

## Israeli charity seeks Calgary's help again

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Calgary Herald

Friday, January 02, 2004

A Calgary woman who makes her home in the mountains of northern Israel hopes Calgarians who helped build a centre for the blind 16 years ago will now help upgrade the facility.

Hoping she can appeal to the holiday spirit of her hometown, Rena Cohen is trying to drum up cash for the charity that is struggling to expand as the Israeli economy limps through years of intense political violence in the country.

"We're seeing very little contribution from Calgary these days because not many people know about what we're doing any more," said Cohen, director of development for the Centre for the Advancement of the Blind in Tsfat, a small city in the Golan Heights.

"Any help we can get would go a long way towards improving our services and with the appalling state of the economy in Israel right now we can use all the help we can get."

Founded in 1987 with \$500,000 from Calgary's Kahanoff Foundation, the centre offers more than 40 programs for blind youths and adults in Tsfat and the surrounding area. The centre offers summer camps for visually impaired kids, fitness and recreational classes for blind adults and programs to help people over age 40 who are losing their vision cope with life without sight.

"Our philosophy is the people need to be independent and empowered. Just because you can't see doesn't mean life is over," Cohen said.

"We teach people how to cook and sew and use computers and other skills they'll need so they can continue with their lives after they go blind," she said.

"It's very rewarding because we have Jews, Muslims and Christians and immigrants from all over the world and everyone gets along."

In Calgary earlier this month to visit her mother and four grown children, Cohen, who moved to Israel in 1991 after raising her family in Calgary, said the centre is having a hard time raising money to replace its outdated exercise equipment and kitchen appliances. The charity isn't having much luck securing funding to start a bus service to pick clients up from their homes or for English-language programs.

"Tourism has always been a big part of Tsfat's economy and it is almost non-existent at the moment," Cohen said, referring to the economic fallout from the three-year intefadeh that has seen the country wracked by Palestinian suicide bombings and harsh retaliation by the Israeli army.

"Of course, there are always so many organizations looking for donations so it is becoming harder and harder to find the money we need," she said.

Tsfat, also known as Safed, is one of the four holiest cities in Judaism and also boasts the ruins of a castle built by European crusaders in the Middle Ages.

A prominent member of Calgary's Jewish community before moving to the Middle East, Cohen helped found another charity earlier this year after she and other Tsfat residents noticed a sharp increase in poverty in the city of 25,000.

"We came across one grocery store owner who was personally supporting 30 families and we asked him: 'How can you afford to do that? What about your family?' He simply replied: 'Yes, I'm worried about that,' " she said.

"We decided we had to do something, so we put out e-mails to our families and friends in North America and Europe to put together food hampers, clothing donations and funds to bring doctors and dentists to treat people who can't afford it."

The group's efforts caught the attention of Lamed-Vuvnik, a Jewish non-profit agency in Florida, that is co-ordinating the fundraising for their work.

"It's amazing to see what a big difference a few people can make. It's an awesome experience," Cohen said.

For more information or to donate to the Centre for the Advancement of the Blind in Tsfat, visit the centre's website at [www.safedblind.org.il](http://www.safedblind.org.il)

Donations to Lamed-Vuvnik can be made by visiting the organization's website at [www.lamedvuvnik.org](http://www.lamedvuvnik.org)

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**Rena Cohen checks a carpet being made by Edna, a blind senior at the Centre for the Blind in Tsfat, Israel. CREDIT: Courtesy, Rena Cohen**