AID IN A BACKPACK

In 2012, three Israeli army officers set out on a trip to Thailand after completing their army service. Nothing unusual about that – about 40,000 young Israelis go backpacking each year to cheap and exotic destinations in the Far East, Africa and Latin America. But these three – Gili Cohen, Yair Atias and Boaz Malikhi – had a new idea. Why not take advantage of the many young Israelis already in these countries in order to make a positive difference and show the world the compassionate face of IDF soldiers? And so, Fighters for Life (in Hebrew, Fighters without Borders) was born.

Since it was founded in 2013, FFL has been organizing volunteer missions for young Israeli backpackers heading to Gondar, Ethiopia; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Mumbai, India and five additional destinations. Those who are accepted for the program begin preparing six months before departure. They meet with past FFL volunteers, do volunteer work in Israel and plan an agenda for their mission. This usually includes agriculture and construction projects, as well as teaching English, math, music and personal hygiene to children in orphanages or slums.

Cohen believes Israelis have unique tools that enable them to carry out such a program: a connection with the worldwide network of Chabad Houses, support from Israel’s Foreign Ministry and an immigrant population that speaks many different languages. “When we decide to establish a volunteering project in a country, we first contact the Chabad House and the Israeli embassy or consulate there and get their full co-operation,” he says. And because speaking the local language is so important, each group of 25 volunteers includes five who are fluent in the local tongue. In Ethiopia, for example, FFL volunteers included five Amharic speakers from Israel’s large Ethiopian Jewish community.

“Our workshops are not just about making us feel good,” Cohen says, “but about making a real change in the communities.” In Ethiopia, volunteers taught blind and mute children. They renovated a shelter and brought along a dentist to treat children living there and to train local healthcare professionals. “We bring whatever communities ask for – dentists, doctors or cardiologists,” Cohen says.

Elsewhere, FFL has sent groups to work with children in the slums of Mumbai Dharavi, India, where they carry out agricultural and renovation projects. In 2015, FFL sent its first group to the San Fernando slum in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Mornings there are spent mostly on renovation and building projects, and afternoons teaching. Although the volunteers stay for only two weeks, they return to work with the same children the following year in order to ensure continuity.

“I don’t think there is any other place in the world where people so young thought of something so noble,” said FFL’s president, Major General Eliezer Shkedi, a past commander of the Israeli Air Force.

FFL has 10,000 followers on Facebook, and Cohen sees great potential for growth in the future, as word spreads and the project receives more funding. “We now go to each place once a year, but we hope … we can do it three times a year,” he says. “Our funders are good people who want to show the world the real Israel.”

1 IDF = Israel Defense Forces
2 Fighters without Borders
3 Foreign Ministry
4 Major General

SPEAK UP Some people would say we should help people at home before we volunteer to help people abroad. What do you think? Which quote below best reflects your opinion?

“I don’t want to live in the kind of world where we don’t look out for each other. Not just the people that are close to us, but anybody who needs a helping hand.” – Charles de Lint, Canadian writer

“Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you.” – Mother Teresa

©Courtesy of Heroes for life Israel Aid Map

NEW WORDS
aid
backpacking
destination
to take advantage of
positive
compassionate
found
volunteer
mission
to head
to departure
to help
agriculture
construction
personal hygiene
unique
to enable
to carry out
support
immigrant
consulate
local
fluent
community
blind
mute
to renovate
shelter
to treat
healthcare
professional
continuity
noble
commander
funding

Practice, page 111

A The post-army trip has become a “must” for many young Israelis. Where do these young people typically go? Why do you think they do it?

B Read the article on page 19 and find out about a different kind of Israeli backpacker. Then answer the questions below.

1 In what way are Fighters for Life different from other Israeli backpackers? (lines 1-12)

COMPLETE THE SENTENCE.
They …

2 What do we learn about FFL in lines 13-23?

CHOOSE THE TWO CORRECT ANSWERS.

a. Who founded it.
b. Why it was founded.
c. Where it operates.
d. How many volunteers there are.
e. How volunteers are selected for the program.
f. How volunteers prepare for the program.

3 Why does the writer mention Chabad Houses, Israel’s Foreign Ministry and Israel’s immigrant population? (lines 24-37)

COMPLETE THE ANSWER.
To explain why …

4 What are we told about FFL in lines 38-55?

CHOOSE THE TWO CORRECT ANSWERS.

a. How the volunteers help the local communities.
b. What the volunteers gain from their experience.
c. How the local population feels about the volunteers.
d. Why the volunteers stay for only two weeks.

5 What can we understand from lines 56-66?

Both Eliezer Shkedi and FFL’s funders agree that (-).

a. not enough people know about the organization
b. FFL volunteers are doing commendable work
c. FFL needs more volunteers
d. FFL will grow in the future

E Would you like to travel? If so, where would you like to go? Would you volunteer for Fighters for Life? Why or why not?

D A STEP BEYOND Wherever there is a need, Israelis step in to provide aid. Find the Israel Aid Map online. Choose one location and find out how Israelis are helping people there. Report your findings to the class.

Practi ce, page 111

 español – مترجمة إلى الإسبانية / خطط للحوار الإسلا مي

funding