

KIKARISTIM

Come Home

By Sara Bedein

Their appearance gives them away: 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

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and roughly 5 percent of 9th-11th graders are dropping out of school—and religious students are dropping out at the same rate as secular ones.¹ Indeed, Jerusalem's Zion Square (Kikar Tzion), which has become a hangout for rebellious youth, attracts hundreds of dropouts from across the country. So many youth have, in fact, taken to dwelling in Kikar Tzion that locals have coined a term for them: "*Kikaristim*."

The Root of the Problem

"During the last year, there has been a worrisome rise in the number of youth from the settlements who roam around [Jerusalem] with nothing to do," according to Noam Hess, Jerusalem coordinator of ELEM, an organization that provides services for troubled youth. "Of the 1,000 youths

out there on the street that we have contact with, 40 percent are religious. From that 40 percent, fully 90 percent of them come from settlements."²

With the outbreak of the current *intifada*, many youth find solace in drugs and other forms of escapism. In a recent article in *Nekuda*, the Yesha [Judea, Samaria and Gaza] monthly magazine, Rabbi Eitan Eckstein, director of the Returno Rehabilitation Center for Addictions, was quoted as saying: "Usually the emotional distress which leads to drugs comes from within the family, society or the community of the teen. In the Yesha communities there is also the security factor, which brings with it uncertainty and confusion.

"Another problem, especially in the small Yesha communities, is that a teenage drug dealer finds it easier to

operate within his own community, where he knows everyone. In this way the problem spreads more quickly. A year ago, only two teens were taking drugs in a certain small Yesha community. Today there are 15" (March, 2002).

A significant percentage of the kids from Yesha communities are treated at the Returno Center in Beit Shemesh. Danny,* who grew up in a small community in Yesha, has been at Returno since the beginning of the year. Danny's mother, Malka, recalls that her son first began exhibiting odd behavior when he was in 8th grade. "Our blinders were firmly in place. All of a sudden, religion became last on the list. There was no more getting up to *daven*. . . . Danny would sleep until the afternoon and stay up until it was almost dawn. When he would stagger into the house totally stoned we would tell ourselves that he was just 'exhausted' from his night out. He had a new set of friends who dressed and behaved similarly. There were extreme mood swings,

When a religious teen enters the secular world, he experiences total freedom and feels that rules and regulations no longer apply to him.

and a lot of anger was thrown our way. We found excuses for every bit of unacceptable behavior, telling ourselves that this rebellion was just an adolescent phase and would soon blow over.

"Our delusions ended after Danny went to visit his grandparents for Shabbat. We went away for the weekend as well and when we returned home Saturday night, Danny wasn't there but the house reeked of smoke. When I got home from work Sunday afternoon, I found Danny sleeping in my bed, fully clothed with his shoes on—he smelled like a corpse. I made him get up and then suddenly it hit me. Danny's eyes were as red as a bat's. He was not able to walk straight and kept walking into the wall. He finally managed to stumble out the door and I alerted my husband that we had a drug problem on our hands."

Of course, the problem of youth

leaving the fold is not limited to the *Dati Leumi* (National Religious) sector; *Chareidi* youth in Israel "go off the *derech*" as well. However, because *Chareidim* live in a more closed society, the issues facing such teens and their families are different. Thus, for example, *Chareidi* teens who drop out tend to do so with great secrecy so as not to affect the *shidduchim* of the rest of the children in the family.

According to experts working in the field, the reasons for the rise in the number of disaffected youth are varied. Some attribute it to the tense security situation; others believe that the state religious school system is to blame. There is often stiff competition to get into a "good" yeshivah high school or *ulpanah* (high school for girls). "The state religious school system tends to be elitist and academic," stated Dr. Stuart Chesner, the founder of Bnei Chayil, a yeshivah for students with learning disabilities, in a recent article in *The Jerusalem Post*.³ Those

who don't get accepted into the schools of their choice endure feelings of rejection, which at times can lead to depression. Rejected from school after school, some students are compelled to apply to third- and fourth-rate high schools. This can wreak havoc with a student's self-esteem.

Children with learning difficulties have an even harder time. Many parents cite the fact that there are simply not enough high schools that specialize in learning disabilities. Thus, students with learning problems are often compelled to attend mainstream schools where they are inevitably singled out as failures. Avi Romano, a youth worker who specializes in dealing with dropouts, tells of one of his boys by the name of Boaz. A 14-year-old who doesn't have the head for Talmud or math, Boaz was rejected from every high school he applied to. At the

moment, Boaz is not in any educational framework and spends his time hanging out at Kikar Tzion in Jerusalem. "Society and the establishment look upon me as a loser and that is exactly what I am—a loser, worthless," Boaz says.

Romano says that a religious teenager who drops out of school and takes on a secular lifestyle differs from a secular teen who drops out of school. When a religious teen enters the secular world, he experiences total freedom and feels that rules and regulations no longer apply to him. Thus, he can easily find himself abusing drugs and getting involved in petty crime to support his habit. The scenario for girls is more severe. Under the influence of drugs, girls become easy prey and are subject to rape; in order to support their habit, they may even engage in prostitution.

Many of the formerly religious youth, also known as *datlashim* (an acronym for *dati l'sheavar*; formerly

religious) are also disillusioned with religious life. They frequently see religious practice as dull and irrelevant to contemporary life. Moreover, too often, they fail to receive adequate answers to the questions they ask—if they are allowed to ask at all.

