

The Israeli Community Center During the Yom Kippur War

DAVID MACAROV, PH.D.

*Paul Baerwald School of Social Work
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel*

IN 1967 the Minister of Education proposed that a network of community centers be established in Israel, with a view toward integration of immigrants, raising the level of education, improving and offering public services, and providing a facility for recreational activities for all ages. In order to facilitate the creation and operation of such centers, a government corporation was formed for the purpose of encouraging and aiding in the construction of centers. Each center was to have its own board, and to move as quickly as possible toward local autonomy. Although the original plan called for thirty centers, the first centers to begin operating created such a good impression that local demands caused the goal to be raised first to fifty, and then to eighty. It was during the Yom Kippur War, however, that the centers proved themselves, and the plan was expanded to include a hundred and twenty centers, with the number two hundred already beginning to be heard in some circles. In any case, with considerable help from donors from abroad, thirty-eight centers are now in operation or ready to open. It is with the experience of these centers in the Yom Kippur War that this article is concerned.

The sudden onslaught of the Egyptian and Syrian armies on Yom Kippur Day caught the community centers by surprise no less than the rest of the country. However, by afternoon of the same day some of the centers were already performing useful functions, and throughout the next few weeks centers responded in various way.

The Center as Unit Headquarters and Assembly Point

Some centers had been designated as assembly points for army units, or headquarters for the Home Guard (*Haga*) or police under regulations applying to emergencies. In these cases the center began to serve a purpose before Yom Kippur itself was over. The center director rushing to his building found such units already beginning to assemble, or settling down within and around the building. In some cases the transition was absolute — the building became, in effect, an army base with no other activities or people authorized. In other cases, the emergency forces used part of the building (often the office and the air-raid shelter) but there was room for other activities. In still other cases, staff would come and go, but there was no room for members' activities. Recognizing the overriding priority for military activities at this time, staff generally not only accepted the situation, but tried to be of service in every way possible. Thus, in some centers recreation material was brought out for the use of the soldiers in the building, volunteers offered to help their families, food and snacks were served, etc. This is poignantly illustrated in the account from one center:

An immediate need was to open the switchboard. Every unit was awaiting its instructions and the lines had to be opened. A police officer was sent to the home of a switchboard operator (a high school student who works a few hours after school at the "Y") to bring her in to open the lines of communication. Food had not arrived and (due to Yom Kippur)

many of the men had not eaten since the previous afternoon. Teenagers (children of the nearby residents who were using the "Y" as an air-raid shelter) went into the cafeteria, and with the food that remained made salads, sandwiches, and coffee. So the soldiers were fed . . . Some came directly from their synagogues. One called home, said that it seemed he was going to be here for a while and requested his wife to send over his *tefilin* and *talit*. Another, hearing the conversation, offered to let him use his, which he had remembered to bring.

In the face of such requisition of the center's facilities, center activities, when they resumed, took place only in the unused portions of buildings, or were carried on in sports field, on the streets, or — in some cases — in the homes of instructors and group leaders.

In some cases the center did not become an on-going base for the army or the Home Guard, but served as an assembly point for units, which were eventually moved to the front. Even in these cases, the inevitable concomitant of army life — "Hurry up and wait" — kept units in the center buildings for several days, waiting for orders. Even the presence of a ping-pong table made a great deal of difference to the bored soldiers, and the facilities of a community center were invaluable as compared to the units assembling in ballet studios or well-baby clinics.

The presence of military or quasi-military personnel in centers was an opportunity to acquaint hundreds of people with the building, the facilities, and the very presence of a center in the community or neighborhood, and for many of those stationed there, it was the first visit to the institution.

The Center as Air-Raid Shelter

All buildings are required by law to provide air-raid shelters for their inhabitants. However, there are areas of the country in which housing was con-

structed during periods of mass immigration, and this requirement was waived, or not fulfilled. There are other buildings, such as apartment houses, where the shelters are inadequate for all the inhabitants. There are still others where for various reasons — seepage, faulty electrical outlets, illegal storage — shelters were not usable. On the other hand, every community center is built with shelters large enough to accommodate the normal occupancy of the building. Consequently, one phenomenon of the current situation was the number of people coming into centers to use the air-raid shelter, both during the day and overnight.

Telephone Services

One of the most ubiquitous uses of community centers during the war was as a telephone relay point. Since telephone service in Israel is very expensive, and since waiting lists for new telephones sometimes entail a two-year period, home telephones are not nearly as widespread as in some other countries, and particularly in outlying "development" areas and in depressed neighborhoods in large cities, getting a message home by telephone was a real problem to many soldiers. The problem was compounded by disruption in the postal services, due to inexperienced volunteers who filled vacant jobs. Consequently, many centers (all of which have phones) set up a message relay service whereby soldiers could send messages to their families concerning their conditions. In some cases, families were called by messenger to the telephone, while in others they were simply given the welcome news that their loved one was all right. Since soldiers' opportunities to call home were unpredictable, many centers kept their telephone service operative twenty-four hours a day, by using shifts

of operators and volunteer messengers.

