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ALONE, TOGETHER

Making a home for lone soldiers fighting for Israel

by Ryan Torok

COVER

A Home Away From Home for Lone Soldiers

Levi, a lone soldier from Los Angeles, stands at a bus stop across the street from the Beit Shemesh Home for Lone Soldiers. Photos by Ryan Torok



From left: Lone soldiers Adam and Yoseph; Avigail and Elidor, *machrichim* (counselors) of the Beit Shemesh Home for Lone Soldiers; and lone soldiers Gavriel and Avi.

by RYAN TOROK, Staff Writer

A sign on a kitchen cabinet at the Beit Shemesh Home for Lone Soldiers explains color designations for meat, dairy and *pareve* dishes. Near the cabinet, empty beer bottles and handles of alcohol line up like trophies on a shelf above the kitchen sink. A stack of magazines, including a Rolling Stone featuring a cover story about Leonardo DiCaprio, sits at the end of a bench next to a dining room table, within reach of a rifle with a scope latched to the top of the weapon.

The gun belongs to Levi. Eyes red, cheeks flushed, Levi (who, for security reasons, asked his last name not be included in the story) enters the Beit Shemesh house wearing his green Israel Defense Forces (IDF) uniform on a recent Sunday afternoon. The 19-year-old from Pico-Robertson is a member of Tzanhanim, a paratroopers unit, and he now lives in this house; he's been in Israel since the summer of 2015, when he arrived in the country on a Birth-right trip and never left.

Levi immediately makes himself coffee and reflects on why he joined the Israeli army instead of the American military.

"I don't think the [American] cause is as important as the Israeli cause. In America, we're good, but in Israel, we're fighting for our existence here," he says. "I love the U.S. military, but they definitely need us more here."

Levi is one of 12 male soldiers living in the Beit Shemesh Home, and one of more than 6,000 lone soldiers currently serving in the Israeli army.

Wendy Serlin, 59, and Gayle Shimoff, 49, two *olim* (immigrants to Israel), established the house in November 2015, in response to the 2014 deaths of Max Steinberg, a lone soldier from Woodland Hills, and Sean Carmeli, from Texas, during Operation Protective Edge. The 2014 conflict between Israel and Hamas exposed the world to the phenomenon of lone soldiers, members of the Israeli army who are serving without the nearby support of their immediate families.

"[The deaths of] Max Steinberg and Sean Carmeli — that sort of alerted the Jewish people to the fact of lone soldiers, that there are a lot of them and they are alone. We came up with all these ideas, invited people in the Beit Shem-

esh community, decided we would rent a home, get together a board and have guys live here,” Serlin, who is originally from Baltimore, said.

“This is their home away from home, during their 1 1/2 to three years of army service,” she said.

Levi falls into one of three categories of lone soldiers, an official classification for soldiers that determines the number of leave days and amount of money they earn during their service. Lone soldiers can be Diaspora Jews who join the Israeli army and don’t have any family in Israel to support them; some are Israeli orphans in the military, while the third group consists of soldiers from Charedi and religious families who join against the wishes of their parents.

“If a religious boy was disowned by his parents who don’t want to speak with him, he is considered a lone soldier,” said Eli Fitlovitz, co-founder and co-chair of Families of Lone Soldiers.

How and through what means the soldiers enlist in the army also often determines their housing situations. This reporter, for example, traveled to Israel on an Aug. 17 flight chartered by Nefesh B’Nefesh, an organization that helps Jews immigrating to Israel (known as making *aliyah*); that flight carried more than 70 lone soldiers who, through the organization Tzofim Garin Tzabar, would be living on *kibbutzim* around the country during their first year of service, and afterward they will have the option to remain on the kibbutz

wife, Avigail, live in an attached unit and are the *madrichim* (counselors) of the house. Gavriel normally wears his hair long, so at this moment he was a bit self-conscious about his new haircut.

Two Californians live in the house. In addition to Levi, there’s Efraim, of San Diego, who was not at the house at the time of the Journal’s visit — it is rare that all 12 are there at the same time because, though they are all combat soldiers, with two of them serving in special forces, they belong to different units, and each unit runs on a unique schedule. Others are from Philadelphia, New Jersey, New York and Manchester, England.

