

Our Obligation to Our Israeli Brethren

By Stephen J. Savitsky



As I write this on Rosh Chodesh Av, the first of the Nine Days, I recognize that by the time you read this, the military and security situation in Israel will most certainly be different from how it is today. Recognizing that this article will not appear for several weeks, it is difficult for me to comment on the situation in Israel. I can state categorically, however, that as far as the humanitarian crisis that resulted from the war against Hezbollah and Hamas, the OU once again rose to the occasion—on several fronts. We immediately organized a nationwide Tehillim-and-learning program with the participation of more than 200 synagogues, in which we raised our voices as one people with one heart.

We also organized a nine-day learning program, which insured that a minyan of Jews would continuously

learn Torah for the sake of Eretz Yisrael, from Rosh Chodesh Av until *erev Tishah B'Av*.

At the same time, we began providing humanitarian aid for our brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisrael, whose lives were so cruelly disrupted during the war. We established an Israel Emergency Fund, which, through our web site (www.ou.org), raised thousands of dollars to be distributed in Israel during these trying times. This effort has centered on the Seymour J. Abrams OU Jerusalem World Center, which sent hundreds of volunteers to northern Israel to visit with, comfort and distribute basic necessities to Jewish adults and children in shelters. A wide array of programs was created to tend to the needs of these families in distress. A friendly smile as well as food and basic necessities goes a long way in showing our brothers and sisters how much we care about them. The OU, as in the past, took the lead, not waiting for committees to be formed, but jumping in to help at a moment's notice.

Of course, when Israel's security is in jeopardy, our primary concern is the physical well being of our Israeli brethren. But our concern is not limited to the physical. Do you know that there are Jewish communities in Israel that do not have a single *beit kneset*? Eretz Yisrael is not merely a land in which Jews live—it is a Jewish land. It is our obligation to ensure that it remains just that.

That's why the Israel Center has embarked on a major outreach initiative

that, if successful, will not only change individual lives, but will also change the face of Israel. We're teaching Israeli Jews how to be Jewish Israelis.

Recently, the OU appointed Rabbi Avi Berman as the new director of the Israel Center. Rabbi Berman, a dynamic young man who grew up in Israel and went on *shelichut* to North America, served as NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) regional director in Vancouver, British Columbia. With his enthusiasm, high energy and extraordinary charisma, Rabbi Berman transformed Vancouver into a hubbub of outreach activity. When he left, his legacy included hundreds of Jewish teenagers who had returned to their faith.

In this position, Rabbi Berman is building on the distinguished work of Rabbi Dovid Cohen, who served as the director general of OU Israel for many years.

One of the ways in which we are reaching out to our secular brethren is through Kehillot Yisrael. A highly creative program, Kehillot Yisrael, under the leadership of Meir Schwartz and Eliyahu Farjun, sends outreach professionals to communities that are religiously impoverished. Drawing upon the OU's expertise in *kiruv*, the Kehillot Yisrael staff sets up a Bayit Yehudi, a warm, inviting place where community members gather to learn about and discuss Judaism. The program involves bringing a number of religious families to the community to serve as models of religious life as well as to teach classes,

conduct services and encourage their secular neighbors to explore the basics of Judaism.

Kehillot Yisrael is but one of the many remarkable programs our Israel Center offers to Jews of all ages and backgrounds. Yedid is an adult-education program that works with singles and adults, taking them on *tiyulim* (trips). Dor Ledor offers ongoing workshops to strengthen families and help parents better their skills. Lichyot BeYachad arranges dialogues between religious and non-religious Jews to give them an opportunity to meet one another, to share ideas and values and to bridge the gaps between them.

One of the jewels in the crown of the Israel Center is The Pearl and Harold M. Jacobs OU Zula Outreach Center, which runs a variety of programs for at-risk teens. With special centers in Jerusalem and Eilat, the program takes youth off the street and provides them with companionship and direction.

The Israel Center has embarked on a major outreach initiative that will change the face of Israel. We're teaching Israeli Jews how to be Jewish Israelis.

Makom Balev—the Israel Center equivalent of NCSY—exposes Israeli youth to traditional Judaism, many for the first time.

NESTO (Native English Speaking Teen Olim) is geared toward native English-speaking teenagers who made *aliyah* with their parents and may be having a hard time adjusting to Israeli society. We work with them in small groups, one-on-one, to help them acclimate to Israel.

One of our newest projects is Machon Maayan, a new school we have opened in Beit Shemesh for young women from the Diaspora who have completed high school and want to spend a year living in Israel, attending college and experiencing religious life.

These programs show our commitment to making the OU—through the Israel Center—a major *kiruv* organization in Israel. This is a commitment that the officers and board of directors share with me; we all recognize that the future of the Jewish people lies with Israel and that anything we can do to strengthen traditional Judaism will strengthen Israeli society.

While we constantly evaluate our array of programs, our commitment to our Israel Center and its outreach programs is high on the OU's priority list. We will continue our activity in this area and will commit the personnel and funds necessary to make a difference in Israel's future.

The Orthodox Union is indeed a global organization, and the Israel Center is a prime example of the important role we play to Jews around the world, wherever they may be. **JA**

**It hurts
to call
a domestic
abuse
hotline.**

**It hurts
more
not to.**

It feels better just to talk about it. That's why we're here. Our staff is made up of caring and sensitive individuals. Together, we can help you explore your options. We can refer you to recognized professionals for counseling, legal advice or help in finding a safe environment. We can also put you in touch with some very special Rabbis. But in order for us to reach out to you, you must first reach out to us.



Confidential Hotline

888.883.2323
(Toll Free)

718.337.3700
(NYC Area)

**Do it for yourself.
Do it for your children.**

Shalom Task Force is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.