



Journey

OF A PENDANT

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PHOTOS: OURIA TADMOR

When Tova Klein visited the Yvel Design Center and bought a pendant with the message *Am Echad*, she had no idea of the journey on which she was about to embark. Throughout the search for the three murdered teens, and Rachel Frankel’s call for unity, throughout the Gaza war, the pendant accompanied her. And when the war was over, Tova embarked on a mission to gift each bereaved mother with this beautiful reminder of the unity of our nation.

This is the story of a pendant.

It’s the story of a Jewish mother whose heart twisted in agony when she read of each soldier who fell in Gaza last summer.

It’s the story of Isaac Levy, a man who transformed his father’s humiliation into a life’s mission.

And it’s the story of the Megemeria graduates, who walked thousands of miles and endured endless travails in their journey to reach the Holy Land — and who are determined to spread a message of peace and brotherhood.

But above all, it’s the story of a nation who are scattered and shattered and strewn over the world and yet who manage to grasp each others’ hands in comfort and in unity.

Tova Klein

“What can you say to a mother who buried an 18-year-old son?” Tova — who calls herself “just a plain Jew who lives in

Jerusalem” — encountered this question not once, but more than 70 times.

In May 2014, Tova and her friends visited Yvel Visitor’s Center. “It was so bashert,” she said. “We had been thinking of visiting the design center for months, but it only panned out in May.” Located in Motza, with a view of the hills surrounding Jerusalem, Yvel has an international reputation for producing iconic jewelry: synthesizing breathtaking baroque pearls with gold, diamonds, emeralds, and rubies. Yvel pieces are exquisite works of art (as reflected in the price tags, which can reach into the millions).

As Tova toured the workshop and gallery, she was entranced not only by the breathtaking beauty of Isaac Levy’s creations (the name Yvel is a mirror image of his name) — she was blown away by the Yvel concept. Five years ago, Levy established the Megemeria School of Jewelry to support the Ethiopian community. The Megemeria Collection contains a range of ethnic jewelry inspired by themes close to the olim’s heart.

Tova purchased a beautiful brass pendant, tooled with the message *Am Echad* in both Hebrew and Amharic. Just weeks later, Gil-Ad Shaer, Naftali Fraenkel, and Eyal Yifrach, Hy”d, were tragically murdered, and a few weeks after that, any veneer of summer calm was shattered: sirens rent the air, and thousands of soldiers entered Gaza.

Tova remembers those difficult days. “I was very affected by the war and the kidnapping. I don’t have kids in the army, but wanted to do something in solidarity with those who did. I was also greatly inspired by Rachel Fraenkel’s call for unity.”

During the war, Tova wore her *Am Echad* pendant every day. “People stopped me in the streets and complimented me on it.” The message clearly resonated deeply. And so Tova embarked on a mission: “I decided that I’d like to give a pendant to every mother who lost a child during that difficult time.” She wanted each bereft woman to have one of the handcrafted pendants celebrating our nation’s unity with its message of *Am Echad*.

Tova contacted Isaac Levy, CEO of Yvel, explaining her idea, and pointing out that she wouldn’t be able to afford the 75 pendants at full price. “I didn’t expect to hear back from him. But just a few hours later, I received an e-mail from Isaac, saying that he loved the idea and asking what I could pay. He underwrote the rest.”

Once Tova and Isaac worked out a price, Tova began to solicit donations from friends and relatives in Israel and in the States.

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Meanwhile, Isaac took the order to the Megemeria School and the workers began handcrafting the pendants.

Just a few weeks later, the pendants were ready, each wrapped in a beautiful box and accompanied by a card written and designed by Isaac.

Pendants in hand, the detective work now had to begin: how to find the families of the fallen soldiers? The army was not allowed to release any personal information, and wading through the phone book produced as many dead ends as leads. Tova spent hours on the computer, trying to trace the boys' families. "I would go to the soldier's Facebook page and find out what school the soldier attended. Then I'd call the school and explain that I wanted the parents' phone number."

Digging into each soldier's past — seeing them and their friends, the smile of a person on the cusp of adulthood, reading Facebook posts from the days preceding their deaths... the process was heartbreaking. "There's never really closure in these situations," says Tova, "but I felt like I was at least doing something. I became obsessed with finding the families."

One memorable quest was to find the parents of a soldier from Netanya. From reading the news articles after his death, Tova learned that the soldier's grandfather was murdered in a terror attack. In 1993, the grandfather had been in his son's electrical store in Netanya when he was fatally attacked.

Tova figured that a story like that would have become part of local lore. "I traveled to Netanya and started talking to the old-time store owners. I knew that they would remember the family and be able to connect us." Sure enough, Tova was soon pointed in the direction of the family, and was able to deliver the pendant.

Tova enlisted the help of friends to deliver the pendants. One friend, Maayan Neeman, galvanized friends from up north and down south to deliver pendants in their areas. "It was too wrenching for me to do it all myself. One mother spent two hours showing the shaliach around her son's bedroom."

Tova recalls one mother whom she spoke to by phone. "She wept throughout the conversation. She told me, 'My friend told me if I end my life I will never meet my son in Gan Eden. That is the only thing that prevents me from doing so.'"

