



Promoting Jewish Unity

By Harvey Blitz

One thing the crisis in Israel has proven is this: Jews come together in a time of need. At the April 15th Washington rally, which the OU helped organize, more than 100,000 Jews—from Alaska to Florida—came together in a remarkable display of *achdut* and *ahavat Yisrael*. The participants ranged from Reform to *Chareidi*; all were united by their love for Eretz Yisrael. Less than a week later, the OU, along with other major Orthodox organizations, coordinated a massive *Tehillim* rally in Manhattan. Some 50,000 people attended and Rabbi Syshe Heschel, a member of the OU Kashruth Department, led the *tefillot*. Live telephone hook ups to similar assemblies in more than 30 other cities around North America made it one of the largest unified prayer sessions ever held.

The seemingly impossible has become possible. Jews from Stockholm to London to Detroit continue to band together to express their staunch and undying support for *Am Yisrael*; suddenly what unites us is far greater than that which divides us.

But why do we wait for times of distress to affirm our unity? Why do we

feel a sense of Jewish peoplehood only in the aftermath of a terrorist attack in Netanya or Jerusalem? Why do we feel more *achdut* when a synagogue is torched in France or London or Moscow?

Fostering Jewish unity is perhaps one of our generation's greatest challenges. This is especially true in Israel where the divide between religious and secular has grown increasingly wider. And yet, important inroads in promoting unity are being made. The OU has, in fact, made Jewish unity a top priority in the Seymour J. Abrams OU Jerusalem World Center in Israel.

In a society where the religious and non-religious have little, if any, positive interaction, our Israel Center's Center for Jewish Unity provides an intellectual forum where Jews from all walks of life come together to share ideas and discuss prevailing issues of the day. Recently, the Center featured a lecture on the Israeli Supreme Court and a day-long program on the Har HaBayit. Attracting Jews across the religious and political spectrum, these events help create relationships among all kinds of Jews.

But there are also significant cultural divides in Israel. There is perhaps no other place in the world where people from so many different countries, speaking so many different languages, live together.

One of the ways the OU Israel Center, under the leadership of Rabbi

Dovid Cohen, director general of the OU in Israel and Yitzhak Fund, president of the Israel Center, builds cultural bridges is through outreach. While the Center was originally established to provide a “home-away-from-home” for English-speakers who are living, studying or traveling in Israel, it has become a hub of activity for Jews of all types. Each week, the Center welcomes 1000 Jews including Russians, *Sephardim*, *Ashkenazim*, native Israelis and recent *olim*.

For youth from Ethiopia, Iraq, Uzbekistan and other places, the OU Israel Center's Makom B'Lev program offers NCSY-styled clubs that give young people positive Jewish experiences such as *Shabbatonim* and *tiyulim*. The program, which operates in poor towns where crime and drugs are rampant, offers underprivileged youth a compelling alternative to the street. In the past year alone, Makom B'Lev's membership has quadrupled.

Similarly, the Center's Bet Kharkov helps alumni of the OU Kharkov Project in the Ukraine integrate into Israeli society. Each year, between 20 and 30 alumni—while still in their teens—make *aliyah*. Most of them arrive without family, without friends, without connections. In the first turbulent days of adjusting to life in Israel, these *olim* often feel scared, confused, alone. Bet Kharkov provides a “home” for some 200 alumni, helping them navigate Israeli bureaucracy,

find adequate housing, suitable religious schooling and financial help. Additionally, the program offers *Shabbatonim*, *tiyulim*, and holiday activities. With the help of Bet Kharkov, *olim* from the Ukraine are successfully assimilating into Israeli society.

Achieving genuine unity requires a commitment to reaching out—and reaching in. While the figures are still relatively small, over the past few years, there has been a frightening rise in the number of *dati leumi*, National Religious youth that are leaving religious life and taking to the streets. Many of these youth grew up in settlements and disillusioned with religion, weary of living in fear, they flock to Jerusalem's Zion Square, a well-known hangout for homeless youth.

With support from the Jewish Agency, the OU Israel Center opened Zula, a den in the Zion Square area, offering a warm, safe environment for disaffected youth. On Saturday nights, some 200 youth—many of whom have been kicked out of their homes and expelled from school—play drums and guitars until the wee hours of the morning. One mother of a homeless teenager recently told David Cohen that Saturday night is the only time she's calm; she knows her daughter is at Zula. The Center is also working with Seth Mandell, the father of Koby, the victim of an Arab stoning, to launch a new program that will take teens from settlements on inspirational *Shabbatonim* to deepen their love of *Yiddishkeit*. Hopefully, this program, and others like it, will help prevent future religious dropouts.

This is the essence of *ahavat Yisrael*—reaching out to the unaffiliated and the disenfranchised, transcending the boundaries of culture and religious level, and connecting to the *neshamah* possessed by every Jew. Indeed, *shalom*, peace and *shalem*, wholeness are derived from the same root. We hope and pray that in the *zechut* of all those who work to promote genuine unity, we shall merit to have that most cherished of gifts, peace. 