

## **Israeli Doctors Run Eye Clinic in Tonga**

by Mark Schulman

Two Israeli doctors traveled to the remote Pacific nation of Tonga to treat hundreds of islanders suffering from eye disease. Drs. Amir Alhalel and Iris Moroz, eye specialists from the Goldschleger Eye Research Institute at Tel Ha'Shomer Medical Center, on a 10-day medical mission sponsored by MASHAV and the Israeli Embassy in New Zealand, conducted an on-the-spot eye clinic in the main hospital from April 20-30 in the capital city of Nuku'alofa.

The Kingdom of Tonga is the only constitutional monarchy in the South Pacific. A Polynesian country, it lies south-east of Fiji, near the international date line, and consists of four main island groups with a total land area of 750 square kilometers, inhabited by a predominantly Christian population of 104,200.

“There are few trained doctors in Tonga and no eye specialists at all in the entire kingdom,” said Ruth Kahanov, Israel’s Ambassador to New Zealand, with accreditation to Tonga. She is also accredited to Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Samoa, and the Cook Islands.

The plan to send doctors began last November when Ambassador Kahanov presented her diplomatic credentials to King Taufa’ahau Tupou IV, the reigning monarch since 1965.

“When I spoke with the Prime Minister during that visit, he said that the biggest contribution Israel could make to Tonga is in the field of medicine, particularly in combating eye disease and diabetes,” Kahanov added.

Many of the eye problems in Tonga, as well as many other islands in the region, are related to high rates of diabetes. High infant mortality rates, heart disease, together with the lack of basic medical resources and facilities also present serious health problems in many parts of the Pacific.

“In the clinic we set up, we performed laser treatment and cataract operations,” Israeli doctor Amir Alhalel said. “We did as much as we could in the short time that we were there, screening about 40 cases a day,” he added.

“We also brought with us about \$10,000 worth of equipment for cataract surgery, most of which remained there as a gift from Israel,” he added.

The eye camp in Tonga follows a similar short-term mission to Micronesia in January 2001 by two other Israeli doctors. At that time, Israel donated a laser unit for glaucoma therapy and retinal disorders, as well as pharmaceuticals.



*Dr. Alhalel operating*

In May 2001, the Foreign Ministry’s special medical and humanitarian adviser, Dr. Yossi Baratz, visited Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau in order to assess further cooperation and assistance between Israel and the Pacific region, particularly in the field of health care.

Israel and Tonga have had diplomat relations since June 1977. The King and Crown Prince have both visited Israel, as well as many other Tongan nationals who have traveled half way around the world to learn from Israeli expertise in the fields of agriculture, public health, education and communications.

“We have sent a lot of Tongans to Israel for training courses over the years,” Ambassador Kahanov said. “Even the Minister of Education is a MASHAV graduate.”



*Dr. Moroz with recovering patients*