

JEWISH TRIBUNE

The trusted voice of the Canadian Jewish Community

NOVEMBER 17, 2005 — CHESHVAN 15, 5766

VISUALLY IMPAIRED LEARN TO FACE NEW FUTURE

By Ron Bousso
Tribune Israel Correspondent

SAFED, Israel – In a secluded location in the mystical town of Safed stands a pink, single-story building, known as Beit Yael, where a unique program has been taking place to aid newly blind and visually impaired Israelis to retrieve part of the independence lost with the loss of their sight and to deal with the psychological aspects of their condition.

Although there are several other centres for rehabilitation and training of the blind across the country, Beit Yael remains the sole location where the newly blind are offered training and facilities allowing them to acquire basic skills needed for reintegrating into the visual society and their families.

Created by Dr. Yael Ben-Dor nearly 30 years ago and funded by a donation from a Calgary family, Beit Yael offers several social cadres for the blind in Safed and the Galilee region, which include a club, recreation courses and summer camps. The rehabilitation program has been running for 12 years with the support of the Welfare Ministry and the Migdal Or association.

“The rehab program focuses on teaching adults how to cope physically, psychologically and emotionally with this new handicap,” David Bronfeld, head of the centre, told the Jewish Tribune. For a whole month, the participants sojourn in the centre, which is equipped with the most up-to-date facilities for the blind, covering all aspects of their daily life, including kitchens, computer rooms, bedrooms and a gym.

“Participants learn to cook and sew, to walk with the white cane, to use computers and other aids for the blind and vision impaired,” said Rena Dvorkin Cohen, director of development. “They receive training in many special techniques enabling them to function successfully both at home and at work: they also participate socially.”

There are 30,000 visually impaired persons in Israel, with 2,000 people becoming blind every year. The causes for the loss or degradation of sight are due mostly to disease and accidents.

Gideon Cohen, 40, from Haifa, suffers from Retinitis Pigmentosa, and over the last 15 years has been gradually losing his vision. Father of three, Cohen had to quit his job as a customs-clearing agent two years ago. He was referred to Beit Yael by the welfare services and started the program at the beginning of November.

"Something amazing is happening to all of us here," he said. "We are being exposed to technologies, tools, new skills, group therapy and simple fun activities. The program offers me a comfortable environment to acquire new techniques to live as a blind person."

Other than the physical challenges that blindness poses, the psychological aspects of becoming blind, especially for those who become blind in an abrupt manner due to accidents, are daunting, social worker Robyn Golan said.

"It is an emotional problem for someone who suddenly can't see, who trips over things in his own home. Some are so embarrassed with their condition they don't even tell their family about it," she said. The rehabilitation program, therefore, includes special psychological sessions and technical training courses with the participants' families.

"My expectations from the program are extremely high, and we're only in day 10," Cohen said. Blindness, he realizes, "is less frightening now because we are taught how to be less dependent."

The centre's Canadian-born Cohen will arrive on a fundraising visit to Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver this month. "We're the best kept secret in the country. I want to make people aware of what the centre is doing. We are one of the only such centres in the world," she said.

She hopes to visit several synagogues and community centres across the country. "I hope to see people get involved in doing Chesed, which is a Jew's job," she said.

[Index](#) | [Letters to the Editor](#) | [Main Page](#) | [Op Ed](#) | [Photos](#)

Send Letters To The Editor:
editor@jewishtribune.ca

B'nai Brith Canada