


Listening to Their Souls:

The OU's Zula Gives Israeli Teens at Risk a Second Chance

It's *Motzei Shabbat* in Israel. Among the families across the country gathering to hear Havdalah, a number are dreading the coming of night, knowing their sons and daughters will soon join the hundreds at Kikar Zion in downtown Jerusalem, partaking in drugs, alcohol and promiscuity. But thanks to The Zula,* a drop-in center and program for teens at risk run by the Seymour J. Abrams Orthodox Union Jerusalem World Center, more and more parents are sleeping better at night, knowing their children have found a safe haven from the dark life of the streets.

The Pearl and Harold M. Jacobs Outreach Zula Center was created in response to a tragedy. In the summer of 2000, an eighteen-year-old boy from a *frum* family in Jerusalem died of a drug overdose. The death motivated Harel Hetzroni, a concerned Jew, to do something about the intensifying crisis of religious youth flirting with self-destruction. No

stranger to the streets, Hetzroni himself had spent a chunk of his adolescence caught up in the dropout scene. "I was into drugs, pubs and discos," he says. "I got as low as you can get." Hetzroni made a deal with God that if He would pull him out of "this pit," he would do all he could to help others in a similar situation. Hetzroni kept his promise.



Every *Motzei Shabbat*, hundreds of wayward youth come to The Zula to play drums and guitar and take in the warm, tranquil atmosphere. Photos courtesy of Abba Richman

*A Turkish word, which in Hebrew slang means a place to hang out with friends.

With the ready assistance of friends, his winning personality and a heart full of *ahavat Yisrael*, Hetzroni began scouting the streets around Kikar Zion, the (infamous) place to buy drugs and hang out. Striking up conversations with the adolescents there, he told them, "Instead of going to the pub [and] doing drugs, come with me. We'll sit, sing songs, share stories and get into your problems."

Within a few months, Hetzroni's grassroots group had gathered more lost souls than they could handle, and sought larger quarters. The group approached the Israel Center, proposing the program. The Orthodox Union (OU) welcomed it.

Today, "Hetzroni's Zula," as it is known, opens its doors a few nights a week, attracting 120 to 250 participants. Every Thursday night and *Motzei Shabbat* from 11 PM to the early hours of the morning, teens sit on the cushions that line the floor, playing drums and guitar and taking in the warm, tranquil atmosphere. Hetzroni, today The Zula's outreach director, and the program's advisors (*madrichim*) scour Jerusalem's hangouts, schmoozing with the kids—some as young as eleven and twelve years old—reeling them in, and saving their lives.

Gerald M. Schreck, chairman of the OU Publications Commission, along with other members of the OU's senior leadership, recently visited The Zula. "We were introduced to a fifteen-year-old girl who openly shared with us that she was involved with promiscuous behavior and that she used drugs," says Schreck. "This was a [formerly] *frum* girl."

"The Zula is an emergency room," says Rabbi Avi Berman, director-general of OU Israel. "The real work is actually done when advisors follow up with the kids during the week. That's when the kids talk. They know the advisors understand where they are; many of them used to be there themselves."

Bringing Them Back to Themselves

Hetzroni, Educational Director Rabbi Pinchas Rubinstein and Director Rafael Danen choose staff members for The Zula with great care. Among the many requirements, staff must have the ability to reach troubled kids, and be willing to work each Saturday night and accept phone calls at any time. Each advisor has his *chevrah*, a close-knit group of five or ten teenagers with whom he is required to keep in constant touch. The Zula also employs psychologists and social workers to help the kids "come back to themselves."

Staff members relate to all aspects of the adolescents' lives. They work directly with parents, providing them with the direction they need to communicate more effectively with their children. The staff also conducts preventative workshops throughout Israel, alerting parents to the signs that indicate their children need help. In addition, Hetzroni and The Zula staff often receive requests to run

Today, "Hetzroni's Zula," as it is known, opens its doors a few nights a week, attracting 120 to 250 participants.

workshops for principals and teachers in schools throughout Israel. The Zula has reconciled parents with their children and placed teens in appropriate educational institutions and in vocational training programs.

"The number of troubled youth has increased significantly since the disengagement," says Yitzhak Fund, president of OU Israel. "Additionally, [Israel is] a country under siege and [this] creates a tremendous amount of disruption in the community. Teenagers—whether from a *Chareidi*, *Dati Leumi* or irreligious background—have access to the dangers of the Internet, [and easy exposure] to the world at large; so many [destructive] diversions. When you add financial stress and the crisis of a community constantly going to funerals, it creates an atmosphere in which

the parents can't reach their children anymore."

Mr. Schreck concurs that the disengagement not only dislocated families physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. "These kids no longer have confidence in the government, or in authority in general," he says. "Unfortunately, this includes their parents."

According to Hetzroni, who wears his *tzitzit* prominently over his clothing, the kids on the street aren't rejecting Judaism. "Even the ones who take off their *kippot* and consider themselves irreligious don't really hate Judaism. If we want to bring them back to Torah, we first

Happy
New Year!

Wishing you and your family
a healthy, happy, prosperous
and sweet new year.



**Price
Chopper**
SUPERMARKETS

Stores located in NY, CT, MA, VT, NH and PA.
To find a location near you, please visit www.pricechopper.com.

Bayla Sheva Brenner is senior writer in the OU Communications and Marketing Department.

have to give them love, unconditionally. We are not going to judge them,” stresses Hetzroni. “[These kids] don’t speak about struggling with *emunah* [faith]; they speak about personal issues, their family lives and suicidal thoughts. Most of them have stopped believing in themselves. Once a person knows his inner strengths, who he is and who he could be, then he can take the next step. We have to work on the individual as an individual before we can work on his spiritual self.”

Hetzroni blames much of the religious alienation he sees among the youth on a school system that values academic excellence over everything. “Their whole lives, people have been talking to their heads; and not to their hearts, not to their *neshamot* [souls],” he says. “Twelve years in a school like that, how can they deal with negative feelings and drives? So they go out to the street for a quick fix, to feel better for a little while. In the school system, if a kid does well, she gets praised, but if she goes out on the street, she

“If we want to bring them back to Torah, we first have to give them love, unconditionally.”

gets a ‘high-five’ simply for wearing a nice dress.”

Hetzroni enjoys the paradox of The Zula’s continued success. “These kids are coming to enjoy themselves and we’re telling them they can’t have drugs here, no messing around between boys and girls and all sorts of other restrictions,” he says. “You’d think they’d run the other way!” Yet, they keep coming—from the Golan down to Eilat, from Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Tzfat and *yishuvim* (small communities) throughout the country. “We deal with hundreds of kids who come every *Motzei Shabbat*,” says Hetzroni. “We see many hundreds during the week—a few thousand on an annual basis—and this is just the

tip of the iceberg.”

Since The Zula was first founded, Hetzroni has been gratified to see many former participants returning to lives of Torah, and has even had the privilege of attending their weddings and the *britot* of their children.

“When I stand near the *chuppah*, watching one of the [former] kids get married, I look up to God and say: ‘Thank You for giving me the ability to do my part; and thank You for doing Yours,’” says Hetzroni.

Pleased as he is with The Zula’s accomplishments, Hetzroni feels that more could be done. With two or three times the resources it has currently, The Zula could help four or five times the number of youth—and could work much more in depth with them. “There’s no end to what we need to do,” he says. “The street is crying out.” ■

To learn more about The Zula or to contribute, please contact Allyson Gur-Aryeh at (212) 613-8124 or allysong@ou.org.



A staff member playing the guitar at the Pearl and Harold M. Jacobs Outreach Zula Center.