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UJA-Fed. To Fund Day School Scholarships

In a first, the charity earmarks \$1 million for tuition assistance; day schools 'not for us,' say non-Orthodox parents in city, L.I., in new study.

Stewart Ain
Staff Writer

For the first time, UJA-Federation of New York will provide scholarship money to Jewish day school students.

The \$1 million in scholarships, to be awarded next year based on need, will be granted through the 280 yeshivas and Jew-



Students at the Hannah Senesh Community Day School in Brooklyn. Their parents, and others, could get \$5,000 toward tuition.

ish day schools in the city, Long Island and Westchester. The minimum scholarship would be \$5,000; the maximum is to be determined based on the number of eligible applications received.

"Our overall strategy is to make day schools an affordable and accessible option for more Jewish families," said Deborah Joselow, managing director of UJA-Federation's Commission on Jewish Identity and

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Gaza War Surges As Questions Mount



Israeli tanks mass at the Gaza border. There are fears Israel could get lured into a costly ground war. GETTY IMAGES

Learning Lessons Of Lebanon War?

Michele Chabin
Israel Correspondent

Jerusalem — The haunting sound of sirens blaring, the images of frightened families huddled in overcrowded bomb shelters as the Israel Defense Forces battled Hamas in Gaza this week has evoked in many Israelis dark memories of the much-criticized Second Lebanon War against Hezbollah during the summer of 2006.

But at least in the early phases of the offensive, there are indications Israel's military leaders learned important lessons from that war — including the need to limit objectives and expectations. Still, by Tuesday some Israel commentators were starting to question whether there was a Gaza exit

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Israel's PR Battle Seen Aimed At Obama

James D. Besser
Washington Correspondent

Pro-Israel groups launched a massive public relations campaign this week supporting Israel's air offensive aimed at stopping missile attacks from Gaza — and an unspoken target of the *hasbara* effort was President-Elect Barack Obama, who now faces the prospect of taking office amid another raging Mideast conflict and worldwide demands for strong U.S. action to end it.

In conference calls, one-on-ones with reporters, and press releases, Jewish groups and Israeli diplomats alike reminded the



A Palestinian man looks at the government ministry compound in Gaza City, which was hit by Israeli air strikes. GETTY IMAGES

incoming president of his supportive comments during a visit to Sderot this summer.

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Ashkelon, In The Crosshairs

Absorbing blows, hoping not to become the new Sderot.

Joshua Mitnick
Israel Correspondent

Ashkelon, Israel — "Come on inside! Come on inside!"

The sudden late-morning wail of the rocket alert siren sent the Levi family dashing from the window of their high-rise apartment to a reinforced safe room in the interior. After a Katyusha slammed into a construction site across the street earlier in the morning, the Levis were not taking

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Israeli children react to a rocket attack in Ashkelon. Anxiety is palpable in the seaside city. GETTY IMAGES

Toward Inclusion: A New Dialogue on Disabilities

Eyes On An Elusive Prize

As the Jewish Braille Institute expands, activists for the blind say the community needs to do more.

Sharon Udasin
Staff Writer

For Nathan Rubinstein, a traditional bar mitzvah seemed improbable, if not impossible. Born with an optic

glioma — a severe type of eye cancer — Nathan endured nearly five years of chemotherapy beginning when he was 3. The treatment left him entirely sightless in his left eye and with only marginal vision

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Nathan Rubinstein reads a large-print Hebrew text, made possible by the Jewish Braille Institute. LARRY ZOLOTOR

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Eyes On An Elusive Prize

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in his right.

But a year and a half ago, as his mother Nancy thumbed through her newspapers and magazines, she came across an ad for the Jewish Braille Institute, advertising large-print Haggadot for Passover 2007, free of charge. Quickly, she found out that they would be able to enlarge his Hebrew school textbooks, and within a year, Nathan was deciphering the magnified Hebrew words with the help of his father. In November, he proudly recited the Torah brachot at his own bar mitzvah, as family and friends sat in the pews of Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan.

