

ACCESS FOR ALL

Fate determined that more than 500,000 people in Israel are disabled - but do they have to be punished twice? Access Israel works continuously to improve the lives of these people and their families, with one basic principle in mind: everybody deserves to live a normal life / Nir Librach

Nearly ten percent of Israel's population consists of people with disabilities. For them, almost every aspect of life presents a challenge. They can't go to the same restaurants as everybody else and they have a limited choice of shops and entertainment centers to choose from - because not all of these places are accessible. Above all, it is not just the physical obstacles that make it harder - it is the public's level of awareness.

Access Israel is a non-profit association, marking a decade of activities, during which it has vowed to change the lives of the disabled. During the ten years since its foundation, the association has managed to bring hope and joy to thousands, by tirelessly working to make Israel accessible and accommodating for all of its citizens, including the ones with disabilities.

The founder of the association is Lieutenant Colonel Yuval Wagner - an Israeli Air Force combat pilot who was injured in a helicopter crash that left him a quadriplegic. For Wagner, life has never been ordinary, as he has seen and experienced the life of the disabled from every possible angle: as a child, he was the son of a father in a wheelchair; as a young man, he became disabled himself after his injury; and as an adult, he is a disabled father to three children.

"It was then - when I became a father - that I decided that being disabled in Israel is simply impossible," says Wagner. "It was a collection of events that I ran into, things I couldn't do with my kids, not being able to go to places with them that other parents could. Things people usually don't think about twice, but when you're on a wheelchair they become unattainable."

Wagner decided to write to the President, Ezer Weizman, and to inform him of the difficult situation of the disabled in Israel. "The moment he heard about it, Weizman - in his usual charismatic way - ordered me to found an association that would work to find solutions to the problem. That was back in '99."

The association Wagner founded has one major goal: to enable normal lives for people with disabilities, or at least to make their lives more comfortable. "Everybody wants to be healthy until the day they die," says Wagner.

"Unfortunately, the reality is different. There are more than 500,000 people in Israel who are disabled, for a number of reasons: accidents, difficult illnesses, disabilities of old age, or sometimes disabilities right from birth. Access Israel was founded so that these people won't be punished twice - once by fate and then by reality. We make sure that the reality for the disabled will be the same as it is for anyone else."

A vast business potential

According to Wagner, the most important thing about Access Israel is its positive approach. The association's agenda illustrates the concept that people with disabilities are a sizeable part of the population, and there is a vast business potential in welcoming them instead of ignoring their needs. "Our message is that we are 500,000 people and we are customers just like anybody else," says Wagner. "We enjoy going to the cinema; we want to have a good time, to shop, to travel; and among ourselves we are divided just like the rest of the population. We are a target audience, and if you make your businesses accessible, then we would come and you would have more customers - more potential buyers. You will also meet the demands of the law. And not less important, your image in the eyes of the public would improve."

All of the above constitute enough good reasons why any business should want to become accessible. Moreover, Wagner claims that it is proven that the cost it takes to make a business accessible is actually an investment. As a result of making a business accessible, the cost is returned and it even becomes a profitable proposition. This model succeeds and there are thousands of businesses that were made accessible this way."

Access badge of honor

Access Israel works through several avenues and innovative projects. First there is the association's Internet site - www.aisrael.org - that contains life-changing information about what places are accessible and what can be done to improve the lives of the disabled in



Israel. The website also provides updates on the frequent endeavors and achievements of the association throughout Israel.

The people that work under the organization's wing are the best counselors for accessibility in Israel, and they offer their services to anyone who would like to make their businesses accessible. The Access Israel professionals guide the businesses that approach them, from the early stage of planning to the completion of the project. Any business that finishes the process and becomes accessible is granted the Access Israel Badge of Honor.

Another of the association's guidelines is that it is legitimate to go as high up as possible in order to achieve its goals, knowing that only through the decision makers - ministers, Knesset members and mayors - the issue of accessibility will truly be promoted. Whether working separately with each government ministry to promote accessibility in the areas under the responsibility of that specific ministry, or working towards the promotion of nationwide accessibility through promoting legislation in various areas, Access Israel does everything within its power to make sure the change is real, permanent and across the board.

