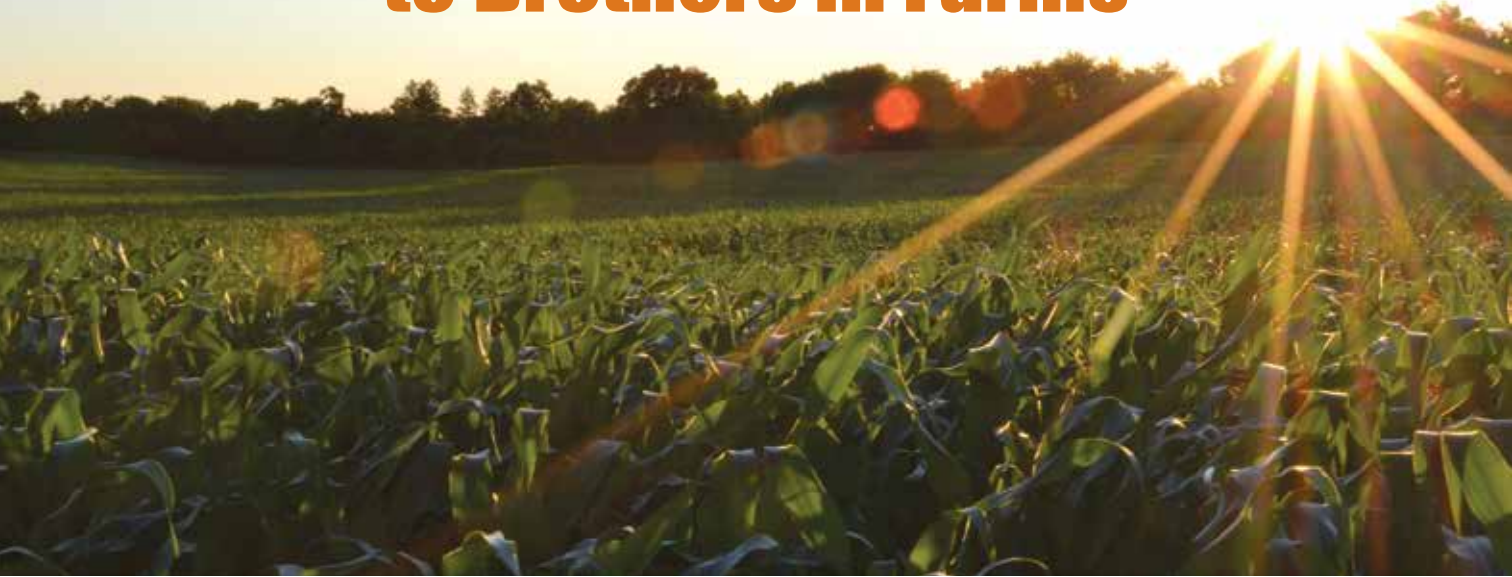


From Brothers in Arms to Brothers in Farms



By Patricia Golan

AT 6:45 a.m. on a Tuesday morning, October 31, at the Idan HaNegev Industrial Park in the northern Negev, a few hundred men and women from around the country were pulling into the parking lot. They came to volunteer to help with the crops in farms in the Gaza envelope, the area within seven kilometers of the border with Gaza, devastated by the horrific Hamas attack on October 7. Since the onset of the war, farms are lacking at least 25,000 workers.

The volunteers filled out forms on their smart phones, then lined up in front of one of three tables where lists of agricultural jobs were listed, categorized as “difficult,” “medium,” and “easy.”

The volunteers, having chosen their jobs according to their abilities, were then organized into teams that would travel to farms in the Gaza envelope. At least half the volunteers were over 65. For the rest of the day, they carried out a variety of jobs in vegetable and fruit



ROEE DINOVICH

Volunteers from the hi-tech company Radcom picking oranges in Moshav Bnei Dror.

plantations, hothouses, and fields, done in the past by paid workers. The volunteers were sent mainly to farms on the *moshavim*, since most kibbutzim are so close to Gaza that they are within a closed military zone.

