KIKARISTIM COME HOME

By Sara Bedein

The boys typically have spiky or long hair; the girls have multiple body piercings and hair colored in unnatural hues.

They are Israel's street youth, a number of whom were formerly Orthodox but who, for one reason or another, call the streets of Jerusalem home, often falling victim to drugs, promiscuity and violence. Having dropped out of school, they leave home without means of support, and oftentimes have little if any relationship with their families.

According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 10.4 percent of 17-year-olds are Israel's street youth, a number of whom were formerly Orthodox but who, for one reason or another, call the streets of Jerusalem home, often falling victim to drugs, promiscuity and violence. Having dropped out of school, they leave home without means of support, and oftentimes have little if any relationship with their families.

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Snapshot of a Special Dad

By Sara Bedein

Tough his five sons are all grown, Rabbi Mordochai Scharf, 57, is still a full-time dad. Rabbi Scharf and his wife, Shoshana, began caring for two foster children, ages 12 and 18.

Over the past 30 years, the Scharfs, residents of Efrat, have provided a home to over 20 troubled teens no longer welcomed in their own parents’ homes. The Scharfs have cared for up to three foster teens at one time. "A child in trouble breaks my heart," says Rabbi Scharf. "But the child has to want to help himself. Some kids are not ready to do this."

Though the foster children’s parents pay a small stipend to the Scharfs, the money barely covers the expenses. Some teens stay at the Scharfs’ only a week; others a few years. Regardless of the duration of their stay, the Scharfs try to stay in touch with all their foster children, some of whom are already parents themselves.

"A number of years ago, we had a 17-year-old foster kid from the North who was kicked out of his parents’ house and sent to us," says Rabbi Scharf. "Shortly before he came to us, he went into trouble with drugs and was taken to prison. For some time during his stay, he had to be in matzarot bayit (home custody); I took full responsibility for him. I escorted him to his day job—he was a delivery boy at a local supermarket. When he was home, he was under my complete supervision. Everybody wanted to put him into a rehabilitation center except for me. I wanted to have a go with him first. He eventually became clean (from drugs)."

Rabbi Scharf also works to reconcile foster children with their families. "After weeks of badgering the father of one of my kids to spend some time with his son, he took him out for a hamburger and a movie. The teen came back so happy. I said to him, ‘I bet it’s been a long time since you did such a thing with your dad.’ He told me that this was the first time his dad had ever taken him out.”

Rabbi Scharf has always made family a top priority. When his wife decided to go to nursing school at the age of 40, Rabbi Scharf retired early so that he could dedicate himself full-time to his children who ranged from age 7 to 22 at the time. In the mornings, Rabbi Scharf would attend a kollel which he helped found, but made sure to be home everyday at 1:00 am to greet his children with a hot lunch and a listening ear.

Rabbi Scharf attributes his great knack with children to his parents. "My father taught me how important it is to spend a lot of time with your kids as a kid, I remember the excitement of getting up 3:00-4:00 AM on Sundays to spend a lot of time with your kids. As a kid, I remember my parents themselves. ‘My father taught me how important it is to spend a lot of time with your kids as a kid, I remember the excitement of getting up 3:00-4:00 AM on Sundays to spend a lot of time with your kids."

Rabbi Scharf shares his expertise on parenting on a radio show he hosts called “Teenagers in Turbulent Times.”

his beliefs regarding nationalism, it jeopardizes everything else.”

One individual who has attempted to address the problem from a theoretical perspective is Shraga Fisherman, academic dean of Michtalet Orot Yisrael, and the author of the pioneering book, Ofstr. H akispiot H azuzot, or The Youth of the Discarded Kippot. Over a period of six years, Fisherman conducted in-depth interviews with hundreds of religious high school dropouts.

Fisherman notes, “We need to stop seeing every doubter as an apostate and every questioner as a heretic.”

Fisherman quotes Ayal, who is no longer religious, “My parents were raised as believers and believed what they learned from their parents. There were no questions. In my parents’ home, they were taught that this is the way of life. It is not something they came to on their own. They were not like Avraham Avinu who one day looked at the sun and decided that there was a God” (125).

But unlike Ayal’s parents, today’s youth seem to question more. Indeed, problems seem to arise when mitzvos performance is rote and superficial, akin to table manners: We eat with a fork and knife and make and we make a berachah over the food.

Romano believes that in order to instill a proper sense of identity, self-esteem, and love of Judaism, we must "empoluy the same methods used to teach a secular person who comes to hear about Judaism for the first time.” Furthermore, the mistake according to Romano, is when “our children are forced to study many hours of Torah and Talmud when often they do not possess even a basic faith in God.”

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The Anglo Factor

Many of those who end up on the street are the Anglo children of Zion, according to K’aren Green, a social worker who is the director of Tzomet (crossroads), a drop-in center for estranged youth located opposite Kikar Tzion. Green explains that aliya can be very difficult for young children.

"Some kids, who came on aliya with their parents, never mastered Hebrew or integrated into Israeli society. Many of the kids have the same problems as inner-city kids: learning disabilities and behavioral and emotional problems... and the additional burden of adjusting to a new culture and language,” Tzomet helps these youth get their high school diplomas, find housing and turn over a new leaf.

