

The Kiruv Imperative

By Jonathan Udren

At first glance, Had Nes, a settlement of ninety-five families on the northern shore of the Kinneret, appears unremarkable. But over the past two years something rather remarkable has taken place in the secular Golan Heights community. Since Kehilot Yisrael became involved with Had Nes residents, some twenty families have begun attending Torah classes, sending their children to nearby religious schools and enriching their lives by keeping *mitzvot*.

Kehilot Yisrael promotes positive religious experiences in communities throughout the Golan Heights, Jordan Valley and Shomron through workshops, minyanim and one-on-one interaction. One arm of the multifaceted project sends small groups of yeshivah and seminary students to secular communities in remote areas to make Shabbat. Kehilot Yisrael, which is run and funded by the Orthodox Union through the Seymour J. Abrams OU Jerusalem World Center, commonly known as the Israel Center, is currently operating in seventeen communities.

"You wouldn't believe it," says Yitzhak Fund, president of the Israel Center. "But there are communities in Israel without even a single *beit kneset*."

Kehilot Yisrael's Panim-el-Panim

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(face-to-face) division is charged with making the initial encounter. Its strategy is simple: Yeshivah students go to secular communities where they knock on doors and hope for a friendly response. Once the initial contact is made, community members "must follow up," asserts Kehilot Yisrael Director Meir Schwartz. Amazingly, most do. "We don't have to look for business," says Menachem Persoff, director of programs for the Israel Center. "Once participants in our programs have tasted the beauty of authentic Jewish practice, the word gets out. Then people come to us."

"We don't just show up with a minyan for Shabbat," explains Schwartz. "We work in conjunction with the community."

Following a Panim-el-Panim experience, the community of Had Nes expressed an interest in hosting a Shabbat minyan. Over the course of several months, the once-barren *beit kneset* started being used for Shabbat services and even daily minyanim.

"After a while we started to understand Shabbat and prayer," says Ilan Ben HaRosh, a Had Nes resident who became a *ba'al teshuvah* as a result of the program and is currently the educational coordinator of the Kehilot Yisrael branch in the Golan Heights. "Slowly, [my wife and I] started keeping Shabbat, and [we] *kasher*ed our house. Suddenly, a whole new world

opened up for us."

As a result of the dramatic success in Had Nes, six months ago Kehilot Yisrael established a Beit Tarbut Yehudi (house of Jewish culture—similar to a JCC) in the settlement. The center, staffed by *hesder*-yeshivah graduates, now hosts daily classes and minyanim.

"We feel like our lives have been returned to us. We are giving off a new light," says Ben HaRosh, whose five children now attend religious schools.

Kehilot Yisrael is one of three outreach programs that the Israel Center has founded over the past few years, each of which targets a specific sector of Israeli society. Kehilot Yisrael centers on families as well as on community building. Makom Balev, also known as NCSY-in-Israel, offers spiritual nourishment to 2,000 elementary and junior high school students from secular, traditional and religious homes. Makom Balev, which means a place in the heart, boasts thirty-eight chapters in twenty-five towns across the country. Lichyot B'yachad (to live together) brings religious and irreligious young people and adults together to study Torah. Meeting on a regular basis, the study partners also go on *tiyulim* (trips) together.

The Israel Center's focus on outreach coincides with a recent shift within the Religious Zionist world. "With the ongoing *intifada* and the ever-widening

Photos: Jared Bernstein



Ronnie Prinz, a teacher at the OU's community center in Ramat HaSharon, meets with an irreligious Israeli. The community center helps foster bonds between religious and irreligious Israelis.



In the Ramat HaSharon community center, the pastel-colored walls create a warm, inviting space for learning or discussing Judaism.

rift between the Left and the Right and the secular and the religious, *achdut* [unity] among *dati'im* [religious Jews] and *chilonim* [secular Jews] has become a primary concern," Persoff notes. In fact, Rav Mordechai Elon, a prominent leader in the Religious Zionist camp who heads Yeshivat HaKotel in the Old City and Mibereshit, a religious outreach program, recently urged Religious Zionists to make outreach more of a priority.

Israel Center is an independent, inclusive organization, steering clear of any specific political agenda.

