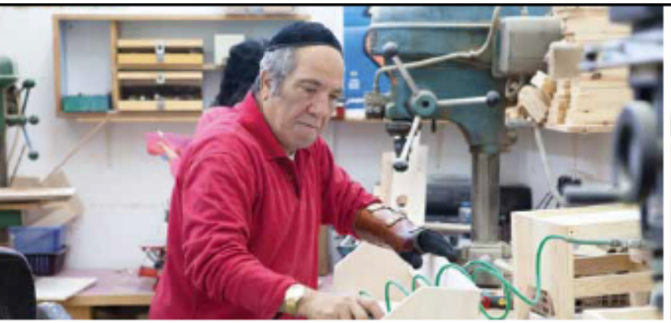
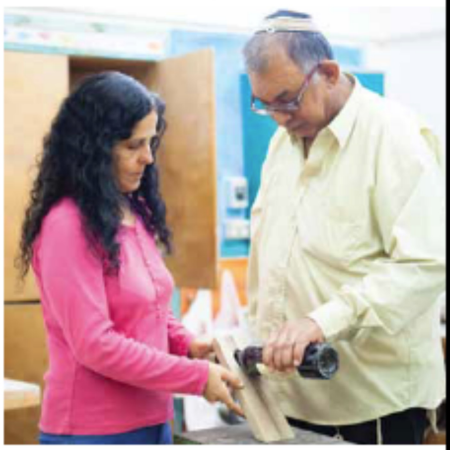


Model Rehab Center:

Lifeline for Head-Injured IDF Vets

"Many of our patients felt lost before they came to us. We make sure patients are happy and fulfilled."



Prof. Eli Vakil

For hundreds of severely wounded IDF combat vets and their families, Jaffa's Rehabilitation Center for Veterans after Traumatic Brain Injury has served as a lifeline. Since its founding 40 years ago by BIU's Department of Psychology and Israel's Ministry of Defense, this model project has enabled patients to lead as normal a life as possible considering their challenging disabilities which preclude a return to the mainstream. What started as a sheltered workshop has expanded over the years to include a broad range of work, social and enrichment activities. Patients come from 8:30 am – 2 pm, moving from one "station" to the next – carpentry, ceramics, silk painting, greenhouse – each according to his capabilities and attention span. They receive art, music, and occupational therapies and meet regularly with a social caseworker and psychiatrist, if needed.

"There's nothing much like this anywhere else in the world," elucidates BIU clinical neuropsychologist Prof. Eli Vakil, who directs the center, which is administered by BIU's Research Authority. Currently there are 50 patients and 20 staff members – "an unbelievable ratio," says Vakil, noting that "Israel is a leader in the rehabilitation of head trauma patients."

It was only natural that BIU, which pioneered Israel's first rehabilitation psychology program, should join forces with the Defense Ministry. "We have the expertise," relates Vakil, who heads the Memory and Amnesia Research Laboratory at BIU's Leslie and Susan Gonda (Goldschmied) Multidisciplinary Brain Research Center. Vakil served as the Jaffa center's clinical advisor for nearly two decades before succeeding founding director BIU Prof. Solly Katz seven years ago.

Patients, known as "*Haverim*," range in age from 25 until 70, and include Yom Kippur War vets as well as those wounded more recently. They elect their own social committee, which decides on funding leisure activities from income from the sale of their products. "We want to give them the feeling that they are in charge. We call it the 'therapeutic milieu', and it gives them a sense of dignity and pride." "*Haverim*" are especially proud of their choir, which this past July held a special concert in Jaffa to mark the debut of their third professional disk.

"We find part-time jobs for those capable of functioning outside, and provide training, support and supervision," he says, noting that one patient is a tailor, another restores old furniture, and a third specializes in silk painting.

"The family's involvement in rehabilitation is a key predictor of success," emphasizes Vakil. "We educate and support the family through every crisis, and invite them to events and outings with patients."

With a BA from BIU and a PhD from City University of New York, Vakil cites the advantages of associating a head trauma rehabilitation program with academia: "Knowledge is amassed in a very systematic way and enables us to develop better diagnostic tools." A BIU-Sheba Medical Center joint study indicates that through developing cognitive abilities, the brain becomes more resilient to dementia. Individuals with traumatic brain injury (TBI) who are highly educated tend to fare better than those who are not, although the "cognitive reserve" is less likely to kick in with the more severely injured. Current research evaluates the benefits of cognitive intervention, and a large-scale study is assessing the long-term effects of memory in older TBI patients.

"I'm privileged that I can merge research with academic and clinical activities and see results in such an immediate and concrete way," relays Vakil, crediting BIU for its pioneering community outreach. "I am proud to be part of such a university."

Demonstrating BIU's social commitment, the Jaffa center offers TBI Israeli combat vets with a new lease on life. "Many of our patients felt lost before they came to us. We make sure they are happy and fulfilled," he says, adding that some patients marry and have children and the center guides them along the way.

"The fact that they get up in the morning and go to work at the center enables them and their families to conduct a relatively normal life. It would be devastating if they stayed home all day." Affirms BIU Prof. Eli Vakil: "This is a real life-saving venture."