Sar-El – The National Project for Volunteers for Israel

Back in the summer of 1982, during the Galilee War, the Golan Heights settlements were faced with the prospect of losing their entire agricultural crop. The majority of their able-bodied settlers had been called up for army reserve duty in the IDF. The acute shortage of manpower left crops ripening and unattended.

Dr. Aharon Davidi (z’l), who in the past had served as head of the IDF Paratroopers and Infantry Corps, was the director of the Golan Heights community and cultural activities. Touched by settlers’ distress and wanting to solve the problem, Dr. Davidi sent a number of his friends to the States. Their job was to recruit Jewish volunteers who would then come to Israel to attend the crops. Within a few weeks 650 volunteers arrived in Israel to assist with the harvesting. Realizing the merits of their action, these first volunteers expressed their wish for a volunteer project to be perpetuated.

In the spring of 1983, Sar-El – The National Project for Volunteers for Israel was founded. Sar-El, של-יר; “Service for Israel,” is a non-profit, non political organization and is under the umbrella of the IDF. Volunteers from various countries come to partake in the project. To date, Sar-El has had participants from over 30 countries. The majority of volunteers have come from the US and France.

One of Sar-El’s “poster children” is our very own YIDB member, Roselee Redelheim. To her credit, Roselee, has completed three “tours of duty” – she volunteered her services three times through Sar-El and will be doing so for the fourth time this coming March 2017. Roselee states volunteering through Sar-El had always been on her bucket list. She discovered the benefits of volunteering with Sar-El through her friends. Their experiences always impressed Roselee. Left with feelings of frustrations throughout her life of not being able to make Aliyah in her late teens, volunteering for Sar-El filled the void for Rosalie. Sar-El became the means by which Roselee’s could fulfill her dreams and perform her duty for her country. For those of us familiar with Roselee’s determination and strength, no one is surprised to learn that Sar-El became her goal, her focus after retirement from her days of being a principal. In retirement, she would then have the necessary time needed to partake in the Sar-El program.

In May of 2013, Roselee flew to Israel. Roselee, with that special gleam in her eye and a smile on her face, refers to it as her “gap year in Israel.” Roselee compares her first day in Sar-El similar to going to overnight camp. Only in this case you first receive your uniform, your mattress (you are considered to be lucky when you are able to obtain two mattresses) and your assigned quarters. The next day you must report for duty. Roselee did emphasize when you report for duty the importance of your army shirt being properly buttoned, your shirt tucked in your pants, your belt buckled and your sleeves rolled down. Even during in the heat of the day! While standing at attention, you observe the raising of the Israeli flag followed by singing of the Hatikva. Roll call is taken. Each new Sar-El volunteer receives their “soldier” epaulets. For Roselee, this is an emotional time. The tears she says just flow. She is so proud to have the opportunity to serve Israel and to give back to the country she holds so dear. “It is amazing and moving,” Roselee told me, to see all the volunteers standing on the parade ground. They are between the ages of 29 to 85. Each one paid their way to Israel and participate in the program. They are from various countries. This year they came from England, Uruguay, Holland and the United States. Some come every year and some have come for the first time. Some are not even Jewish. Surprisingly, some are Israelis who live in the country. Everyone comes from a different walk of life to perform one purpose.
Once the morning ceremony is completed, you must report to your assignment. At this particular army base located in the north of Israel, the assignment is to take inventory of guns and tank parts and place barcodes on these items housed in a warehouse. You work until lunch time when you are dismissed to have lunch in the chadar ochel (dining room.) Here you are free to sit either with the Sar-El volunteers or with the IDF soldiers who are based on the base. Roselee cherished the time she was able to “schmooze” with the IDF soldiers. She loved to able to converse in Hebrew with these soldiers and discover more about their life in the army and in Israel.

Roselee’s second stint in the army took place in October, 2014, somewhere deep in the Negev at a special communication and missile base. This time the volunteers were basically Americans and the task was to separate iron from the bullet belts and missile casing that had not been fired. Every morning the volunteers climbed aboard the bus and were driven further into the Negev to an area covered with camouflage netting. There, Roselee revealed, you would sit over a barrel and begin separating the precious iron which is collected and eventually recycled. It was back-breaking work and would indeed prove to be hard on Roselee’s back. A few days later, Roselee was reassigned to kitchen duty. This involved setting up before meals, cleaning up after meals, washing floors and some cooking. Roselee was impressed by the IDF’s respect and strict adherence for Kashrut. The base had a separate kitchen for meat and milk and a separate room for vegetables and fruit where checking for bugs was done. Although this was a shemita year, the army did not accept the heter, a dispensation, from Rav Kook to eat local fruit and vegetables. Rather, the IDF either obtained fruit and vegetables from other sources other than Israel and/or fruit and vegetables grown in water.

During this time, I remember Roselee calling me to let me know her whereabouts deep in the Negev. As it was nighttime for her, I recall asking her if she had looked up at the sky to see the stars which are so clear in the desert. “Stars!” she exclaimed, “I am busy looking down for scorpions, snakes and jackals!”

It was here, at this base, Roselee learned just how moral and ethical the IDF is. The Commander in Charge informed Roselee and the other volunteers during one of their nightly talks that Israeli soldiers were not permitted to shoot a terrorist in the back, even it is clear to the soldier who the perpetrator is. Roselee’s voice becomes an octave higher at the thought of this rule. She is of the opinion that obeying this regulation ties the hand of the Israeli soldier. It makes for an impossible situation and gives the terrorist the upperhand.

Roselee’s “third tour of duty” took place in May 2016 near Tel Aviv. This time Roselee had the “cushy job” of packing medical supplies for field packs. It was an important yet tedious job. The same medical supplies must be placed in the same pocket every time. A mistake cannot be made. The medic in the field has to be able to locate the item needed instantly. A soldier’s life could be at stake. The Commander of the base poignantly pointed out as a medic in the army, he was performing field triage for a soldier who had been badly hurt when they came under fire. Knowing this soldier would not make it, the Commander knew he needed to perform immediate emergency surgery. He did not hesitate. He had no doubt the medical field packs were packed correctly by the volunteers of Sar-El. He located the necessary surgical items within minutes. Thanks to the work of the Sar-El volunteers, he acknowledged, he was able to save the soldier’s life.

To the outsider and maybe even to some Israeli soldiers, the volunteer services for Sar-El might seem trivial. After all, it does seem somewhat irrational to pay a fee to volunteer your time for a week, two or three and for some, a couple of months to perform these somewhat menial tasks. For sure, a regular chayal would refuse to do these jobs. After speaking with Roselee, I can see why the work of Sar-El volunteers is essential and vital. I also understand the sense of pride, the sense of giving back to the country I know Roselee considers her home.