



ZAKA's Yehuda Meshi-Zahav in the aftermath of the Tsunami

Through the eyes of ZAKA

Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, the founder of ZAKA, speaks with a soft voice, a wizened face and eyes that have seen far too much. He explains to the audience of a small gathering the evening before the official launch of ZAKA Hong Kong, Macao & China that in Israel there are no exports of any real value: there is no oil, no diamonds, no coal, only the basic tenets of the sacredness of life, the essential duty to be humanitarian and the core value of respect for others. Though no value listed on the world's commodities markets, these exports carry a great weight and responsibility, he explains.

Meshi-Zahav is no stranger to the limelight in Israel, often featured in headlines on the unpopular side of heated controversies. But his visionary leadership of ZAKA has seemingly erased the boundaries between right and left, the ultra-orthodox and the secular, Jew and non-Jew, Israeli and non-Israeli.

The following evening at the official launch, keynote speaker Yaacov Peri, a legendary figure in Israel and former Director of the Israel Security Agency, jokes that ZAKA is about the only thing there is a clear consensus about in Israel. Sometimes this is seemingly not far from

the truth and, truth be told, in the court of popular world opinion ZAKA is one of the few things that virtually everyone will accept about Israel at face value.

To my American friends, ZAKA are the guys in Israel in the yellow vests on CNN that make sure religious Jews have a proper burial. It is arguably only as of recent years that ZAKA has begun to internationally market its primary export, the values of the Jewish people.

Most recently, ZAKA captured the world's attention with their humanitarian aid to disaster-ravaged Haiti. World media finally bought their export and showed the extraordinary efforts of these Israelis determined to save as many lives as possible irrespective of nationality, race or religion. This is a core Jewish value and one that Israel was founded on, but somehow one that is too often passed over by international media.

Yehuda Meshi-Zahav's speech at the official launch described the efforts and recovery work the ZAKA teams committed in Haiti to locate the body of a sole missing Canadian Jewish businessman, Alexander Bitton. In rotating teams, ZAKA volunteers worked for over a month at the site of

the Montana Hotel until his body was ultimately recovered.

The understanding of the value of the importance of even a single life is what gave these rotating teams the strength to tirelessly work to find one man. It is not about the numbers, though they saved many lives and recovered countless bodies. There is little mention of teams staving off the physical and emotional pain of the task. Despite the fact that ZAKA was among the first international aid organizations to arrive, they regret only not having arrived sooner.

As ZAKA volunteer Arele Klein, blogged from the mission in Haiti, "We can't count the number of bodies transferred for burial in a mass grave. The human brain cannot absorb the quantity of bodies that we have been exposed to in these first few days in Haiti. I discover a strange sight at one of the mass graves - families have a special tune that they sing at the graveside, a song that moves back and forth from song to tears, singing and crying. Who can understand it?" This is the world through the eyes of ZAKA.

In Asia, ZAKA was instrumental after the Tsunami in 2004 in the systematic identification of thousands of bodies,

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by Jana Daniels

allowing countless family members a bit of comfort in the knowledge that their loved one would be buried with dignity and they would be given some sense of closure. ZAKA returned to Thailand three years later immediately following the crash of One-Two-Go airlines in Phuket in 2007. The responders made that trip with images of the Tsunami still deeply imprinted in their minds. Also in 2007, they again found themselves in route to Thailand to provide assistance following the Koh Phi Phi ferry accident that left one Israeli dead and another seriously injured.

In 2009, after the terror attack in Mumbai they again responded immediately to disaster in Asia. This time was different, as Shuki Brief, one of the six Israeli

volunteers immediately deployed in response to Mumbai wrote in his blog, "At that very moment, evil murderers were killing their compatriots; our sole desire was to get there and help," yet he continues, "We say Tehillim (Psalms) and speak words of faith and encouragement... blood, fire and pillars of smoke, Mumbai, Friday, 6.30 am."

On Friday night, he continues, "The grim moment arrives. Two bodies are dragged out of the door and rapidly put inside a waiting vehicle...But there's no time for mourning or sadness."

The task is grim, the work tireless, the images haunting, but what prevails is the invaluable measure of the commodity of the profound respect for life. 

The newly founded ZAKA Hong Kong, Macao & China will hold a volunteer training program in June 2010 in Hong Kong.

For additional information regarding ZAKA contact Lydia Weitzman at lydiaw@netvision.net.il or see their website at www.zaka.us.

For inquiries related to the training program contact Rafael Aharoni, President of ZAKA Hong Kong, Macau and China, rafaelco@netvigador.com.



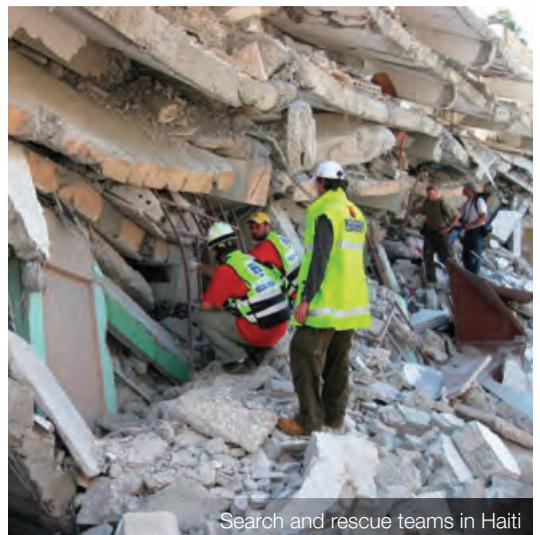
Rescue and identification mission, Phuket plane crash



Terror in Mumbai, Chabad House



Identification specialists mission, Asia Tsunami



Search and rescue teams in Haiti