

# Philanthropic Foundation for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities Searches for Arab “Rothschild”

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**Wealthy people and business owners in Arab society prefer to donate to religious institutions, rather than to social NPOs \* the Masira (“Journey” in Arabic) Foundation, which works for the inclusion of people with disabilities in society, has managed to recruit 50 business people to date – but has only raised NIS 120,000 \* “There is a large stratum of Arab business people who have accumulated capital – it is time we took care of ourselves**

Around two years ago, business woman Julia Zohar, general manager of the Nazareth-based Tehinat al-Erez company, met with two enthused social activists Souad Diab from the JDC and the blind media personality Mustafa Shalatta. The latter wanted to recruit her to a pioneering philanthropic venture in the Arab sector – the creation of a foundation that would raise funds for programs for Arabs with disabilities.

Zohar, who works to a very tight schedule, tried to politely turn them down.” I them ‘leave me alone, I have tons of things on my hands, I am very busy’,” she says. “I didn’t know what it was all about, and it was only when they produced the figures that I was amazed: there are no less than 200,000 work-aged people with disabilities in the Arab sector in Israel. I innocently asked them: ‘are you sure? Maybe it’s 2,000?’ And then I got the message and I agreed to join in as a founder.”



The foundation, which took the name of Masira (“journey” in Arabic) was launched in January 2012. It came into being in order to identify a stable long term financial infrastructure for the JDC’s Masira programs which operate at most of the Arab communities and help disabled people to acquire skills which will enable them to live an independent and productive life. The JDC funds projects for defined periods, after which they are handed over to the government which provides them with only part of the requisite subsidy. The difficult financial position of the Arab local authorities placed all the activities in doubt. This work has helped tens of thousands of disabled Arabs, some of whom have even set up their own businesses with the JDC’s support.

Just before the program collapsed due to budgeting constraints, new MK from the BLD party, and the former publisher of the Malkum financial magazine, Dr. Bassel Gattas, together with Diab, conceived the idea of creating a foundation designed to raise capital for people with disabilities, with the help of Arab business people, which will also offer disabled people employment opportunities. Thus far, around 50 business people have joined the effort. These include Yousef Ashkar, owner and general manager of the Big Zol chain, Bashir and Samia Abed Alrazzek, owners of the Golden Crown hotel chain in Nazareth, Saliba Kardush, joint general manager of the Kardush truck body metal plant, and Rabia Ibrahim, founder and general manager of the BRF Engineering high tech company.

## “Philanthropy in Arab society is in its infancy”

“There has always been giving in the Arab sector, but it has been spontaneous, non-institutional – it is not true to say that there is no tradition of giving in Arab society,” notes MK Gattas. “I attach great importance to a society of almost 1.5 million people declaring ‘it is time we relied on ourselves.’ We don’t need to rely on others all our lives.”

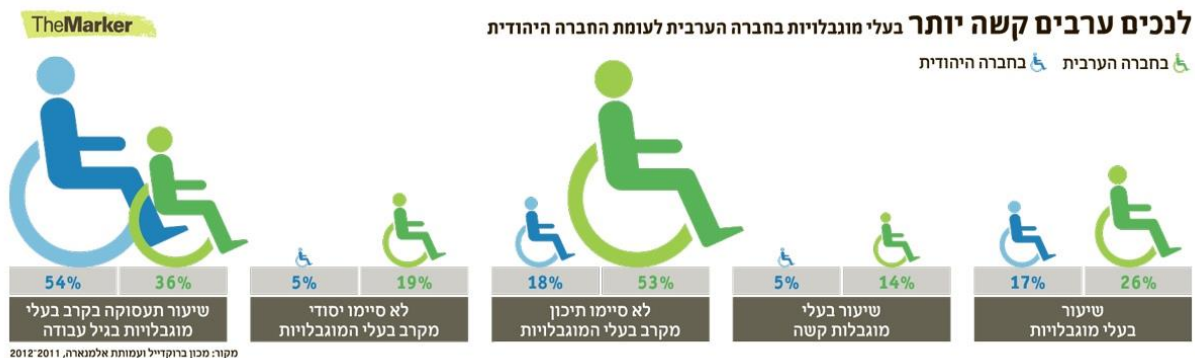
Dian maintains the thought: “This is the first time we are basing a social project on internal forces, rather than on donations from abroad or on organizations connected to religious Arab movements. There is a growing stratum of Arab business people who have amassed great capital. We can start taking care of ourselves.”

However, words and actions don’t always go together. In the meantime, as there is no awareness in the sector of concepts like philanthropy and corporative responsibility, the Masira Foundation is struggling to take off. To date, it has raised only around NIS 120,000, out of a target of NIS 400,000 for each activity year.

