

# THE HOME FOR LONE SOLDIERS IN BEIT SHEMESH

BY MICHAL BASHAN

(TRANSLATED BY MANDY BERZACK)

*In Israel there are about 2,000 new immigrant lone soldiers serving in the IDF. Most of them return home to empty apartments and are left without food or clean laundry even after two exhausting weeks in the army. These soldiers have no family or relatives in Israel and no one to turn to during normal times or, more importantly, during rough times. Two special women from the Nofei Aviv neighborhood of Beit Shemesh - who made Aliya themselves more than twenty years ago, had children and are mothers of children serving in the IDF today - decided to establish a home for lone soldiers in Beit Shemesh.*

## A JEWISH MOTHER

Wendy Serlin and Gayle Shimoff are two warm, generous and energetic mothers. I met with them at the Home for Lone Soldiers which just opened last November in a rented house in the Givat Sharett neighborhood. Right at the entrance to the home one gets a sense of the intimate, homey atmosphere and the sense of calm and tranquility that prevails. This is no temporary apartment or residence but rather a home in the full sense of the word: the house is filled with warm homey colors, carpets, pictures, cushions, kitchen utensils and a table just like in your home or mine.

We sat down at the dining room table for a chat. Wendy and Gayle told me about this wonderful initiative, from the day the idea was born during Operation Protective Edge, until the home was opened, only about a year and a quarter later. There is no doubt that it took a very short time for the dream to become a reality. Once you get to know who these women are, it is no surprise that they managed to put all the pieces together, to gather information and ideas, and to create something from nothing - a home for lone soldiers in no other place than Beit Shemesh.

## OPERATION PROTECTIVE EDGE

"One day during Operation Protective Edge in August 2014, Gayle and I were in a water aerobics class for women at a local swimming pool. All the women from the class had left their cell phones lined up in a row on the table and every time one of them rang, we all jumped up to answer," Wendy recalls. "Most of us had soldiers serving in the army at the time, many of them in combat units. My son served in the "Egoz" elite combat unit and did not come home for 50 days. We saw how much we worried about them and waited to hear some news from them and when they would be coming home. Then we asked ourselves what happens to those soldiers who have no one waiting for them at home and no one worrying about them, especially during such difficult times. Our concern for our own soldiers brought us to the decision to do something for lone soldiers - to provide a warm and supportive home for them."

Gayle adds, "On the evening of the day that my second son was drafted into the army, I attended the funeral of Max Steinberg - a lone soldier whose funeral was attended by



30,000 people who answered calls on social media to participate. This proved how much Israelis understand that something needs to be done for the lone soldiers and it becomes even more evident at times of war and crisis. At the same time, there was no doubt about the fact that these difficulties are faced all year long during their military service, day in and day out."

And when Gayle and Wendy decide to do something they do it! They gathered together residents of the neighborhood, with a great spirit of cooperation and collective responsibility. "We understood that there was no way we could tackle such a big project on our own," they say. "We also understood that our success was largely dependent on the strength of our community, the Anglo-Saxon community that understands the difficulties of making Aliya first-hand. At first we announced that we were having a meeting and whoever felt some connection to the subject should attend. We also spoke amongst ourselves about the idea and how to make it happen and what types of soldiers we would like to take in."

#### **A TRULY ZIONISTIC ALIYA**

Wendy and her husband immigrated to Israel 23 years ago. They have five children, one of whom has already completed his service in the IDF while another enlisted five days after his brother was released. Wendy grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and made Aliya with her family from Washington DC. She has a masters' degree in community social work and worked for many years in Jewish organizations and assisting new immigrants from English speaking countries. She recently ended her position as the coordinator of extracurricular activities at the community center in Ramat Beit Shemesh.

Gayle and her husband made aliya with her husband 22 years ago from New York. They have two sons. One of her sons has already completed his army service, is studying in Ariel and is engaged to a young woman who made Aliya to Israel all on her own. The second son is currently serving in the army as a combat soldier in the "Nachal" unit. Gayle holds a masters' degree in learning difficulties, specializing in dyslexia and difficulties that bilingual children face. She is currently studying towards a second

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masters' degree in the management of non-profit organizations at the Hebrew University.

Wendy and Gayle met when they first made aliya with their families and lived in Ra'anana. They ended up becoming neighbors when their families moved years ago to Beit Shemesh.



### GETTING ORGANIZED TOGETHER WITH THE COMMUNITY

After many meetings with members of the community they began planning communal activities for soldiers already during Operation Protective Edge. Volunteers got together from the youth movements: Ezra, Bnei Akiva and Ariel and also from organizations like Melabev. A friend of theirs, an English teacher in the Orot School, arranged a bake sale and raised a considerable amount of money for the activities for the lone soldiers. The community embraced any initiative in this area, donated funds and showed support by helping and volunteering.

