

Life-Saving. Soul-Saving



AVRAHAM VERTER, CHIEF SOCIAL WORKER AT EZRAT NASHIM PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL IN ISRAEL, CONSULTS WITH RESIDENT PATIENT. "WITHOUT INSTITUTIONS LIKE THIS, DEDICATED TO TRUE REHABILITATION OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AND OTHERS," HE SAYS, "ISRAEL WOULD BE LIKE OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST; PEOPLE LIKE THIS WOULD BE LIVING AT BUS STATIONS OR ON THE STREETS." EZRAT NASHIM IS PARTIALLY SUPPORTED THROUGH THE 1983 UNITED JEWISH APPEAL ISRAEL SPECIAL FUND. PHOTO CREDIT: BARUCH RIMON/UJA.

BY GINNI WALSH
UJA SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

The Ezrat Nashim Psychiatric Hospital in

Israel, inaugurated in the '40's as the first such institution in the Middle East, does not fit the image of a modern, top-ranking rehabilitation center. Yet, despite its unprepossessing size and its lack of sophisticated equipment, the hospital's success in renewing the lives of seemingly hopeless patients is world-renowned.

That record has been achieved through the tireless efforts of a staff selflessly dedicated to a unique patient clientele, including many long-term psychiatric victims of the Holocaust.

"Israel is unfortunately almost a laboratory for working on cures for the effects of persecution," says Dr. Haim Dasberg, Ezrat Nashim's medical director and himself a Holocaust survivor. "But we don't -- and mustn't -- approach them as emotional cripples. They're heroes, living examples of Jewish history. It's an honor to help them, not a burden."

Calling on his associates -- Abraham Verter, chief social worker, and Dr. Yehuda Oppenheim, research director -- he cites two examples. One, a personal tragedy softened. The other, what may be a total cure.

Hiya is the patient on the road to full recovery. Liberated from Auschwitz at 20, the sole surviving member of her entire family, she married a man with a similar background. They had more to survive together -- internment as "illegal immigrants" in a Cyprus camp, the death of their first baby as a result of the unspeakable conditions there.

In Israel at last, they persevered against the odds to build a good and prosperous life. They had two healthy sons, both of whom served in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and returned home safely. Then, just when her life seemed settled,

serene, past horrors overcome and a solid future ahead, Hiya suffered a nervous breakdown.

"It's the kind of delayed reaction many people have after great persecutions," observed Dr. Dasberg. "Hiya and her husband were incredibly strong people who worked long and hard to build new lives and succeeded. But there was a deep emotional price. Hiya's collapse was a reenactment of all the depressions she should have had in her life but kept repressing."

Ezrat Nashim's staff set out to heal those emotional wounds in its own characteristic way. As chief social worker Verter says: "We think about discharge from the day of admittance. For some, it's a long and rocky road. But to see someone return to a full life after leaving the hospital's care -- that's worth all the time, all the effort, all the money."

For Hiya, Verter is certain that day will come soon. After ten years of residential and outpatient treatment, she is only months away from living completely on her own again -- thanks to the supporting, rehabilitative approach of the hospital's staff and to the use of new and beneficial medications, some of them developed in Ezrat Nashim's own laboratory.

Simple and no larger than an average apartment, that laboratory has an international reputation. Its research focuses on the psychological causes of mental illness and the development of drugs to assist in cures. An ambitious new research program, currently unfunded, will seek effective treatment for Alzheimer's Disease, a degenerative brain condition causing severe and premature senility in people as young as 45.

Dr. Oppenheim, who will head the program, explains its importance: "Nobody knows why brain cells die prematurely. With the aging population in Israel -- and in America and throughout the world -- increasing so rapidly, this research could contribute toward preventing a major worldwide public health problem."

It is still, however, in individual care and prevention successes that Ezrat Nashim excels. Hiya will soon come to terms with her haunting

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