

February 5, 2012 Sunday 12 Shevat 5772 11:50 IST  Print  Back to original article

THE JERUSALEM POST

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Those helping Holocaust survivors to be honored

By RUTH EGLASH
05/02/2012

Newly established “Medal of Light” award aims to shed light on those who work to improve lives of Shoah survivors.

A new award aimed at honoring those who have worked to help improve the lives of thousands of Holocaust survivors in Israel and highlight the contributions survivors have made to the state will be inaugurated Sunday night in a ceremony in Tel Aviv.

The first “Medal of Light” award, an initiative of The Foundation for the Benefit of Holocaust Survivors in Israel, will pay tribute to some 16 individuals – either survivors who have contributed greatly to society, volunteers working with the survivor community or officials who have gone above and beyond their positions to improve the lives of survivors in Israel.

Among those to receive the prize, which will be awarded by Welfare and Social Services Minister Moshe Kahalon, are the ministry’s director-general Nahum Itzkovitz, Ministerwithout- Portfolio Yossi Peled, author Aharon Appelfeld and the founder of the humanitarian aid agency Latet, Gilles Darmon.

“This is the first ceremony of its kind that will honor the outstanding work of Israeli society,” commented the foundation’s CEO Col. (res.) Rony Kalinsky.

“Despite the fact that such recognition did not take place since the creation of the state, we hope this will bring recognition to those who have made outstanding contributions to society.”

Since being appointed director-general of the ministry five years ago, Itzkovitz headed an inter-ministerial committee to find ways to improve the plight of thousands of survivors in Israel and implemented several drastic new measures allowing them to live out their final years in dignity.

The new measures implemented by Itzkovitz include finding funds to increase pensions and other financial benefits for some survivors, increasing support for essential medical supplies and creating an information center to advise survivors about their rights and additional financial benefits.

“I am very touched by this award. It is a very good feeling, especially because I am a son of Holocaust survivors and I am happy that I had the chance to help soften some of the suffering that other survivors have gone through in their lives,” Itzkovitz told The Jerusalem Post.

He said that he was honored to have had the chance, through his work, to address the issue of helping survivors and to have increased recognition of other groups of Jews who suffered during the Nazi atrocities.

“I don’t know if I deserve this prize or not, but I guess the committee has decided that I do and even though we have increased the amount of government funds going toward survivors, the needs of the people have grown and we still have to continue fighting to increase the budget even further,” said Itzkovitz, adding, “We have come a long way but we still have a long way to go.”

The foundation’s Kalinsky also said that one of the the aims of the new award was also to raise awareness to the plight of an estimated 207,000 elderly survivors living in Israel, whose living conditions are very bad and whose needs increase as they grow older.

According to the organization, an estimated 50,000 survivors live below the poverty line and close to 35 survivors die each day. Roughly 60 percent of the survivors are immigrants from the former Soviet Union that arrived here during the 1990s and there are still some that are not eligible for certain specific pension funds aimed at helping survivors financially.

Recently, the foundation, which receives 40% of its budget from the Israeli government and the rest from the Conference for Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference), announced that its budget no longer covers the growing needs of the aging group. For the first time in its 16-year history, it declared that it would start to seek financial support from Jewish and non-Jewish communities around the world.



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