

Anchored in the Earth

A healing farm for combat vets



IDF VETERANS work the fields as part of Kaima's Anchored in the Earth therapeutic farming program. (Photos: Courtesy Kaima Farms)

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

While on reserve duty as a tank commander in Gaza, "T" had to make one of those split-second decisions typical of battlefields. His tank was hit, undoubtedly causing injuries among his soldiers.

Having to prioritize between finding his way to safety and checking on his soldiers, he focused his immediate attention on navigating to a secure position. The six minutes it took to accomplish that task felt like an eternity. Afterward, T felt guilty and ashamed.

"It's called a moral injury," said clinical social worker Guy Bar Navon, a reserve mental health officer in the IDF. Back at home, T couldn't discuss the incident with his wife and had little patience for his children, which made him feel even worse "because he's really very sensitive," Bar Navon said.

T was one of 46 traumatized reserve soldiers who regained their emotional footing in the first pilot year of a therapeutic farming program called *Ogen B'Adama* (Anchored in the Earth). It was established by Bar Navon under the auspices of the Kaima network of nonprofit therapeutic farms scattered across Israel.

The 10-week program operates at the Bein Hatlamim Farm near Pardes

Hanna. Now in its second year, the initiative serves approximately 60 veterans across four cohorts, providing a structured path toward healing and reintegration through farm-based therapeutic work.

"Working in the fields helped T tremendously," Bar Navon reported. "He told us how the agricultural work helped him find himself again and become more easygoing. While the guilt is still there, he has come to understand it."

Being part of something

Anchored in the Earth grew out of Bar Navon's previous work with Kaima ("sustainability" in Aramaic). The NGO was founded by Yoni Yefet-Reich in 2013 to provide socialization, purpose, structure, skills, paid work experience, and a listening ear to disenfranchised 15- to 18-year-olds and young adults seeking alternative National Service opportunities.

"We knew we could give these young people something beyond what they get in sessions with a social worker or psychologist," Yefet-Reich said – and, "most importantly, we knew it would involve farming."

Workers at Kaima's three sister farms, and at several others inspired by the organization's model, work alongside staffers and volunteers growing produce for community-supported agriculture

customers. External research has shown that the program effectively fosters a healing response by building trust, reducing social isolation, and restoring hope in the future.

Some 86% of Kaima's approximately 500 alumni have chosen to reenter high school – a remarkable percentage for programs targeting this population. "Going back to school is not our goal, and we don't talk to them about it. If they want to return, we help facilitate that, but the bottom line is they just want to feel normal and capable," Yefet-Reich said.

Relieving a heavy burden

Bar Navon and Yefet-Reich had often discussed how the model could be adapted to other populations. The war made it clear which one to start with.

In speaking with post-Oct. 7 combat veterans, Bar Navon noticed that "a big part of their trauma related to the isolation, loneliness, and the heavy emotional burden they carry." He felt that integrating them into a supportive community, mirroring Kaima's approach with young people, could alleviate their struggles.

"The idea is to empower them to do something productive with others who share similar experiences," he said; "to help them feel part of something larger than themselves."

The psychological benefits of An-

chored in the Earth stem from a combination of factors, its founder explained.

"First, research has shown that physical labor can enhance mental health. Second, touching the soil is extremely healing. Third, nurturing a living thing – taking part in raising healthy, tasty vegetables – brings a tangible result," Bar Navon said.

"And the most important thing is to surround yourself in a safe environment with a variety of people who know what you are going through. This creates the conditions to get back to being yourself."

Halfway through the program, one participant said that "the person I was when I got here and the person I am now ... are not the same person.

"I was fighting since October 8, and it took a long time to realize the damage it did. You can't just go back to your regular life," he said.

"For the first time, I'm meeting people like me. These are people I'd have no problem going back into battle with. The connection to the land grounds you. You plant a small seedling and watch it grow before your eyes: There's nothing more satisfying than that. It's completely home-like; you feel you can just be yourself – no masks, no layers, just you."

Natural relationships

Anchored in the Earth doesn't ask applicants for an official PTSD or other

mental health diagnosis, which can take months.

"We knew we needed to create an environment where participants could build authentic relationships, not clinical ones," Yefet-Reich said. "One of the most powerful ways to help people is through genuine connection – it's the most natural form of healing."

Led by trained staff, participants in this privately funded program learn to plant, cultivate, and harvest pesticide-free vegetables on the farm's two acres. In addition to hands-on agricultural work, the program provides individual and group counseling, complementary therapies, such as yoga and psychodrama, and family outreach. A group campfire wraps up each session.

"The program takes place two days a week, allowing participants the opportunity to simultaneously try to return to some sense of routine," Yefet-Reich said.

