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## Someone To Run With in Israel

*Via Vans, Cafes and Counseling, ELEM Reaches Out to At-Risk Teens*

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It had to be one of the most moving reality TV moments.

**Giving 2010**

On September 4, seconds before 18-year-old Holon resident Diana Golbi was crowned winner of "*Kokhav Nolad*," Israel's version of "American Idol," program makers revealed how she had started on the road to national stardom.

They showed a clip of her making a visit, just after midnight, to a street in Holon, near Tel Aviv. She headed to a van where social workers and volunteers give advice and support to at-risk youth, and recalled how in her younger teenage years, she spent many nights at such a van.

She spoke of a friend who was reluctant to turn to ELEM — the charity that runs these vans — and who later died of a drug overdose. Viewers saw her emotional reunion with Ira, the former ELEM employee who encouraged Golbi to study performing arts and convinced her to enroll in classes at Holon Theatre.

"For hours [Ira] used to sit quietly and listen to me," Golbi said, adding that she remembered his life-changing offer: "If you want it, just say you want it...and I'll make the phone calls and I'll arrange it."

ELEM, an acronym loosely translated from the Hebrew to mean the nonprofit for youth in distress, is one of Israel's largest children's charities, serving the 30% of Israeli youth it says is at some level of risk. Established by a group of Israeli and American volunteers in 1981, today it employs 270 professionals and uses 2,000 volunteers to help in-distress youth in 40 cities throughout the country. Its programs cost 33 million shekels or \$9.2 million in 2009, only 25% of which came from public funds. Last year it provided services for about 13,000 youngsters: Jews and Arabs, immigrants and native-born Israelis, members of virtually every ethnic group in the country.

ELEM established its street van project, which now operates in 15 cities, in 1996. The vans have since drawn more than 36,000 visitors, many of whom suffer from physical, emotional or sexual abuse; difficulties at home, or abandonment by their families.

A few miles from the van where Golbi was filmed is a modest two-room building where 20 teenagers are gathered. At first glance, the scene is unremarkable. But a closer look shows that in each of the informal groups they have formed, there is

a volunteer or social worker listening to them, drawing out their painful stories.

This is one of 12 venues styled like a coffee shop, aimed at what ELEM defines as "marginal risk" youth: those who have difficulties functioning; are struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts and who have a history of drug or alcohol abuse.

One of the groups comprises a few boys who have gathered around the bar, where a volunteer is serving coffee. They are chatting openly with her. Looking on from a storeroom that is piled with jars of coffee and packets of cookies, social worker Adi Silanikov said: "I really believe in an informal environment for therapy and counseling like this. It's the right formula to get to the youngsters, as many of them have trust issues."

Silanikov says that although she is, at 28, clearly an adult, the youngsters see talking to her as "the middle point between speaking to an adult and speaking to a friend."

Much of what goes on here is a process of addressing a sense of alienation that results in many Israeli youngsters living life on the fringes of society. It is estimated that 21% of kids who turn to ELEM's coffee shop centers are from families who have emigrated from the former Soviet Union, and many feel ghettoized. "They had antagonism for every Israeli they saw, so they went out looking for trouble," Silanikov said.

Yet after several months of involvement with ELEM, many are less dependent on alcohol, get into fewer confrontations and are more at ease with their dual identities as Israelis and as Russian speakers, she said.

"I think the success of this place is that youngsters who come here can see something different to the world they have decided they will be part of," Silanikov said.

ELEM also runs 13 centers that provide social and educational programs, and, during the summer, temporary support centers on Israeli beaches. Both of these projects are aimed at "serious risk" youth — youngsters with an inability to function within the educational system, or those with severe emotional

and familial problems.

For "high risk" youngsters, those who have dropped out of school and are deteriorating into delinquency and criminality, ELEM operates a rehabilitative employment and mentoring program, as well as a center for girls in a state of detachment and extreme distress. It also uses initiatives to help teenagers learn a trade.

Three projects serve "fatal risk" youngsters: those with such traits as homelessness, criminality and detachment from society. The projects operate a network of day centers for homeless youth, a program for youngsters involved in prostitution and a shelter for young women who are drug addicts or prostitutes.

ELEM also runs the Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Sexual Violence Among Children, which, provides diagnoses, treatment and counseling to children who have sexually abused other children and seeks to prevent today's sexually abusive children from becoming pedophiles when they grow up. Before the age of 12, at which time Israeli law deems children legally responsible for their actions, authorities are unable to insist that children accused of committing acts of sexual abuse undergo treatment. But "if you start to work on these kids when they are very young, it reduces the chances of them becoming pedophiles," said the charity's executive director, Efrat Shaprut, adding that 90% of children treated by the center have not abused again.

In October, ELEM planned to open a Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Sexual Violence Among Children in the northern Israeli Arab town of Shfar'am.

In Shaprut's opinion, the reason that so many people use ELEM's services is because of the charity's unique approach. "In Israel you have a lot of programs for youth, but they wait for the kids to come to them," he said. "But kids don't knock on the door of the municipality and say, 'I have a drug problem.' It doesn't work like that."