

Ma'ase Volunteers Rally to Help During and After Carmel Fire, December 2010

On Thursday, December 2, a forest fire broke out on Mount Carmel in northern Israel. The fire, which started in a garbage dump near Ofsiya, spread quickly and threatened many communities over a large area. The worst fire disaster in Israel's history claimed 43 lives, forced 17,000 people to leave their homes and destroyed nearly 50,000 dumans of land and 5 million trees. It was fully extinguished only on Sunday, December 6.

In response, many Israelis offered to volunteer and help those who were affected by the calamity. The members of Ma'ase, which carries the banner of leadership and social involvement as Rashi's volunteering arm, joined the relief efforts as a matter of course. The volunteers worked in two main arenas:

1. Members and staff of the Gal pre-army program (Mechina) helped at the national emergency centers in Tirat Carmel and Haifa;
2. Members and staff of the Eitan program helped at the Yemin Orde Youth Village, which suffered much damage.

Additional activity is planned at the Bedouin village of Ein Hud (see below).



Gal volunteers at the emergency centers

On Friday morning, some 50 Mechina members, graduates and staff traveled to the evacuation center in Tirat Carmel where more than 50 families and 250 people were staying. Talking to the evacuees, the volunteers realized that beyond the basic necessities such as water and food there was a strong need for reassurance – clear and reliable information, organized timetable and so on.

Based on the needs they identified, the volunteers worked on several levels:

- Keeping children, youth and adults with through arts and crafts, sport, conversations, kabbalat Shabbat and dinner in order to dispel the tension, boredom and frustration;
- Helping to tidy up the center – cleaning, making sleeping arrangements, arranging referrals to welfare and health services;
- Attaching speakers of Amharic and Russian to welfare and municipal staff to help translate instructions, answer questions and so on.

The response proved valuable and significant, with excellent connections being formed between the volunteers and the evacuated people.

By the commencement of Shabbat, a small team of 10 volunteers remained in Tirat Carmel to provide further assistance and to map the needs in cooperation with the civil forces in the field. They strive to work efficiently and professionally together with the local residents, while fitting within existing support systems and avoiding risk to human life.

Eitan volunteers at Yemin Orde Youth Village

Ma'ase works with the same population groups as Yemin Orde, and graduates of the village are among its members. Therefore, offering help in times of trouble is very meaningful to us.

Once the blaze was over, on Tuesday evening, we received a call to organize a team to help cleaning and clearing the village in preparation for the return of the youth residents. On Thursday morning a group of 13 volunteers (one of them a graduate of Yemin Orde) and 5 staff members arrived at the village. Following a quick briefing on safety issues, they joined the house mothers to clean, air the rooms, gather clothes, bedding and curtains to be washed, sort out laundry, pick up trash and throw it out etc.





The volunteers worked all day in groups of three, each assigned a staff member from the village, with great enthusiasm and willingness to do any job. For the volunteers this was a transforming experience, making them feel the results of the disaster as well as the direct impact of their contribution towards welcoming the young residents back to the place they call home.

Ein Hud

The small Bedouin village that was hurt by the fire enjoyed much less media attention and public sympathy than other places.

During the fire we were in continuous contact with public figures and educators from Ein Hud to clarify the needs and express our readiness to help as required. We were asked to provide support to the village's children, particularly individual educational tutoring, social-recreational activities and group work involving emotional processing. Ma'ase undertook to carry out the activity with Arab volunteers from the Afek program, starting as soon as possible.

The next steps

We intend to continue our efforts with volunteers from all our programs, Arabs and Jews working shoulder to shoulder to repair the damage, offer relevant educational activity to children and help in any other way as needed. This is in fact the essence of Ma'ase: finding a common denominator of civil responsibility.