



KIRUV ON THE FRONTLINES

In recent years, there has been a steady and worrisome erosion in Jewish identity among many Israelis. This is especially true with regard to the youth. Influenced by Western and secular mores, large sectors of the Israeli public have developed a looser sense of connection with Jewish history and Jewish destiny.

This was borne out most starkly by a survey conducted two years ago among Israeli Jews by the Mutagim polling firm. Participants were asked whether they felt more Jewish or more Israeli, and while the overall result was fairly even—50 percent said they were Jewish first and 45 percent said they were Israeli first—the outcome among non-religious Israelis was starkly different.

Among those calling themselves secular, 72 percent said they were more

Israeli, compared with just 23 percent who said they were more Jewish. By contrast, 82 percent of religious respondents said they were more Jewish while a mere 8 percent said they were more Israeli.

Along with the loss of Jewish identity, the wearying demands of compulsory military service, coupled with years of reserve duty and a heavy tax burden to pay for national defense, have started to take their toll.

Clearly, something needs to be done to reinforce the formative Jewish and Zionist values that gave birth to the State of Israel, lest the next generation of Israelis grow up increasingly disconnected from their roots.

“Some twenty-six percent of Israelis do not go to the army,” says Rabbi Avi Berman, director-general, OU Israel, who served in an Israel Defense Forces artillery unit. “Many have clearly lost interest or are lacking in motivation. And even among those who do serve, many have lost the willingness to go and fight for the Land.”

As in numerous other areas of Israeli life, the Orthodox Union (OU) is

on the frontlines of the battle to bring Israelis back to Judaism, doing its part to address these challenges, which go straight to the heart of ensuring Israel’s inner strength and spirit.

And so, eight years ago, OU Israel developed Mashiv Haruach, a unique program that reaches thousands of young Israelis in uniform each year, drawing them closer to their heritage. The hands-on program was then jump-started in the wake of the 2006 Lebanon War, when, Rabbi Berman says, the need for such an initiative became especially acute.

Working closely with Israel’s Chief Rabbinate and the army’s Education Branch, the OU put together an intensive educational and experiential day-long excursion for soldiers to Gush Etzion, outside of Jerusalem.

The aim, according to Rabbi Berman, is to “make [these soldiers] better Jews and better soldiers.”

Young recruits spend time visiting sites such as the scene of the January 1948 Battle of the “Lamed-Heh,” where, in a heroic clash to defend Jerusalem, thirty-five members of the

Michael Freund served as deputy director of communications under Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu during his previous term of office. He is the founder and chairman of Shavei Israel, a Jerusalem-based group that assists “lost Jews” seeking to return to the Jewish people.

Haganah lost their lives in the Judean Hills. They learn about the history of the struggle to establish the State of Israel, and of the sacrifices that were made to help bring it about.

Participants are also taken to Kfar Etzion, the religious kibbutz in Gush Etzion that symbolizes the Jewish people's unwavering commitment to rebuilding the Land of Israel. There they are shown a multimedia presentation that tells the history of the kibbutz, from the massacre of its residents by Arabs in May 1948 to its miraculous rebuilding and resettling in September 1967 following the Six-Day War.

"We are touching the heart of Israeli society," says Rephael (Rafi) Even Danahan, director of Mashiv Haruach. "We approach [the soldiers] without any judgment and they are open to hearing [about] their heritage and history. 'This is the real *Tziyonut* [Zionism]!' they tell me. They say, 'For the first time in my life I understand why I'm fighting.'"

"We intentionally chose a place [to take the soldiers] that is within the Israeli national consensus, one with an unbelievable and inspiring story that would surely have a deep and lasting

impact on the soldiers," Rabbi Berman says. "Almost everyone across the spectrum agrees that Gush Etzion is and will remain part of Israel, so this is not a political issue."

