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COVERING ISRAEL, THE MIDDLE EAST & THE JEWISH WORLD



An unyielding fight for those who remain

IDFWO's CEO Shlomi Nahumson says 230 women, 550 children and 29 unborn babies were left behind by Israel's fallen defenders since Oct. 7



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IDFWO: Supporting the families that paid the highest price for the security of Israel

According to CEO Shlomi Nahumson, all of us – including the state – can and must do more

By Lior Novik

WHEN ORIA and Shira (not her real name) participated in the IDF Widows and Orphans Organization’s (IDFWO) annual Bar and Bat Mitzvah event in Jerusalem in early April, they did so having already met on the IDFWO Otzma Program a few months earlier. Due to a cruel twist of fate, the death of their fathers brought these girls together and forged their supportive friendship. Oria’s father, Sgt.-Maj. Shmuel Smatzo Golima, bravely fell in the line of duty on October 7, defending the Sderot police station. Shira’s father fought courageously, and fell as a member of the civilian defense team of their community in the Gaza envelope on that same dreadful day.

“I feel happy today because I met my friends from the Otzma camp I went to in December,” says Oria. “Only they can understand what I feel. But I miss my father. This is my first birthday without him, and he should have been at my bat mitzvah.”

Shlomi Nahumson, CEO of the IDF Widows and Orphans Organization, stresses the importance of supporting the families who have paid the highest price for the security of Israel, by providing them with support and community.

Since October 7, over 550 children have been orphaned (in addition to 29 yet unborn babies) and 230 women widowed, he says.

“We represent all the widows and orphans of our fallen IDF soldiers, police officers, and other security forces,” says Nahumson, who is leading efforts to welcome them into the supportive embrace of the organization, as well as to enhance the state’s support for them. “These families paid the highest price



KOBIL KOENIKAS

Oria Golima at the IDFWO Bat Mitzvah event.

for the security of Israel. Our duty is to give them emotional support, a sense of community and belonging, and to amplify their voices. Any family that has endured such a tragedy is a family in need.”

Established in 1991, the IDF Widows and Orphans Organization holds a unique position in Israeli society, legally recognized by the state as one of only four official “representative” nonprofit organizations. Dedicated to serving the bereaved spouses and

children of Israel’s fallen heroes, the organization’s mission is pivotal: providing a comprehensive range of support – emotional, social, and financial – while also advocating for their rights at legislative levels. This holistic approach ensures that affected families receive not only immediate aid but also sustained support through various programs designed to promote resilience and personal growth.

“We address three primary areas,” explains

Nahumson. “First, community and emotional support. In addition, we provide assistance, including scholarships for students, medical grants for elderly widows, wedding grants for orphans starting their families, and various other forms of aid,” he says. Nahumson explains that the third area focuses on representation – whether in Knesset legislation or advocacy with other authorities and the media wherever necessary.

An unprecedented reality

“Our flagship program, Otzma, serves orphans aged six to 18 by providing ongoing, holistic support in a communal setting that nurtures them throughout their formative years,” Nahumson continues. “Since October 7, the number of orphans requiring our support has surged by over 130%, creating an

urgent need for resource expansion to maintain and enhance our care quality. One of our most immediate, and long-term challenges is to grow and evolve our Otzma Program, centered on four annual camps, which now must meet the dramatically expanded demand to ensure that no child lacks the comprehensive support he or she needs.

“For instance, some 270 widows and orphans participated in our pre-Pesach Otzma Camp in Kfar Hanokdim in mid-April,” he says. “Half of them are widows and orphans from the Swords of Iron war. One of the most meaningful moments I witnessed was a mother saying that it was the first time she had seen her children happy since their father’s death.”

Shiran Abuharon, the wife of Roni Abuharon, who was killed on October 7 while

fighting in Ofakim, went to the Otzma Camp with her three children, Lior (11), Maya (9), and Eliel (5). “Thanks to this camp, I feel that my children are opening up to others, that they are learning new things, and I feel that they are happy here,” says Abuharon. “I am happy to have the opportunity to get to know people like me, and gain strength to grow.”

