proportion,” she added.

Last summer, the NGO welcomed another special group of volunteers organized through SodaStream, the Israeli-based company that manufactures home carbonation devices, this time in its Dimona branch.

Headquartered in Southern Israel, the company, realizing the strain on parents - their employees - to keep their kids busy and engaged over the summer, organized a camp for the children.

Each week, as a part of this program, children of SodaStream employees from all backgrounds and religions visited Meir Panim’s Dimona branch and volunteered,

meeting the patrons, lending a hand, and having a good time together.

The young adults carried out the work with incredible energy - sorting and packaging produce, serving meals, visiting and playing games with the Holocaust Survivors who visit the day center run by Meir Panim, cooking, and sprucing up the facility with a fresh coat of paint.

Meir Panim also welcomes many volunteers visiting Israel from abroad — individuals, families and groups. This summer, among others, their branches enjoyed the visit of multiple groups of teen tours.

“It was a very special day and we enjoyed working with all the wonderful employees,” said Leslie and Neil, two of the teens volunteering. “They are committed, polite, and treated the people with dignity.”

For all the volunteers, the time spent at Meir Panim leaves a big impact.

“It’s been a very eye-opening experience,” Strizevsky concluded. “Even if someone cannot physically come to help prepare the food and serve the guests, I encourage everyone to support Meir Panim with a donation. It is a really great cause.”



Monday.com employees visited Meir Panim as a part of a team-building retreat | Photos: Courtesy of Meir Panim

# EXTENDING A HELPING HAND TO UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

## An interview with a Ukrainian family that escaped the war

By Alan Rosenbaum

On February 24, 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine, and the world has not been the same since. The physical, psychological, and economic damage that the war inflicted has changed the lives of millions.

According to figures from Israel's Welfare and Social Affairs Ministry, since the outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine, more than 50,000 Ukrainian refugees arrived in Israel, some of whom claim the right to aliyah based on the Law of Return. Some 15,000 of them remain.

Meir Panim, Israel's largest assistance network for the needy, has been at the forefront of providing help and support for hundreds of Ukrainian families who have fled the war and arrived in Israel. In the spring of 2022, after the war began, the organization arranged a special Passover Seder for Ukrainian refugees

who had come to Israel with nothing but the shirts on their backs.

The conflict in Ukraine has been ongoing for a year and a half, and there is no end in sight. Meir Panim continues its efforts to help all Ukrainian refugees in this country. The vast majority of the Ukrainians have taken up residence in Tiberias. Through the assistance of a Ukrainian translator, the Jerusalem Post interviewed a family that is living in Tiberias.

Sixty-five-year-old Irena Poliev, her thirteen-year-old grandson Alexei, Irena's sister Nina Konitsa, Nina's daughter Anna, 30, and Anna's five-year-old son Boris arrived in Tiberias in March 2023. This is their story:

Until the war began, the families lived in Kharkiv, the second-largest city in Ukraine.

