

Engaging



the world





RABBI TAG: Tag International Development founder and chairman Rabbi Yossi Ives; (above right) Kenyan wildlife rangers practice advanced first-aid techniques with expertise and kits provided by Tag; (preceding pages) Solomon Islands women welcome Israeli experts with a dance
ALL PHOTOS: TAG INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT



'The best way we can defend Israel is by building bridges with people across the world,' says London Rabbi Yossi Ives

Tibor Krausz *Bangkok*

TWO ISRAELIS, AMOS AVGAR and Roy Ben-Eliezer recently spent a few bone-jarring hours rattling along some of the rutted dirt tracks that meander through much of rural Myanmar. Their destination: a remote villages of the Pa-O people in the impoverished Southeast Asian nation's Shan State.

In hamlets of bamboo huts on stilts with piglets rooting through refuse underfoot, the sudden appearance of the two men created an instant stir. "Very few people from the West set foot there," recalls Dr. Avgar, a Jerusalem resident with decades-long experience in relief work across the developing world. "I asked them, 'Do you do anything differ-

ently than your parents and grandparents did?'" They said no. I told them, "You will, because we're bringing you Israeli expertise."

More precisely, they were bringing queen bees from Israel.

Beekeeping has a long and hallowed tradition in the Holy Land, stretching all the way back to the era of "milk and honey"



in early Biblical times, and the country is again at the forefront of beekeeping. Avgar and Ben-Eliezer, who work for a British/Jewish NGO called Tag International Development, traveled to some highland hill tribe villages outside the town of Taunggyi to give locals some genetically bred queen bees they had purchased from the Levana Apiary in Israel.

The highly productive bees and modern beekeeping techniques may go a long way toward helping the villagers, whose sole income derives from harvesting wild honey in hilly forests and selling 1,000 liters for just a few hundred dollars to unscrupulous middlemen. “They live on less than \$1

a day,” Avgar, Tag’s COO, tells THE JERUSALEM REPORT. “They have nothing. They are totally isolated.”

The Israelis hope to change that. “Beekeeping is one of the best and easiest income generators in agriculture for the rural poor,” says Ben-Eliezer, the organization’s Regional Director for Southeast Asia. A road safety specialist from Petah Tikva, he currently lives in Myanmar (formerly Burma) with his wife, development professional Michal Strahilevitz, from Raanana, who is Tag’s Country Director for Myanmar.

The couple is implementing various humanitarian projects on behalf of Tag. They

are helping set up an emergency response unit in Yangon for the victims of accidents in the free-for-all that passes for traffic on Myanmar’s roads. They are also working on providing resilience-building courses for members of local NGOs operating in war-torn areas in the ethnically seething country.

“Unfortunately, in Israel we have acquired tremendous expertise in first aid because of all the wars and terror attacks,” Strahilevitz tells The Report. “Now we can pass on that knowledge to others.”

The Israelis’ job involves plenty of networking, sharing of expertise, liaising and partnership building as they navigate the

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at times bafflingly byzantine ways of bureaucracy in a country that is just opening up to the outside world after a half-century of domestic repression and international isolation. Strahilevitz adds, “We have to build everything from scratch.”

SO DO OTHER TAG OPERATIVES and consultants in places as varied as Indonesia, Georgia, Kenya and Solomon Islands – more than a dozen countries in all. Tag’s emissaries and advisors are all trained professionals, whose ranks include the former CEO of a Fortune 500 company and a onetime executive director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee’s International Development Program – Avgar himself.

During their stints abroad, the Jewish and Israeli experts initiate and collaborate on women’s health projects in Turkey and Sri Lanka; help coordinate disaster response, mitigation and preparedness in a quake-prone region of Indonesia; assist in training embattled wildlife officers in Kenya; and set up a “model farm” training and demonstration center in Rwanda.

Tag’s mission, in the words of founder and chairman Rabbi Yossi Ives, is to spread “Jewish values” by providing Israeli expertise, free of charge, in a variety of fields to as many needy communities as the charity can reach (and handle on its limited budget). “We, as Jews, realize that there’s a wider world out there that may need our help and there is so much Israel can share,” Ives, an Orthodox Jew, tells *The Report* from his home in England.

Ives exudes the relentless drive and indomitable optimism of a self-help coach – which he is. The London rabbi, who has a PhD in life coaching, has written books about Jewish mysticism and secular self-help with titles like “There Must Be a Better Way!” When it comes to the issue of Israel’s humanitarian potential, he needs little prodding to begin elucidating at length about his vision of the Jewish State taking a lead in humanitarian work worldwide, according to the concept of *tikkun olam* or “repairing the world.”

And that’s after he’s just spent three hours, before dinner, preparing a strategy report for Sierra Leone, a new location he is approaching with an offer of help from Israel. “Israel has to engage with the world,” he stresses. “We have a lot to offer. Because of the country’s turbulent history Israel has more humanitarian knowledge



RELEARNING THE OLD SKILLS: Tag encourages restoring traditional carpet-weaving skills in remote Azerbaijani villages; here master weaver Minaya Allahverdiyeva (left) presents a carpet to Tag project manager Gilah Kahn-Hoffmann

per square inch than anywhere else in the world. And where Israel has real expertise, it’s second to none – whether it’s trauma services, first aid, rehabilitation or women’s empowerment.”

Ives launched the charity three years ago to try and help foster social innovation,

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– Bayram Valiyev

with the help of Israeli experts, in select trouble spots and impoverished regions of the world. “Tag was set up to say to Israeli organizations, ‘Look, we’ll do the networking. Can you work with us?’” he says.

