When Miriam learned she was pregnant with her third child, she was ambivalent about her pregnancy. She and her two young children were feeling unwell and she had recently been laid off from her part-time job, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Without his wife’s paycheck to supplement the family income, Miriam’s husband was afraid they wouldn’t be able to both feed the family and pay their rent.

Then Miriam tested positive for Covid-19.

Due to her high-risk pregnancy, she was rushed into isolation in the corona ward at Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem. Miriam felt helpless, as though her entire life was crumbling around her, and she was left to deal with it all on her own, without even the support of her close family.

When a Shaare Zedek social worker suggested she contact Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael, Miriam jumped at the chance.

For many women suffering from financial and emotional distress, or experiencing medical complications or high-risk pregnancies, the pregnancy is often too much to cope with.

That’s where Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael steps in.

Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael (with the financial backing of Just One Life, USA) was formed in 1988 by concerned individuals who recognized the need to provide support for expectant mothers in Israel, where financial hardship and social and medical issues can lead to difficult pregnancies.

The founders of the organization were Rabbi Solomon J. Sharfman a’h, Dr. Shimon Glick, who was then the Dean of Ben-Gurion University Soroka Hospital, Jack Forgash, a businessman from the USA and a friend of Dr. Glick and Rabbi Sharfman, and Madelaine Gitelman from Jerusalem, who became the organization’s Director and Head of Social Workers in 1989. The organization’s name was derived from the Talmudic passage in Sanhedrin that states, “One who saves a single Jewish life has saved an entire world.”

The key to the organization’s success is that “we provide stability to families who are experiencing turbulence in their lives,” said Rabbi Martin Katz, who has served as the USA Executive Vice President of Just One Life since its founding. “By providing professional counseling, emotional support and financial assistance, Just One Life empowers mothers to bring their pregnancy to full term, thus preserving Israel’s most precious resource – its children.”

Veteran social worker Chaya Katzin, the current Israel Director and Head of Social Workers, and her team of social workers and therapists, help expectant women speak about their challenges at the welcoming Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael/Just One Life office on Jerusalem’s King George Street.

“Helping women process their choices and empowering them to understand their strengths is the goal of our intervention. We try to bring down the crisis level and arm women with the skills they need to more easily manage their lives,” says Katzin. “Through various workshops and methods of individual and group therapy, we help women
develop an empowered approach to parenting and provide their children with a healthy and supportive environment."

For example, Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael’s team of social workers provided Miriam with emotional and financial support, and empowered her to cope with her difficult pregnancy and give birth to a healthy son. The brit was in their home, the baby is starting off his new life with a layette provided by Just One Life, and Miriam is in a much stronger mental and physical position to be a happy healthy mother to her children.

The social workers and therapists at Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael aid approximately 500 families every year, which has resulted in over 18,500 babies over the last three decades. The couples come from all over Israel and from a broad range of backgrounds: religious and secular, Ashkenazi and Sephardi and new immigrants as well as longtime Israelis. But what the women share in common are limited incomes, stressful family situations or health issues. A pregnancy only adds to their long roster of challenges.

Jack Forgash, the Chairman and Co-Founder of JOL and Nefesh Achat for 31 years, said, “I would be remiss if I did not give praise, recognition and todah to the manner in which the professional social workers for 31 years have given care and compassion to the mothers and the 18,500 plus children born in Israel. To Madelaine Gitelman, who served as Director for 27 years, current Director, Chaya Katzin, and the professional staff – Shira Keyak, Sara Gordon, Atara Block and Eliana Rubinstein. Just One Life in the USA provides the resources and the Nefesh Achat organization in Israel provides the loving care.”

Women often find their way to the Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael office through referrals from doctors, social workers, nurses and welfare offices. Even now during this pandemic, overwhelmed hospital nurses and social workers are calling upon Nefesh Achat to take on additional cases.

The organization also receives referrals from major hospitals across Israel. For example, Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael maintains a strong relationship with Shaare Zedek in Jerusalem. Shaare Zedek’s high-risk pregnancy clinic, led by Dr. Ori Shen and Mrs. Yehudit Ackerman, refers patients who require additional emotional or financial support to Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael. Dr. Shen has praised the organization’s important work: “There is no doubt Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael’s assistance has created circumstances optimal for helping the couples and has brought about beneficial outcomes.”

The vast majority of the women that turn to Nefesh Achat B’Yisrael have very limited income. Currently, 1.7 million people in Israel are living below the poverty level. Just One Life provides nearly $1,800 to each mother for financial and psychological services.

Just One Life has earned praise from many leading politicians and medical professionals, including Danny Danon, Israel’s Ambassador to the United Nations, who recently recognized the organization’s three decades of success in bringing Jewish life into the world: “Your work for Jewish families is fundamental to the future and well-being of the Jewish people. Bringing Just One Life to Israel was an important development, and brought the issue of raising Jewish children straight to the heart of the Jewish world.”

The children who have been born with the support of Just One Life are now taking their rightful places in society. Many have grown up to serve in the Israel Defense Forces, attend Torah institutions and universities and have families of their own.

“In the 31 years since the organization has been helping women have their babies, nobody has ever come back to complain,” recounts Katz. “But many have returned to give thanks. They say, ‘I can’t imagine what my life would be like without my children.’”

For more information and to donate please contact:

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