Nahumson goes on to speak about the necessity to assess the unique needs of this ongoing war. Among several other emergency response programs the IDFWO has activated is the Letzidech Project for now 29 pregnant war widows – 14 of them have given birth already. Letzidech is a lifeline for the expectant mothers who have lost their partners, providing comprehensive support throughout the pregnancy, childbirth, and the early postnatal period, ensuring emotional and practical as-



LOCO GROUP

Participants at the IDFWO Otzma Camp in April 2024.



COURTESY

The Abuharon family. By permission of Shiran Abuharon.

sistance during this critical period.

Yaakov Ozeri was killed in a fierce battle in Gaza on November 7. On March 6 his wife, Hagar Daniels Ozeri, gave birth to their first child, Ella. “I wasn’t planning on having my first child alone,” says Daniels Ozeri. “I was planning to have Yaakov with me, but some stuff needed to change with the new situation. The Letzidech program gives a lot of support and gives me a chance to talk to other women in the same situation. I feel that just because Yaakov isn’t here to help me with everything basically, they give me support and have my back.”

The need for legislation

Nahumson says that the mission of the IDF Widows & Orphans Organization also includes spearheading legislation, with many areas in need of change.

“As an organization with a lifelong emotional and representative commitment for widows and orphans, spanning generations, we also provide support to older widows and orphans from previous conflicts. If I close my eyes, I already see the lasting repercussions of this current tragedy, highlighting the critical importance of community engagement.”

For this reason, according to Nahumson,



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Hagar and Yaakov. By permission of Hagar Daniels Ozeri.

the State of Israel has a responsibility to act.

“Israel needs to ensure that these families can truly recover from the damage they have endured,” he emphasizes. “Ultimately, we are talking about soldiers who left their homes, kissed their spouses and their children goodbye, and went out to defend us so that our children could sleep safely at night. We have a responsibility towards their fam-



DAVID METZLER

Shlomi Nahumson helping a bar mitzvah boy to put on tefillin for the first time.

ilies.”

Nahumson says that today, the reality is far from ideal. Many widows suffer significant hardships, both financially and in their ability to form new, fulfilling relationships and to raise their children by themselves.

Just over two years ago, the Ministry of Defense convened a public committee chaired by justice Elyakim Rubinstein of the Supreme Court. The committee examined how the state deals with the issue of IDF orphans. The committee concluded that the country does not do enough for them. For instance, when an orphan turns 21, he or she is no longer entitled to the benefits the younger siblings receive. The children of fallen soldiers (a term that Nahumson considers more respectful than “orphans”) should be entitled to full benefits until a much later age.

“We know that in Israel, most 21-year-olds are still supported by their parents,” Nahumson says. “If their father died to protect the country, this should be taken into consideration.”

According to Nahumson, this issue is just one symptom among many, highlighting the broader problem that the State of Israel currently struggles to support orphans and widows properly.

He adds that the issue does not stem from

the Ministry of Defense’s operational or performance levels but rather from legislative gaps.

Nahumson has been with the organization for 14 years and was appointed CEO three years ago. Early in his tenure, he tasked the staff with preparing a plan for a significant operation or war, anticipating the resources that would be needed and the expansion of the team.

“Looking back, we prepared for a wave similar to perhaps the Second Lebanon War or a large-scale military operation, but in reality we faced a tsunami,” he reflects. “Within the first few days after October 7, we were dealing with hundreds of deaths, and, unfortunately, there has been a steady stream of casualties since then.

“There’s nothing that can fully mend or bring comfort; this tragedy will stay with these children and women for the rest of their lives,” he adds. “However, we are there to support and alleviate some of their burden. For instance, when we organize a bar mitzvah for a child at the Western Wall, we feel how the boy’s father was supposed to be there, but he is not.” ■

This article was written in cooperation with IDFWO.