



by Libi Astaire

When Jewish students at Columbia University charged several professors in the Middle Eastern Studies department with intimidating them in the classroom, for their pro-Israel views, the university promised to set up a committee to investigate the students' charges. The committee released its report last March. To no one's surprise it found that none of the professors had acted inappropriately. It's only criticism was for the "outside organizations" and faculty members who had sym-

pathized with the students and worked to make their charges public.

A few weeks later, Columbia announced that the university had received a \$3 million endowment to establish a chair in Modern Israeli History, Politics, and Society. Who might be chosen as the first holder of this Israel Studies chair?

Since two of the five-member selection committee — Rashid Khalidi and Lila Abu-Lughod — identify themselves as Palestinian and have accused Israel of being a gross abuser of human rights, it's unlikely that the newly appointed professor will be

someone who waxes nostalgic for the Jewish state.

Fortunately, some university students are bypassing their campus Israel Studies programs and coming to Israel to find the answers to their questions about "the Middle East situation," and campuses of places like Ohr Somayach and Jewel, Aish Ha-Torah's introductory program for young women, are ready for them.

"The students are coming here with a lot of questions about Israel and their identity as Jews," comments one of the Jewel directors. "They're unsure about Israel's

What it Means to be Jewish



Despite the recent surge of anti-Israel sentiment on university campuses, and reports of high assimilation and apathy, there still appear to be a significant number of unaffiliated Jewish youth who want to learn more about their Jewish heritage. Seemingly against all odds, some of them are making their way to the Jerusalem. Who are these young people, and what are they looking for? Do they herald a glorious new chapter in the history of the baal teshuvah movement in the English-speaking world — or are they the final chapter in the book?

claim to the land. They're wondering if the Jews are as evil as the Arabs say we are."

Both programs offer at least one lecture by a leading political or military figure. However, there are also lectures that encourage the students to go beyond the headlines and think more deeply about their Jewish identity and connection to Eretz Yisrael.

"We explain that the conflict doesn't affect the real essence and source of the Jewish people," says Rabbi Reuven Geffen, Director of the Shores Introductory Program and the Jewish Learning Ex-

change (JLE) Program of Ohr Somayach. "It's just part of the ongoing saga of the Jewish exile. We are still in exile, despite the fact that we have a state. So every Jew still has to discover the real essence of what it means to be Jewish."

The Way it Was

For those with long memories, the arrival of spring in Israel used to mean two things: the sprouting of masses of wildflowers that transformed the barren hills into lush carpets of vibrant color, and the

arrival of masses of North American student backpackers, who, in their own way, were just as colorful.

Although the wildflowers still put in their annual appearance, the once ubiquitous backpacker who came searching for meaning and truth — and had the time, if not the money, to find it — is now a rare specimen. Yet this doesn't mean that kiruv institutions in Israel are going out of business.

Rabbi Geffen has been at Ohr Somayach since 1976. In those nearly three decades, he has encountered thousands of ►►

students and seen firsthand the changes in their attitudes about life, Judaism, and the pursuit of happiness. In his opinion, the recent surge of anti-Israel sentiment on university campuses has not hindered Ohr Somayach's ability to attract young men to its introductory programs.

"Even during the difficult years of the first intifada, there was a very strong group who wanted to go to Israel," he comments. "These students were saying, 'We're Jewish, and we want to know what this Jewish thing is all about.' The same is true today."

That's not to say that there aren't any differences in the way that kiruv programs need to be developed and packaged to attract today's students. Even the ones who want a serious learning experience are landing at Ben Gurion airport with a very different set of values and expectations than students of a decade ago. And they're a universe away from those backpacking *baalei teshuvah* pioneers of the 1960s, as Rabbi Geffen explains.

"The Six Day War in 1967 opened the door to travel to Israel," says Rabbi Geffen. "The generation of backpackers coming to Israel then were looking to discover meaning in life. Ohr Somayach was founded because there was a need for an institution that could speak to these students about contemporary issues, and at the same time convey to them the charm and magnificence of Torah study."

The backpacker era came to an end in the 1980s, the decade that saw the start of Israel's war in Lebanon and the first intifada. Anti-Israel sentiment on university campuses was on the rise, because of Israel's supposedly imperialist and colonialist policies, making Israel decidedly out of fashion for all but the most determined students.