Rabbi Daniel Tropper, director of Geshar, an organization dedicated to religious-secular dialogue, describes the *datlash* phenomenon as one of the effects of postmodernism on the religious community. "It is very difficult to be a religious person in a world where there is no final authority," he explains.⁴

Others blame the philosophy of Religious Zionism. One instructor in a Jerusalem yeshivah notes, "Religious Zionism's educational thrust is on nationalism, meaning that a personal connection with God is underemphasized. When a young person questions

Snapshot of a Special Dad

By Sara Bedein

Though his five sons are all grown, Rabbi Mordechai Scharf, 57, is still a full-time dad. Rabbi Scharf and his wife, Shoshana, are busy caring for their 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 got in trouble with drugs and was taken to prison. For some time during his stay, he had to be in *ma'atzar 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 my badgering the father of one 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 PM 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 go golfing with my father. We did lots of father-and-son things together which created strong bonds...."

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



Rabbi Mordechai Scharf

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 Michtelel Orot Yisrael, and the author of the pioneering book, *Noar Hakippot Hazerukot*, 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 *mitzvot* performance is rote and superficial, akin to table manners: We eat with a fork and knife and we make a *berachah* over the food.

Romano believes that in order to instill an abiding *emunah* in our youth, we must employ "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."

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 acclimated at 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

"We need to stop seeing every doubter as an apostate and every questioner as a heretic."

The Anglo Factor

Many of those who end up on the street are the Anglo children of *olim*, according to Karen 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 *aliyah* can be very difficult for young children. "Some kids, who came on *aliyah* 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 that doing so would miraculously resolve their problems. A recent article in the *Maariv* daily newspaper featured Harvey, 19, who made *aliyah* with his family when he was 10 years old. "The Americans between the ages of 15-18 who come

A Response Takes Shape

While in the past many communities in Yesha were in denial about the growing number of troubled youth in their midst, some progress is being made: The Shomron Regional Council, with 33 communities under its jurisdiction, is intensifying its efforts to deal with wayward youth. Programs involving rabbis, youth counselors, social workers and educators have been created. Additionally, the Council has created prevention programs geared to nipping the problem in the bud.

Under the banner "Zero Dealers, Zero Users," the Efrat City Council declared war on the drug problem. Pamphlets on the topic were distributed in mailboxes, lectures were delivered and other community projects are in the making.

Romano, who was hired by the Efrat Council to address the problem, meets with youth at a clubhouse started three years ago by Yoni Riskin, the son of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin. At the clubhouse, youth play *shesh-besh* (backgammon), ping-pong or watch a movie.

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, dipping in the *mikveh* of the Ari at dawn, and discussions with *ba'alei teshuvah*.

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 Gush Etzion area who have dropped out of the formal educational system. Founded by Riskin and Avi Yossef, both of whom are 28, the school's 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 *datlashim* (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 as 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?"

Hetzroni slowly began returning to Torah life. But he maintained his connections with the disco and street youth in an attempt to influence them.

In May 2000, in response to the death by overdose of an 18-year-old formerly religious teenager—a popular member of Jerusalem's Kikar Tzion crowd—the Seymour J. Abrams OU World Jerusalem Center in Israel joined with Hetzroni to create the Zula, a den in downtown Jerusalem. There *Kikaristim* socialize after the pubs and discos close for the night. (A *zula*, which originated in Turkey, is a tent with colorful rugs and Turkish coffee, a place where people come to relax after work.)

"Hetzroni's Zula," as it is known, is open a few nights a week and Motzei Shabbat all night long. Every Motzei 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 Chassidic storytellers, lecturers and lately even some rabbis.

Not too long ago, many of the *datlashim* who frequent the Zula would shudder 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 Israel 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 Jerusalem World Center, assisted with this article.

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



Photo courtesy of Menachem Persoff

approval of the Efrat City Council to open Lachan," says Riskin. "We started out with six students and today we

to go for probation appointments with the police. We had the schedule hanging in the teachers' room for reference.

"Some kids, who came on aliyah with their parents, never mastered Hebrew or integrated into Israeli society...."

have 27, with people knocking on our doors from communities throughout Yesha."

Riskin and Yossef 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

Now, there is only one student who still meets with a probation officer."

Riskin and Yossef also plan on creating a petting zoo to give the teens responsibility over the livestock. Moreover, the petting zoo will be open to visitors, enabling the teens to interact with community members. "This interaction will allow them to see the kids in a different light," said Riskin.

Shani, the mother of Gadi, an 11th grader at Lachan, describes how the school impacted her son: "All through school Gadi has been a troublemaker. He was kicked out of two schools before he went to Lachan....Lachan fits him like a glove....Most of the kids who go there carry around a lot of negative baggage after years of being forced into a mold that was unsuitable for them. Finally, here is a school that has made every effort to mold itself to fit the students' needs. Gadi, who had to be dragged out of bed every morning to attend school, jumps out of bed nowadays, concerned that he might be late for

school. We used to get into a lot of 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 at home and as Gadi's self-esteem improves, he is dropping a lot of the negative behavior that was so much a part of him."

Rabbi Abraham 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. **JA**

*Names of youth have been changed to protect their privacy.

Notes

1. Gail Lichtman, "Where Dropouts Drop In," *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, April 19, 2002, 16-19.
2. Effie Me'ir, "We Are Already Lost," trans. David Derovan, *Iton Yerushalayim—HaMusaf*, Adar 3, 5762.
3. Lichtman, 16-19.
4. Cited in, Michale S. Arnold, "Let My Kippa Go," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 30, 1999.