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American Jewish women visit victims of terror

By *JENNY HAZAN*

For the past three days a delegation of six women from Maryland has been traveling around the country to offer crisis care to families affected by terrorism.

The delegation, consisting primarily of social-work professionals, came for a week under the auspices of "Operation Embrace" a non-profit organization founded in 2001 by four Orthodox Jewish women in Potomac, Maryland, who after learning about the misdirection of funds raised through some organizations for victims of terror, decided to take matters into their own hands.

"There are so many organizations that exploit terror victims," said Aviva Tessler, co-founder of Operation Embrace. She said the National Insurance Institute refuses to work with some non-profits because they don't follow through with their promises. "Some organizations vow to provide help, but the victims don't actually end up seeing a penny of the money raised for their cause." In other cases, said Tessler, even the money raised by organizations with the best of intentions is not distributed effectively.

That's why Operation Embrace, which has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in the US since it was established, decided to tackle the issue of assistance on a case-by-case basis, hand in hand with Israeli social workers. "Social workers know exactly what each case needs," said Tessler, who has raised money for a wide range of items including a laptop for a girl who lost her legs and a flight ticket to Poland for a boy whose family couldn't afford to send him on a school trip to visit Holocaust sites. "They help us understand the whole dynamic of the family so that we can provide assistance where it is most needed." With the guidance of their Israeli counterparts, the women will continue to visit hospitals and private homes across the country until their departure on Saturday night.

Operation Embrace organizes about five similar trips a year. "We like to keep the group sizes small in order to ensure that the visits result in true, personal connections between the volunteers and the victims," said Tessler.

The organization also brings victims of terror to speak to groups in the US. "It is very important for Americans to have a chance to know the people behind the numbers," she said. "Every number has a face and a family and a husband or wife." "You don't get an accurate picture from the papers," agreed participant Mina Spiegelman, a congregant at the Beth Sholom synagogue in Potomac, where Tessler's husband, Joel, serves as rabbi.

"You really have to come to this country and meet the victims to understand how truly heroic they are," says the first-time visitor to Israel. "It is emotionally overwhelming to meet the people who have gone through these attacks and to see how far they've come since then." For participant Golda Jacobs, a social worker in Silver Springs, Maryland, it's the social workers in Israel who have struck her most deeply. "They do a tremendous amount of work with a lot less resources than we have in the States,"

she said. "Meeting them has been an incredibly moving and reaffirming experience of how Israelis help one another."

"The purpose of the organization is to connect people in America with real people here in Israel," said Tessler. "It's not about the material comforts we try to provide; it's about the symbol which represents that there are people in the States who love and care about the people of Israel. The best way we can fight terrorism is with proactive love and concern."

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