



AYELET HASHACHAR

ONE NATION, ONE HEART

Ariella Schiller

Somewhere out in the Galil, in the northern tip of Eretz Yisrael, an olive orchard is being readied for planting. As summer slides into the land with sundrenched days and breezy nights, small, hopeful olive trees are being planted. Each tree in memoriam for a brother or sister, father or mother, grandfather or friend taken from us by the dreaded coronavirus. It will be a planting of memories, branches of farewell with the faint, heady scent of hope. And it will all be under Ayelet Hashachar, the morning sun.

Some dreamers are out of the box, and some dreamers are so far out of the box that they're in a different shape altogether. Rav Shlomo Ra'anani, who first established the Ayelet Hashachar initiative in 1998, has been dreaming without limitations ever since. He credits his two mentors, Hagaon Rav Aharon Leib Steinman ztz"l and Reb Zev Wolfson ztz"l, with his perseverance. Reb Zev taught him the importance of feeling a responsibility to every member of Am Yisrael, and Rav Steinman was the daas Torah of the program from its outset.

"Reb Zev once told me that he didn't believe such an initiative could be successful," says Rav Ra'anani. "But then he added, 'If you believe it, then you will accomplish what you set out to.' Well, I believed."

A Platform of Love and Friendship

Ayelet Hashachar is a platform that connects all of Israeli society — religious, non-religious, and anywhere in between — into one People. The platform is multi-pronged, and Rav Shlomo Ra'anani seems to never run out of new and innovative ideas for reaching his fellow Jews. The foundation for every single one of these initiatives? Love

and friendship. As Mishlei teaches, kamayim hapanim lapanim, what you feel toward another, they will feel toward you. The obvious baseline for this sort of outreach is love. Acceptance. No judgment. And friendship. Always friendship.

After being drafted into the Israeli army upon his return from several years abroad, Rav Ra'anani faced, head on, the distrust that non-religious



The Rosh Yeshiva, HaRav Aharon Leib Steinman, ztz"l, signs on the founding charter of the Bais Medrash in Modi'in.



Harav Raanan with Yoel Marshak, head of the Kibbutz Movement task force Putting on tefillin for the first time in his life

Israelis held toward the chareidim. His realization was simple: They had no reason to trust people they have nothing to do with. Most irreligious Israelis have never had a genuine relationship — or even a conversation — with a religious Jew. And the unknown is always frightening.

Rav Shlomo determined that it was time to break down those walls of separation and introduce chareidi Israelis into the lives of the average Israeli. He decided to primarily focus on those living on kibbutzim and in settlements outside the big cities. These Israelis could not appreciate the joys of religious neighbors and coworkers simply due to lack of opportunity to meet and interact with them.

The plan began with finding wonderful families who were deeply infused with Torah willing to move and bring their families to these far out settlements and kibbutzim. This initiative has now grown to over 170 families, who are the chareidi pioneers into 170 irreligious communities.

They come not to lecture or critique, they don't push unwanted doctrine onto their new neighbors. Using only love and friendship, they simply make



Mr. Nir Meir Secretary of the Kibbutz Movement in kibbutz Keren Shalom synagogue



Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlgeleer



HaRav Steinman distributing tefillin to baalei teshuvah of Ayelet Hashachar

themselves available for relationships. These special families accept and seek to be accepted in their new hometowns, and gradually, are welcomed by the thirsty Jewish souls living there, some whom have never heard the shofar on Rosh Hashanah or experienced a Pesach Seder.

Project Chavruta

The growth sparked by these pioneers has been tremendous. Shuls have been built, bar mitzvahs celebrated, and eiruvim erected. In a short period of time, the number of men and women seeking someone locally to teach them, to explain, and to be there for them grew too large for one family to manage.

And that's when Project Chavruta was born. Men and women from Meah Shearim and Bnei Brak, chassidish and chareidi, were invited to be matched with a partner from an irreligious background to learn Jewish content together. The chavrusashaft is generally scheduled once a week over the phone for about twenty or thirty minutes. The "meeting" is set ahead of time to fit the schedule of both partners. Today, there are over 10,000 pairs, in Israel and abroad, learning together, building friendships, and becoming family.

The women have batei medrashim as well, where they can



Ayelet Hashachar

learn with searching women of Klal Yisrael who have not had the opportunity to do so before.

"People find it unbelievable," says Rav Ra'anana, "how many members of secular Israeli society actually are interested in learning about Yiddishkeit.

"They are hungry," he continues. "They call us, and we have become their first address for all ruchniyus needs. They ask us for mezuzahs, for eiruvim, for sifrei Torah, and to help establish a minyan. We have set up kollels, learning centers, after school programs, university programs, vocational training, adult Jewish education lectures, homework help. And of course, they want shuls."