In addition to incoming calls from soldiers to their families, centers also offered a free telephone service to soldiers stationed in or near the center — or even passing by — to call home. This was particularly important in those cities which had a high concentration of army bases in the vicinity.

Emergency Transportation

Most public transportation in Israel was severely curtailed or cancelled altogether due to other calls on buses and trucks. Consequently, emergency transportation arrangements became exceedingly important. Through the use of volunteers with cars, centers generally established this kind of service. In one case, the importance of the service was increased because of the lack of a hospital in the town, and the need to transport both hospital patients, and those visiting hospitals, to another city. Other types of emergency driving included taking medical personnel back and forth on emergency calls, taking discharged patients home from the hospital, and delivering supplies to outlying areas or families in difficulty.

Another type of emergency transportation deserves mention, and this is the ferrying of soldiers from point to point. In the first few days this meant getting soldiers to their units and, particularly, getting reservists to their assembly points. Later, the need was to help soldiers who had a short leave to get home and back quickly. Again, the need was aggravated by the lacks and gaps in normal transportation facilities. Several centers organized this type of emergency transportation service, and one of the accomplishments of an Arab-Jewish center was putting twenty Arabs (who are not subject to mobilization) on the roads in their own cars, helping soldiers get to their destina-

tions. One such driver relates:

I picked up an officer, two male soldiers, and a girl soldier, hurrying home for Friday night. The officer noticed that I was listening to the news in Arabic from Lebanon, and commented that I must know Arabic well. I replied that it was no great accomplishment, since I am an Arab. The girl soldier then whispered to one of the men that they had made a mistake; this was undoubtedly a taxi and I would expect to be paid. I explained that I was one of twenty Arab volunteers from the center, engaged in transporting soldiers on the roads. At that point a violent argument broke out among my passengers, almost becoming a fight, as to whose guest I would be for Friday night dinner.

Collecting and Dispensing

Many centers engaged in neighborhood collections for gifts for soldiers. In accordance with an appeal to the public to contribute games, shaving equipment, cigarettes, radios, and candy to be made into gift packages for soldiers, center members and volunteers made house-to-house calls soliciting such items. They then made up the packages for delivery to soldiers on the front. In many cases the persons making up the packages were encouraged to enclose notes wishing the soldiers well and telling their own names, ages, etc. Many centers have since received return notes and phone calls in thanks. Again, Arab centers and Arab-Jewish centers sometimes enclosed notes in Arabic, or in Arabic and Hebrew, and the response to these notes is reported to range from delight to incredulity.

At least two centers, located along heavily travelled roads leading to the fronts, set up roadside refreshment stands for soldiers, offering cakes, cookies, cold drinks, and coffee. In general, the food was collected from and donated by center members or people of the neighborhood.

Recreation and Entertainment

In view of the tensions and anxiety inherent in a war situation, and the lack of normal tension-reducing activities due to disruption of routine, centers felt it important to offer recreational opportunities to all that wanted them, and to offer entertainment when it seemed appropriate.

Recreation often started with the soldiers who were stationed in or near the building, and included ping-pong, billiards, and the use of sports equipment. It then spread to soldiers stationed near-by, and to non-soldiers. One result of this situation — particularly caused by the unavailability of interest-group (*chugim*) leaders — was an increase in more "open" types of activities. Instead of youngsters partaking of a ceramics group, for example, or a fencing group, or an art group, they came together in social groups and engaged in a variety of activities. Scattered reports indicate that there was considerable increase in the number of participants in this kind of program, over the former interest-group format.

Some centers found that there was increased use of libraries, to the extent that they extended library hours beyond the normal schedule. It is not clear whether this is simply because participants had more free time, or whether reading contributed to anxiety-reduction, or because many other activities normally engaged in were not available.

In addition, centers formed, and used previously-formed, entertainment groups. In some cases they entertained the soldiers in the center, those near-by and the neighborhood population as a whole; or they travelled to army bases, hospitals, etc. Some groups gave performances simply as a morale-lifting factor, while others charged or collected money for the Voluntary War

Loan, or for soldiers' welfare. It is instructive to note that one group which offered its services to a hospital was told that there was a spate of professional entertainers for the same purpose, and that their services were not needed. However, they were told that in a few weeks, when the excitement had died down, the professionals would no longer appear, and then the center group, neighborhood based and permanent, would be greatly in demand.

