

Rowing for life

Women who have undergone surgery for breast cancer band together to row across Lake Kinneret in a competition that tests their physical and emotional strength



THE 'HATIRA LAHAIM' women practice for the rowing competition. (Courtesy)

• BARRY DAVIS

Mira Idels looks to be the picture of perfect health. When she tells me she is 71, I am almost tempted to ask for ID to check her year of birth. We meet at the well-appointed Daniel Rowing Center on the banks of the Yarkon River in Tel Aviv. It is a highly impressive building, with its modern decor, high ceilings and advanced equipment, and there is a buzz about the place.

There is also an effervescent buzz about Idels as she talks about her battle with breast cancer, and how rowing has helped her and the other women with whom she takes to the water, all of whom have either overcome or are dealing with breast cancer. "I am the elder member of the tribe," she chuckles, referring to the bunch of women, mostly aged 40 to 50, who are determined to stay healthy and stay fit, and to grab life – and oars – with both hands.

Later today, Idels and her rowing cohorts will pit their will and physical fitness against teams from the United States, Canada and Israel, in a competition that kicks off from the Ma'agan Beach on Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee).

Idels says that the women's chosen sporting pursuit offers important physiological value, in addition to boosting their general level of physical fitness. "Our team got together after there was a report in Canada about findings that indicated that women who had undergone surgery for breast cancer, if they row and use their shoulders, that helps them overcome a complaint called lymphedema. We have some of our lymph nodes removed in surgery, and that makes the arms swell up. Rowing releases that.

"The life-changing information came from professional quarters. The girl who heard about the report works in the pharmaceutical field, so she really understood what it was all about," Idels continues. "She is called Dafna – we don't use family

names among us – and she came here to tell the people here about the report."

Unsurprisingly, the 10 women on Idels' team are a tight-knit bunch. "We are our own support group," she says. "There are a couple of women who are in regression, so we stick together. If anyone is a bit down, we help boost their spirits."

They also help each other out with logistics. "If one of us needs to go into hospital for chemotherapy, one of us will take her, and will stay there while she has the treatment. One woman had to go into hospital to have repeat transplant surgery, so we went with her. This is about a lot more than the rowing."

But make no mistake, these women are totally sold on getting out in their dragon-headed craft, come what may. "There have been some weather conditions when we have been told we shouldn't go out to row, but we almost never miss an opportunity to row," Idels declares. "It is a very important part of our life, and we are all busy people."

The team members are all professionals, including senior hi-tech workers, an interior designer, a lawyer and "fittingly," a physiotherapist. "We train twice a week," Idels continues, "and we fit other bits of our life around the rowing. We train on Monday afternoons, and in the morning on Thursday."

The training sessions are grueling, and no quarter is asked or given. "We have two trainers," Idels explains. "One is Israeli – a really sweetie – who started out with us. The other is Russian. He is so disciplined and he makes us give our all for the rowing. He works us really hard and we love it."

The septuagenarian says there is a lot of strength – both of the physical and emotional variety – in the team. "We are all confident and forthright people. We all consented to talk about our cancer, not to hide it away from people, and to accept the disease and to fight it each in her own way."

Idels notes that things have changed in terms of the way the medical profession and society relate to cancer since she was diagnosed. "That was 19 years ago. No one said the word 'cancer' back then, they said 'disease.' There was no support for the cancer sufferers, or the people around them. Just think about it – besides the person who got cancer, there was the partner



and the family, who were also devastated by the way their life was turned upside down. And the partner generally found it hard to keep working, which also brought earning problems. Thankfully, things are different these days."

Idels has also done her bit to help women with breast cancer outside the realms of rowing. "I worked in all sorts of cultural organizations, and was also active in One in Nine," she says, referring to the organization which aims to raise awareness of breast cancer and advance breast health in Israel – and provides patients and their families with support, information and advice about rights, helps promote policy on the disease, and campaigns for the inclusion of various forms of medication and treatment in the national health basket.

"When I was sick I didn't have the support of One in Nine, because it didn't exist back then. Now there is also the Israel Cancer Association," notes Idels, adding that we have also come a long way on an awareness level. "Today, it's OK to talk about cancer. It's not like when I had it, when people were scared to talk about it. We get on with our lives and we are independent."

"Independent" is the operative word, and Idels says that she and her friends have learned to cope and live life to the fullest under their own steam. "A while back, we had a professional woman who came to give us emotional support. But, after a while, we realized that we didn't need her services, and she understood that too. We stick together and support each other."

