

September 16, 2011

Shlomo Raanan
Director,
Ayelet Hashachar

Dear Rabbi Raanan,

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity of observing the work of Ayelet Hashachar, and I wanted to share with you my impressions about your work and why I think it is so successful. Indeed, the activities that I have seen lead me to consider this to be a model example of how to forge better relations between religious and nonreligious Jews in Israel.

The nature of the relationship between the religious establishment in Israel and the non-religious public has led to a negative orientation among some nonreligious Jews to anything relating to Jewish practice and ritual. While I understand the motivation of religious politicians and religious functionaries in ensuring the nature of Israel as a Jewish state, many actions have led to a feeling of religious coercion and, subsequently, to an out of hand rejection of religious behavior. This has created a situation in which the religious needs of the nonreligious population are largely unmet. Furthermore, developing religious needs are particularly difficult to address in settings that have been characterized by strong anti-religious feelings in the past. This is where Ayelet Hashachar fills a particular void. I will explain.

What I have seen in my visits in the north of the country is a series of kibbutz settlements known for their nonreligious, even anti-religious—orientation in the past. There seems to be a thirst for religion, though, on the part of individuals, that could not find any outlet in the past. The provision of minimal religious facilities in these locations by Ayelet Hashachar seems to be met with considerable interest, and I attribute this particularly to the way in which Ayelet Hashachar has gone about its business. The individuals I have met are characterized by an open and accepting orientation that is the antithesis of what the nonreligious population stereotypically expects from Orthodox, let alone anyone who might appear to be Haredi, Jews. This approach is exactly what is needed to foster better relations between groups of different religiosity levels in Israel, and to allow nonreligious Jews to explore and fulfill their religious needs in a non-threatening manner. Inviting the nonreligious population to take part in religious activities in an accepting manner, and at the same time maintaining an Orthodox framework, must be a very challenging and daunting task. I believe that the success that I have seen is due to the fact that the nonreligious population quite accurately does not perceive your activities as missionary, but, rather, views the people they encounter as non-threatening models of religious behavior.

The religious services that you provide the nonreligious population are complemented by the opportunity that you provide this population to hear lectures delivered by religious personalities from a wide range of fields. These lectures and meetings enable the general population to personally interact with religious persons in a way that they have not experienced before and to see that religious Jews can be accepting (and interesting). Indeed, these meetings undermine the perception of the religious and nonreligious populations as being really separate groups. The developing perception is of mutual acceptance that breaks down the barriers that have characterized the relationships between these populations in the past.

All in all, I am very much impressed with what you have accomplished, despite your limited resources. I would hope that other organizations could emulate your activities and thereby foster better relations as well as allow the general Jewish population to fulfill their religious needs in the Jewish state.

Sincerely,



Ephraim Tabory