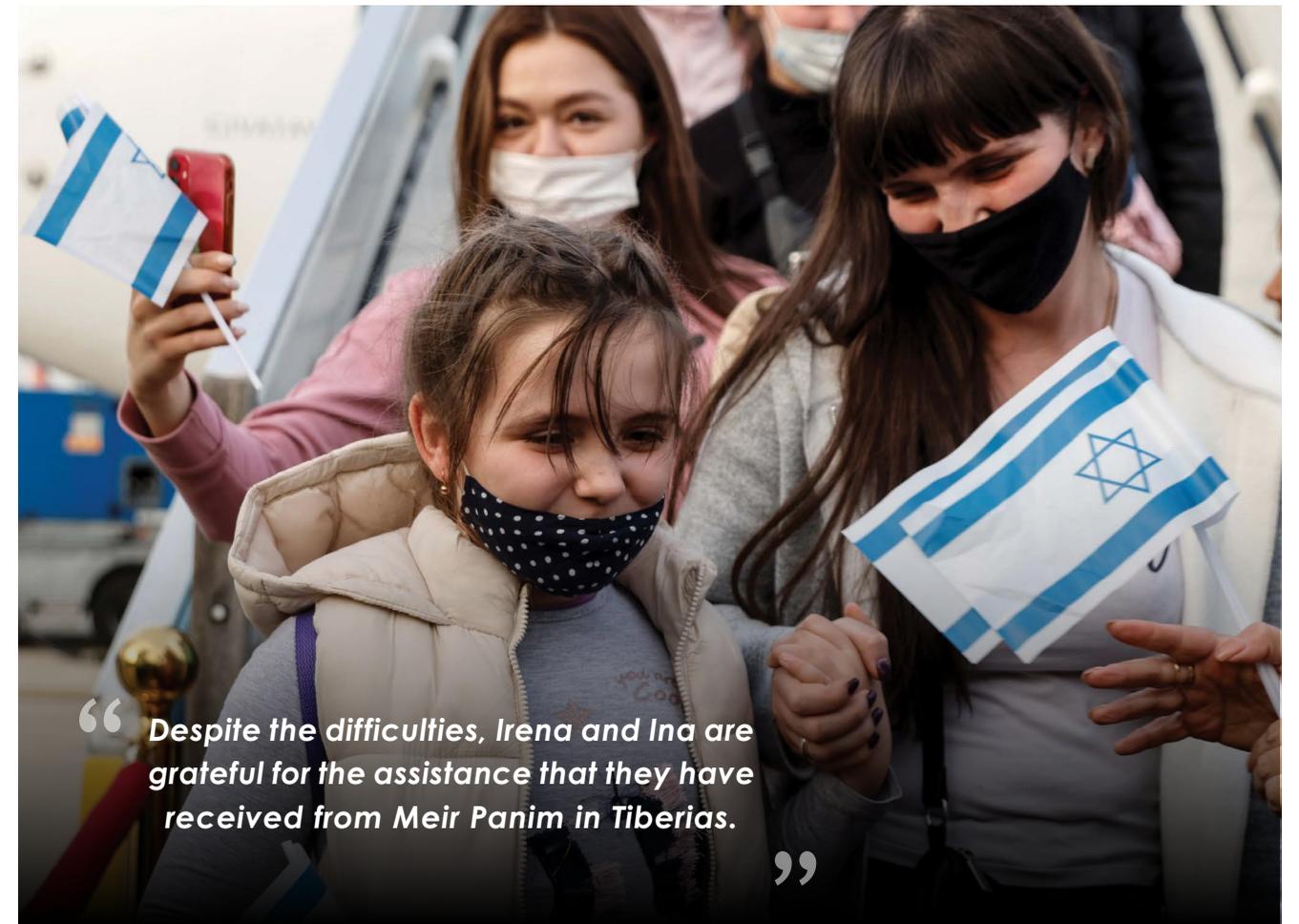
Kharkiv is located just 30 kilometers (19 mi) south of the Russia-Ukraine border and was considered a major target for the Russian military early in the invasion.

The city was shelled repeatedly in the first months of the war, from February until May, in what was known as the "Battle of Kharkiv." In mid-May, Ukrainian forces pushed back Russian units attempting to encircle the city from the area. By May 20, Russian forces again resumed their bombardment of Kharkiv. Overall, it is estimated that over 600 civilians were killed in the shelling of the city.

When the shelling of Kharkiv began, Irena and her family fled to the underground Metro train station and stayed underground for a week. Under repeated shelling, the family, afraid that the Metro tunnels would collapse, escaped, taking a bus to Dnipro, in central Ukraine. From there, they continued east to Lviv, and then on to Poland. The roads were jammed with people and war materiel going east. They purchased plane tickets to Israel when they reached Warsaw.

Once they reached Israel, Irena, Alexei, Nina, Anna, and Boris went to Tiberias, where they rented an apartment. "The people in Tiberias helped us, and brought us clothing and food," says Irena. "We received a warm reception."

