

[Disaster victims support activity by IsraAID - Kokoro no care-]

36th Breakfast Meeting Minutes

The 36th Breakfast Meeting was opened by Miki Kunimura of the Health and Global Policy Institute, who introduced the topic and the speaker, Yotam Polizer, Japan Project Coordinator for IsraAID: The Israel Forum for International Humanitarian Aid.

Mr. Polizer started his presentation with a video overview of IsraAID's activities in Japan, and then started his presentation in a different way to usual with the "ohayo gozaimasu" game, a way to break the ice that they also use when working with groups in the disaster areas.

IsraAID was founded in 2001 and is made up of a coalition of 15 Israeli NGOs that work together to bring humanitarian aid to disaster areas around the world. Every place that IsraAID works in they try to find what the particular niche in which Israel can bring its own expertise in terms of technology and knowledge. They have worked in more than 40 countries around the world, including Thailand and Sri Lanka following the tsunami, Nepal, and America following Hurricane Katrina. Currently they have 3 other big projects, in Kenya, Haiti, and Southern Sudan. They are not only working on mental health issues, but rather try to design projects based on local needs.

In Japan, the project was started just four days after the tsunami, having received excellent support from government and non-government organizations to help them to get into the field. IsraAID is small, but is non-bureaucratic and thus can move fast. Initially they were moving between evacuation shelters dealing with 2 main things: emergency relief (distribution of food, medicines and educational equipment), and conduction of research to determine how Israel could support Tohoku over the long term.

They started their mental health program activities when they noticed distributing equipment in Watari-cho that the children had nothing to do. They therefore did an art therapy activity game with the leaders in the evacuation center, in cooperation with a doctor who had done art therapy activities for 4 years in Thailand. They took a large piece of paper and divided into 4, giving each section a title: tsunami, home (uchi), hope (kibou), and happiness (shiwase). Each child was asked to paint according to what they felt for each section. When the children saw the words tsunami, they took black crayons and erased the word as though they didn't want to see it. For home, they painted their houses washed away by the tsunami. For hope, they painted their houses before the tsunami. For happiness, they painted flowers and happy faces. The children didn't speak but just painted, a very natural way for them to express themselves. For the teachers in this evacuation center they were very shocked, as it was the first time

they had seen the children express their emotions about the trauma of the tsunami. The teachers asked for training so that they could help the children themselves to overcome their fears and trauma.

Back in Israel, they gathered 12 experts in PTSD and art therapy, who came to Japan in May to conduct a one-week training course for the teachers in Watari-cho. In the training, they not only gave the teachers tools to help the kids, but they also gave them a place to relax and release their stress. Mr. Polizer stressed that IsraAID is not treating anyone, and they are not diagnosing anyone with PTSD, but rather are dealing with prevention. Following the teacher training, they were told that this kind of program doesn't really exist in Tohoku, and the teachers thought it should also be carried out in other places. They were introduced to 5 more schools and nurseries around the Sendai area, including a place in Yamamoto city where 8 children and one teacher had died. IsraAID was happy to be able to support this place as well, and they continue to work there now.

As time went on, the situation in Tohoku also changed, and they realized this program was useful for people other than just children and teachers. For example, they have big projects in temporary housing (15 centers), to support both local people and volunteers who have a lot of stress through meeting many people who are suffering. They found that in addition to relaxation, they could also give volunteers leadership training to become socially active and help the local community to hold events etc. Another group they work with are nurses in around 5 hospitals in the Fukushima area, where stress is high due to worries about radiation. In total they are therefore working with over 30 diverse groups in the Tohoku area. Mental health training and treatment is a long term commitment, so they will work with each group for at least 2 years, holding workshops at least once a month.

Mr. Polizer went on to describe in more detail the methods used by IsraAID. Art therapy is an indirect and non-verbal approach to expressing emotion, which enables people to "speak" through their art. For example, in one example of an activity each person was asked to paint their own body, and color it according to their feelings, with different colors representing for example fear, anger, happiness and sadness. Movement therapy involves using physical activity to release this stress, and seemed to be particularly effective with the nurses due to their high levels of work stress. Drama therapy involves acting emotions to help release stress, and is very useful with children. For music therapy, people are creative and love music, and so it helps them to relax and express emotions. Finally, guided imagery is a simple technique can be used by everyone, whereby the individual closes their eyes and imagines a safe place to help them relax. IsraAID mixes and matches all of these techniques – for example getting an individual to imagine a safe or happy scene and then getting them to depict it in art, and this helps them to see a better future.

Mr. Polizer finished his talk by saying that for IsraAid it has been a great experience, and coming as they are from the outside they have found it has enabled them to be able to more easily get people to open up their hearts. On the recent one year anniversary, and in speaking to Japanese partners, the most important thing was that IsraAid wanted to communicate is that they are there for them and plan to stay for at least another 2 years.

Q & A:

Q. Sustainability is important so, what are the funding resources, are you thinking of any longer time scales, and are there any permanently oriented members of IsraAID in Japan?

A. IsraAID receives funding from Jewish communities in America. IsraAID wants to meet demand, but they are always searching for more funding, for example for the temporary housing project. In terms of the long term outlook - they are not trying to create experts in Japan, but rather are providing a practical box of tools. Follow-up will depend on what the people in Tohoku want, as some people think some kinds of therapy are more effective than others, and experts will monitor and evaluate their progress through consultancy. They hope to stay here longer if possible, but it is a matter of funding. They have 4 permanent IsraAid staff in Japan, with experts visiting periodically.

Q. These activities are very important, so is there any kind of plan to work with other NGOs to help share and disperse the art therapy etc. activities?

A. IsraAID has already started making joint collaborations, for example in Ishinomaki they work with a local clinic called You Home, which works with about 30,000 people in both partially destroyed houses and those in temporary housing. The Tohoku area is very big, and as yet they haven't reached as far as Iwate, but hope to do so in the future dependent on funding.