

Aged Help Each Other In Katamon Program

(By Murray Kass)

In Katamon, one of Jerusalem's most depressed neighborhoods, an elderly Moroccan woman enters the rundown apartment of another Moroccan woman who, sick and withdrawn, sits listlessly on her bed. She straightens up the room a bit, makes a cup of tea for her ailing hostess and tries to engage her in conversation. The uninvited visitor, Aliza, herself recently had an operation, but she is mobile, alert and

able to offer the emotional support and practical help which the other woman needs.

Both women are participants in a mutual help project, Elderly-to-Elderly, which is aided by Malben, the Joint Distribution Committee program in Israel, funded by the United Jewish Appeal. The program uses mildly handicapped persons of similar cultural backgrounds to help care for the bedridden or house-bound elderly.

Four years of experience have shown that this is a simple, inexpensive and effective way of helping groups of aged to conquer loneliness and depression. The "visitors" find status and purpose in helping; the persons visited benefit from the contact and interest shown.

"It is a 'mis and match' program," says Dr. Claire Davidson, medical director at the JDC/Malben-supported Guidance and Counseling Center for the Aged, which serves as headquarters for the project and matches the "visitors" and "visitees" according to need and background.

Aliza is one of 24 elderly visitors who during 1972 made approximately 4,500 visits, not including the collateral visits, such as shopping, errands or reporting back to the professional staff at the Center. In addition to her regular visits, Aliza often drops in daily "just for a few minutes to see how Malka is." She is providing the daily and individualized contact which is essential to any program for the aged, but which cannot be given by professional manpower alone.


Bi-monthly meetings with the staff at the Center give the "visitors" a chance to talk over their "cases," to discuss the problems they have encountered. They find status in being part of a work-force and meaning for lives previously devoid of that purpose.

Operating costs for the program are minimal. Although the "visitors," whose ages range from 60 to almost 80, receive a small sum for their services there is more than just practical value to this payment. It is an important factor in restoring their mental well-being, in giving them the feeling that they are still capable of earning, still able to continue as productive members of society. The present that Aliza was able to buy for her

grandchild with her first earnings did more for her than the anti-depressant pills she had formerly required.

"Inquiries from abroad reflect the growing interest in home-care services for the elderly," Dr. Davidson said. "It is felt that these services can prevent the ultimate deterioration which may lead to costly psychiatric services and possible institutionalization. The Elderly-to-Elderly project is far from a complete home-care service, but it can be an important adjunct to any program for the aged."

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