Tova pauses to reflect: "It's impossible to understand the depth of these mothers' agony. The war ends, and people go back to their lives, but the lives of these women and their families will never be the same again."



Isaac Levy

Isaac Levy is the CEO of Yvel Jewelry. He also

founded and established the Megemeria School for Ethiopian olim.

"People get very excited when they come here and see the pearls and the beautiful jewelry," says Isaac Levy, in his beautifully appointed office in the Yvel Design Center. "But I tell them that it's not about the building. It's not about the jewelry." He pauses and there's intensity in his dark eyes. "It's about the people."

This was evident the minute I walked through the front gates, past the artfully placed semiprecious stones along the tinkling stream, and into the design center. The design center itself is a blend of hominess — couches and rugs and Levy's daughter's dog scampering around — and sophistication. But any thought that this is a sanctuary for aesthetics is quickly dispelled. Levy is adamant: "Without the people, this place is a body without a soul."

Walking through the design center, I begin to understand. I see Esther, originally from Ethiopia, sorting pearls: the lustrous stones pass through her nimble fingers. My guide tells me that Esther's highly developed eye and exquisite sense of aesthetics enable her to determine which pearl should be placed next to another. It's a careful choice, as each pearl must be selected to best complement the natural shape, shade, and beauty of each stone. Other workers shape wax models of brooches, which are cast in silver, and then in 18-carat gold. An oleh from South America offers me a peep through a pair of binoculars. I adjust the focus and a tiny diamond glitters — it is one of hundreds being set into a necklace. Across the way, another worker signs to the man sitting next to him.

With workers from over 20 countries, how

does Levy achieve a sense of cohesion? Levy pets the dog as he answers. "Twenty years ago, Orna [Levy's wife] and I went to the pearl farms, and everyone else was looking for the round, white, perfect pearls. The ones that are flawless. But Orna and I always looked for the baroque pearls — those that are imperfect, irregular shaped. It's the same with people. I don't look for the most professional or the model worker with top diplomas from prestigious design schools. We look for people with more passion than profession."

Levy molds and shapes each person's skill set, and achieves "an amazing mosaic of people." He pauses. "It's the same way we design jewelry."

Still, the journey to achieve this is not always simple: Levy admits that it takes decades to build a group. "Success is a long-term achievement. You fail, you fail, you fail, you fail, and then you succeed. And then you try to figure out what you did right and keep on that path of success."

What was the impetus behind Levy's determination to help olim? Levy's family made aliyah from Buenos Aires in 1963, when he was just a little boy. It was a difficult absorption: his father, an entrepreneur, invested their savings in a sausage factory just outside Jerusalem. Three months later, his partner absconded with the money, leaving Mr. Levy Sr. with nothing but bitterness.

Decades later, that very same plot came up for sale, and Isaac Levy snatched it up for his high-end jewelry business. He designed the magnificent premises using his practiced eye for detail and beauty. And in doing so, Levy closed the circle not only for his family, but he worked to establish a new model of integration.

But even this wasn't enough. Levy was pained by the plight of Ethiopian olim, who arrived in the Holy Land on a wave of idealism and were greeted



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by poverty and, often, discrimination. For this downtrodden community, he felt a new beginning was in order. And so the Megemeria School was born.

Megemeria — the Amharic for Genesis, or beginnings — was the perfect name for the school Isaac and Orna (together with YEDID, a charitable organization promoting social and economic justice in Israel) opened in 2010. Megemeria offers professional training to Ethiopian immigrants — from design and tool handling, to goldsmithing, gem setting, and pearl stringing. Armed with these professional skills, the immigrants would be equipped to earn a livelihood and integrate successfully into Israeli society.

With 200 applications for just 21 spots, Isaac had to set very specific criteria for acceptance. His aim was clear: to help people who would otherwise not be able to find work, and equip them with the skills they need to support themselves. “This is the highest form of tzedakah according to the Rambam,” he says. And so Isaac selected people who had never completed their studies, were slightly older, and who saw this as a passion.

Eight men and 13 women were selected for the inaugural class. Of the 13 women, five were single mothers. Challenges — or opportunities — quickly followed. The first challenge was the language barrier — none of the olim spoke more than a broken Hebrew. Isaac built a classroom and instituted an on-site ulpan. As training began, many of the students were making basic mistakes: sawing in the wrong places and measuring liquids incorrectly, not to mention their different concept of time. Isaac is sanguine about the frustration he encountered on the way. “If I see a small problem, I try to deal. But if I see a huge problem I jump right into it and work things out from the root upward.”

Jump Isaac did. He brought in an optometrist from Hadassah hospital to check the students’ eyes. Many needed glasses. Then he realized that their measuring errors stemmed from a complete lack of mathematical education. He brought in a



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math teacher. The instructors realized that although the students constantly nodded and told him that they understood, often they had not yet grasped the relevant concept. The instructors learned how to obtain feedback from the students, and Isaac brought in an assertiveness trainer.

