

Comedy cheers lonely Holocaust survivors

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By Yoni Peres

NEVEH ESHKOL, Israel – Am Sameach, meaning “Happy People,” is a non-profit organization that was begun 10 years ago in Tel Aviv. Here in this regional council, near Israel’s border with Gaza, Am Sameach representatives help to lift Holocaust survivors and other residents from the depression and fear caused by the ever-present danger of rocket attacks at any time.

Earlier this month, some 60 elderly people, mostly Holocaust survivors, were sitting while Enzo Agada, full of energy, was hopping among them, dancing and playing the violin.

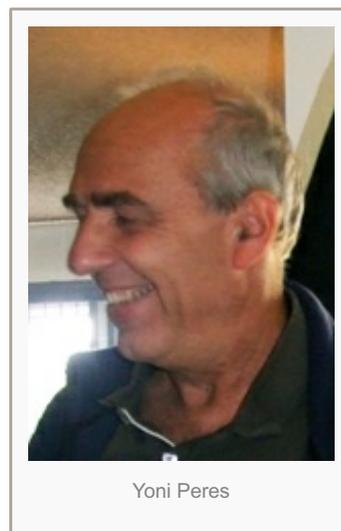
Following several short speeches, the lights went off and a series of short humorous movies were projected on the screen, prompting laughs and giggles from the audience.

Enzo Bau made Aliya from Argentina 33 years ago. He changed his name to Enzo Agada (“Im Tirzu, En Zo Agada” – “If you will it, it is not a legend” –Theodor Herzl).

Agada realized a long time ago that a stressful life style leads to many problems, such as heart disease, ulcer disease, diabetes, hypertension, depression, etc. Also, stress reduces work efficiency and increases the number of road accidents, due to nervousness and impatience.

To combat stress, Am Sameach uses humor, laugh Yoga workshops, clowns, humorous short movies and more funny activities. It has been proven that smiling and laughing stimulate the release of compounds to our blood stream, such as endorphins, enkephalins and others, contributing to a significant decrease in stress.

The situation of about 180,000 Holocaust survivors in Israel is very sad. A quarter of them live below the poverty line. Most of them live on a very limited budget, lonely and depressed. It seems that the state authorities do not take enough care of them. As a result, various non-profit organizations try to help and support this elderly community.



I witnessed another Am Sameach presentation about two years ago in Modi'in, the city that was home to the ancient Macabees.



Sad faces turn into happy ones during Am Sameach presentations and activities. (Photos: Danny Wieler)

I sat in on a session for 30 people, most of whom came with sad faces. Forty-five minutes later, a miracle happened there. Yohanan (Jorge) Weller, a film director, instructed the participants in a humorous movie workshop, to engage in comic situations and edit short movies.

Weller divided the participants into groups of 2-3 each. He asked them to think of funny situations and act them out for 5-10 minutes. In a very short while, the room filled up with laughter and giggles. One could not believe the difference between the mood of those participants, before and after the workshop.

Daniel Luz is an 82 year-old Holocaust survivor. After many years of living in Kibbutz Nirim, he moved to Moshav Yevul, closer to his daughter. After suffering 12 years of missile and mortar attacks in the Eshkol area, he explained: "When I discovered the physical limitations of the third (elderly) age, I decided to look for ways to cope with it. The people around you do not like to hear your complaints about pain and sadness, unless you use humor. Fortunately, I met Yohanan Weller with his project 'Life as a funny movie.'

"Yohanan believed in me and encouraged me to create a stand-up comedy monologue, helping me fulfill my childhood dream – performing on the stage," Luz added. "Recently, I realized that this approach is called 'Positive Psychology.'"

On March 9, in an annual "Local Spirit" talent contest at the Eshkol Regional Council, Luz won the first prize with his

stand-up comedy monologue, with 600 people in the audience, laughing to tears.

Am Sameach's mission is to reach out to as many Holocaust survivors as possible as well as to people who are disabled or intellectually challenged or with special needs. It relies solely on contributions. Its website is www.am-sameach.org.

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Peres is a retired veterinarian and freelance writer with a wide acquaintance with Israel's government, land, and peoples. He may be contacted via yoniperes@sdjewishworld.com. Comments intended for publication in the space below must be accompanied by the letter writer's first and last name and by his/ her city and state of residence (city and country for those outside the U.S.)

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