



Boxing coach Zeev Aksman (right) in action. (Marc Israel Sellem)

Feeling immense pride: Tikvah 4 Parkinson founder Debbie Shapiro. (Photos: Tikvah4Parkinson)



## Boxing helps Jerusalemites fight the disease

• By BENJAMIN DUKAS

**'B**eat Parkinson, beat Parkinson," yells Zeev Aksman in heavily accented Hebrew. His shouts of encouragement parallel the thuds of punches he is blocking. He slowly rotates his feet, his trainee following and punching. Jab. Straight. Jab. Straight. Upper-cut.

At 53, Aksman has been coaching boxing for more than 30 years, first in his native Ukraine, and for the past 20 years in Jerusalem. He has worked with people of many ages and backgrounds, training them recreationally and competitively. His work has taken him as far as Baku, Azerbaijan, to coach in competitions. But this year for the first time, Aksman is training a group of unexpected boxers: people with Parkinson's disease.

According to the Parkinson's Disease Foundation, Parkinson's is a chronic and progressive disorder in which crucial nerve cells in the brain malfunction over time. Symptoms include tremor of body parts, slowness of movement, rigidity, and loss of balance and coordination.

"There is no cure for Parkinson's," says Debbie Shapiro, the founder of the Jerusalem-based organization Tikvah 4 Parkinson. "The medicines – all they really do is cover up the symptoms, but there are often severe side effects, some that only appear years later. The only thing that is known to slow down the disease is physical activity."

That is where boxing comes in. Pioneered by Rock Steady Boxing in Indianapolis, boxing is increasingly being used as a form of rehabilitation for Par-

kinson's. The sport works on coordination and balance, which are much needed areas of improvement for people with the disease.

The first to bring this technique to Israel was former attorney general Yehuda Weinstein. A boxing champion in his youth, Weinstein started training Parkinson's patients in Bnei Brak about a year ago. Aksman saw an article about Weinstein's work and was inspired to follow in his footsteps. So when Shapiro called the Jerusalem Boxing Club, the gym where Aksman works, looking for an instructor for Parkinson's patients, Aksman happily accepted the job.

"STOP," AKSMAN tells his trainee. The elderly kippa-clad boxer lowers his arms. He is breathing heavily, but determined to continue.

"Arms up," Aksman commands. His student complies. "Now spin around." The technique helps Parkinson's patients work on their balance.

As the trainee begins to rotate, Shapiro walks into the room. Beaming, she calls out, "I wouldn't want to meet any of you in a dark alley!"

Looking at the circle of 10 male participants, Shapiro feels an immense sense of pride. These Jerusalem residents are getting the rehabilitation that they've needed, and been deprived of, for a long time.

Shapiro made aliya from San Francisco and has lived in Jerusalem for the better part of the last 45 years. When she was diagnosed with Parkinson's three years ago, she learned an unsettling truth about the city; there is al-

most no support available for people with Parkinson's in her adopted home.

"When you're diagnosed in this country with Parkinson's, no one tells you a thing," Shapiro says.

Until recently, there were no doctors in Jerusalem that specialized in Parkinson's. A patient would have 15 minutes with a doctor, during which he would be informed he had the disease, given



Aksman: Seeking smiles. (Marc Israel Sellem)

medication, and told to come back in three months.

Shapiro says she has received many frantic calls from people who, after being diagnosed, thought that their death was imminent. No one told them how to manage Parkinson's nor explained the importance of physical exercise. Because of this, she says, many people with Parkinson's stay in bed and become vegetative.

Additionally, there were no appropriate resources for patients. Physical therapy and speech therapy are crucial for people with the disease, and there weren't any proper outlets in Jerusalem. The minimal amount that existed was mixed gender, with which many religious patients were uncomfortable.

So Shapiro, a 64-year-old ultra-Orthodox grandmother, decided to make a change.

Three months ago, she started Tikvah 4 Parkinson, an organization that provides Jerusalem residents with therapies that help manage Parkinson's. Participants come twice a week to Yad Sarah, a center for the disabled, where they are split by gender and provided with a range of services, including physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy and support group.

They also have other activities that are less medical, but known to be helpful for people with Parkinson's. Both men and women do tai chi. The women have art and choir; they plan on performing in the near future. The men have gym and boxing.

