



Distributing food. 'The elderly are looking for dignity; they don't want to be seen as needy.' (Photos: Courtesy)



A happy group raises their drinks. Ezrat Avot is looking to 'create a place where the elderly can continue to learn, exercise, communicate, be productive and give back to society.'

## Enriching the lives of seniors

• By JOSH HASTEN

Enough talk. Where's the action?" asks Naomi Sharabi, the feisty executive director of Ezrat Avot, a not-for-profit organization she founded with her grandfather Rabbi Shlomo Gamliel in 1976 with the goal of providing dignity – and a hot meal – for Jerusalem's seniors.

Her frustration stems from her view that not enough is being done for the more than 75,000 residents over the age of 65 in the city, many of whom she says suffer from isolation and loneliness.

Sharabi has dedicated her life to aiding Jerusalem's growing community of lonely seniors. As Ezrat Avot celebrates its 40th year, the organization is preparing to move from its cramped Mea She'arim center into its new Senior Health and Life Enrichment Center on bustling Golda Meir Boulevard in Ramot.

Once fully operational, the state-of-the-art six-story 2,500 square-meter facility will offer a broad range of cultural, social and welfare services for the elderly residing in the greater Jerusalem area. Currently, the main floor of the new building has been completed with an activities hall, synagogue and administrative offices. The rest of the building remains under construction.

Sraya Sharabi, Naomi's son, who is the organization's managing director and has been working for Ezrat Avot for 16 years, is hopeful that the move into the new building will happen soon.

He says that during this transition period, two of Ezrat Avot's main programs – meals on wheels and a food basket program – are still operational.

Through the meals program, 1,000 weekly meals are delivered to homebound elderly in need, and more than 200 food baskets of dried goods prepared by volunteers for impoverished seniors are picked up at the Mea She'arim center. In addition, more than 2,500 needy

families received food packages, including wine and matzot, for Passover.

Sraya is adamant that the new center will be a game changer in expanding services for the elderly.

"More than 42,000 cars pass this site daily," he says. "This location is accessible from all over the city, and will attract a diverse group of the elderly – religious and non-religious – and our programming will attract all types."

Sraya says that the mentality of the elderly seeking services has changed over the years.

"The elderly are looking for dignity. They don't want to be seen as needy. They don't want to be stereotyped, or have this stigma as being unvalued. Those who feel stigmatized shy away from organized activity and programs."

He says that studies show that only 3 percent of the elderly in Israel regularly attend programming in their neighborhoods, but he believes Ezrat Avot's new center will change that.

"We want the elderly to be active, to have a social life, to be part of the public arena." He notes that new center – adjoining the Ramot Mall, which houses branches of all of Israel's health funds in addition to a post office, supermarket, banks, etc. – will automatically draw people to the center. The blue line of the Jerusalem Light Rail will stop at the door.

"If people know they can attend a yoga class or a lecture when [leaving the house] to take care of personal errands, they will be drawn here, and it will be a part of their daily lives," he says.

Aviyah Lev, who serves as Naomi's assistant at Ezrat Avot, details the programming that will be offered in the new center. The facility will house an exercise and fitness center, and a swimming pool. Therapy programs will include gardening and petting animals. The center will also feature enrichment programs and lectures, and offer

legal advice. With an industrial-scale kosher kitchen, the meals and food packages program will be greatly expanded.

Lev believes the main goal of Ezrat Avot is "to create a place where the elderly can become productive, increase their quality of life, and enable them to contribute to society."

She says that in this world, "we admire the young," and thus tend to focus on them. The elderly population "can lose self-esteem, or walk with their heads down, especially if they are in a difficult financial situation. We are creating a place where they can continue to learn, exercise, communicate, be productive and give back to society."

Lev adds that the organization would not be where it is today without "40 years of faithful volunteers" who have sustained its activities and programming. Sraya notes that while more than 100 volunteers work in the old building preparing meals and running programs the new facility will be "the biggest volunteering center for the elderly in Israel."

Many of the organization's volunteers are seminary students and other young people. Lev says that some of the most inspirational volunteers are part of the "Seniors for Seniors" program. There elderly people in a good physical and cognitive state give of their time to help their peers. She describes an 89-year-old "elegant" well-to-do socialite who can be found in the Ezrat Avot kitchen cutting vegetables.

Naomi believes that the new center will further diversify Ezrat Avot's pool of volunteers. Notwithstanding the current location in Mea She'arim, Sraya says that most of those benefiting from the food distribution programs over the years are not haredi.

On a tour given to *In Jerusalem* of the unfinished building in Ramot, Sraya gets excited about the future kitchen. Programming can only begin once that facility and the adjacent dining room are fully operational, he explains. Plans include a café offering a social environment to linger over a light meal or a drink.

Edna Yerushalmi, who has been attending Ezrat Avot activities for seven years, is looking forward to the move to Ramot.

"Unfortunately, because of my health problems, it's difficult to travel to Ezrat Avot. There is no transportation to its present location, and no parking. I look forward to moving to the new center, and I will be happy to be able to stay at the *moadon* [club] for longer hours and more activities," she smiles.

Miriam Mazor, who has been active at Ezrat Avot for more than 20 years, says "After all these years, it will be good to have better conditions, to come to a permanent and big place with fresh air, windows and sun. We will have more things to do, and stay for a longer time each day."

Lev credits Sharabi with having the vision and determination to make Ezrat Avot's new building a reality.

"Naomi has drive. 'Let's not talk. Let's do' [is her motto]."