“They prepared special holiday meals for us, gave us meals throughout the week, packages of food and vegetables, and distributed gifts to the children. The atmosphere was warm and friendly”



“Despite the difficulties, Irena and Ina are grateful for the assistance that they have received from Meir Panim in Tiberias.”

Welcoming the new Olim in Ben Gurion airport. Photo: Reuters

While the family is happy to be living in Israel, far from the war in Ukraine, they are dismayed that the family is not together. The husbands of Nina and Irena were drafted into the Ukrainian army and remained in Ukraine. Though they are in touch with them, they are not permitted to leave.

Additionally, there have been some rough spots in their absorption in Israel. "It has been difficult for the children and grandchildren, say Irena and Nina. "The hot climate and the language barrier have made things difficult." Ana and Boris eventually went to Germany and remained there with her husband.

Despite the difficulties, Irena and Ina are grateful for the assistance that they have received from Meir Panim in Tiberias. The family's first Passover in Israel in 2023 was memorable, because of Meir Panim. "They prepared special holiday meals for us, gave us meals throughout the week, packages of food and vegetables, and distributed gifts to the children. The atmosphere was warm and friendly," say Irena and Ina.

Since their arrival in March of 2022, they add, Meir Panim staff has prepared hot meals for them throughout the week and offers them fruits and vegetables once a week. But

it is the warm and caring attitude that has really made the difference. "The relationship of the staff of Meir Panim, especially from Yehudit Amar, the branch manager in Tiberias and her husband Dudu, who is an honorary Meir Panim staff member, has always come with a smile and kind words. We have never experienced anything like it in our entire lives."

# COMING OF AGE AT MEIR PANIM

## Or Akiva Branch celebrates festive Bar Mitzvah for four celebrants

By Alan Rosenbaum

In early August, Ilanit Hafuta, the legendary, indefatigable Branch Manager of Meir Panim's Or Akiva branch, was busier than usual. That's because, on August 2 and 3, the organization celebrated the Bar Mitzvahs of four Or Akiva residents whose families are clients of Meir Panim.

Each of the four boys arrived at their Bar Mitzvah day under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. One is the son of a single father that is disabled and is one of nine siblings, two are brothers, also with numerous siblings, who are being raised by a single mother. The fourth is a recent Ukrainian refugee whose parents are divorced.

On Wednesday evening, August 2, a gala dinner was held honoring the Bar Mitzvah celebrants and their families in Or Akiva. Hafuta and her team prepared a vast array of dishes, including twenty different types of salads, six kinds of meat dishes, and much, much more. The four young men were each presented with tefillin, a watch, and new clothes to mark this most significant event. Tefillin are two small black leather boxes with black straps containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah. Jewish adult males are required to don tefillin each weekday morning. One box is placed on the upper arm, and one is placed on the head.

The next morning, the group gathered at a synagogue in Or Akiva for morning services. The four celebrants donned their tefillin, read the Torah expertly, and were honored for their passage into the world of Jewish adulthood.

The Bar Mitzvah boys were well-prepared by Meir Panim staff and knew how to put on their tefillin and read from the Torah. Following the event, a sumptuous brunch was served. The celebration was capped off with festive Shabbat meals for the boys and their families.

Apart from the food for the brunch, which was prepared at Meir Panim's Or Akiva facility within the organization's budget, all of the costs of the event were donated and earmarked specifically for the Bar Mitzvah.

Ilanit Hafuta explains that planning and conducting separate Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations for the children of Meir Panim clients is an annual tradition. Bat Mitzvah girls experience a special day with Meir Panim staff, enjoy a special evening out at a restaurant, and are honored with a special celebration dinner similar to the Bar Mitzvah celebration, where they receive watches and new clothes.

Hafuta points out that the Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations are much more than a party. "When you become an adult by celebrating your Bar and Bat Mitzvah, you are responsible for your actions." It is for that reason, she explains, that all Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrants spend a day volunteering at Meir Panim, preparing food, delivering food to the elderly, and spreading good cheer.