The aim of the school is to equip the students with the skills they need to find work in this competitive market. And so, while some of the graduates go on to work in the main Yvel Design Center and some find work with other jewelry companies, many stay on at Megemeria, which Levy eventually turned into a social enterprise, owned and managed by the students (though overseen and underwritten by Levy), who produce their own line of jewelry. “At first I wanted to train them to follow our designs, but when I saw the beauty and authenticity of their designs, I decided to give them free rein,” says Levy. The new collection features water jugs, biblical themes, and incorporates inscriptions in Amharic, many of words such as “love,” “friendship,” “hope,” and “trust.” The Am Echad pendant that Tova chose is part of the collection produced by graduates of the Megemeria School.

Levy leans back in his chair. “You know, every morning I wake up and think, I can’t do it. And then, in the evening I turn around and think, It was all right after all. Challenges strengthen us.”

His face takes on a pensive expression: “If my father hadn’t gone through all those challenges in our own aliyah — and it was very, very hard — then I would not be here today, trying to achieve my own tikkun olam.”

“When Tova came to me with her idea to give out pendants to the mothers of fallen soldiers, I wanted to say yes right away. But I told her that I need a few days to look into it. Why? Because I needed to ask the students first. Success only comes when there is teamwork.”

Our conversation returns to the pendants: “It was an important project. To me and to all our workers, it was an expression of Jewish values: understanding, empathy, and unity.”



Zalka Stantan



Zalka is one of the Megemeria graduates who designed and produced the pendant that Tova distributed.

“We, the Megemeria graduates, had a meeting together, when Isaac asked if we would be willing to make the pendants,” Zalka tells me, looking up for a moment from the necklace he’s fashioning. There are two other workers on his bench, each of whom works calmly but intently on a piece of jewelry. One woman polishes a silver necklace, another works small grooves into the side of a pendant. There are fixed periods in the year devoted to designing each collection — on the day of my visit, the workers are filling specific orders, mainly for necklaces. The atmosphere is quiet: fascinated, I watch the workers’ fingers. Deftness, control, and patience mark each move.

Zalka continues. “We all felt that our nation has given us so much and we wanted to take this opportunity to give back in return.”

The pendant Tova selected to present to the mothers of fallen soldiers has a special history. In 2012, an Ethiopian oleh was trying to find a rental unit in Kiryat Malachi. A group of residents banded together and refused to allow an Ethiopian to rent in the area. To protest this blatant discrimination, and stimulate public outcry, the man decided to walk all the way from Kiryat Malachi to the Knesset. On the day he was scheduled to pass Motza on the way to Jerusalem, the Megemeria graduates requested to join him in that day’s walk. Levy agreed, and when they returned to work, they designed the Am Echad pendant. Zalka tells me more of the sentiments behind the design: “Although we come from all over the world, we all feel each other’s pain. We must try to connect with each other, whether through pain, or through friendship and unity. After all, we are all Jews. We are all rachmanim bnei rachmanim. This is our true identity, not where we come from, but what we can become when we are unified.”



The Mothers

The responses to the pendant were swift — and heartfelt. Tova was inundated with texts, phone calls, and letters thanking her and the Megemeria graduates for their gesture.

From the mother of Max Steinberg, Hy"d:

Words cannot express how touched I was when I received the beautiful pendant. I absolutely love it. What a beautiful design. My compliments to the designer/jeweler.

Thank you for honoring all of us mothers. I must say, it brought a few tears to my eyes. Losing a child is not a fun club to be in, but such kindness and generosity make our days more bearable.

I will cherish the pendant and what it represents for the rest of my life. Max would be so happy to see all the love and support that Israel and the Jewish people have, and are continuously giving our family during this difficult time.

Again, many, many thanks from the bottom of my heart.

Best, Evie

From the parents of Gil-Ad Shaer, Hy"d:

Dear Tova and the Megemeria graduates,

“Harvest the deeds

The words and the letters

Like a blessed crop, abundant and rich

Remember the growth

Which gave you the memories

Of a summer that disappeared before its time.”

A new year. Fall pushes away a summer that withered before its time. So much has happened since our son disappeared, since we learned of his murder.

Day follows day, night follows night. War. More and more murdered Jews. Our private pain is entwined with the national pain. We have endured days of war, days of destruction, days of intense yearning for a yeshuah, for the Geulah, for the Third Beis Hamikdash that will be rebuilt and will unite us and draw us close.

The wound is fresh, the pain is great. Slowly, slowly, we find ourselves gathering the deeds, the words, the letters written in tears, the pictures, the gifts that were given to us during that period, and we are overwhelmed with emotion. Our burden is heavy; the blessing that they give us is great and so necessary.

I can't describe how much strength it has given us, how much it means to us that there has been this deep and spontaneous outpouring of giving — we have been enveloped with love. “We are with you,” you tell us, each in his own way. “We are with you” — in hope, in faith, in pain...

We did not choose to walk this path, yet along the way we have met so many good people — people like you.

In the midst of our pain, the unique pendant that you sent, along with your feelings of solidarity, warmed us and reminded us how fortunate we are to belong to such a nation.

Ofir and Bat-Galim Shaer ☺