That involves much more than meeting at the rowing center, getting into their rowing gear and hitting the Yarkon. "Next Sunday we are going on a trip together," says Idels. "We also socialize with each other. We have been together for almost two and a half years and we are all really close friends."

And, naturally, there is the not insignificant matter of the competition, which is now in its second year. "This is a big deal for everyone involved," says Idels. "Last year there were 450 women rowers from abroad and 400 from Israel, and this year it is the other way around – 450 from here and 400 from there."

Women who have, or have experienced, breast cancer comprise a special category in the competition. "There are two teams of 10 women breast cancer survivors from the Center who will be in the competition," explains Idels, adding that the teams have a pretty neat name too. "We call ourselves 'Hatira Lahaim' – a play on words which translates as 'rowing for life' or 'striving for life' – and none of us was a super athlete before this. I started with sport only around three years ago. You know, at

school, I almost didn't get my *bagrut* [matriculation] certificate because I hadn't completed my physical education stuff. But I'm very different today."

TEAM MEMBER Michal Geller says she generally kept in half-decent shape throughout her life, even before she set her hands on the oars, but that she is so much healthier – in several departments – now. "I have been a bit overweight all my life, but I have always done some form of exercise – walking, dancing, all kinds of things."

She also says she is impressed with Idels's mind-set. "She is over 20 years older than me and I have a very hard time trying to keep up with her. She is a great source of inspiration for all of us."

Geller also touches on the bond that all of the rowers feel. "We just went on a day trip, and it was so much fun. We have something that ties us all together. I can't explain it in words. This is an amazing bunch of extraordinary women."

There is the idea that we sometimes need a kick in the rear end to get us going, or possibly to change our course in life. Geller says this rings true for her. "My life has changed almost completely since I got cancer. I wouldn't go so far as to say that cancer is a great gift I was given, or that I am happy I got it, but as absurd as it may sound – and I have had some very challenging experiences – my life is much better and richer today. For example, I switched jobs after working in the same place for 20 years, I do things that I never dared to do before. I really

live my life to the fullest. I look at life differently now."

Geller says that these experiences, and others, have impacted her entire family. "We went through a medical crisis with my husband a few years ago, around two years before I became sick. When we got through that we thought we'd get back to the way things were before, and that nothing would change. When I got sick I realized that things could never be the same again. I realized that I had to make lemonade out of lemons, and take what I'd been given and take out of it what is good for me, and what is good for my family. I am a much happier person today."

But, as Geller notes, we all have our own way of responding to momentous events in our life. "We each take things like cancer differently. Some people who get cancer live in constant fear of, for example, the disease recurring. I stand a far greater chance of getting sick with cancer again than someone who has not had it. But I refuse to live my life in fear."

That, says Geller, can also involve a certain amount of denial. "I think that, in recent years, psychologists have begun to realize that it is all right to suppress certain things, that it's not necessarily a bad thing not to deal with things head-on, the whole time. In the last two years I have attended the funerals of four or five women I knew, but I am not going to live my life constantly worrying that I am going to die. I have to [take] every day as it comes. I have small children, I have a family. You have to look at things like that, without fear."

The spiritual side also comes into the mix. "I wouldn't call myself a particularly spiritual person. I don't go for all that stuff, but today I believe that if the soul is healthier and happier the body will also be healthy, and there will be less chance of me getting sick."

Geller, unfortunately, has had more opportunities than most to test the practicability and rewards of that approach. "I look forward, never back. There was a test they did at a hospital, and they really messed up the whole procedure. A friend told me I could sue the hospital, but I preferred to let it go and just look forward. That's the only way to live."

Geller found her way to the rowing center by chance. "I was going through treatment for the cancer and I saw something on the Internet about the rowing center, and the women rowers, and I thought 'that's just for me,' and it's close to my home so it was also convenient."

It was love at first row, at the first sight of her new sisters in oars. "As soon as I started rowing I was hooked on it," she recalls. "And there was such warmth between us all, right from the word go."

Mind you, Geller has no illusions about the Hatira Lahaim team's chances of success in the rowing contest on the Kinneret. "We're not Olympic champions, or anything like that. We're just a bunch of women enjoying the rowing and each other, and keeping fit and healthy, in our bodies, mind and spirit. That's the important thing." ■

