

Teens raise \$36,000 for Israeli special needs group



The Hebrew Academy team participating in the Jerusalem Marathon are seen with high school principal Laura Segall.

CJN STAFF

Alongside schoolwork, extracurricular activities and gearing up for final provincial exams, 10 Hebrew Academy high school students have added fundraising, long-distance running and strength training to their daily commitments.

The group – Yehuda Bessner, Nathan Benizri, Shalom Zobin, Elie Benizri, Joelle Cons, Sarah Azoulay, Leah Elkaim, Ariella Abenhaim, Arielle Rohr and Leora Feld – will be participating in the Seventh International Jerusalem Winner Marathon on March 17, running in support of Shalva, the Israel Association for Care and Inclusion of Persons With Disabilities.

Together with almost 500 international Team Shalva runners, the grade 10 students will be among 29,500 participants in one of Israel's largest marathons.

Shalva is a non-denominational organization that provides programming and high-quality care to children with disabilities while supporting their families and advocating for social inclusion. After learning about the organization from Team Shalva marathon director Fran Cohen at a school assembly, students were eager to get on board and lend their support.

"On a daily basis, Shalva gives children with disabilities hope that they will one day be the best that they can be and reach their fullest potential despite all the obstacles they face," said Feld. "I find Shalva's mission to be beautiful and incredibly inspiring, which is why I wanted to be a part of it."

Classmate Elie Benizri was equally inspired by Shalva's mandate and objectives. "Our funds will be helping their National Children's Centre, which will help thousands more than before. [Shalva] is an exceptionally hard-working, heartwarming organization, and I feel the right thing to do is to help them by giving whatever we can, whether it's our time – which we in Montreal cannot give since the organization is located abroad – or our money to help fund the organization."

In addition to preparing themselves physically to run either the 5km or 10km race, Team

Shalva participants must each raise \$2,800, money that goes directly to the centre.

All expenses related to the three-day trip, including airfare, meals, accommodations and a weekend reunion in Jerusalem, are covered by corporate sponsors. At press time, the Hebrew Academy students had raised over \$36,000, with more donations expected.

Cohen has been running in the Jerusalem Marathon for Team Shalva since 2010, and believes the trip can be life-changing, particularly for young adults.

"Running with Team Shalva is one of the most special educational experiences a teenager can have. It offers the opportunity to persevere through fundraising and training – both not simple tasks – giving a true feeling of accomplishment.

"The three days in Jerusalem...[give] participants a chance to meet fellow Jewish students from around the world while in Shalva's inclusive environment. Most important is what the students take home.

"After three days of inclusion and inspiration, my hope is for them to return inspired and motivated to create similar settings of inclusion at home in Montreal."

Cohen learned of Shalva from her daughter Tania Cohen-Levenstein, a Hebrew Academy alumna and former Team Shalva marathon director.

Hebrew Academy is the first and only Montreal team to participate in the Jerusalem Marathon as part of Team Shalva, and the initiative has been a source of excitement and pride for students and staff.

The school's executive director, Linda Lehrer, said, "Their passion and commitment to this wonderful cause are exemplary. I wish them much success in this endeavour."

High school principal Laura Segall, who will be chaperoning the group, is similarly moved by the students' devotion to the cause.

"I am extremely proud of these young trailblazers. From the time of that first assembly [where they learned about the organization], their dedication to and passion for Shalva has never wavered. They believed they could make a difference and they truly are." ■

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