Meanwhile, Wendy and Gayle went out to learn about the subject of lone soldiers. At the time they were sure that they did not want to establish a new non-profit organization, because they envisioned a process that would take years. They looked up on Google under the subject of "lone soldiers" to see what already existed and came upon a non-profit organization called "The Lone Soldier Center in memory of Michael Levin", established by friends of the late Michael Levin who was a lone soldier that was killed in the Second Lebanon War. This organization which has been in existence for about seven years, is located in Yerushalayim and assists lone soldiers in many ways; such as finding furniture, guiding and mentoring them, arranging Shabbat meals and places to stay and more, but they do not have a home for lone soldiers. Wendy and Gayle decided that they would like to be adopted by the Center that would provide them with guidance and instruction as well as administrative assistance. At the same time, they do not receive financial support from the Center and function as an independent project of the Center.

They also visited HaBayit shel Benji in Ra'anana - another home for lone soldiers built in memory of the late Benji Hillman who made aliya from London with his family and was also killed in the Second Lebanon War. This home was built with the assistance of The Legacy Heritage Fund. It serves as a home for lone combat soldiers that enjoy hot meals, laundry services and social activities similar to those they would enjoy if they were in the framework of a supportive family. There is also a training center

in the home that prepares soldiers about to complete their military service for the transition to civilian life. Wendy and Gayle listened and learned about what was done in Ra'anana and decided that they would establish a real residential home for lone soldiers close to their homes and community and run by the community.

The 55+ Anglo Program, a group of pensioners that followed their children and made Aliya also became enthusiastic partners. This group is made up of a social circle of couples that live in Givat Sharett. The members of the group decided to organize a fundraiser for this goal and indeed, three weeks ago they held a successful fundraiser for the Home.

### WHO ARE THE LONE SOLDIERS?

New immigrant lone soldiers are young men and women who have chosen to leave their homes and come all alone to Israel to join the army. These youngsters are usually highly idealistic and motivated, but very often their military service is very difficult for them without the help, love and support that soldiers usually get from their families. These difficulties are also faced by non-immigrant soldiers who come from difficult family backgrounds and problematic homes; they too are considered lone soldiers by the IDF.

As soon as the soldiers are free for the weekend the countdown begins. They need to organize everything before returning to their bases on Sunday morning. Very often lone combat soldiers find it very difficult to finance decent apartments and their income from the army is insufficient. When they are on vacation from the army they have no place to stay, no place to give them a feeling of family. They need to find a place to stay, a way to do their laundry, a way to eat an inexpensive meal and to deal with their personal matters. Instead of using their precious free time to catch up on sleep and rest they have to deal all alone with these basic tasks, tasks that are usually taken care of by regular soldiers' families.

Also included in the definition of lone soldiers are young men and women who come from Haredi families, decide to join the army and in doing so lose their ties with their families. There are also orphans, families in distress and new immigrants from Ethiopia whose families are not always able to support them during their military service.

Lone soldiers do receive certain benefits from the IDF including a partial rental subsidy, discounts in electricity and municipal taxes, an increased army salary and more. New immigrant lone soldiers also receive a plane ticket to visit their families overseas once during their military service.

Gayle and Wendy decided that of all these lone soldiers, the home they would open would be for new immigrant lone soldiers from English speaking countries, so that they and their community would speak the same language as them, understand their



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mentality and know how best to help them. Together with Gayle and Wendy another four adults – (Deborah Broder, Leslie Feinberg, Azriel Novick and Stuart Schrader) and three students (Natanel Shimoff, Dahlia Lazan and Ariel Weil) joined the committee to run the home. After much discussion it was decided that the home would be observant of Shabbat and Kashrut, would house only boys and would be identified with the national religious community.

During the interviews with lone soldiers that had been referred to them, they explained that due to the traditional character of Beit Shemesh and the lack of public transportation, whoever lived in the home would not be able to leave Beit Shemesh on Shabbat. Out of all those that they met, they put together a group of 8 soldiers, people who were a good match socially and personality wise, those who had some level of independence which would ensure the success of this type of setup which also demands personal responsibility. They furnished the home with new beds, washing machines, dryers and other essential equipment. They also collected donations from the community of used items of furniture, decorative items and dishes.