'He told us how the agricultural work helped him find himself again and become more easygoing'

Bar Navon discovered that the mostly 20-something veterans in Anchored in the Earth are eager for help in dealing with their trauma.

"After just a few sessions, you feel their trust. They say, 'Do whatever you need to do; I'm with you.' We have more freedom than we thought about how to proceed," he said.

Yefet-Reich explained that the veterans' readiness to be drawn out emotionally was an unexpected contrast to the youth, "where you have to wait a long time for them to open up. We have to wait, wait, wait. It's exactly the same with agriculture, especially organic agriculture. Plant the seed, take care of its needs, and eventually you get results."

National training center for social farming

Achieving results with reservists, teens, or any population requires appropriate training for staff and volunteers.

Even before Oct. 7, Kaima recognized the need for a national training center to promote best practices in therapeutic and social farming for educators, mental health workers, and agriculturalists.

"There is no central place for that," Yefet-Reich said. "After Oct. 7, there is more interest in therapeutic farming and CSA [community-supported agriculture] in Israel, and it's become more important to provide standardized training. We have accumulated so much knowledge and are keen to share it with others."

Kaima is in the midst of a campaign to raise \$2.7 million to build Beit Kaima, Israel's Training Center for Social Farming. This multi-purpose campus will



TOUCHING THE soil is extremely healing.

be built adjacent to Kaima's prototype farm on Beit Zayit, the moshav outside Jerusalem where Yefet-Reich has lived all his life.

Incorporating green technologies, Beit Kaima will house the nonprofit's educational, agricultural, and administrative activities, and will include a demo kitchen, packing house, and more. Partnerships and naming opportunities are available.

Yefet-Reich pointed out that two factors dovetailed to make the relevance of this training center obvious: an increased interest in local community farming, and the lessons learned about Israel's vulnerable agricultural sector during the war.

At Kaima's urging over the past decade, the Agriculture Ministry recently adopted regulations allowing land zoned for farming to be used for social purposes – previously only possible on a limited scale.

"This policy breakthrough, which relied heavily on Kaima's demonstration of the viability and impact of our model, opens access to agricultural land and infrastructure across the country, making it possible for NGOs to open social farming programs for many kinds of populations," Yefet-Reich said proudly. "Beit

Kaima will teach them how to succeed from the agricultural and therapeutic angles."

A place to come back to

While the impact of the war on IDF soldiers is obvious, it's less obvious for the teens in Kaima's full-time employment program.

"On October 8, the Home Front Command didn't allow the youth to come to the farm. Five of the 14 adults came to work in the morning, some stayed home out of anxiety, and some went to *miluim* [reserve duty]," Yefet-Reich recalled. "I said the first thing we need to do is take care of this farm. If we don't keep that up, there will be no place for the youth to come back to – and they will need a place to come back to."

He also knew, from the pandemic experience, that these teens were vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and disconnection when stuck at home. Until he could get a bomb shelter in place, he had

to think of an immediate solution.

"Shortly after the start of the war, we connected to our friends at Luiza Catering in Abu Ghosh. They obviously couldn't take any jobs then. So, we brought their workers here and sent our youth to their kitchen, where they had a huge shelter."

The resulting initiative, Taste of Unity, produced 1,000 meals a day to send to evacuees and soldiers, using vegetables donated by Kaima and other farms. After a few months, Kaima had raised enough money to put up a bomb shelter and welcome the youth back to the farm.

From the beginning, Yefet-Reich insisted that Kaima participants get to work every morning on their own, to instill a healthy work ethic. Some stay on the job four to six months, others a year or more.

One participant, who's been at Kaima Beit Zayit for a year, said she wakes up at 5:30 and travels an hour and a half to get to the farm.

"Yes, it's a long trip, but it's worth it," she said. "When I first arrived, I wasn't connecting socially; I wasn't even talking to anyone. I'd been hurt in the past. Here, I met people who care and want to listen and do things together. It's taught me in the most natural way what humanity is. Even though I sometimes have bad days, I always want to go back the next day."

Yefet-Reich said that Welfare Ministry officials "can't believe these teenagers wake up at four or five in the morning to come here, from Petah Tikva, Lod, Beit Guvrin, Kiryat Arba. It's because they love the environment here. If you create great environments – and we need to create a lot of different ones – things will change."

He pointed to grapevines spilling over a stone wall on the farm.

"The vines need a relationship with the stones, the soil, the sun... and we are exactly the same. If we don't get the right environment to create relationships, it's not good for us." ■

Visit www.kaima.org.il or www.kaima.org.il/anchored for more information on Kaima's projects.

YONIF YEFET-REICH, the founder of Kaima.

