

Equal opportunity for Israel's periphery

A 40th anniversary interview with Rashi Foundation president Francois Leven



AFTER OCTOBER 7, the foundation pivoted quickly to provide emergency assistance to dozens of local municipalities. (Courtesy Rashi Foundation)

• BY ALAN ROSENBAUM

The Rashi Foundation is marking its 40th anniversary this year. *The Jerusalem Post* caught up with its president, Francois Leven, to learn about the impact of the foundation's work in promoting social mobility in Israel's geo-social periphery and its vision for the future.

Leven hails from five generations of Jewish philanthropy dating back more than 160 years, beginning with his great-grandfather Narcisse Leven, one of the founders of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (KIAH) in 1850, and his great-uncle Gustave Leven, who founded the Rashi Foundation.

In addition to his role as president of the Rashi Foundation, Francois Leven is also a member of the board of Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Jewish Funders Network (JFN). He references his family's long history and its legacy of dedication to Israel and the Diaspora.

"My family's goal has always been to help the Jewish people in the Diaspora and to strengthen Israeli society," Leven says.

He visits Israel frequently and is very involved in the Rashi Foundation's activities.

"Like my father Hubert, who was president of Rashi for 35 years, I and the whole board are committed to continuing the legacy of Rashi's founder.

"It was important for [great-uncle] Gustave to always hear from the people on the ground. An important initiative, the National School Lunch Program, for example, started after he visited a school and understood that the children never brought lunch from home and were hungry.

"After a successful pilot program, a law was enacted ensuring that children in kindergartens and schools receive a hot meal during long school days."

Leven continues: "This highlights the importance of the Rashi Foundation's role in Israeli society: We identify a significant need, design a model together

with the government and local municipalities, and develop it into a sustainable long-term function of the authorities. But we also must respond to the changing needs.

"The State of Israel changes in each generation and together with those changes, so too, have the challenges."

HOW HAS the Rashi Foundation impacted Israel over the past 40 years?

"The foundation has been and will always be there to address the relevant needs in Israel's North and South," says Leven, "whether by investing in the establishment of infrastructure to upgrade higher education and expand regional employment, developing services for parenthood and families, advancing excellence in education, or bolstering the strengths of each local municipality and region.

Over the decades, he explains, the Rashi Foundation has played an integral part in helping develop



FRANCOIS LEVEN,
current Rashi Foundation
president.
(Courtesy Rashi Foundation)



GUSTAVE
LEVEN, founder
of the Rashi
Foundation.
(Courtesy Rashi
Foundation)



‘PROVIDING AN equal opportunity, regardless of where you’re born, is what we’re after,’ says the Rashi Foundation president.

Beersheba into the capital of the Negev, contributed significantly to the recovery of the north after the Second Lebanon War, partnered in building academic colleges in the periphery to increase access to higher education, “and of course what we are doing today in the wake of October 7.”

“Once we understand the emerging needs,” he says, “we always adapt the foundation’s strategy to maximize our impact.”

Leven cites several initiatives that Rashi began with its partners over the decades – and which continue to operate with public funding. These are the National School Lunch Program; treatment centers for child victims of sexual abuse; the Magshimim cyber education program; the Families First program for helping families break out of poverty; and the Darca school network – to name a few.

“These and others are moving on and flying on their own,” says Leven. “We’ve done our job and passed the baton. Through these and other initiatives, we are not there just to do good, but to significantly change the system.”

He also acknowledges Rashi’s “deeply committed and very active new chairman, Shaul Shani, and strategic partners who joined us recently – Elena and Yakir Gabay, whose involvement during the past six months has been extremely valuable.”

Currently, among its efforts to improve the lives of those in Israel’s periphery, the Rashi Foundation is focusing on education, youth, employment, and welfare. Its strategy is based on empowering local municipalities by building their capacity (economic development, management, and data systems) to create opportunities for children and families.

The Rashi Foundation understands that the local authority is the best channel for bringing constructive solutions to residents. Expanding on this theme, Leven explains that since the outbreak of the war in October, the foundation pivoted quickly to provide emergency assistance to dozens of local municipalities, particularly in the South, such as Sderot and Ofakim, and in the North, such as Kiryat Shmona.

“We work closely with them to answer immediate needs as well as to design long-term plans that will enable them to recover and thrive once again.”

“Michal Cohen, Rashi’s CEO, is an important key to opening doors to ministries and municipalities,” says Leven, in addition to leading and managing the foundation.

Leven explains that all Rashi Foundation programs now include treatment for trauma. “For example, through experiential education programs in sports or the arts, we create opportunities for children to express and process their feelings, building emotional resilience.”

THE RASHI Foundation has a unique combination of characteristics: it is a foundation and also operates on the ground; it also has a professional team engaged in the development and evaluation of initiatives, and a nation-wide presence through a network of eight affiliated nonprofit organizations.

“This gave us a huge advantage when the war broke out, being able to immediately deploy staff and volunteers from our different affiliates and provide what was needed in the field,” Leven notes. “We also have a branch that deals with policy change.”

Cross-sector partnership is the key to achieving significant long-term change, he believes: “Philanthropy and the business community play an essential role in starting innovative models for social initiatives, which the government can adopt and scale up into national programs and services after their effectiveness has been proven, thus ensuring their sustainability.”

Leven has a message for Israel’s citizens on the observance of Independence Day.

“Providing an equal opportunity, regardless of where you’re born, is what we’re after. The basis of my family’s involvement in philanthropy is the same basis of the State of Israel – to be there for one another.

“Israel has human capital with tremendous potential; it has overcome huge challenges in the past, and I truly believe that all the citizens of Israel can improve their quality of life, no matter where they live. Step by step, with hope and determination, we will make it happen.” ✨

This article was written in cooperation with the Rashi Foundation.