

## **Always On Guard**

An Interview with Magen David Adom employee, Eliya Bitton

Written and translated by Alon Coret

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A few days ago, Eliya Bitton came back to his car after working a night shift to find a shattered windshield. To his unpleasant surprise, his vehicle was hit by shrapnel from one of the numerous rockets shot towards Israel by Hamas in the most recent escalation in violence. Luckily for him, Bitton was nowhere near his car at the time.

Bitton, 25, began volunteering in Magen David Adom (MDA) at the age of 15. Following his army service he returned to MDA as a full-time medic, and has been working for the past two years in the Holon station, just south of Tel Aviv. Since the beginning of Operation Protective Edge on 8 July, Holon, along with other parts of central Israel, has been subjected to sirens (“Code Red”) several times per day. When compared to cities in southern Israel such as Sderot, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Beer Sheva, the situation in the Tel Aviv area is one of relative ‘calm.’

There is an expression in Hebrew that literally translates to “With a hand on the pulse” (“עם יד על הדופק”), meaning to remain alert and maintain a constant guard. This expression epitomizes the reality of daily life in Israel, and particularly the mentality of emergency medical services. “You have to be aware of your surroundings; we are always under some kind of threat, and you never know who is going to strike next,” explains Bitton.

But while the news make it seem like there is a serious crisis in Israel, Bitton would like to emphasize that people are generally protected from any physical danger. With the Iron Dome missile defense system in place, along with shelters and warning signals, Israelis are able to go on with their daily business – but nonetheless with an added dose of stress. “We have a good defense system which gives us clear and strong protection; there is no big fear. We have a strong and moral army, despite how it is often portrayed around in international media,” says Bitton.

So, what is it like to work in MDA ‘under fire?’ “There are currently no ambulances in the station, as they all go home with the drivers for the night [on-call in case of emergency]. There are also no youth volunteers [under 18]

because of the situation, so we rely more heavily on our part-time volunteers. There are sometimes sirens during a call, at which time we have to evacuate the staff and patient – with our helmets and bulletproof vests – and find a nearby shelter.” This might sound like a bit too much action for some of you, but Eliya thrives on the adrenaline. He loves the world of MDA and emergency medicine: “The work is never boring, you always get to work with different people, and you have to make critical decisions and think outside the box...I love the lack of routine.”

Since the beginning of Operation Protective Edge on 8 July, MDA ambulances have treated over 300 patients. On 15 July, MDA also offered to collect blood donations to be sent to injured civilians in the Gaza Strip, according to JNS news. All political conflicts aside, Magen David Adom is committed to treating any human being in need of help. “We do not distinguish between Jews and Arabs – a patient is a patient. We do our best to save lives, offer assistance, and put a smile on a patient’s face.”

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For more information on MDA’s relief efforts, please visit <http://www.mdais.com/>  
Interested in becoming an overseas volunteer for MDA? Check out <http://www.mdavolunteers.org/>

Alon Coret is an undergraduate student at McMaster University (Ontario, Canada). He is currently volunteering in the MDA station in Haifa.