

# SOUTH OF THE BORDER NCSY GOES TO CHILE

BY SHAYNDI RAICE

Before Rabbi Shimon and Laura Vinger came to Santiago almost three years ago, there weren't many religious experiences available to Chilean Jewish teenagers. But, then again, most Chilean Jewish teenagers weren't looking for religious experiences.

Indeed, the religious landscape has changed in Santiago, Chile, since the Vingers, who had previously been living in Israel, brought the OU's National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY) to the country, the first NCSY chapter outside of North America and Israel.

While over the past ten years a Jewish renaissance has been taking place among Chilean Jews, with the arrival of NCSY, young people are becoming more involved in Judaism. "[The creation of] NCSY Chile was the first attempt to reach out to the younger people," says Dr. Raul Shilkrut, a psychiatrist and member of the Santiago Jewish community.

In Santiago, where 13,000 out of Chile's 15,000 Jews live, there is a sizeable *ba'al teshuvah* community and an Orthodox day school—Maimonides School—with 200 students. Currently, roughly eighty to one hundred families in Santiago are Orthodox, but the number is growing. Kosher food is now readily available, and the Orthodox community has a voice on the CREJ, the Chilean Board of Jewish Communities. Addition-

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*This logo for NCSY Chile was designed by Jocy Stein, whose younger sister is active in NCSY Chile.*

ally, the community boasts a *kollel*, kosher restaurants and three Orthodox synagogues.

Assimilation is one of the greatest challenges facing the Jewish community in Chile. According to "Rav Shimon"—as he is lovingly referred to by his NCSY-ers—there is a 50 percent assimilation rate among Chilean Jews.

Some attribute the high rate to the country's tolerant, secular climate. "Most Chileans say that they're Catholic, but the secular tendencies are very strong. The secular climate in Chile has affected the Jewish community," explains Dr. Shilkrut.

Although the Jewish community in Chile dates back to the early sixteenth century, when conversos traveled with the first explorers, almost all of the country's observant Jews left in 1970 when Salvador Allende and the communists took control. Chile lacked a substantial Orthodox presence until General Augusto Pinochet's political eclipse in the late eighties. In 1989, Dov Friedberg, a Canadian entrepreneur and a supporter

of NCSY Toronto, was in Chile on business. Distressed over the Chilean Jewish community's lack of Jewish identity, he decided to establish a *kollel* in Santiago. This move marked the beginning of Santiago's religious revival.

In early 2002, the Vingers moved to Chile, lured by the opportunity to teach at Maimonides School. The opportunity came to them through Ner LeElef, a Jerusalem-based international *kiruv* organization. Soon after the Vingers started teaching, they saw the need for an Orthodox Jewish youth group. "Almost every Jewish high school student [in Santiago] is involved with a secular [Jewish] youth group, but these groups don't try to teach Judaism," says Rabbi Vinger. "It just isn't their goal. They are more focused on inculcating leadership skills. They do a great job, but they don't stop assimilation."

Aware of the extraordinary success of NCSY in North America, the Vingers contacted the NCSY headquarters in New York and were directed to Rabbi Yisrael Lashak, the director of NCSY's Southwest Region. For the past year and a half, Rabbi Lashak, who was born in Mexico City and is a native Spanish-speaker, has been traveling to Chile intermittently to help the Vingers establish NCSY Chile.

Rabbi Lashak has had to tailor the NCSY curriculum to fit the needs of Chilean Jews. "[Chilean kids] don't know much, so the material we give them is very different [from that which we give to other NCSYers]," explains Rabbi Lashak.

Lessons usually focus on Jewish

ethics or values. "The best way for people to become religious is slowly and gradually," explains Rabbi Vinger.

And because of the close familial bonds in Chile, it's important not to distance parents. "Parents can be skeptical ... we don't want to scare them," says Rabbi Lashak. "Family is the basis of society in Chile. Kids don't move out of the house at the age of eighteen like they do in the States. Families are very close."

Identifying teenagers' interests and relating to young people are not easy, but NCSY has excelled at understanding teens since its inception fifty years ago. "Today's society can give teens all types of fun, but very little meaning," says Rabbi Steve Burg, the national director of NCSY. "NCSY shows teens how they can live a fun, yet spiritually meaningful life."

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participating in the activities of the Southwest Region, which encompasses Texas, New Mexico and Colorado. In December 2004, for example, Chilean and American teens participated in a Southwest regional *Shabbaton* in Costa Rica.

But Rabbi Lashak has bigger plans. He sees NCSY's expansion to Chile as the first of many opportunities to help other Jewish communities in South

can't be successful," explains Rabbi Lashak, adding that regional *Shabbatonim* and activities are what make NCSY such a huge success. "When teens realize that there are other Jewish kids going through the same thing they're going through, it creates a bond, and they help each other," he explains.

Of course fulfilling the dream of an NCSY South American region requires dedication and commitment from the South American Jewish communities. Unlike the NCSYs of North America and Israel, which are funded by the Orthodox Union, at present the NCSY of South America has to be funded by the communities themselves. Rabbi Vinger says that raising funds has been one of the most significant challenges for NCSY Chile.

While a South American region is a goal, for now, focusing on Santiago is the number one priority. Ariel Bohoerovcaner, a fifteen-year-old student at Instituto Hevreo, a Jewish (but not Orthodox) school in Santiago, says that NCSY has given him a rich Jewish social life. "My family isn't like most of the families here," he says. "They are more religious; they keep kosher and Shabbat." Ariel says that growing up, he had very few religious friends and while "it's hard, it's been that way all my life." That is, until NCSY came to the city. "Things have changed a lot because people are beginning to know more about Torah," Ariel says.

Friedberg, who began this Jewish revolution a decade ago, is proud of how far the Chilean Jewish community and NCSY Chile have come. "There are so many young people around the world whose connection to their Jewish identity, to our people and to Israel literally hangs in the balance," he says. "The work that NCSY does transcends all borders in the Jewish world." JA



*Sixty high school students squeezed into a sukkah for NCSY Chile's holiday party last Sukkot.  
Photo: Laura Vinger.*

Each NCSY chapter is part of a larger region serving specific states and cities in North America. The twelve regions in North America organize regional *Shabbatonim* and gatherings that give NCSYers the opportunity to meet other teens their age from different areas. Since NCSY Chile doesn't "belong" to an NCSY region, its members have been par-

America. He has flown to Argentina to help its Jewish community, which has been suffering since the collapse of the Argentinean economy. Ultimately, Rabbi Lashak would like to create a drop-in center in Argentina where kids could both learn Torah and receive nutritious meals. Uruguay would be the next stop. "Without a South American region, we