MASHAV (the Israel Ministry for Foreign Affairs Center for International Cooperation), Magen David Adom (Israel’s emergency medical service), American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), MATAV home care for the elderly and Beersheba’s Ben-Gurion University, among others, said yes. “We set ourselves very modest goals,” Ives adds. “But by the end of Year One, we had more than 10 projects going.”

Today Tag is running, or planning, several dozen projects, with the Jewish charity working on joint initiatives with Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims in its widening global network.

“People can transcend their religious differences,” says Dr. Roni Kaufman, head of the social work program at Ben-Gurion University who has volunteered with Tag in Sri Lanka, as he sits next to social workers dressed in *hijabs* from Indonesia and the Maldives at a recent conference in Bangkok, which Tag organized for its partners from 12 countries on the subject of disaster preparedness in Southeast Asia.

“If we cared about politics, we wouldn’t be here in the first place,” he adds.

TAG’S MODUS OPERANDI IS simple: for the neediest, a little help can go a long way. Even coconut husks can make a world of difference. They certainly do in the remote village of Alegoda, a community of poor farmers who cultivate coconut groves in central Sri Lanka. Local villagers now make coir brushes – a million of them each month – and thanks to their new smartphones with Internet access, courtesy of Tag and Google, they can now sell their coconut fiber products profitably to the outside world and create employment in the village.



TAG TEAM: Tag brings teamwork and leadership training to teens in frontline villages in Azerbaijan; (right) Israeli agronomist Shaikhe Stern demonstrates beekeeping techniques in Myanmar

To get the “Smart Village” project up and running, Ives and his Israeli helpers have done what they always do: network relentlessly. They’ve succeeded in bringing together a local entrepreneur, a local network provider, Sarvodaya (Sri Lanka’s largest social justice and volunteer organization), and the corporate giant Google, which donated android smartphones. Tag is also introducing Israeli drip irrigation and organic farming techniques from Ne-tafim (the Israeli company that is a global leader in smart drip and micro-irrigation solutions) as well as launching rural health projects and running a training project for wildlife rangers in a biodiversity hotspot.

“We’re talking about raising villagers out of poverty and all they need is some training and some phones,” Ives says. “And at the same time we’re building bridges and creating alliances.”

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– Dr. Roni Kaufman

A continent away in Muslim Azerbaijan, Tag funded a youth football tournament in designated “Play Safe Areas” among frontline villages in the country’s land mine-infested border region with Armenia, where the two former Soviet republics fought a bitter war in the early 1990s. “They re-

ceived uniforms, equipment and trophies, but as a precondition participating youths had to take a first-aid course provided by the local Red Crescent society,” recounts Gilah Kahn-Hoffmann, Tag’s Manager of Communications and Special Projects, who has traveled to the area a number of times.

This past summer, in its second pilot project in the region with the Azerbaijan Red Crescent Society (AzRC), Tag brought Maayan Fux, an outdoor training expert from Israel, to coach local people on how to teach youths in isolated frontline villages about teamwork and leadership. Tag also sent a senior Magen David Adom paramedic – Baku-born David Applebaum – who brought state-of-the-art first-aid techniques to his colleagues at AzRC.

In addition, Tag funded a local master weaver to reawaken interest in the traditional art of carpet-making, once the proud preserve of Azerbaijani women in the region. Tag donated looms, equipment and



yarn to five villages so local women and girls can continue their weaving.

Exporting Israelis' can-do spirit is a priority for Ives. "Many people, when they see a problem, learn to live with it," Ives, who describes himself as "an agitator for good causes," offers. "Jews are intolerant of problems. When they see a problem, they need to solve it."

During her recent Tag mission to the volatile border region of Azerbaijan, Kahn-Hoffmann and the other Tag professionals were invited to a picnic in a forest. "There we were, surrounded by land mines, having roasted lamb, homemade bread and vodka, and singing 'Hava Nagila' with our Muslim colleagues, who knew the words in Hebrew!" she recalls.

Bayram Valiyev, a member of the Azerbaijan Red Crescent Society, was one of those colleagues. "Israeli professionals have a lot of expertise and experience to share that we can use," he says.

The oil-rich Central Asian country,

which is home to some 12,000 Juhuro, or "Mountain," Jews, is a rare Muslim-majority nation with close diplomatic and economic ties to the Jewish State. "Local Muslims look favorably on Jews and Israelis," Valiyev adds. "They don't have any of the

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common prejudices against Israel."

In Solomon Islands, Tag, together with MASHAV and JDC is involved in a program for local economic and social development that encompasses Public Private Partnerships, agricultural innovation, industrial development, health and education. On a recent visit, local tribesmen

surprised two visiting Israeli experts by laying on a traditional welcoming ceremony for them. Bare-chested warriors shook their spears, rattled their shields, brandished their machetes, and blew a conch shell. Then, women wearing flower wreaths and blue T-shirts emblazoned with stars of David and the words "I love Israel" performed a traditional welcome dance and sang Hebrew songs.

Ben-Eliezer and Strahilevitz have enjoyed similar hospitality in Myanmar. "I met taxi drivers who know Israel's history to an extent," says Strahilevitz. "People here have very high opinions of our country. It can only benefit Israel if we make new friends."

Ives agrees. "We don't tell people what to do. But if you feel we can help you, we are happy to do it. And we don't want anything in return," he says. "But we do have some self-interest," he acknowledges. "The best way we can defend Israel is by building bridges with people across the world." ●