Building Batei Knessiot

Ayelet Hashachar is the first phone call for any kibbutz wanting a shul of their own. The program helps them set up their very first beit kneset, firstly roping off a section of the dining room or setting up chairs in the bomb shelter, to act as a makom kavua for tefillah.

As the demand grows, the process continues with architectural plans, town planning, building sites, and much more. Ayelet Hashachar leads the way in building shuls according to the needs and wishes of each community. In most cases, a physical location



In consultation with the Rosh Yeshivah, HaRav Gershon Edelstein, shlita

serving as a center of Jewish activity provides a focus from which their interest and knowledge of Jewish matters can be expanded — not to mention enabling the formation of a cohesive group of like-minded individuals, with all the benefits that entails.

To date, Ayelet Hashachar has built shuls in nearly 50 kibbutzim and moshavim around Eretz Yisrael. In places where any signs of religious interest have long shriveled up, where men never said Kaddish or put on tefillin, they are now working on building plans and dancing as their new beit kneset's doors are flung open for the first time. Five new shuls are in the works currently. Within a short time, an active shul will soon grace Kibbutz Beit Kamah, Kibbutz Kfar Azah, Kibbutz Givaat Hashaloshah, Kibbutz Chanaton, and Kibbutz Negbah. Each shul will boast a plaque dedicated by Jews from all over the world. Following that, there is a lengthy waiting list of communities ready for a beit kneset of their own.

The platform includes an incredible bar / bat mitzvah program that invites boys and girls and their families from all over the world to come celebrate their bar mitzvah in one of these sparkling new shuls. A community of fellow Jews is eager to celebrate with them. It is so touching to see older souls join with the youth from Israel and abroad as they learn together about becoming responsible for Hashem's



HaRav Avraham Levin Rosh kollel Ayelet Hashachar Tivon – One of the most beautiful cities in the world



An ecological shul, made of clay in Kibbutz Neve Ilan

Torah and mitzvos. Ayelet Hashachar also offers Hebrew-language lessons to all those interested, in Israel and abroad, through its Ivrit B'Ivrit program.

Today, when many shuls abroad are still closed or minimized due to the terrible virus that has claimed so many lives, Ayelet Hashachar invites all in need to come and use their shuls for simchahs, free of any charge. Days of learning have been dedicated in the memory and for the refuah of the victims. Ayelet Hashachar has also reached out to those mired in isolation — the lonely souls who couldn't leave their homes even for essentials — and has adopted them as family members and friends.

Come on Up

Ayelet Hashachar is offering a helping hand to its brothers and sisters abroad; to those contemplating aliyah, to those who have already done so. It is hard to settle into society, to make a home for yourself in a strange land, when one feels like an outsider. But there is a way to turn dreams of aliyah into something bigger, something more meaningful. And in Ayelet Hashachar's two thriving integrated Torah communities, there are no outsiders.

Modi'in and Kiryat Tivon are two cities where Ayelet Hashachar has cultivated cohesiveness in the local community and with shuls and schools. By creating personal bonds and allowing for non-judgmental inclusion of Ashkenazim, Sephardim, traditional,



kabals Ol Malchus Shamim in Sde Boker

chassidish, and irreligious Jews, they have created thriving communities. Kollels provide the structure and network for all those interested in more Jewish study, and staff members divide their time between delivering lectures, study groups, home visits, and social interactions with their non-religious neighbors. This open give-and-take allows for both sides to see each other as people, to connect on a personal level, and dispel the preconceived notions that divide them.

See the Forest and the Trees

Kiryat Tivon, in the Galil, is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, a city built in a forest filled with greenery and foliage, surrounded by mountains, and inhabited by the top intellectuals of Israeli society. It is located very close to high-tech parks, hospitals, and shops, and is just a short drive to the thriving city of Haifa. Anyone who wants to relocate to this scenic city — and the equally beautiful area of nearby Emek Yizreel — in order to help unaffiliated families living there will be granted a very generous stipend for their first two years, all costs subsidized by Ayelet Hashachar.

Settle Down

A true pioneer's work is never done. Successful rabbanim who have done wonders in chutz l'Aretz are now ready to make aliyah and settle down in the Holy land. But relaxation is far from their minds as they gear up for round two: making a difference in Eretz Yisrael.

After serving as a rabbi in several communities in the United States, Rabbi Yehuda Oppenheimer and his rebbetzin, Lonni, came on aliyah two years ago, determined to continue their lives' mission. With the help of Ayelet Hashachar, they have made inroads in the completely secular community of Lavon in the beautiful Upper Galilee. Although the journey has not been easy, they are grateful for the help and support of Ayelet Hashachar. There is no better way to counteract all the negative stereotypes that the Israeli media creates about religious people than to come to know them as loving friends and neighbors. Ayelet Hashachar is determined to help make that happen in any way they can.