The project is one of a nationwide wave of volunteer initiatives, the largest civilian rescue

and support system the country has ever known, and – at least for the first month – filling the void left by a largely dysfunctional government and civil service.

According to a recently published Hebrew University study, more than 1,000 civil initiatives have been launched since the war began, such as the rescue and evacuation of civilians and animals; provision of essential supplies; and support for bereaved families and families of those who went missing during the conflict. Approximately half the Israeli population has been volunteering in some capacity or other since the start of the war.

This recruitment center in Idan Hanegev for agricultural volunteers, which operates daily, was set up by the Brothers in Arms (*Achim Laneshet*) organization, one of the protest movements established last January set up to oppose the government’s judicial overhaul bid. The group of active reservists and military

veterans – some of whom had threatened for months to boycott their reserve duties – raced to the front lines on the day of the attack and created a crisis center at a Tel Aviv convention center.

Taking advantage of their nationwide networks, databases, and organizational skills, the group pivoted on a dime, suspending all protest activities and becoming that first week the largest non-governmental aid agency in Israel to help those affected by the war. Brothers in Arms members organized drives for weapons and supplies. They helped rescue and rehouse 2,000 families who were in hiding, including people hiding at the site of the Supernova music festival where hundreds had been slaughtered. Their hi-tech members even worked to retrieve DNA samples from the Israeli villages that were attacked to help identify the dead, and organized visits to bereaved families.

Brothers in Arms was soon joined by another protest group, Women Building an Alternative (*Bonot Alternativa*), which, having also perfected their organizational skills during the nine-month protest movement, immediately mobilized and began running an operations center in the Tel Aviv convention center to provide clothing, medical supplies, equipment, transportation, and food packages.

WITHIN DAYS of the outbreak of the war, it was clear that farmers in the Gaza envelope had been left on their own to deal with the situation, in addition to the horrible disaster with their families. Their workers, mostly from Thailand, had either been killed, kidnapped, evacuated, or returned to Thailand. Many Israelis employed on farms as tractor drivers, machine operators, and managers were called up for military service. Farmers growing lettuce, tomatoes, avocados, fennel, pineapples, peppers, cucumbers, pomegranates, and strawberries had no help.

Lisa Perlman had been back in Israel for less than a week following a sabbatical year abroad when she was asked by friends in Brothers in Arms to try to set up a way to recruit volunteers to help farmers in the Gaza envelope area.

“We had no experience in doing this, but via social media and the organization’s own contacts, we manned the phones, and the mission exploded exponentially,” says Perlman, a former environmental reporter for *The Jerusalem Post* and spokeswoman for the European Union. “We could see that the government wasn’t doing anything to help the people who were most devastated by the massacres. The people in Brothers in Arms just started doing



Volunteers harvesting tomatoes in Moshav Yated.

what they know how to do.”

Within only a few days Perlman, together with Rony Pfeifer and Adi Enzel, set up a “war room” at the Beit Kama Junction in the northern Negev, and within two days were able to send hundreds of volunteers every day to some 60 farms. On weekends, more than 1,000 signed up. In a play on words, they renamed the project Brothers in Farms.

Southern Israel provides 70-80% of the nation’s fresh produce. “The entire chain of how these vegetables are tended and picked and taken to markets is Israel’s food security to a great extent. Why should we import from Turkey if crops are ready to pick from the field?” Perlman adds. “In addition to giving practical help, the volunteer project is also a morale boost to the farmers to know that people want to help.”

“We go to the farms in private cars, with as many people as possible in one vehicle. Everything is coordinated with the army. Sometimes we’re told not to come or that only a few can come,” explains Idit Avishai, who volunteers in agricultural work through Brothers in Arms several times a week. Volunteers are given detailed maps showing how to get to the sites, since the GPS is scrambled. “When we’re stopped at army checkpoints, they already have the list of who we are and where we’re working.”

Since the organization is well known as a protest movement, volunteers are cautioned not to discuss politics while at work. “Of course, we’re wearing our T-shirts that say what our organization is, but we don’t know what the farmers think, and we’re just there to help. We don’t want to make things more difficult,” says Avishai.