Mimi Rozmaryn, Meir Panim's Director of Global Development, adds that some families who are not affiliated with Meir Panim have chosen to celebrate upcoming Bat Mitzvah celebrations by volunteering at Meir Panim, enabling them to help others and give back to the community at large. One Bat Mitzvah celebrant, she recalls, arrived at Meir Panim's Jerusalem Restaurant-Style Soup Kitchen, together with her mother and both sets of grandparents. All the family members participated, preparing food and serving, and the Bat Mitzvah girl brought trays to clients, greeting each one with a smile.

"We make these Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations for the children at Meir Panim as if they were our own children," says Ilanit. We are there for them. I did not give birth to these children, but I view them as if they are my own."



The Bar Mitzvah celebrations in Or Akiva. Photos: Courtesy of Meir Panim



## MEIR PANIM YOUTH LEARN THE MAGIC OF ANIMATION!

By Alan Rosenbaum

In late July, Meir Panim organized a trip to the Hive Studio in Tel Aviv, one of Israel's leading animation studios, for four outstanding teens from its Sderot Community Center— Oz, Ariel, Shilo, and Benaya – in recognition of their volunteer work in the city. Amit Gicelter, award-winning producer, content creator, and founder and CEO of the Hive, explained animation basics, including idea creation, how to create sketches on paper, prepare a storyboard, design models, and create and produce an animated film. After

the session, the boys watched “The Black Slide,” co-produced by Gicelter, which was short-listed for nomination in the Animated Short Film category for the 95th Academy Awards held in 2023.

“It was really wonderful to meet the kids from Meir Panim and to show them a bit of the Hive Studio’s animated world,” said Amit. “Who knows – maybe we inspired the next Israeli Disney to open up shop in the Negev!”

Mimi Rozmaryn, Director of Global Development for Meir Panim, added, “We’re always happy to give our teens in Sderot as many new experiences as we can. Accompanied by one of the program staff, the teens enjoyed the visit to the Hive Studio, where they learned how they might be able to make a career through their creativity, went out for lunch, and had a break from the daily pressures of life in Sderot.”

A frequent target of missile and rocket attacks, the residents of Sderot are accustomed to living on high alert and having to seek refuge in bomb shelters. Sderot’s poverty and unemployment rate are higher than the national average, and teens have an alarming 15% high school dropout rate. Meir Panim has introduced a variety of activities offered at its bomb-proof Sderot Community Center for children and adults, designed to help them deal

with their anxieties and fears. “Our goal,” says Ta’ir Sassi Edri, Meir Panim’s Program Director in Sderot, “is to ensure that the residents of Sderot are full of the joy of life, equally integrated into all aspects of their lives.”

The teens’ visit to the Hive Studio undoubtedly accomplished this goal!

*The teens from Sderot Community Center visiting the 'The Hive' studio in Tel Aviv. Photos: Marc Israel Sellem*

# MEIR PANIM DICTIONARY



## PATRONS OR DINERS

The people who arrive at our branches, who are served nutritious meals.



## FREE SHUK

Every Tuesday, Meir Panim's branches set up our version of a shuk or open market, providing farm fresh produce for our patrons to choose from and prepare in their own homes according to their own tastes and dietary needs.



## RESTAURANT-STYLE SOUP KITCHEN

How we refer to our branches, which have the look and feel of a normal restaurant to enhance our patrons' experience. Across all five of our locations, approximately 1 million fresh and nutritious meals are served annually.



## GROCERY SHOPPING CARD

Pre-paid card that we provide our patrons ahead of the holidays, enabling them to shop at any grocery store and select their own items (except alcohol and tobacco) in dignity, the way anyone else would.



## HOLIDAY BASKETS

Before each holiday, we provide a full basket of items with prepared food, shelf-stable products, and special seasonal treats, such as Hamentaschen for Purim, and Sufganiot for Chanukah.



## POWER OF GIVING PROGRAM

The program collects second-hand equipment for distribution to needy individuals. The items are repaired, cleaned, and cataloged before being distributed.

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