Informational Services

The lack of solid news and information which characterized the early days of the war resulted in rumormongering to an alarming degree. Some centers set about countering this situation by engaging in informational services of various kinds. These included mass meetings — for which recruitment efforts included placards, sound-trucks, and messengers — and sending people to visit families to discuss the situation. These efforts were particularly well received among that portion of the population that speaks mostly Arabic, particularly when the explanations were given in that language.

A particularly effective part of the centers' informational services had to do with countering a peculiarly nasty phenomenon, whose roots have yet to be traced. The phenomenon consisted of false death reports, sent by telegram or by telephone. Whether this was vandalism or enemy action has not yet been determined, but when it became apparent that such reports were being received, some centers set up rumour-scotching centers, which checked on the information received — including these and other rumours — through official sources.

In this connection, the role of the Arab-Jewish center is interesting. Con-

cerned that normal neighborhood frictions and incidents could, under pressure of the war, blossom into Arab-Jewish incidents, the center staff arranged with the local police that in any incident involving Arabs and Jews, volunteers from the center would be permitted to try to talk the incident out with the participants before any police action was taken. Potential incidents included charges that Jewish storekeepers were refusing to sell to Arabs, and the reverse, when the objective situation involved food shortages in the store. Teams of Arab and Jewish volunteers were on stand-by status in the center, and as a result of their activity no such incidents reached a level requiring police intervention.

Intensification of Normal Activities

As staff was or became available, centers attempted to carry on as much of their normal program as possible, but experience indicated that certain kinds of activities were more necessary than others. There was an increase in the amount of baby-sitting or other child-care activities, for example. In some cases this seems to have been because the center was the safest place, from point of view of facilities and air-raid shelter. In addition, it represented the needs of mothers to be free to make all kinds of arrangements to overcome the absence of the husband-father. There may also have been an element of tension-reduction present, in terms of getting away from the demands of the child for a while.

Some centers took over the function of other agencies for the crisis period. For example, a center which had, by agreement, not engaged in work with youth because of the plethora of such agencies in the city, undertook all the youth work in town because of staff shortages in the other agencies.

Similarly, centers with washing machines for the use of members of the neighborhood reported a substantial increase in the use of their machines, representing, it is supposed, the lack of manpower at home, the desire to get chores done as quickly as possible in case of emergency, and the desire to be with other people, inquiring about their welfare and sharing information and feelings.

Use of Volunteers

Perhaps the most widespread center activity during the war period was the recruitment, use, and assignment of volunteers. Volunteering was a characteristic of this war period, as it was in previous ones. Thousands of Israelis of all ages, occupations, and statuses volunteered for the war effort. Those with certain skills — electricians and plumbers, for example — were snapped up. At the other end of the continuum, many people who registered at several of the many volunteer registration centers were never called, and found nothing constructive to do.

The number of agencies recruiting and placing volunteers was great, and their variety fascinating. These ranged from the national center for volunteer efforts in the Prime Minister's office, through the Veterans of Haganah, various immigrant associations, centers established by local governments, and individual agencies like Mogen David Adom or various hospitals. One enterprising real estate agency even got into the act, being careful to reap attendant public relations benefits through newspaper ads calling attention to their efforts. Accordingly, in some place community centers were, or became, the chief focal point for volunteering. In others, the center was one of several such points. And in still others, the center recruited mainly for its own needs.

The difficulty lay in properly registering volunteers, determining their desires and skills, assigning them to appropriate jobs, giving them the supervision they needed, and helping them to leave with dignity when either the need or the desire abated. Among tasks which volunteers carried out was escorting people to banks or social welfare offices. These were usually people whose husbands or sons had taken care of such matters for them, and who did not know how to get to the right place, let alone what to do when they arrived. Volunteers also built *sukkot* for families whose men were away, and visited bereaved families to determine what help they could offer.

One of the widespread uses of volunteers was in case- and problem-finding. Centers sent volunteers to those families with whom they were familiar, that had on-going or incipient problems. Some centers sent volunteers door-to-door, asking in what way they or the center could be of help. In some cases these volunteers identified important problems. In one center, for example, it was learned that many families were caught without ready cash. The wage-earner had been mobilized before he had collected his salary; or his check was ready but had not been picked up; or the check was in the hands of the family but nobody was authorized to endorse the wage-earner's name. In this particular case, the center acting-director called an influential member of the Board, who got in touch with city authorities who in turn contacted national authorities, and it was arranged that social welfare centers would make loans to cases such as these; that banks would accept the checks with substitute endorsements; and that National Insurance and social welfare payments would be advanced.

A second widespread problem identified by volunteers was simply tension

and anxiety engendered by the sudden, unexpected, and obscure war situation. In some cases home visits were mounted as tension-reducing devices. Other centers used visiting mental health personnel. For example, one center had weekly hours with a psychiatrist, assisted by volunteers, receiving the public. Still others used volunteer activities themselves as tension-reducing devices, and sought jobs for volunteers on the basis that being active is less tension-creating than being idle.