"One of our main goals is to build bridges between different factions of Israeli society," says Shaul Goldstein, the mayor of Gush Etzion, who gladly consented to have Mashiv Haruach launch its outreach efforts there. "The OU is giving us the opportunity to bring Israel's [diverse] people together, helping them to get to know and understand each other. When the soldiers hear about the battle for Gush Etzion, it strengthens their connection to Zionism."

Rabbi Berman points out that David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, once said that the fighters of Gush Etzion had saved Jerusalem. "The fact that we are able to live in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv is because there were people who were willing to be *moser nefesh* [sacrifice their lives] for this country, and the young people of today need to be reminded of that," he says.

A particularly powerful moment during the excursion inevitably occurs when the group stands on a hill and sees the sweep of the entire country before them, from Ashkelon in the south all the way up the coast to Tel Aviv. "Suddenly, they real-

ize that everything is literally just a rocket's distance away, and they always ask: 'Is this the Judea and Samaria that everyone is talking about?' It gives them an additional perspective on just how small our country truly is," says Rabbi Berman.

The hiking and touring, while important, is only one part of the experience. In the afternoon, the soldiers are taken to Yeshivat Har Etzion for a glimpse into the world of Torah—an experience far removed from their daily existence.

"Religion in the army is a very touchy subject," says Danahan. "It's eye-opening for them to meet reserve officers learning in yeshiva. My view is that they are really meeting *themselves* there. The soldiers leave with a big smile and tell me their stay was too short."

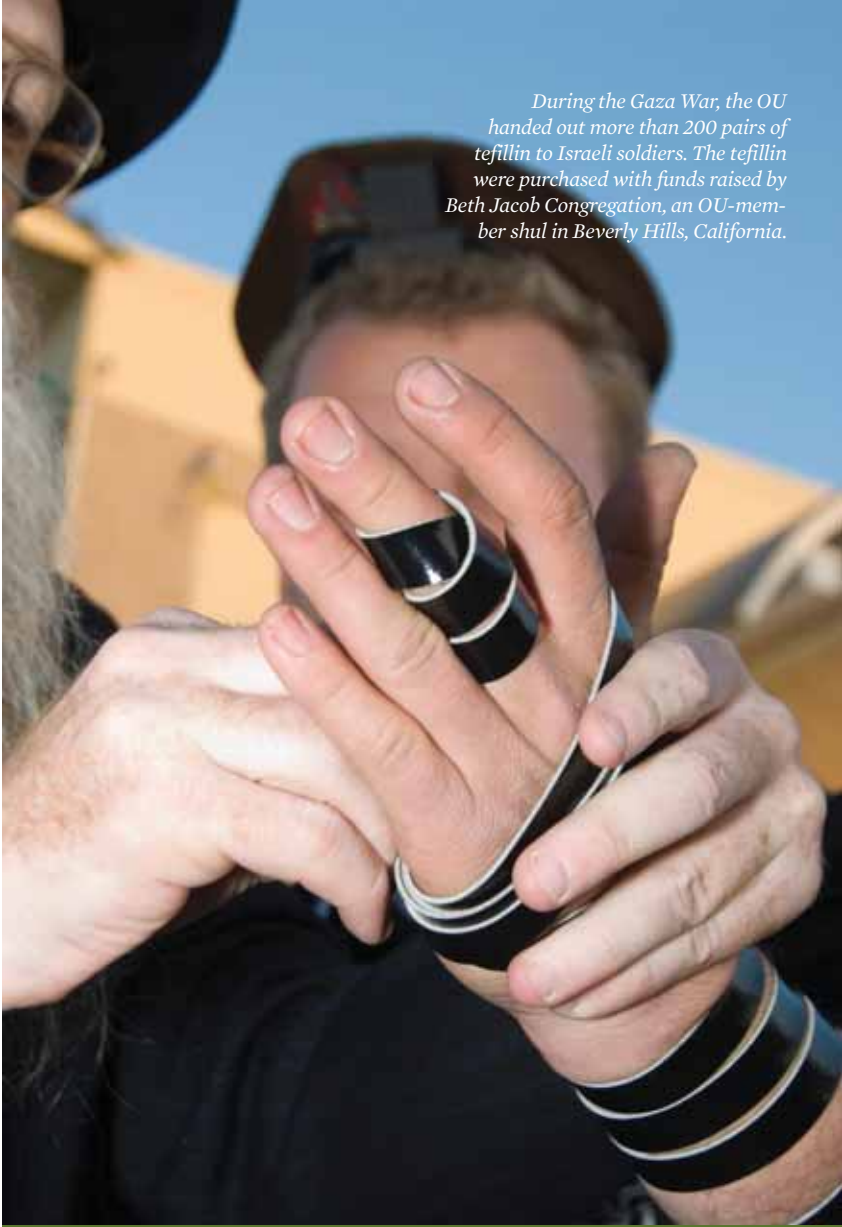
The number of soldiers participating in Mashiv Haruach has surged, with more than 10,000 men and women participating this past year. Rabbi Berman's goal is to boost the number to 15,000, with only a lack of funds holding him back. More support, he says, will help Mashiv Haruach reach more soldiers.

