

**AYALA (ELAINE) MATLOW
TAL-EL, 57
FROM TORONTO
TO JERUSALEM, 1980**

Keeping an ear out for change



After two of her daughters were born deaf, Elaine Matlow Tal-El enlisted the support of her community and international organizations to find alternative treatments to give her girls a normal life

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

Last May, Ayala (Elaine) Matlow Tal-El won honorable mention in the Prime Minister's Prize for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, in recognition of her accomplishments on behalf of children with hearing loss.

Tal-El is founding director of AV Israel. "AV" stands for auditory-verbal, a parent-oriented approach that encourages communication through listening and talking, rather than sign language, for children with hearing aids or cochlear implants. Children raised in this way – like Tal-El's twin daughters – are mainstreamed in school and in society. Both girls served in the IDF – Dana in the air force and Tamar as a teacher-soldier.

In celebration of 20 years since Tal-El successfully imported this North American methodology, AV Israel held a gala fund-raiser at the Jerusalem Theater on November 3 featuring a performance by dance troupe Maymana. AV Israel "alumni" of all ages – deaf and hearing-impaired children who grew up with the AV approach – served as hosts, and Canadian Ambassador Vivian Bercovici relayed greetings.

Why Canadian? Because Tal-El was born and bred in Toronto.

"My grandparents moved to Israel from Toronto in 1953 in fulfillment of a longtime dream," she says. "We visited them in Ramat Gan in the summers, so my three siblings and I had a very Israeli experience."

Her father served as a soldier in Mahal, the overseas volunteer brigade, in 1948. "My home was very Zionist. My mother was national president of Canadian Hadassah WIZO in the 1990s, and our home was the center of lots of activity around Israel-related issues."

The Matlow family came to Israel for a year in 1970, and Elaine went to Jerusalem's Gymnasia Behavia school for eighth grade.

"That was a transformative year for me. By the end of the year I was a wreck about leaving," she recalls. "I loved Tzofim [Scouts], the trips, the holidays, the seasonal produce, the freedom to walk around on my own. Everything was accessible, and I was the master of my time. Schools was so informal, and the whole culture was so relaxed."

She continued summering in Israel, and in 1976 she came to the Hebrew University for her junior year abroad from the University of Toronto. There she had her first opportunity to meet Jewish youth from around the world.

"Though it sounds naive now, that was an eye-opening for me," she says.

The following year, she transferred to Brandeis University in Massachusetts, where she headed the Brandeis Zionist Alliance. She graduated in January and made aliya on Purim, 1980, along with some of her college friends. Sharing an apartment in Jerusalem, she began studying toward a master's degree in contemporary jewelry at the Hebrew University, and became certified as a high-school history teacher. Upon graduation, she taught at the René Cassin High School in northern Jerusalem for a few years.

The first summer after her arrival, she worked as an administrator for Jewish Agency-sponsored summer programs. One night, she started talking with a medic accompanying one of the tour groups. His name was Eli Matlub (later changed to Tal-El).

"His family name and mine – Matlow – were spelled the same in Hebrew, though his ancestors were from Iraq and mine from White Russia. It was too bizarre to be coincidental," she says.

The couple got married in 1983. Their first daughter, Michal, was born in 1985, and Noa followed two years later. Meanwhile, Eli started Tal-El Productions, a business in media and filmmaking, and his wife worked with him on the production end. And then Dana and Tamar came along in March 1990.

LIFE-CHANGING EVENT

"When they were two, they were diagnosed with profound deafness. That's what changed my life," says Tal-El.

She began learning about AV through others, particularly one immigrant family, the Eisners, whose children had been raised on this approach in Toronto.

"Their mission was to bring this approach to Israel to help raise the functioning of kids with hearing impairment. I was happy to help because I wanted it for my own children," she says. "On December 10, 1992, we introduced a living room full of parents and professionals to AV. We had a conference call with AV International in the US, and they welcomed us."

The following summer, Canadian AV expert Warren Estabrooks was in Israel and examined the Tal-El twins. He determined they didn't have enough hearing for AV, so the family came to a New York hospital to get the girls cochlear implants and start the process.

Tal-El enrolled her twins in a "regular" preschool in keeping with the AV philosophy, and in 1994 officially established AV Israel as a nonprofit organization. A speech therapist interested in learning the method was sent to Toronto for training.

Looking back, Tal-El is able to say that this bold experiment was a success.

ELAINE MATLOW TAL-EL with her twin daughters Tamar (left) and Dana. (Courtesy)

"The results are extraordinary. The typical speech and language of these children trained in AV had never been seen before in profoundly deaf kids," she says. "We call it 'physical therapy for the brain,' because hearing takes place in the brain and you have to work it."

She notes with pride that AV-trained children are able to go to the same schools as their siblings and include speakers of Yiddish, Hebrew, English, French and Arabic.

In 1999, AV Israel opened an education center in Jerusalem for AV speech therapy. It has also opened the Dr. Daniel Ling Speech and Hearing Center in Ramatana for hearing tests and hearing-aid assessments.

"We brought leaders in the field from around the world to train our professionals and to teach in universities here. It still was not widely known because we don't get government funding," she says.

To make a bigger impact on Israeli society, the AV Israel board expanded operations in 2007, and Tal-El became executive director. Two years later, the organization established a rehabilitation program for cochlear-implant users at Shaare Zedek Medical Center, and today serves as a practicum site for students of four academic programs for speech-communication disorders. Last year, another site was established in Sdot Negev (near Netivot) to bring sorely needed testing and therapy services to the periphery.

"We invested in building a hearing-test booth there and started our program in partnership with the regional council. We'd like to open it up to the whole South," says Tal-El.

Her twin daughters are in college now, one at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, and the other at Hadassah College.

"Their story is an inspiration to the other families we met along the way," she says.

Her own three siblings did not choose to live in Israel, "but they're all committed to Judaism and Israel." Her parents had bought an apartment in Jerusalem, and although her mother died a couple of years ago, her father often comes to stay.

Fellow congregants at Jerusalem's Kol Haneshama Reform (Progressive) congregation have become Tal-El's surrogate family.

"I am a Torah reader from the age of 12 and a bar/bat mitzva teacher," she says.

Aside from AV Israel, she enjoys Pilates, taking part in weekly art classes at the Israel Museum, and hiking the Israel National Trail with her husband and friends. So far, they've completed several segments of the trail and hope one day soon to finish the entire stretch. ■