### SHABBAT IN THE HOME FOR LONE SOLDIERS

On Fridays, most of the soldiers arrive at the home independently from the train station or bus stop. Wendy and Gayle, along with members of the committee and a host of other volunteers help them with their laundry and make sure that they will be hosted by a family in the community for Friday night supper. (Someone in the community arranges a roster for hosting the soldiers). A young couple that lives in an adjacent apartment, Avigail and Elidor Chadad, serve as *madrachim* (counselors).



They are young, dedicated and have a natural ability for counseling and mentoring young people. Elidor grew up in Beit Shemesh and Avigail did her national service in Beit Shemesh where she met Elidor. They are students who fit the counseling and assistance to the soldiers into their days. They go above and beyond the measure of their duties. They even attended the swearing in ceremony of one of the soldiers and took him to the doctor afterwards when he didn't feel well. Elidor and Avigail are the on-site "parents" while Gayle and Wendy are the "mothers"

that are responsible for, supervise and take care of all the rest: they make sure they receive a *cholent* for Shabbat because the soldiers prefer to catch up on sleep and rest during the day and to eat Shabbat lunch in the house. The house is also stocked up with other food for the rest of Shabbat. If one of the soldiers is sick



Wendy and Gayle take care of him and take him to the doctor. They know about everything going on in the lives of each and every soldier and are there to help with any problem, large or small. The soldiers are surrounded by a supportive environment of the *madrachim*, Gayle and Wendy and the neighboring community. "This is not a hostel," they tell me again and again and emphasize, "All of us are like real family to the soldiers." On Sunday mornings more volunteers drive the soldiers to the train station or bus stop on their way back to their bases. There is also a roster of drivers from the community that take care of this. The volunteers are happy to help the soldiers get back to their bases more easily.

We asked Wendy and Gayle how the lone soldiers knew to



contact them. They answered that anyone who was looking for a home for lone soldiers heard about them from The Michael Levin Lone Soldier Center or HaBayit shel Benji. Soon two more rooms in the house will be renovated and this will allow four more soldiers to be taken in. At the moment seven soldiers from the US and one from England live in the home and very soon more friends will join them. Because of IDF rules we could not publish names or photographs of the soldiers. We spoke to two of them and were asked for them to remain anonymous.

Y.K. is a 20 year old new immigrant from Manchester in the UK. When he was born his parents made *Aliya* but returned to England, moved to Mexico and then returned to England. "I made *Aliya* six months ago in order to serve in the army," he tells

me. "I serve in a Haredi unit in Giv'ati. At first I was in a framework of a pre-army academy, and when I turned to the Michael Levin Lone Soldier Center they referred me to the home in Beit Shemesh. I was told in advance that this would be a Shabbat and Kashrut observant home and this really suited me. When I saw the home I was really excited. I discovered that the whole community is involved in it. It looks wonderful – it is so homey and comfortable. The meals are hot and home-made. We once ate at a family whose ten year old son organized a bake sale in his class to raise money for us. Last week one of the families had a bat mitzvah. The batmitzva girl baked challot with a bracha and brought us some for Shabbat. The community's involvement here is moving and heartwarming. You need to understand that everyone has difficulties during their military service but this home, the community, the madrichim, Gayle and Wendy all give us so much strength and motivation to succeed. Gayle and Wendy are all that we need and more. They are amazing! There are no words to describe how much they care about us. I never imagined that there were people like them, like all the people involved in the home – people of true giving and chessed. Every week I am amazed again. Not a week goes by when I am not pleasantly surprised. I do have relatives in Israel but my real family is in Beit Shemesh. The fact that I was not adopted into the home of a family allows me to be independent and to have my personal space, while at the same to get all the support of Wendy and Gayle, the madrichim – Avigail and Elidor – and the whole community."

L.I. is an 18 year old new immigrant from Los Angeles, California. He came to Israel on Birthright and right now serves on a special base for new immigrant soldiers. "I had been out of home before," he tells me, "but here there is an amazing combination of family on the one hand but also independence and privacy on the other. It is the most amazing home that I know, and believe me, I had other options, like living on a kibbutz but there is no privacy there, or living in a big city but it is terribly lonely there. The bond and connection between the lone soldiers in this house is wonderful. The madrichim and Wendy and Gayle give us all the emotional and practical support we need. Also, the whole community embraces and helps us. I would never have imagined that I would find such an amazing setup."

If you would like to volunteer please contact:  
 Leslie Feinberg (general volunteer list) [lesjon1990@gmail.com](mailto:lesjon1990@gmail.com)  
 Jackie Escott (rides to the train/bus) [sjescott@sjescott.com](mailto:sjescott@sjescott.com)  
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If you are interested in donating money to this wonderful home for lone soldiers send an email to: [gaylesusan@gmail.com](mailto:gaylesusan@gmail.com) or call Wendy at (02)9992186.

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