"I'm thankful for JBI," Nathan said, noting that he's abandoning childish T-shirts for the mature black pants, white button-down look of his father, and he'll continue studying Torah as he enters adulthood. "We're really getting the hang of it," he added.

The Jewish Braille Institute serves 35,000 customers in more than 30 countries and publishes audio books, large-print media and Braille translations in eight different languages. Architects melded JBI's original, seven-story Murray Hill double brownstone into one home in the 1960s, but the facilities were structurally unsound by the turn of the 21st century, and staff members could not operate with maximum efficiency, according to the director of development, Beth Rudich.

In October, however, through private donations and foundation support, JBI opened a newly renovated building where they are now able to easily distribute books to their customers with new conveniences like temperature-controlled library stacks.

Through services that JBI provides, clients and their families hope that the wider Jewish community will begin to better integrate blind people into congregations and create equal opportunities for all synagogue goers and Hebrew school students like Nathan.

"Awareness is beginning to seep in," said Sharon Shapiro, the director of Yad HaChazakah, the Jewish Disability Empowerment Center. "It's up to people in these congregations to tell the leaders of the congregation what their needs are because no one's going to do it without being told and told again."

In JBI's basement, the audio production room still contains old analog cassette recording equipment, but the staff members there say they are currently digitizing most of the tapes and already have the ability to translate the books into mp3 files for expedient transport overseas. Affiliated with the Library of Congress National Library Service for the Blind

and Physically Handicapped, the institute distributes tapes that play only on the special Library of Congress cassette player, available solely to those who have a proven need for audio books. Each book contains about six cassettes, with four sides on each, and the library houses 13,000 talking books, most popularly in English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, Spanish, French and Hungarian, according to Rudich.

"For most of our material there are no other ways for our people to get this," she said.

Eventually, Rudich explained, they hope to substitute memory cards for the cassettes, but the current clientele on average is generally elderly and not quite technologically savvy enough to handle such a shift yet.

"Down the road, streaming audio books is something that will become more common," Rudich said. "I think in 10 years from now [audio-book distribution] will be much different."

Next to the audio production room is Joyce Carrico, a technical specialist in the Braille book section who oversees the manufacture of custom prayer books, documents and other Braille materials. Though she can run normal computer files through a Braille translation program, Carrico and her staff must carefully format the results for page breaks and other nuances unique to Braille. The printer only produces 100 to 150 pages per hour, she said, but the Braille department still chugs on, translating custom texts for students in need.

"Our belief is that things should be accessible," Carrico said. "Our people should not have to fight for things other people take for granted."

A couple of floors up, Inna Suholutsky and Arlene Arfe manage JBI's large-print section, where clients like the Rubinsteins are able to submit personal requests and have nearly any Jewish text enlarged. Volunteers help them by proofreading the books, but the team aims to fulfill requests as quickly as possible, even if a student's textbook needs to arrive in segments.

"My children need their school books," said Arfe, who feels personally connected in these children's lives.

"They [JBI] enlarged the National Jewish Outreach Program's Hebrew crash course," said Nathan's father, Harvey Rubinstein. "I used it in conjunction with helping Nathan to learn how to read Hebrew, learn how pronounce the different vowels, and basically it helped him with the pronunciation and learning a number of additional Hebrew words."

"I think it helped him gain a lot of self-confidence," Rubinstein continued. "Essentially, JBI was the vehicle that was used to get Nathan started in terms of learning how to read and understand Hebrew."

And JBI materials are able to reach students across



"I'm thankful for JBI," says Nathan Rubinstein, reading a large-print Hebrew text. "We're really getting the hang of it."
LARRY ZOLOTOR

the country.

"Anything that our religious school here needs, we send to Arlene and it comes back a few weeks or a couple months later depending on how big it is, and blind students can be easily included in the curriculum," said Rabbi David Krishef, spiritual leader of Congregation Ahavas Israel in Grand Rapids, Mich., whose own son is visually impaired.