The house is located in the Givat Sharett neighborhood of Beit Shemesh, “midway between Ramat Beit Shemesh and the original neighborhoods of ‘old’ Beit Shemesh,” according to press materials. It is a short train ride from Tel Aviv, an easy bus ride from Jerusalem. The bus stop is located across the street from the house, and the train station is a short drive away. A large shopping center is located at the train station.

Beit Shemesh, divided between the newer neighborhoods of Ramat and old Beit Shemesh, is a quiet, predominately religious city filled with English-speaking olim who came for its affordability and abundance of schools and synagogues; the population now numbers approximately 100,000. The fact that the city is filled with olim creates a synergy between

Three Paths to Service

by RYAN TOROK, Staff Writer

There are three ways a lone soldier can serve in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

One is Mahal (mahal-idf-volunteers.org), which operates programs for non-Israeli citizens to serve in the Israeli military. Mahal is an acronym for “Volunteers From Abroad,” and its usage dates to Israel’s 1948 War of Independence. Short on experienced soldiers, the newly declared Jewish state fighting for its existence recruited fighters from abroad, many of whom had recently fought in World War II. Those soldiers were known as Mahal.

Mahal has programs for nonreligious and religious participants, and requires a minimum length of service of 18 months.

Young adults — men from 18 to 25 and women 17 to 20 — who have made *aliyah* (immigrated to Israel) are required to serve in the IDF. Nefesh B’Nefesh, an organization that helps facilitate aliyah, making the bureaucratic process much easier, offers free chartered flights for *olim* (immigrants) throughout the year and runs a program for enlistees that partners with the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces (FIDF).

The Nefesh B’Nefesh Lone Soldiers Program (lsp.nbn.org.il) was created with the “goal of providing assistance and support to new immigrants that are required to serve in the IDF,” according to the program’s website. Its funding comes from the FIDF and the Israeli government. Required service for a lone soldier who is an Israeli citizen is longer than for a lone soldier serving through Mahal.

Many young adults who make aliyah through Nefesh B’Nefesh also participate in Tzofim Garin Tzabar, a partner program of Nefesh B’Nefesh. Garin Tzabar provides a more guided experience for olim required to join the military, as it places the olim on *kibbutzim* — adopted homes — across the country.

Garin Tzabar (garintzabar.org) events take place for the olim in their cities of origin before they embark on their aliyah journey.

All lone soldiers in the IDF serve shoulder to shoulder with one another and with soldiers from Israel. Thus, they are expected to speak fluent Hebrew and are required to participate in intensive Hebrew courses, known as *ulpan*, before their service.

“Because the army is a unifying force ... it’s an unofficial rule they all have to speak Hebrew,” Gayle Shimoff, co-founder of the Beit Shemesh Home for Lone Soldiers, said. “There are plenty of English-speaking bilingual guys who are regular soldiers in the army who you think would help the lone soldiers, but they are not supposed to talk in English. They are supposed to talk in Hebrew.”

The army offers *ulpan* for free to all lone soldiers. Adam, a current lone soldier from Rockaway, N.J., bemoaned how difficult Hebrew can be. Nevertheless, he said in an interview, lone soldiers are “strongly motivated to do the best they can do.”

Adam, 22, who when he is not on base lives in the communal

Lone Soldiers by the Numbers

APPROXIMATELY 6,000 LONE SOLDIERS CURRENTLY SERVE IN THE ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES. FEWER THAN HALF OF THE ESTIMATED 6,000 LONE SOLDIERS ARE FROM ISRAEL.



THE REMAINDER COME FROM 65 COUNTRIES.



AT LEAST 89 CURRENTLY ARE FROM LOS ANGELES.

APPROXIMATELY 1,500 ARE FROM THE UNITED STATES.

Source: Eli Fitlovitz, co-founder and co-chair of Families of Lone Soldiers (FOLS). For more information about FOLS, visit folsidf.org.

or to live in their own housing.

Because the residents of the Beit Shemesh home did not come to Israel via any organized group — each soldier joined the army on his own — they were required to find their own housing. They each applied to live in the Beit Shemesh house, which is run under the aegis of the Lone Soldier Center in Memory of Michael Levin, an Israel-based organization that provides a variety of services to lone soldiers. To qualify, they had to undergo interviews with the house’s volunteer committee, whose members, like the soldiers, are olim.