Volunteers are expected to bring their own supply of water and food for the day. Few are used to this sort of physical labor, and even the



Orit Nevo, volunteering in the citrus plantation in Moshav Emunim on the Gaza border. ‘My great-grandparents would have been proud of me. They were pioneers who planted orange groves 90 years ago.’

“easy” assignments can be tough. Orit Nevo, a communications and environmental expert who has been volunteering through Brothers in Arms, relates that “farmers don’t always supply work gloves, so I know I have to bring my own. Workers in the field are not protected if there’s a missile attack, so the army determines how many people are allowed to enter each farm, and everyone must return together.”

Indeed, even the occasional mortar falling in the open fields has not kept the volunteers from coming. Nevo, who is an international dog show judge, has recruited members of her own Ridgeback dog club to volunteer.

Brothers in Arms first set up their war room



BROTHERS IN ARMS

Volunteers (left to right) Na'ama Dotan, Anat Mazor-Baz, and Idit Avishai harvesting cherry tomatoes in Moshav Ami'oz.



LIOR SIMCHA

Among former politicians volunteering to help out in farms is former deputy chief of staff Yair Golan, milking cows in Kibbutz Nir Oz. A reported 38 people were killed from the kibbutz on October 7 and 75 abducted.

activities at the Beit Kama Junction, “But when the immediate emergencies, such as locating and evacuating people stopped, we still had the issue of logistics – where to send volunteers to help the farmers,” says Shi Hanan, coordinator of the agricultural recruitment center set up on a vacant lot at the Idan HaNegev Industrial Park, explaining why they relocated to the industrial zone next to the Bedouin city of Rahat. The adjacent hi-tech start-up office building has provided its facilities to the organization. The nearby SodaStream company has also provided its warehouse facilities to Brothers in Arms for the collection of equipment, clothing, and food for soldiers, as well

as help for families that have been displaced.

“Every day we call all the farms we know to ask how many volunteers they need and what type of work,” says Hanan, adding that they have yet to receive the list of farms from the Agriculture Ministry. All volunteers sign up for the work by submitting their ID numbers and other personal details. This ensures that they are covered by the National Insurance provider (Bituach Leumi) for the day. (Anyone registering for volunteer work via an organized group or platform is insured for the day.)

Since the project began after the war broke out, more than 30,000 volunteers through

Brothers in Arms have headed south to volunteer – 4,000 to 5,000 weekly.

“TZAV 8 for agriculture” is an app created to consolidate many of the organizations that are funneling volunteers to help the farmers. (Tzav 8, or “Order 8,” is the code for the emergency call-up of reserves.) “We’re part of a digital platform that organizes the volunteers rather than each farm doing its own thing, so there won’t be multiple teams going to the same farm,” explains Yaron Solomon, spokesman for the Israel Farmers Federation.

Solomon, who has an avocado plantation in Moshav Dekel near the Gaza border, has been accessing the app to recruit volunteers to harvest avocados or work in the packing plant. “These volunteers,” he states, “are not something I would take for granted. This is the really beautiful Israel.” Although the Agriculture Ministry has now taken responsibility for the Tzav 8 network, “It’s the people who created and ran the system; don’t imagine that it was the state that set this up,” says Solomon ruefully.

(While the Agriculture Ministry rather belatedly released a statement promising to fund logistical costs, including transportation and food for volunteers working in agriculture, and even offering payment to some, to date, none of the organizations has received any aid.)

Tamar Feingold from Herzliya was one of 10 volunteers working in the avocado plantation in Moshav Dekel last month. She’d heard about the project through her local Women Building an Alternative branch. “Physical work clears the mind,” she says. “You meet other people, we’re helping the farmers, and we like the work.”