The army, Rabbi Berman explains, allocates a certain number of educational days each year to its units, and officers have to select from a menu of



Secular Israeli soldiers visit Yeshivat Har Etzion as part of Mashiv Haruach, OU Israel's unique outreach program for young Israeli soldiers.

Photos: Abba Richman



During the Gaza War, the OU handed out more than 200 pairs of tefillin to Israeli soldiers. The tefillin were purchased with funds raised by Beth Jacob Congregation, an OU-member shul in Beverly Hills, California.

PROVIDING SPIRITUAL AMMUNITION

At the height of Operation Cast Lead last year, the OU delivered more than 200 packages consisting of tefillin, *tzitzit* and a *siddur* with Tehillim to Israeli soldiers on the battlefield. The items were purchased with funds raised by Beth Jacob Congregation, an OU-member shul in Beverly Hills, California. The synagogue's former rabbi, Rabbi Steven Weil, is currently the executive vice president of the OU.

"The IDF arms the soldiers with their military weaponry. The OU's mission is to arm them with spiritual ammunition as they put their lives at risk," OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb said at the time.

"When the war broke out, we were getting calls from IDF rabbis, literally begging us for more sets of tefillin, more pairs of *tzitzit*," Rabbi Berman recalls. "There are no atheists in a fox-hole, and when I was standing there giving out tefillin to soldiers, there was a long line of young men who were pleading to get a pair."

Rabbi Berman, who was born in Brooklyn and made *aliyah* with his parents at the age of nine, takes great satisfaction in his work, seeing it as essential to tearing down the barriers that have developed between different sectors of Israeli society.

He tells the story of a female soldier who approached him recently at the end of the trip to Gush Etzion and told him that she had not wanted to come. She had grown up hating Judea and Samaria and the settlers. Her parents had been opposed to her attending the program but her commander had forced her to go.

When Rabbi Berman asked her how she felt after having experienced the program, the young woman smiled and replied, "Well, I am leaving here and I don't hate you anymore."

"Our goal is to take down barriers and give these soldiers a better understanding of who they are and why they fight," says Rabbi Berman. "We are changing the country, one soldier at a time." ■

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options, which can range from a trip to Yad Vashem to a tour up north. The OU's program is officially recognized by the army for this purpose, and as word has spread among the officer corps, the demand for spots in Mashiv Haruach has soared. "It's a very important experience for [the soldiers]," says Danahan. "We first meet them during the early stage in their army service. Later on, many phone me and

say, 'I'm now an officer and I want to bring my soldiers.' That's a true measure of our success."

Thanks to the program, the special connection that has developed between the OU and various IDF units has opened up new avenues for the OU, enabling the organization to assist with meeting the spiritual needs of Israel's soldiers on various occasions.