The goal of the house’s leadership was to find soldiers who would mesh well together.

Two soldiers share each of the bedrooms in the Beit Shemesh home, which mixes frat-boy like décor with kosher observance and the realities of military life. A pingpong table rests against a wall in the house’s courtyard, where Gavriel, a resident from South Africa who also asked his real name not be included here, has planted a tea garden. Tiny bits of hair were scattered on the patio next to the garden when this reporter visited, as several of the guys had just had their heads shaved by Elidor, who, along with his

the residents of the city and the residents of the lone soldiers home.

“The majority of our friends in the neighborhood are English-speaking, and we understand where they [the soldiers] come from,” Serlin said.

On Shabbat, the city closes down. Walking around, it feels a lot like walking around Pico-Robertson.

The house is on a sloped block. A storage room is the first area one passes when walking onto the property. Inside, multiple laundry machines whirl with the dirty clothing of the soldiers.

“On Friday, the machines are always going,” Serlin said, leading this reporter into the house a few hours before Shabbat.

An outdoor staircase leads to a patio area. Plants grow in pots and toilet bowls. A large piece of white paper with handwritten messages welcoming people to the house is taped to the wall at the entrance to the house. Inside is a mundane environment, with a kitchen, dining room area and a living room. The Netflix series “Black Mirror” is on pause on a tele-

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Lone Soldiers

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vision set. An acoustic guitar stands in the corner.

Bedrooms are located on the first, second and fourth floors. The third floor has another lounge area, with a video game system hooked up to a television. The fourth floor is an attic that was recently converted into two additional bedrooms. When the house was launched, it housed only eight residents.

Though the religious level of each of the residents differs, residents of the lone soldiers home are required to observe Shabbat and spend Friday night dinner in the neighborhood with a host family. On Saturday, they are left alone and eat meals that have been cooked for them by people in the community.

Community support for the house is evident everywhere one looks, from the artwork created by children of the Beit Shemesh community — kids in the neighborhood recently had a bake sale raising \$2,000 for the home — to the bins of donated socks, toothbrushes and other supplies that have filled their linen closet. Serlin handed Adam, 22, of Rockaway, N.J., his mail after giving this reporter a tour of the house.

"It's my banking statement — I don't need it. I have an app for that," Adam said.

This is one of two homes for lone soldiers overseen by the Lone Soldier Center in Memory of Michael Levin. The other is in Jerusalem. Both are currently full, but there are hopes to accommodate more. Brian Lurie, president of the recently launched U.S. Supporters of the Lone Soldier Center in Memory of Michael Levin, the organization's American fundraising and awareness-raising arm, said the organization is considering creating an additional apartment complex for lone soldiers in Jerusalem.

"The goal is to do something really big," he said.

Lone soldiers have been part of Israel's military since the days of the Jewish state's founding. Realizing Israel was short on experienced fighters before Israel's War of Independence in 1948, David Ben-Gurion, then the chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the future first prime minister, worked with the Haganah — the precursor to the Israel Defense Forces — to recruit soldiers from abroad, many of them World War II veterans. These soldiers were known as Machal, a Hebrew acronym for "Volunteers From Abroad."

The Machal continue to be an important part of the lone soldier phenomenon. Soldiers from abroad interested in serving in the IDF without becoming Israeli citizens do so through the Machal programs. They serve side by side with all of the other soldiers in the IDF; Levi enlisted through Machal.

Operation Protective Edge (in Hebrew referred to as "Miv'tza Tzuk Eitan," or "Operation Strong Cliff"), also known as the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict, was an important moment for many current olim. Hamas' kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teens led to Israel's crackdown on the Gaza Strip, which led to the fighting that claimed Steinberg and Carmeli's lives. The conflict also intensified Levi's support for Israel. When pro-Palestinian groups demonstrated outside the Israeli consulate in West Los Angeles, Levi participated in counter demonstrations across the street on Wilshire Boulevard.