Some believe that the emphasis on *kiruv* may be attributed to a growing sense among Religious Zionists that the community has been way too focused on the issue of settlements at the expense of other *mitzvot*.

Others believe the shift in focus is

"In the past, there were some Religious Zionists who expressed discomfort with kiruv. However, in light of the recent efforts by Religious Zionist rabbanim, kiruv has been embraced by the Religious Zionist mainstream."

due to a rising interest in religion among secular Israelis. Indeed, this is evident in the success of the Kehilot Yisrael program. "The response has been overwhelming," says Fund. "In fact, the Kehilot Yisrael experiment has confirmed in our minds a truth which we have long believed to be self-

evident—despite the media reports of widespread anti-religious sentiment, there exists, at the grass-roots level, a great thirst for Torah and tradition."

"In business, when there is a great demand, people step up to fill that need. That is what we are seeing today," says Avi Rath, Mibereshit's director of education.

Aside from providing classes, lectures and *Shabbatonim*, Mibereshit is behind the popular Friday afternoon television show *Parshat Ha'Shavua*. Set in *chavruta* style, the show features co-hosts Rav Elon and Rath discussing Torah topics while breathing modern meaning into ancient wisdom.

"The political, economic and social collapse of the country over the last few years has left many feeling empty," says Rath. "There is a great sense of disappointment in Israel's secular society today. People are starting to search for their roots and for meaning in their lives, and we are helping them discover what it means to be a Jew."

But even though there is a rising interest in religious observance, there is still strong anti-religious sentiment amongst many Israelis.

"Many secular Israelis are not ignorant of religious life [as Jews are in America]," declares Schwartz. "They are aware of it, and often have strong negative feelings towards it."

"Most Israelis only know about religious people from the skewed images

they see on TV," explains Schwartz. "Kehilot Yisrael aims at breaking down these barriers. Until we eradicate these negative images, we can't even start [doing *kiruv*]."

Indeed, Panim-el-Panim volunteers are not always greeted with a friendly face when they go door-to-door. On Schwartz's most recent trip, twenty-two people opened the door for the students, but only two let them inside.

"We never come looking for a fight, but sometimes people get angry. They say, 'I came to live in a secular area, and I don't want to see a *beit kneset* here,'" says Schwartz.

Aside from the Beit Tarbut Yehudi in Had Nes, Kehilot Yisrael established two other centers: one in Jordan Valley and one in Ramat HaSharon, just north of Tel Aviv. Though the majority of Kehilot Yisrael's work is done in outlying areas, the center in Ramat HaSharon seeks to reach people from the country's heavily populated centers.

In the Ramat HaSharon center, the pastel-colored walls create a warm, inviting space for learning or discussing Judaism. The bookshelves are not filled with an impressive-looking set of the Talmud, but with books on

the Torah view of psychology and relationships as well as other user-friendly Jewish topics.


"We try to provide intellectually stimulating classes as well as a good example of what a religious person is like," says Shmuel Sasson, the program director at the Ramat HaSharon center. "People spend so much time in front of a TV or in a chat room, both of which are 'cold' experiences. In here, we offer a lot of warmth."

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The Beit Tarbut Yehudi also hosts events for each of the holidays. For example, the Yom Ha'atzmaut seder that took place this year brought in over seventy participants. The seder not only included Biblical texts and prayers for Israel, but also secular Israeli folk songs familiar to the crowd. "We try to do outreach in a comfortable way," explains Schwartz. "We come to show secular Israelis what Judaism is about, but not to force anyone into anything."

According to Rabbi Dovid Cohen,

director general of the Israel Center, the Center is adhering to the mandate of the Orthodox Union in America: to intensify and expand in-reach and out-reach efforts to the Jewish community. "If we can be *mekarev* an entire Jewish community in *Eretz Hakodesh*, or even one Jewish soul," says Rabbi Cohen, "then all the effort and expense are worthwhile."

"As a pioneer in Jewish outreach in the United States, it is only natural for the OU to expand its efforts and adapt its phenomenally successful *kiruv* programs to fit the needs of Israelis," says Fund. "This is not just an opportunity, it's an obligation." 

For more information about Kehilot Yisrael, Makom Balev, Lichyot B'yachad and other programs at the OU Israel Center, go to <http://www.ou.org/israel/ic/about.htm>.

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