

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Angels from G-d

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Sometimes you don't appreciate how great an impact you can have as a volunteer. I found that out in an unexpected way in Israel.

I recently returned from my 16th stint as a volunteer on an Israeli military base. My volunteer experiences were arranged through US-based Volunteers For Israel ("VFI"), which partners with Sar-el, an Israeli organization that places volunteers on IDF bases. (Full disclosure: I serve on VFI's Board.)

Our experienced team of volunteers was assigned to an Israeli Air Force base. The base was the receiving base for all aircraft parts shipped into Israel, primarily from the US. In essence we got to see part of what the \$3 billion in annual aid to Israel looks like – expensive aircraft parts. They ranged from small bolts to giant jacks used to raise an aircraft in order to replace a flat tire.

We worked together with the soldiers in the base's vast main warehouse. Every morning we stripped open giant air cargo shipments from the US and entered each shipment's hundreds of boxed parts into the warehouse's inventory. Every afternoon, we shipped out the boxed parts to specific Israeli air bases.

The work was dirty, sweaty and never-ending. And it was crucial. The soldiers would often proudly say that without this base Israeli Air Force jets cannot fly. And that thought is emblazoned on the base's caps: "We Are The Oxygen Of The Israeli Air Force."

During our first week, the volunteers were asked whether we would like to opt out of a previously-scheduled Wednesday 12 hour work day (8 a.m. to 8 p.m.) required of the soldiers. We responded that, of course, if the soldiers worked until 8 p.m. we would too. But by that Wednesday, the volunteers and soldiers working together had whittled down the warehouse's backlog to a point that a 12 hour work day was not necessary.

By the end of our second week, the backlog had been eliminated. And by the end of our third and final week, the daily work was being completed by 4 p.m. The soldiers were dismissed early to go home to spend more time with their families and friends.

During our time in the warehouse, we had befriended an Israeli soldier named Joshua, who had made aliyah from the US in order to join the IDF. Towards the end of our third week on the base, I asked Joshua to reveal what the soldiers said about the volunteers behind our backs.

His response was instantaneous: "They all think you're crazy. They are required to sacrifice three years of their lives to serve our country. They don't understand why you would leave your families and your comfortable lives in your home countries to work on our base. So they think you're all crazy."

Joshua's answer was what I'd heard on other bases regarding the soldiers' views of the volunteers. But after a moment of hesitation he added an additional gloss:

"The soldiers may think you're crazy but there's something else you need to know that affects their attitude towards the volunteers. This base is the intake base for all air force equipment



—by Mark Werner

coming into Israel. From here, the equipment is shipped to air force bases all over Israel. A tremendous volume of work flows through this base. We're like the Amazon.com of the Israeli Air Force.

"We are not adequately staffed to keep up with this volume and are constantly backlogged.

Frequently, we are asked to work late. Other times, Israeli reservists must be brought in to help. The pressure from this workload is never-ending and wears us down.

"You guys come here highly motivated to work hard. You work fast and churn out a tremendous volume of material. You've helped us catch up on the work in our main warehouse to the point that, by 4:00 p.m. today, there was no work remaining. The soldiers were dismissed early. Wow! That never happens here.

"The soldiers love you guys (and gals). You took the pressure off them and allowed them to see their friends and families an extra hour every day this week. That's precious time. They call you volunteers 'Angels From G-d' behind your backs.

"So you see, on the one hand they think you're crazy. On the other, they call you 'Angels From G-d'. I think you should take that as a compliment."

On our final day on the base, the major in charge of base logistics called us into his office. He thanked us with this story: Every year on Holocaust Remembrance Day, the base soldiers are brought together to hear remarks from a Holocaust survivor. Recently, they heard from an elderly woman who had been 12 years old when the Germans invaded her native Poland. Her entire family was killed and she barely survived in the Auschwitz death camp. In her remarks, she told the soldiers that during the Holocaust the Jews won. One of the soldiers in the audience interjected (respectfully): "But we lost 6 million Jews. How can you say that we won?" She replied: "We won because we survived and the Nazis are gone. We won because we have a strong State of Israel. And we won because we have the finest air force in the world."

His story concluded, the officer gazed around the table at us, and quietly said: "Thank you for helping us keep winning." As we lined out of his office, he handed each of us a specially published Bible of the type normally given to each new soldier at the time they are sworn into the IDF.

On the inside front cover, the major had pasted the following inscription:

"Though an army encamp against me,
My heart shall not fear;
Though war arise up against me,
Yet I will be confident." Psalms 27:3

Thank you for supporting our confidence.

I will always treasure this Bible. But it would have been enough thanks to learn the title the soldiers had bestowed upon us volunteers: "Angels From G-d."