The streets also attract Anglo teens whose parents sent them to study in Israel in the hopes of doing so would miraculously resolve their problems. A recent article in the Ma’ariv daily newspaper featured H, arvey, 19, who made aliya with his family when he was 10 years old. “The Americans between the ages of 15-18 who come here (hangouts such as Kikar Tzion) are problematic kids whose parents don’t want them home anymore. There are also kids who come to Israel with their families... leaving behind their friends in America. They don’t want to be here. They don’t get accustomed to school because they don’t pick up the language. Here... they meet other kids like them and... escape through drugs... All the kids come from good homes. There is a lot of money floating. A kid can come to Israel even though he hates Israel and Judaism but his parents promised that if he goes they’ll buy him a Porsche at the end of the year” (May 31, 2002).

Romano recruits youth by initiating a conversation with them and asking for their names and phone numbers; slowly a relationship is formed.

"Usually the kids are eager to talk. There are not many adults who take an interest in what they are doing and want to know what they think. These kids are normally shunned by the adults in the community, who also warn their own children to keep away. Ultimately the kids are looking for someone to hear them out, even though outwardly they may put on a hostile pose,” says Romano.

Romano and Riskin are great believers in using music as a therapeutic tool. The clubhouse has an assortment of musical instruments and Riskin is in the process of forming a band with the local talents. Romano plays a wide variety of African drums and, together with the youth, produces some very beautiful music. He hopes to provide them with professional music lessons and get them to the level where they can put on performances, thereby greatly raising their self-esteem.

Additionally, this summer Romano is planning a seminar at the Ascent Center in Tzfat where the teens will enjoy a blend of soul music concerts, day trips, bonfires, dancing in the mikvah of the Avi at dawn, and discussions with bala’teh beshuvah.

In addition to these informal programs for dropouts, a number of schools have been established. Lachan, for example, which is located in Efrat, attracts students from the entire Gulf Etzion area who have dropped out of the formal educational system. Founded by Riskin and Avi Yossif, based in Efrat School, the appeal lies in its charismatic principals.

“Two years ago, Avi and I got the
Welcome to the Zula

By Sara Bedein

Twelve years ago, Harel Hetzroni, 33, went through what many datiashim (formerly religious youth) are going through today. A yeshivah graduate, Hetzroni entered the Israeli army; by the end of his service, he was no longer wearing a kippah.

“I had no problem with religion itself,” says Hetzroni, who today sports tzitzit over his clothes and a black beard. “I knew I was doing bad things, but the streets were very tempting. I was unable to resist the temptation. I worked a D.J. at a disco and I got as low as you can get.”

Hetzroni’s turning point occurred at the disco one night when the patrons were particularly wild. “It’s like I suddenly woke up from a bad dream… I said to myself, ‘What has become of us?’ ‘Have we become like animals?’ Have we no shame?’”

By Sara Bedein

A rabbi addresses teenagers at the Zula at 2:00 AM while madrichim (advisors) look on.

“Hetzroni’s Zula,” as it is known, is open a few nights a week and Mo’etz Shabbat all night long. Every Mo’etz Shabbat more than 100 youth arrive. They settle down on cushions that line the floor and play drums and guitars until dawn. Often, storytelling is interspersed with the music. Occasionally, the Zula invites special guests, including musicians, inspiring Chasidic storytellers, lecturers and lately even some rabbis.

Not too long ago, many of the datiashim who frequent the Zula would shutter at the mere mention of the word “rabbi.” Hetzroni remembers how rabidly anti-religious they were. But after spending a few months in the Zula atmosphere, the youth often arrive at the conclusion that the problem is not so much with religion as it is in the way it was presented to them.

Hetzroni, who was dubbed by one Israeli newspaper “the Israeli Center’s Pied Piper,” genuinely accepts and befriends the teens who hang out at the Zula. “If you want to change these kids,” says Hetzroni, “You must accept them as they are. This does not mean that I agree with their lifestyles—and they know this, but the first step in influencing them is accepting and loving them.”

Menachem Persoff, director of the Seymour J. Abrams OU World Jerusalem Center, assisted with this article.

Rabbi A braham Isaac Kook, the former chief rabbi of Israel, once said that in every generation, the methods for teaching Judaism need to be made relevant to that particular age. It seems like Lachan and other outreach programs are attempting to do just that.


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Approval of the Efrat City Council to open Lachan,” says Riskin. “We started out with six students and today we have 27, with people knocking on our doors from communities throughout Yesha.”

Riskin and Yosef spent many hours devising a creative formula that would motivate their students to complete high school and receive their matriculation certificate. They came up with a four-day school week: small, individualized classes (some classes have only three students) and afternoon courses that take place outside of the classroom including agriculture, photography, computers, art and music. There are a few basic rules that the students must abide by: no drugs, no alcohol, no violence. Boys must wear kippot but aside from that, anything goes: long ponytails, dyed hair, earrings, body piercing, etc. Issues such as drugs and alcohol are open for discussion at Lachan. “We confront the problems head on and have many discussions on the topics,” said Riskin. “I can’t say that we are 100 percent clean but we are getting there. When the school first opened almost all of our students had fights with Gadi about everything from his slack in religious practice to the way he dressed and what he was smoking. Things are a lot calmer now and as Gadi’s self-esteem improves, he is dropping a lot of the negative behaviors that was so much a part of him.”

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Notes