Modi'in

Only several years ago, Modi'in was one of the most technologically evolved cities in the world; high-tech innovations could be found in the smallest details — right down to the city's garbage cans. Overflowing with greenery, housing celebrities and government officials, host to country clubs and universities, it was a paradigm of culture. Secularity, Conservative and Reform Jewry reigned supreme — and then Ayelet Hashachar moved into town. Previously, Torah had a difficult time gaining a stronghold here; all shopping centers and forms of entertainment were open on Shabbos, and there were buses that would cart 14-year-olds off to Tel Aviv to party on Shabbos, free of charge. There was no infrastructure to accommodate chareidim.

Some twenty years ago, this lovely city got a whole lot lovelier with new batei knesset, wonderful rabbanim — including Rav Lau, Chief Rabbi of Israel — and many other Torah institutions. But the

crowning glory is the 24-hour Torah center and beit kneset called Ayelet Hashachar. In Ayelet Hashachar's Torah Center, Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Jews of all stripes, sit and learn together. There are highly popular classes for women, the semichah programs are full, and the shul is overflowing with chavrusas learning at all hours of the night. Modi'in is slowly losing its secular character. And it is Ayelet Hashachar that is rounding it out.

"I've lived here, in the Ayelet Hashachar community, for four and a half years. And besides the beauty, the community, the Torah, and the outreach that I get to experience every day, I marvel constantly over the ripple effect that the foundation we're laying right now will have on future generations," says Dovi Auerbach, young husband and Modi'in resident.

Modi'in is a genuine wonder in its inclusive nature. And Rav Ra'anana has more big plans for it.

Come Learn Jewish Responsibility

Rabbi Jeff Wohlgernter, a dedicated community rabbi for 33 years in La Jolla, California, came to Israel for a yearlong sabbatical. That is, until he met Rav Shlomo Ra'anana.

"He dreams bigger than anyone I know, and yet his dreams somehow turn to reality, against all odds," Rav Wohlgernter marvels.

And that's how Rabbi Jeff Wohlgernter found himself making aliyah in middle of his sabbatical and agreeing to head the Anglo community in Modi'in and open a brand-new, novel yeshiva.

"It will be a yeshiva for boys who have already spent a few years in the wonderful mainstream yeshivos here in the country. Boys who are ready for the next step, but not ready for the next stage. Boys who are interested in furthering their love for their fellow Jew."

The yeshiva will train these bochurim for wherever they go next, be it rabbanus, chinuch, or the workforce. Because wherever they go, they will undoubtedly find Jews who are different from themselves. It is critical that they instinctively feel love and responsibility toward them for their wellbeing.

"I attended yeshiva in Baltimore," says Rabbi Wohlgernter, "and although it was many years ago, I so clearly remember the message that permeated every shiur and class and derashah: a sense of responsibility for Am Yisrael."

That's what Yeshivas Mikdash Dovid wants to do: add an additional element to these bochurim's development as bnei Torah, focused on giving and sharing the Torah they already possess. This will be achieved by synthesizing two sedorim of high-level yeshiva learning and the opportunity to give shiurim and be involved in the community of Modi'in.

They will be taught the finer points of public speaking and how to create an inviting derashah. There will be guidance given through one-on-one direction from rebbeim and close mentorship from leading rabbanim and mechanchim geared toward developing each bochur's innate, personal talents. The boys will have firsthand opportunities to watch and be involved in communal leadership and development in a rich Torah environment.

After a year in this program, a bochur will have fine-tuned many of the skills and leadership qualities necessary to be a resource for any



Harav Ranan with Rabbi Kanievsky

community that he attaches himself to. There is no greater gift for a member of Am Yisrael than to give him the tools he needs to help his brother.

"And we hope that each bochur will walk out with this after the one-year program: a sense of achrayus toward his nation," Rabbi Wohlgernter says.

These new programs — helping new olim settle in Eretz Yisrael, and Yeshiva Mikdash Dovid to train future activists who will act responsibly in building communities in Israel — are only the latest phase in the many efforts of Ayelet Hashachar to build bridges between all Jews in Israel and develop strong communities based on love and friendship.

Rooted In Memory

The olive orchard being planted for the victims of coronavirus will consist of 3,000 trees on 120 dunam. Jews from around the world — Guatemala, Canada, Peru, England, the United States — are dedicating plaques to be placed at the trees in the blessed memory of their loved ones taken by COVID-19. The Jews of the Diaspora have stood by their brothers in the Holy Land countless times before. Today, Ayelet Hashachar reaches out to them in gratitude and recognition.

"We are one nation, no matter how far out we're spread," says Rav Ra'anana. "And all of our roots, like the olive trees, stem from Eretz Yisrael."

After all, we are one nation, with one heart.



Rabbi Shlomo Ranan outside the Ayelet Hashachar shul before entering Gaza in Operation Protective Edge