Volunteers carried out many of the activities described previously, and in addition did many other jobs. One of the activities of the centers thus became assigning volunteers to places where they were needed, even if this was outside the center's orbit of activities. Hence, some centers served as recruiting agencies for volunteers with skills needed in industry, transport, and other sections of the economy. Arab, and Jewish-Arab, centers whose staff, membership, and population were not mobilized did yeoman work in this regard, finding and assigning needed technicians to pressing home-front needs.

Training

While giving due credit to the marvelous, and sometimes inspired, work of volunteers and indigenous staff members, it is clear that those centers with trained staff — or with more trained staff — got into action quicker, reassessed the situation better, and gave better service than did others. The principles of group work and community organization were clearly helpful to staff who were re-grouping activities, seeking coordination with other agencies, and establishing new lines of communication and responsibility. This was even true in those centers where most of the professional staff were mobilized — the systemization which

they had established allowed for continuation to a much greater extent than those centers whose operations had been based primarily upon a charismatic director. Hence, the importance of the graduate program for training center directors and senior center staff which had been established at the Hebrew University on the initiative of the corporation of centers before the war, was re-emphasized.

Preparation

Centers were no more forewarned of the war than any other portion of Israel. However, those which had established programs which involved outreach programs, including visiting families in homes, were in closer touch with community needs than were those which were building-enclosed, or study-group centered. Similarly, centers with *ulpanim* were in closer touch with new immigrants; and those which had established reputations as helpful, easy of access, and central to community thinking, were more prepared to play their wartime roles. In planning for the future, however, it is not enough that the centers increase this kind of activity. There need to be definite plans for dealing with crisis situations, including the absence of key staff. These plans can include volunteers who are trained for take-over jobs before the crisis; the shifting of services to increase those which are crisis-induced; and contingency plans for different phases, types, and severity of crises.

Local Needs

The strength of the center during wartime was that it was not only in the neighborhood, but knew the needs and the resources on the local scene. For example, centers in neighborhoods of working mothers had different problems than those in areas of working

fathers and non-working mothers. The fathers were generally called into service, whereas the mothers weren't. Similarly, those neighborhoods where mothers tended to work three mornings a week differed from neighborhoods of full-time workers. Border areas had different problems regarding use of air-raid shelters than did relatively internal areas. Localities without hospitals had their own difficulties regarding transportation, and so forth. Centers exemplified the advantages of decentralization of planning and services, and should continue to stress the need for local autonomy, in order to be able to plan the distinctive complex of services needed in each community.

Mental Health

Although much of that which centers ordinarily engage in has mental health content, or contains an often-unexpressed goal of better mental health, the experience of the war pointed out the need to sharpen this focus. Israel will continue to live under stress and threat for a long time, and the tensions and anxieties which these create should be recognized by the centers, understood, and planned for. Children's fears about war, parental absences, loss, and injury; the absences and disruptions caused by periodic (and sometimes unexpected) reserve duty; the fears of spouses, parents, and siblings concerning their loved ones; even anticipation of shortages of food and other commodities — all contribute to the need for an active mental health program in centers. This should include self-help and mutual-aid activities, not only for their intrinsic merit, but for the results which can be expected according to the "helper therapy" principle.

Volunteers

During each of Israel's periodic crises

there have been outpourings of volunteers, both from abroad and from within the country. The desire to be of service is as legitimate as any other need, and many centers felt it incumbent upon them to serve this need by providing something for volunteers to do, even if it did not fit their needs or abilities, and even if it was made-work. The entire area of working with volunteers needs to be conceptualized, systematized, and institutionalized in centers during peace-time, with plans for increases during wartime. There should be pre-registration of volunteers and prediction of needs, as well as pre-training.

The problem of overseas volunteers is more difficult. The tasks which non-Hebrew-speaking short-term personnel who do not know Israel in depth can undertake are limited, and need careful definition in advance. In addition, there is never any assurance as to how many such volunteers will appear

at a center, or what abilities they will have. Nevertheless, pre-planning should be such that volunteers will see both the desirability and the possibility of their remaining in Israel. As one center worker put it: "People who are willing to give their lives for Israel in the moment of crisis should be helped to undertake the more difficult task of devoting their lifetimes during the unglamorous periods."

Summary

The community center in Israel proved itself to have the potential for innovative and need-filling services during the war. It has been almost required to maintain some of its new roles, and to adopt others, in the post-war period. Whether it continues this *chalutzic* role in the local communities depends in good part upon the quality of the senior staff, and the amount of futuristic planning which they bring to bear in their work.