Diab confesses that business people, including the very wealthy ones, only donated a few thousand shekels each to the Masira Foundation. Fundraising is also proceeding by involving employees in the foundation - companies which are participating in the project suggest to their employees to give NIS 10 from their salary to the Foundation, and the company matches the monthly amount that accumulates.

Gattas: “This is only the start. The aim here is not to raise funds only from wealthy people, but for the entire society to contribute and be a partner. Wealthy people in Arab society are well known and everyone chases them, they get dozens of requests a day – from job applications to help for the dental care of children. We don’t want to stand in line. When every employee donates NIS 10, that is an educational act.”

Avital Sandler-Loeff, Director of Israel Unlimited at JDC Israel (through which the Masira program operate) was party to the optimist view: “Even the US President, Barack Obama, raised one dollar from every supporter, and managed to raise enormous amounts, The current rate of fundraising is modest but we want the move to gain momentum, and we are contacting donors overseas as well. When we demonstrate that there are donors in Arab society that encourages donors abroad. Philanthropy in Arab society is in its infancy but, the more professional we become, the more the amounts will grow.”



### **The Wealthy in the Arab Sector Are Not Contributing**

Why has Israeli Arab philanthropy stood still for so many years? Makbula Nassar, a media professional, social activist and media coordinator for the Tsofen organization for advancing Arabs in the high tech sector – is not afraid of self-criticism: “There were no protests in Arab society about wealthy people not contributing enough,” she says.

“It is not on the agenda of wealthy people and there is no Arabic media that talks about this, because the potential donors are also the leading advertisers – the media makes allowances for them,” says Nassar with candor. “Why ask workers, those who don’t have much, to contribute NIS 10 to the Foundation? It is the people who have a lot who should who should be asked to contribute. The employers should take a stand.

“At a large number of Arab businesses, the rights of workers, particularly female workers, are not enforced. In these circumstances it is clear that issues of corporate responsibility and donating to NPOs simply don’t come up. Before we talk about responsibility and making donations the workers should be paid in accordance with the law.

“Successful businesses, too, with handsome monthly turnovers, exploit their employees. It should also be noted that many of the wealthiest members of Arab society do not come from wealthy backgrounds, and they do not consider themselves wealthy. Arab society is still at a survival stage, and is starting a process of forming awareness of caring for others, and the disadvantaged,” explains Nassar.

Shalatta also feels that business people are committed to the society in which they live: “We have not witnessed organized philanthropy, through a community-social infrastructure, in Arab society until now. If business people live off society and profit from it they have a responsibility to give something back to it. When key figures and leaders in Arab society support a foundation that helps people with disabilities, they not only contribute money but also to convey the message.

“The message conveyed by key figures in Arab society who support the Masira Foundation is that issues that affect disabled people are not insignificant, but are part of the mainstream. It is no trivial for the society in which some of the families are ashamed of disabled relatives and hide them away from society, at home, for years,” Shalatta notes.

### **The Wealthiest Members of the Sector, Too, Have Not Yet Pledged Their Support for the Foundation**

Shalatta: “It is true, and the reason is that this is a very embryonic initiative, and so it arouses suspicion. It is hard for business people to trust people who ask them to contribute to something unknown. The challenge facing business people is twofold, as not only is organized philanthropy in Arab society undeveloped, the area for which donations are made – disabled people – is still a very sensitive issue and there are a lot of prejudices about it.

In addition, most business people are used to working independently, and also contributing independently via religious institutions. Or challenge is to find the big benefactor who will look upon the Foundation as his baby, and will invest in it. We still don’t have philanthropists on the scale of the Rothschild family or Sari Arison who, with a wave of a pen, can or want to contribute very significant sums.”

### **“One Can Donate Part of the Company’s Profits”**

Kardush, who volunteers and contributes to other projects in addition to Masira, says that there is still prejudice in Arab society towards foundations and NPOs. “Non-profit organizations are still considered as a means of stealing. They acted cleverly at Masira by recruiting senior and well known business people, with standing in Arab society. With a management like this it is easier to attract more donors.”

Ashkar – the owner of the Big Zol marketing chain (who is known as “the Rami Levy of the Arab sector”) – belongs to a small group of people who donate to the Masira Foundation, who maintain relatively large scale business operations: “Some of the business people in the sector are still wary of donating to foundations, and they prefer to contribute to religious bodies – we will develop philanthropy gradually.”

According to Ashkar, who makes regular donations to disadvantaged people, irrespective of their nationality. “I donate because it is important to make donations, regardless of sector. A donation is a donation. I am involved in the community and believe that if it is possible to share the company’s profits with people who really need help, one should do so.”