

This article appeared in the June 5, 2015 Jewish Advocate

THE JEWISH ADVOCATE®

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JFK Crossing agency specializes in more than travel:
Owner also helps coordinate support to IDF soldiers

By Susie Davidson
Advocate Correspondent

Area residents may regard BLER Travel as a mainstay of the community, the place where you go to plan your upcoming trip to Israel. And indeed, Shimshon Erenfeld has been doing just that for decades out of his Brookline office. But did you know that you can also visit or contact the agency if you'd like to help support IDF soldiers?

Since 2002, Erenfeld has served as the Vice Chairman of AFL-American Friends Of LIBI, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that raises money for educational, medical, recreational and other types of support of IDF troops.

The official fund of the IDF, LIBI was established in 1980 by then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin, along with then-IDF Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan. Erenfeld said that the acronym loosely translates to "My Heart" in Hebrew, and also derives from the Hebrew phrase "l'maan bitchon Israel," which denotes "For the security of Israel." According to its website, over 95 percent of donations are applied directly to various projects that benefit Israeli soldiers.

Erenfeld said that the American arm helps people fulfill their desire to assist soldiers in any way they wish. "We are a passive, and not an active organization," he explained from his office at 420 Harvard St. in Brookline's JFK section. "It's for those who want to do things. They may be family members with children in Israel, or people who simply wish to support IDF soldiers." Erenfeld said that in the past, they had to go through Israel. But after discussing the matter with others, he decided that there was a need to have an American chapter that could provide a direct connection to Israeli soldiers. "We were all volunteers, and we are still all volunteers," he said. "But we felt that a lot of these projects could not be accomplished easily through any other organization."

Erenfeld, a former IDF soldier himself, served in the Yom Kippur War, but also trained fellow soldiers, both in their duties, and in adopting a trade for their post-service lives. "I saw that in many cases, their needs were not met," he said.

LIBI projects originate from the IDF's Chief of Staff office. "They define what they need, and we raise the funding," he said, while adding that donors, whom he said hail from Alaska and Hawaii as well as within the continental U.S., can specify where their funding should go, for example, to assist a specific lone soldier, or to provide warm clothing for the winter. There is also a checklist of categories on the donor form.

Thousands of donations come in each year; Erenfeld was, in fact, getting ready to conduct an electronic funds transfer to the LIBI office at Camp Rabin, IDF's Tel Aviv headquarters.

"It's a popular group," he said. Indeed, a glance at American Friends of LIBI's Facebook page revealed 53,787 likes, with 3277 talking about the group at that moment.

To keep donors informed, Erenfeld has a subcontractor produce and disseminate a newsletter that outlines current efforts. Among notices Erenfeld recently received and forwarded to the newsletter are, for example, the "A Bond for Eternity" project, where 75 Torah scrolls are being dedicated in memory of last summer's 75 war victims.

"Each one of the 75 Israelis killed in Operation Protective Edge will have a Torah scroll written in their memory," the item reads. The scrolls, to be donated to communities and military bases across Israel, will commemorate 67 IDF victims, five civilian victims, and the three teenage boys kidnapped and murdered by Hamas in June 2014.

"In the Jewish tradition, dedicating a Torah scroll is one of the most sacred ways of memorializing a person, family, or community," the posting states, as it explains that the same effort was recently completed for the terror victims in Paris.

Other entries cite programs to assist lone soldiers, marathons to support the IDF, and delegations sent to aid victims of the Nepal earthquakes.

Erenfeld, a Newton resident, founded BLER in 1993. The name was a combination of a former business partner's initials, and his own. "Now, we say 'business, leisure, educational and recreational travel,'" he said with a smile. Back in Israel, he managed the customer service department for Israeli high tech company Scitex, which relocated to Bedford, Mass., and, Erenfeld, said, developed the first PhotoShop-like system. His wife, who still works at BLER, was working in another travel agency, and Erenfeld decided to learn about the industry at Uniglobe, a travel education company in Boston. "And I have had 37 years now in customer service," he said.

From the beginning, BLER had an active client base, although there were many other agencies at the time. Most have closed, but BLER is still going strong. "Word of mouth is good, and we have special arrangements with airlines," he said. While his agency is perhaps best associated with El Al, Erenfeld stressed that they have partnerships with every airline. "We do cruises, vacations, Eurail, individual, groups, international, and domestic," he said.

These encompass complex trips with families coming from various places, conventions, corporate "Incentive or Events Planning" trips, and trade missions for civic and political leaders.

"We work with people, and we advocate for them if problems come up, such as if someone becomes sick, or has to rearrange their trip for different reasons," said Erenfeld, emphasizing advantages that he can offer over booking online.

"It can be hard to reach online companies, but we provide personal service," he said. "We advise on the best things to do. We arrange flight changes."

BLER can also customize trips such as b'nai mitzvah at the Kotel. (Should the clients desire, they can arrange ceremonies, book hotels, plan receptions, and even obtain the rabbi.) The agency arranges excursions to the Holy Land for many synagogues, churches, communities and civic groups.

"Israel is very attractive to people for historic, religious, family reasons, and more and more, business relationships," said Erenfeld, who said people contact him online, walk in, call, text, and/or fax.

Nonstop flights from Logan to Tel Aviv begin on June 28, and will take off three times a week at 9 p.m., on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Erenfeld said they are filling up, and advised booking as early as possible, because flights become more expensive closer to the date of departure. Kosher meals will be served, and Israeli movies and media will be featured.

"It's a happy field, and when people come back and say they had a wonderful trip, it's very gratifying," he said.

BLER Travel is located at 420 Harvard St. in Brookline's JFK Crossing area, just north of Coolidge Corner. To donate to American Friends of LIBI, call [617-738-0500](tel:617-738-0500), Email info@friendsofibli.org, Fax [617-734-7914](tel:617-734-7914), or visit www.friendsofibli.org.