While other organizations funneling volunteers to farms had to set up recruiting mechanisms almost overnight, the veteran volunteer and educational nonprofit Hashomer Hachadash already had in place substantial resources to assist farmers throughout the country who had suddenly lost all their workers. Established in 2007, initially to combat agricultural theft and harassment, Hashomer Hachadash (“The New Guard”) operates a wide range of educational programs and receives generous support from the government and the Jewish National Fund – USA.

Hashomer Hachadash has tens of thousands of volunteers, a youth movement of some 24,000, four agricultural schools, and 300 cadets doing National Service (instead of regular military service) and pre-army programs (*mechinot*).

“We’ve been working for 14 years, so we have a large contact database from our many educational programs,” explains organization spokesperson Liat Cohen. Since the Education Ministry won’t allow young people to volunteer in the Gaza envelope, high schoolers are sent to farms in other parts of the country, she explains. “We have a unit that only deals with the Gaza border, and other units finding matches for farms in northern and central Israel because everyone is missing workers. We’ve expanded our outreach by posts and newsletters and WhatsApp message systems.”

Hashomer Hachadash has even begun airing TV ads to recruit volunteers. “Many people who were not connected with us in the past have responded and signed up, especially people who are temporarily out of work,” says Cohen.

Many major Israeli companies are also allowing their employees to do farm work once a week, though of course, they are salaried. According to a spokesperson, Hashomer Hachadash is currently supplying 2,000 volunteers a day to 600 farms throughout the country. JNF-USA has launched a special war-time campaign to support Hashomer Hachadash.

Potential volunteers fill out a form online in the evening, and are then sent a text message showing where they are to be placed and where to meet the next morning. Brothers in Farms also uses the “day before” online system. “Everyone until now has been working in emergency mode,” says Perlman of Brothers in Arms. “Now we’ve been organizing in a better and more constructive way. Everyone has to look to the future, in the short and long term.”

The country is now lacking some 25,000 workers, many skilled or semi-skilled who cannot be replaced by ordinary citizen volunteers. When it comes to working with livestock, especially the dairy farms, farmers can’t rely on untrained workers who may never have seen a cow before showing up for duty.



GIDEON FREUND

(Left to right) Gideon Freund, Tamar Feingold, and Michael Feingold working in the avocado plantation in Moshav Dekel near the Gaza border.

“Fortunately, the dairy industry has a network of volunteers all over the country who are willing to help those dairies that have lost workers,” explains Lior Simcha, CEO of the Milk Producers Association. There are 660 working dairies in the country; even retirees still know how to operate the complicated milking machines, boasts Simcha. These include some well-known former Israeli politicians who have been photographed wearing high rubber cowshed boots and milking the cows, such as retired generals Moshe Ya’alon and Yair Golan.

MANY GROWERS hope the volunteers can keep them economically afloat. But while all the groups and organizations are recruiting volunteers to help the farmers now, one Israeli organization is focused on the future. The

Volcani International Partnerships, the veteran NGO boasting top-notch experts in their field, principally works abroad, tackling global food insecurity by providing Israeli expertise. In Israel, it supports agricultural innovation and research. More recently, it funded firefighting equipment and mobile bomb shelters in the Gaza envelope communities.

“The communities that were most devastated by the Hamas attack are in crisis; they can’t think beyond the next hour, let alone the next day or month. They need a strategic partner with the experience and know-how to design a rehabilitation program, to find ways to build back even better than before, and to raise the funds needed,” states Danielle Abraham, executive director of Volcani. “They need someone to work for the farmers and with the farmers.”

To do this, Volcani International Partnerships has launched ReGrow Israel, the first fund focused on the rehabilitation and rebuilding of agricultural communities in the western Negev. The fund will be in partnership with kibbutzim, moshavim, and key agricultural organizations throughout that region. “The western Negev is really important agriculturally for the country,” says Abraham. “This is a catastrophe for the area. If we don’t rebuild the agriculture, there will be no foundation on which to rebuild the communities.”

Here are links to organizations mentioned:

- <https://www.ahimlaneshek.org/>
- <https://eng.hashomer.org.il/>
- <https://supportingisraelifarmers.co.il/>
- <https://www.vipartnerships.org/>



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