

Volunteering for Israel

Local women describe how packing medical supplies is good medicine — for them

BY [ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN](#) May 18, 2017, 11:57 am

They ate mediocre meals, slept in spartan rooms, and donned drab work clothes to perform repetitive tasks from 8 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon for five straight days.

And they can't wait to do it again.



Hilda Froelke of Hoboken, Tobey Lyden of Fort Lee, and Iris Coleman of Leonia — a trio of 60-something friends who met through their mutual membership in the JCC of Fort Lee/Congregation Gesher Shalom — took off on April 21 for a stint with Volunteers for Israel.

VFI's partner organization, Sar-El National Project for Volunteers Israel, places the visitors on Israel Defense Forces supply bases and oversees their activities.

Approximately 1,200 Americans each year join thousands of volunteers, 17 and older, from more than 60 countries. Not because they're expecting fabulous food or four-star accommodations, but only to contribute their time and labor to the defenders of the Jewish state.

Marion and Steve Mittelman of Morris County, voluntary North New Jersey Ambassadors for Volunteers for Israel, emphasize that no training or skills are required and participants may choose one-week, two-week, or three-week stints all year round.

“When Israel has a crisis or a need, people are clamoring to volunteer,” Ms. Mittelman said. “This year is a little quieter, but usually we have about 12 groups per year from northern New Jersey.”

Ms. Froelke, Ms. Lyden, and Ms. Coleman were assigned to a group of 19 and put to work checking and packing medical supplies.

Ms. Froelke admits to a moment of cynicism on the first day. “It was hard work, and at one point I said, ‘Well, this is just cheap labor.’ But in the evening we all met in the club room and the commander who handles the volunteers explained why they do this.”

He told them that as a defense army on a tight budget, the IDF keeps the number of active-duty personnel to a minimum, calling in reservists when there is a flare-up or conflict. There aren’t enough standing soldiers for the unglamorous day-to-day jobs required to keep the army ready for action.

“So that’s why they count on volunteers to do the prep work,” Ms. Froelke said. “After I heard that, I felt a lot better and very motivated to do my part. One day we were asked to work till 5:30, and we all said okay, even though it’s all day doing the same thing.”

They also came to realize the vital importance of their repetitive tasks.

Ms. Lyden and Ms. Froelke were shown how to pack and seal medical supplies into plastic bags. They then placed the sealed bags into trunk-sized canvas bags and into 13-compartment backpacks in which each item had to be in a specific compartment for fast access.



From left, Hilda Froelke, Iris Coleman, and Tobey Lyden worked for Volunteers for Israel.

“The big bags, which were extremely heavy and would require multiple people or machinery to carry, contained medicines and equipment for any medical situation you could imagine,” Ms. Lyden said. “These were used both within Israel and outside of Israel in countries that require medical aid due to disasters.” The smaller backpacks held field supplies for medics.

She never will forget what the civilian supervisor said when they performed a related task, she added. The volunteers were asked to disassemble medical bags that came back from the field. After a certain amount of time, they must be updated with fresh items. “When we opened the unused backpacks to resupply them, our manager said, ‘Thank God they were not used.’

“Israelis want peace. They don’t want to have to use this equipment.”

Ms. Coleman recalled that on the last day, “All the bags Tobey and Hilda had put together were wrapped up on a pallet to be sent out. I thought about how these items might help wounded soldiers or Syrian women and children who come to the border for medical assistance. To me, that was totally amazing.”

She was working under a different civilian supervisor, unpacking and checking medical gear, including CPR kits, stethoscopes, and blood-pressure cuffs that had been packed two years before. Equipment found to be in perfect working order was then repackaged and sealed for another two years.

“At first, I thought, ‘Israelis are so inventive; can’t they build a machine to package all this stuff and check the gauges?’” Ms. Coleman said. “But then I looked at a piece of tubing and saw some cracks, and I realized maybe we can’t develop a machine that looks for cracked tubing. And that could be a matter of life and death. You really need eyes on this equipment because lives are at stake.”

In the evenings, two female soldiers assigned to the group led programming for the volunteers. “Many people wanted to learn more about the base and the army and the volunteer programs in general, so they brought us speakers,” Ms. Froelke said.

She noted that there were both religious and secular military personnel on the base. They learned that Israel provides civil-service alternatives for men, and especially for women, whose stringently religiously observant lifestyles preclude military service.

The friends’ stay in Israel coincided with three special commemorative days: Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), Yom Hazikaron (Memorial Day), and Yom Ha’atzmaut (Independence Day).

“On the night of Yom Hashoah, we went with the soldiers for a very meaningful ceremony where one of the young women read a story her great-grandmother had written about being a survivor,” Ms. Lyden said.

“The program was extremely moving, and made me realize that in spite of everyone’s efforts to annihilate the Jewish people, we are strong and we have our own army and a future. My group leader said that evening — and she was all of 20 — ‘Thank God we can defend ourselves now.’ The next day, we stood at attention for two minutes when the siren was sounded throughout Israel.”

Although most of this cadre of overseas volunteers was Jewish, that's not always the case. Ms. Lyden and Ms. Coleman went to Israel with VFI last year as well, and about half of that group was gentile.

"One man's grandfather had liberated a camp and said that he felt he owed it to the Jewish people," Ms. Lyden said. "We also had two German women in our group."

Bev Cohen, co-manager of the VFI Philadelphia Region — which covers New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and West Virginia — said that in recent years, New Jersey residents have accounted for 55 to 60 percent of volunteers from the region. The number ranges from 80 to 100 annually.

"It takes a special person to leave the comfort of home and family and live in a barracks and do physical labor all day," she said.

"Tobey, Hilda, and Iris are three of the most enthusiastic volunteers I have processed for our program in Israel," Ms. Cohen continued. "They were meticulous in submitting their applications and in their preparation for this great adventure. I just knew they would be outstanding volunteers and contribute in a meaningful way to their assigned IDF base. They will be active ambassadors for our program, and I hope they will return as participants in the near future."

After the women finished their week on base, they traveled to Jerusalem for Shabbat. Walking in the Old City on Friday night, they spontaneously joined a service at Robinson's Arch, a continuation of the Western Wall, with a group from a Reform congregation in North Carolina that had just come from the March of the Living in Poland. They found it especially moving to see a 94-year-old Holocaust survivor, a member of the congregation, lead the prayers.

They were in Tel Aviv for Memorial Day and Independence Day, back-to-back holidays on which the somber mood of the first gives way to the joy of the second as night falls. On that transitional evening, they joined the crowd at Rabin Square, the plaza next to the municipal building.

“There were thousands of people there — families with children, everyone out in the streets and everyone at ease,” Ms. Froelke said. “We felt that we all belonged there, and we’re all the same.”

Before leaving for the airport on May 2 at the end of Independence Day, they watched the annual Air Force flyover on the Tel Aviv beach.

“The impression I got from our trip was that Israel is a growing and thriving economy under constant threat of war, yet Israelis live their lives each day happily and seemed to appreciate that we cared enough to give our time,” Ms. Lyden said.