In addition to children, however, Arfe and Ina interact directly with their populous elderly clientele, who often will call them for large-print book recommendations as their vision begins to fade.

"I had a patient who called and said our tapes are the only living voice in her house all day," Ina said.

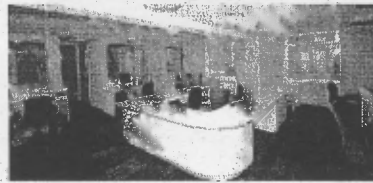
On one of the top floors, state-of-the-art recording studios host a flux of volunteer readers, including Broadway actors and authors like Anne Roiphe, Cynthia Ozick and Herman Wouk, Rudich said. In total, approximately 150 volunteers spend time in the recording studios regularly, each committing to four hours of recording time weekly. During each session, one volunteer reads in the booth while the other is outside listening through headphones and directing. Some of the volunteers have been recording with JBI for over 30 years, others include post-bar and bat mitzvah programs and at least a third of the participants are non-Jews, according to Rudich. In addition to the recently recorded Israeli fiction titles in translation, some of the newest material includes audio productions of Hadassah Magazine.

Customer Rose Zahler, 84, from Riverhead, is particularly excited that Hadassah Magazine is now available in both large-print and audio versions, as she has been an avid member of the organization since 1948 and would like to continue to read their publication.

"All the old ladies died off. There are only two of us left," Zahler said. "My chapter became a chapter when Israel became a state."

After a recent car accident causing Zahler to lose her reading vision, she called the Helen Keller School for the Blind, who in turn recommended that she request materials from JBI. And while still sick during the High Holy Days this year, Zahler was able to request cassette recordings of Yom Kippur and Rosh HaShanah services.

"Here was this magnificent service with a chorus and a cantor," she said. "I played



The newly renovated Jewish Braille Institute in Murray Hill. The group serves some 35,000 customers in more than 30 countries and publishes audio books and Braille translations in eight different languages.

COURTESY OF JBI

it all day long — it was the first year that I remember that I didn't go to synagogue."

But inside the synagogues, many activists for the disabled think that much more needs to be done in terms of inclusion.

"Anything that we do, whether it's in the structure of the synagogue or what programs are run — full accessibility needs to be a part of the equation just like electric wiring, telephones, plumbing," Yad HaChazakah's Shapiro said. Specifically, she feels that hallway signs should all have Braille translations, and synagogues should purchase large-print editions of prayer books that

are unabridged, so that congregants can have a full worshipping experience.

"The whole culture has to be educated," added Michael Levy, who himself is blind and serves as the director of the Travel Training program for the MTA and is a board member of Yad HaChazakah. "Would you have your child go on a play-date with a child who's blind? Would you accept a blind Jewish child in your day school? How would you feel if your young daughter was dating a Jewish man who was blind?"

Levy and Shapiro agree that the necessary technology for inclusion is readily available, but synagogues need to actively take the step to incorporate new ideas and equipment into their congregations — and to them, it's mostly a matter of mindset.

"I think that every synagogue should have a Braille siddur — they're easily available from JBI," added Rabbi Krishef, who has consistently been disappointed in his travels with his blind son to synagogues all over the country. "They haven't yet gotten around to the simple phone call to JBI."

But for Nathan Rubinstein, his blindness was by no means a barrier for his inclusion as a bar mitzvah at Lincoln Square Synagogue.

"We had a number of compliments about how he went up there and recited the blessings for his bar mitzvah," his father said, excited to continue Nathan's Hebrew and Torah lessons as a young man. "I think it's just a stepping stone because we are continuing to study and learn more and more." ■

The "Toward Inclusion" series thus far has reported on the community's increased awareness of and funding for autism, documentaries that deal with the struggles of Jews with disabilities, and the ordination of deaf rabbis.