"[I] became more interested in Israeli politics and aware of lone soldiers," he said. "I knew I wanted to [enlist] but had never been to Israel."

Levi's Birthright Israel trip was his ticket to Israel. After the 10-day excursion ended, he contacted the office of Machal. After four or five attempts to reach out to them, he succeeded in enlisting. He went through a couple of living situations that did not work out well before contacting the Lone Soldier Center in Memory of Michael Levin, which arranged for him to live at the home in Beit

Shemesh during his service. Like all of the residents, he will remain in the house until a couple of months after he completes his 18-month service. If he decides to become a citizen of Israel, his service would potentially be extended.

Levi, for now, said he does not know whether he will make aliyah after he finishes his service, but said he is happy he found the lone soldiers home.

"I get the privacy I need and the social interactions I want and the support," Levi said. "So, this is the best house for me."

Serlin and Shimoff understand what it's like to uproot one's life and move to an unfamiliar country. Serlin, who has a master's degree in social work, made aliyah more than 22 years ago and is now the mother of five kids, including a son who recently completed his three years of army service, as well as another child currently serving.

"There wasn't Nefesh when we made aliyah. It was hard. You had to want to be here. There were no perks, no fun flights, it was

Serlin and Shimoff are confident the lone soldiers home fulfills an essential need for its residents, though they have not always received the gratitude from the parents of the soldiers that they expected they would.

"We thought we'd get responses from all the parents, 'Wow, Gayle and Wendy, that is wonderful, thank you so much for taking care of our kids,' and I think all of these boys — some of them are running away, some of them are running to, some of them aren't interested in their families, some have great relationships with their families, but I wouldn't say all 12 boys have amazing relationships [with their families, or that] all their parents are sending us chocolates and flowers every week," Serlin said.

Take Levi, for example: "It took his parents a long time to accept him being here," Serlin said.

Nevertheless, many people, including Serlin and Shimoff, at the Michael Levin Lone Soldier Center and volunteers from the community, are working together to help these young men navigate



Beit Shemesh Home for Lone Soldiers co-founders Gayle Shimoff (left) and Wendy Serlin. Photo by Ryan Torok

really hard. You had to stand in line for hours; there was bureaucracy, it wasn't like how it is today," Serlin said.

Shimoff, a learning disabilities specialist who made aliyah 21 years ago and is studying for a master's degree in nonprofit management and leadership at Hebrew University, has a son who recently completed army service and another currently serving in the IDF.

The two met while living at an absorption center in Ra'anana shortly after making aliyah.

They work with a committee of volunteers in overseeing the house. The house cost \$60,000 to set up and has an annual operating budget of \$60,000. They are also trying to raise \$800,000 to purchase and renovate the home, which is for sale. Soldiers' salaries from the army help cover costs.

the unusual experience of serving without their families nearby.

"They're 12 guys, and they have all different stories," Shimoff said.

"Some of them are positive stories; some of them are not positive stories; some of them are running away, some of them want to be heroes, some of them are trying to find themselves either religiously or emotionally, and by us providing this environment ... [we're] giving them independence and space ... security and people they can trust."

For information about how to support the lone soldiers home in Beit Shemesh, visit lonesoldiercenter.com/homebeits. For information about the Lone Soldier Center in Memory of Michael Levin, visit lonesoldiercenter.com. ■

Service

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home in Beit Shemesh with 11 other lone soldiers, comes from the state that is the most significant producer of lone soldiers, according to Mara Tannenholz, 24, a volunteer with the Lone Soldier Center in Memory of Michael Levin, which

oversees the Lone Soldier Home in Beit Shemesh.

More lone soldiers come from the New Jersey cities Englewood and Teaneck than from any other American cities, she said in a phone interview.

Many others come from Los Angeles, Tannenholz said, though she did not have the exact figures.

Michael Meyerheim, COO of the Lone Soldier Center in Memory of Michael Levin, said that about half of the more

than 6,000 lone soldiers currently serving are from outside of Israel. The numbers, however, also include soldiers from Israel who are serving without family support.

More lone soldiers from abroad come from the United States than from any other foreign country, Meyerheim said.

According to FIDF, which provides lone soldiers with financial, emotional and social support, "950 new lone soldiers join the army each year." ■