

Healing voices

• By TAMAR LAFONTAINE

Earlier this week, the Jerusalem-based Beit Midrash launched a unique pilot program entitled "Ailing and Healing" together with Sheba Medical Center's National Center for Medical Simulation. The program offers a select group of health professionals the opportunity to explore their roles as caregivers through Jewish text study and simulated real-life scenarios in the health field.

Kolot, whose main office is in Jerusalem's German Colony neighborhood, has been in the business of applying Jewish studies to modern life since its inception in 1997. The center offers a series of programs including a virtual Beit Midrash and on-line forum for learning with Diaspora Jews, a lay leadership program, learning groups for television and film professionals, learning communities in Modi'in, Tzur Yigal and Ramana, and a special Jewish study track for students at the Nisan Nativ Acting School.

Moti Bar-Or, its founder and director, says he created Kolot ("Voices) because he saw the need

for "a state with a joint vocabulary, to share one story with different voices or *kolot*." He identifies the organization as "part of a movement in Israeli-Jewish Renaissance, of secular Israelis renewing their Jewish identity."

Sheba's Medical Simulation Center, or MSR (Hebrew for "message"), for short, is also a fledgling operation. Dr. Amital Ziv, inspired by the experiential nature of his aviation training during his army service, created MSR in 2001 as an alternative training center for health-care providers that pivots on what he calls "nightmare-driven education." The program is built on role-playing staff-patient encounters between trainees and hired actors, "enacting our most dreaded situations such as delivering bad news, dealing with aggressive families, managing a domestic abuse case or helping a patient cope with a chronic illness," Ziv explains.

"Extreme encounters are great learning opportunities," he adds. In "confronting the struggle of our limitations, we hope to be better prepared and aware, and ultimately better health-care deliverers."

The partnership between the two centers grew out of Ziv's acquaintance of Kolot as a Fellow. "I saw a need to equip the health

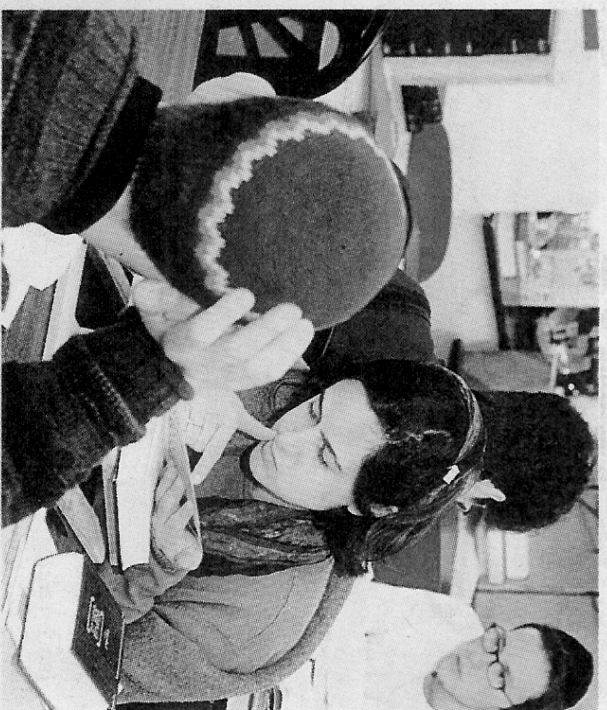
provider with all kinds of support for the task," including the wisdom of Jewish sources, and Bar-Or saw a rich opportunity for "connecting Jewish text study to action, and translating lessons into different areas of community."

Twenty participants from a variety of disciplines within the health field – including nurses, physicians, psychologists and social workers – were selected to participate in the year-long "Ailing and Healing" program, at no cost. The group meets for four hours every two weeks at Kolot's Beit Midrash in Ben-Shemen to discuss Jewish texts covering issues such as the role of the health provider, the relationship between caretaker and patient, dealing with incurable disease, and human error in diagnosis and treatment. The group then reconvenes for sporadic meetings at the Sheba simulation center in Tel Hashomer to develop and simulate scenarios that relate back to the textual discussions.

Jerusalemites Batia Ovadia, a hospice nurse, and Ze'ev Luria, a group facilitator, are among the candidates chosen to participate in the program.

Ovadia says she wanted to take part in the program because it sounded "curious and attractive, different from the day-to-day," and offered a forum "to converse on topics of interest, make connections with a variety of caretakers, connect experiences with our Jewish origins, and to expand understanding."

Luria is fond of the idea of



(Brian Hendler)

"dynamic interplay between spirituality and psychoanalysis," which he anticipates in the group meetings. "I believe that there is a strong connection between psychoanalysis and spiritual awareness, a similarity in their search to solve similar problems such as the search for love, belonging, self-confidence, and coping with trauma. Their connection can help find solutions."

Leading the group are Rachel Ettun, a family and couples counselor who specializes in coping with loss and chronic illness, and Zvika Blat, a journalist and Kolot Fellow.

Ettun describes the program as "a dialogue between psychology, meditation and Jewish texts," but tempers that by saying it is "not New Age and also not intellectual."

Blat says there is "a sense that caretakers seek happiness in the East," and offers that this is "something that can be found at home, in Judaism, which can be a source of support, awakening, happiness, and comfort. Judaism contains the different worlds, integrates life at home, at work, in the office."

"The answer for treating suffering is not only medical or technical," adds Blat. "Particularly in this day and age, with ever-expanding technology, we feel a greater need to develop our spiritual base."

Ettun hopes the experience will "enlighten the dark places and give meaning, especially to Israelis, by connecting to role models of the past" and will "create something new in the relationship between caretaker and patient."