"Accessible Stops"

In order to demonstrate to the public how simple it is to change the attitude toward the disabled, Access Israel has initiated several innovative and unique projects. Several such projects are aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of the importance of accessibility and acceptance of people with disabilities as equals.

Through educational programs aimed at Israel's youth - Access Israel is able to expose them to the various disabilities, the need for accessibility and the achievements possible if the chance is given. The youth undergoes "Accessible Stops," each aimed at exposing the participants to a different disability, such as using a wheelchair to go up a ramp and





Access Israel improves the lives of disabled Israelis through a wide variety of projects

“It was then - when I became a father - that I decided that being disabled in Israel is simply impossible,” says Wagner

abilities: we blindfold them, we cover their ears and then we put baking gloves on their hands so they won't be able to use them for cutting. At first, it seems to them that it is next to impossible to eat without seeing, hearing or cutting, but then we show them that all it takes are a few simple alterations in their approach and behavior, and they quickly learn that it is actually quite simple to have a normal dinner even when you are disabled.”

The Internet - a tool everybody uses nowadays - is actually inaccessible to many disabled people unless certain modifications are made. “These days most businesses use a website to promote their business. What many business owners do not know is that just as having a ramp or accessible toilets opens your business to potential customers with disabilities, so does an accessible website,” explains Wagner. “Making relatively simple adjustments can enable people with disabilities who otherwise could not be exposed to the information a website might offer, to become a customer.” The adjustments to which Wagner is referring include adding special features to the site that would make it possible to change the colors and the size of the fonts, as well as to plug in special programs such as a text reader. The association gives professional counsel on this subject as well.

score points with a basketball; or being blindfolded and using a guide stick or a guide dogs to complete an obstacle course.

Another project, aimed at increasing awareness among adults is the “Accessible Tastes” project - an event that takes place in a restaurant, and just like Accessible Stops, increases awareness through enabling participants to experience first hand various disabilities. When these people experience for themselves what it feels like to be disabled, their awareness and sensitivity toward the disabled increases.

“During such an event we let the participants know what a disabled person feels like when they dine in a restaurant,” says Michal Moked-Rimon, Head of Development at Access Israel. “Throughout the meal the participants experience different types of dis-

What else can be done?

Access Israel has been working for the past decade to improve the lives of people with disabilities. The association receives pleas and requests from individuals as well as organizations, and uses every means available - be it the media or the government - to promote accessibility throughout Israel. It has accumulated numerous successes along the way; in fact, the association's achievements are so profound that there are certain models it uses that are adopted by other countries around the world. Considering that Israel started to promote accessibility fifteen years after most of the advanced nations, that is a solid testimony to the association's success.

Even so, there is still a long way to go until Israel becomes truly accommodating in its attitude toward people with disabilities. Yuval Wagner believes that the major obstacle is the lack of knowledge regarding what can be done to make things better. “If an architect doesn't know enough on this subject, he will design an inaccessible building. If a storeowner doesn't know how to take a few simple steps to make his store accessible, such as installing proper ramps or automatic doors, he will lose a great number of customers. If a mayor doesn't make sure that the laws of accessibility are enforced, then the disabled in his city won't be able to live a normal life. We all have to remember that the investment we make is little, but the gain - both to our businesses and to the disabled - is significant,” says Wagner.

As part of the association's efforts to encourage accessibility and promote a business environment in which accessibility will become a bare necessity, Access Israel has decided to mark a decade since its establishment by creating a Forum for Accessibility Promoting Businesses. “I am proud that we managed to create a given status in which thousands of businesses are now accessible - even though they didn't have to do so by law,” concludes Wagner. “In five years, I believe that we will live in a reality where every building will be built accessibly, and that disabled people in Israel will be able to live just like anybody else.”

For more information about Access Israel, please contact +972-9-7451126 or michal@aisrael.org.

**Alexander Muss High School In Israel provides a dynamic education for young Jewish minds...
An experience in Israel that lasts a lifetime!**




*Learn it!
Live it!
Love it!*



Tel: 1-800-327-5980 • WWW.AMHSI.ORG