The boxing class meets once a week, usually made up of 11 to 13 participants. Most wear kippot, and many have tzitzit visible. Several sport long beards. All are above 60 and fighting Parkinson's. Aksman leads the group, first in non-contact partner drills. Then they all sit in a circle, and are called up individually to box with Aksman or his assistant, Rex Merino.

Unlike Aksman, Merino is not a professional boxing coach, but an aide for a participant in the class named Eliyahu Marmon. Before immigrating to Israel, Merino was a boxing champion in the Philippines. When





Rex Merino (right), Aksman's assistant, boxes with participants Yosef Kula...



... and Eliyahu Marmon.

he learned of the rehabilitative power of his sport for those with Parkinson's, he spent hours researching the best techniques, and boxes with Marmon almost every day. When Tikvah 4 Parkinson held its first boxing class, Merino asked if he could help teach it. Shapiro eagerly acquiesced.

Aksman and Merino don't use pads, as they may hurt the patients' hands. Participants punch their coaches directly. Each participant is given several turns to box with one of the instructors. Usually each turn lasts about a minute.

While boxing is not a cure for Parkinson's, research has shown that it increases functionality for those with the disease and lessens its symptoms.

"If he's walking, he uses the walker," says Merino of Marmon. "When he's boxing, he doesn't use the walker."

As a form of high-intensity exercise, boxing triggers the creation of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that deals with physical movement. A lack of dopamine is what causes Parkinson's. Many Parkinson's patients take dopamine supplements, but these medica-

tions often have dangerous side effects. According to Shapiro, boxing serves as a natural medication for the disease, and after classes patients often skip their pills entirely.

"It's amazing, when he boxes, doesn't matter how tired he is, doesn't matter how off he is: it's working!" says Marmon's wife, Ilana.

There is still a lot to be done for the nearly 11,000 living with Parkinson's in the Jerusalem area. Shapiro is trying to raise funds for a center for Tikvah 4 Parkinson, which would have proper fa-

cilitates for Parkinson's rehabilitation, room for a full-time expert staff, and a library that educates people on how to continue living a functional and meaningful life with the disease.

"Tikvah means hope. And I want to give hope for people with Parkinson's," Shapiro said.

Aksman in Jerusalem and Weinstein in Bnei Brak remain the only two in Israel teaching boxing as Parkinson's rehabilitation. They both hope knowledge about the technique will spread, and soon be brought to Parkinson's patients across the state.

"I think all Parkinson's patients should do it. All Parkinson's patients must engage in physical activity," said Weinstein. "And one of the most successful exercise is boxing. That's why I would like it in every city, everywhere."

Boxing's effects on Parkinson's patients are more than just physical. Many with the degenerative disease experience a lowered quality of life and as a result crippling depression.

"[Boxing] helps with your self-confidence," says Daniel Loney, a participant in Aksman's class.

For Aksman, the emotional component is the most important part.

"I don't know if it helps them [physically], but it puts a smile on their face."

To learn more: [Tikvah4Parkinson.org](http://Tikvah4Parkinson.org) or [Tikvah4parkinson@gmail.com](mailto:Tikvah4parkinson@gmail.com).

# Why we WEEP

## TISHA B'AV 5777 AT OHR SOMAYACH

### MONDAY NIGHT-JULY 31

8:10 pm Maariv & Eicha  
followed by a shiur by  
Rabbi Yitzchak Dalah

### TISHA B'AV DAY-AUGUST 1

7:50 am Shacharit  
8:50 am - 12:15 pm Special  
Kinot Reading & Explanation  
with Rav Yitzchak Breitowitz,  
Rav, Kehillat Ohr Somayach  
12:15 pm - Eicha

### ALL-DAY SEMINAR FEATURING TALKS BY:

12:45 pm Rav Nota Schiller,  
*Rosh Hayeshiva*  
1:45 pm Rav Yitzchak Breitowitz  
2:45 pm Rav Nachshon Schiller,  
*Rosh Yeshiva, Ohr Shmuel*

3:30 pm Rabbi Dovid Kaplan  
4:15 pm Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb  
5:00 pm Rabbi Avraham Rockmill  
5:45 pm Rabbi Reuven Laufer  
6:15 pm Rabbi Yaacov Asher Sinclair  
7:30 pm Rabbi Yehuda Samet

6:50 pm Mincha - 7:59 pm Maariv - End of Fast 8:05 pm

Ezrat Nashim will be open throughout the day.

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