

A crisis doesn't end when the flames die down

By RUTH BAR-ON, Opinion Feature

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For families who have made *aliya*, sudden disasters are all too often exacerbated by the lack of lifelong friends and extended family.



Photo: Dr Pinchas Chanoch, Irena Shremko (middle) and Dr. Dina Chanoch at the funeral of Kyril Darman, who perished in the bus fire. Irena's son was killed in a terror attack in 2003. (Selah)

LAST WEEK'S catastrophic Carmel fire has left a terrible scar, not only on the beautiful landscape, but on the lives of many across the country. In its aftermath, however, just as the trees will be replanted and the forests rejuvenated, so too lives will need to be rebuilt and communities restored.

That the fire has been extinguished is only a tiny step in a long road to recovery. Those who have lost loved ones, or seen their homes destroyed and possessions ruined, may never truly "recover" from such a tragedy, but rather with a crucial blend of bravery and support will go on to rebuild shattered lives.

Moreover, for a number of the victims of this catastrophe, this process of recovery and survival is made all the more difficult because they are relatively new to the country. For

families who have made aliya, sudden crises – not only on a national scale but on a personal level – are all too often exacerbated by the lack of lifelong friends and extended family which sabras would have.

Coupled with language and culture barriers, immigrants facing tragedy are often left vulnerable and isolated at the most difficult and painful of times.

This is where Selah steps in. Established in 1993, Selah (the Israel Crisis Management Center) is a countrywide network of assistance and support for immigrants hit by sudden crisis or tragedy. We provide comfort, financial and material aid in both the short and long term, as well as practical solutions for the urgent problems arising from crisis. Crucially this is carried out by specialist care givers, able to speak, for example, Amharic, Russian and Spanish, and familiar with the different cultural sensitivities.

On a daily basis, we encounter the most tragic of cases; sudden illness or death of parents, children, spouses or siblings; elderly grandparents or aunts and uncles left to raise orphaned children; siblings forced to care for their families; victims of road or work accidents; violence and murder in the family; and those affected by war and terror.

These are individual cases, which differ vastly, where the coping skills of those affected may vary greatly from family to family and person to person. Accordingly, Selah deals with each individual, providing the tailor-made care and support needed in response to the often life-changing consequences of such events.

HOWEVER, WHEN faced with a wide scale national disaster such as the Carmel fire – with high casualty numbers and massive levels of destruction – it is crucial to remember that each individual still requires that same level of care and attention.

We attend the funerals of the victims from immigrant families. We are present at their homes, offering support and care, help and assistance. Following the fire, Selah's team of trained professionals and expert volunteers went to seven of the funerals of the bus victims who were from immigrant families. These included Ethiopian immigrant and father of three Seyum Tzege from Netivot and Kiryl Darman from Afula, whose wife Anne is in her eighth month of pregnancy.

These are just two of the tragedies to befall the immigrant community in the past week, and just two of the many that we have endured as a country.

Remembering this, Selah, together with all the emergency and support organizations, must balance carefully our ongoing long-term projects with the immediate response necessary to cope with an event of such enormity.

Consequently, we went ahead with our planned healing retreat on Tuesday and Wednesday in the Jordan Valley for Ethiopian families who have suffered bereavement in the past months and years.

The week before then, we held a similar retreat in Kfar Maccabiah, for bereaved families who immigrated from the former Soviet Union. Through a program of nature walks and outdoor adventures, support groups and sharing among peers, we aim to build a network of friends with common experiences. With the leadership of our skilled therapists and devoted volunteers, we see the development of essential coping skills, and the building of trust, belonging and meaning – vital to the healing process.

For me, the surreal juxtaposition of the raw wounds of a fresh tragedy with the experience of joining those rebuilding lives after such calamities provided an important reminder of what can be achieved with support and care. This is of course not just true for those new to the country, but for all.

Moreover, it proved a crucial reminder that when the event has passed, the flames extinguished, the funeral has taken place and the shiva concluded – that is when the real healing begins. Now is the time to turn our attention and resources to helping the victims of this tragedy to rebuild.

The government – as it has begun to do – must show and give support to those caught up in the fire and the bereaved families. As a wider society, we must all show our support.

There is no need to face tragedy alone.

Further still, we all benefit from the strength and bravery of the survivors and their families. Perhaps no better example of this, are the Selah volunteers, many having themselves suffered personal tragedies, yet now give of their time to help those in need today.

The message is clear. With support and understanding, we can rebuild.

The writer is Founder and Director of Selah, the Israel Crisis Management Center for immigrants (www.selah.org.il). Selah is a member of the Israel Trauma Coalition.