Also, the "yuppie" era was in full swing. Young people suddenly had the opportunity to make an astounding amount of money at an astonishingly fast rate. There was no longer time to take time off and travel around the world and search for meaning in life. The goal in life was to get rich quick, and many young people did.

By the early 1990s, especially in the aftermath of the Gulf War when Israel was hit by Scud missiles from Iraq, travel to Israel had just about slipped off the radar map.

While security is still a concern for visitors to Israel, in recent years, students have begun to take a more balanced approach to life. They still want to succeed — and view money as a barometer of success — but they view money as a means to achieve their life goals and not as life's only goal.

"Today's students feel that they're missing something in their lives. In the 1960s and 1970s, students felt a need to find meaning and truth. Today, students are saying, 'We want to be successful, and we're essentially okay in our lives. But we're looking for something that's going to enrich our lives,'" says Rabbi Geffen.

"They're not looking for religion, *per se*," he continues. "But they *are* looking for something that will help them build a strong marriage and successfully educate their children. Because of the breakup of the home environment — we can no longer assume that students on our programs come from homes where the parents are still married — they want homes that will be based on genuine and meaningful values. And because of the rate of assimilation, they know that they can't assume that they or their children won't in-

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The View from the Gap

It's not only young Jewish men who are looking for values that will enable them to live more meaningful lives. Not far from the Ohr Somayach campus is the multi-story residence that the Jewel program calls home. Established in 1997 as part of the Aish HaTorah network of kiruv programs, Jewel is a serious learning program for women, ages twenty to thirty, who have little or no background in *Yiddishkeit*.

"This is a generation that's missing love and affection," one of Jewel's directors comments. "There's such a gap, such a hole in their lives. When a rabbi involved in *kiruv* on campus invites students for a Shabbos meal, expresses an interest in listening to them, and makes them feel a part of something, this more than anything else pulls them towards *Yiddishkeit*. The pull isn't philosophical. It's more psychological. These students are saying, 'Listen to me. Make me feel a part of something.'

"And they've had more than enough of the liberal type of love that tells them, 'Do whatever you like and I'll be there for you.' They appreciate finding someone that talks to them about responsibility and commitment and tells them how to live. They don't want their lives to be one big confusion."

In contrast to Rabbi Geffen's assessment of the young men's attitude toward intermarriage, the Jewel directors don't feel that intermarriage is an issue for their students - unfortunately. At the beginning of the program, students fill out a questionnaire. One of the questions asks if they would date someone who isn't Jewish. Most of the young women respond affirmatively, and don't even understand why intermarriage is an issue.

One of the reasons for their acceptance of intermarriage may be their own family background. Although the young women who learn at Jewel are all *halachically* Jewish, many of them come from an environment where intermarriage has been the norm for several generations. In some of the students' families, only one out of four grandparents is Jewish.

Short But Sweet

This summer's Rebound program at Ohr Somayach got underway last week and will continue until the week before *Shavuot*. Although three weeks might not sound like a long enough time to really



learn anything about Torah and *Yiddishkeit*, Rabbi Geffen points out that these short term programs are yet another sign of the times. Beginning students are unwilling to commit to long term programs, so the program organizers have to make the most of every minute. The same is true at Jewel. When the program began in 1997, they tried offering six-week programs, but with only limited success. Once they began offering three- and four-week programs, the number of participants began to rise. After the students go back to campus or to their careers, the Jewel staff invests a great deal of effort in following up on them, helping the young women find other programs, whether in Israel or closer to home, which will enable them to continue to grow.

"Today, it's a much slower process," Rabbi Geffen remarks. "It's much harder work for us, but some people would argue that, in the long run, this is much healthier for the students."

When asked how they define "success," the directors of the Jewel program say that full Torah observance is the highest goal, and that fifty-seven percent of their graduates do eventually become *shomer Shabbos*. But there's also a "minimum" level of success, which is convincing a young woman not to marry a non-Jew. Here, too, the

numbers are encouraging; by the end of the three-week program, the vast majority of the young women have changed their minds about intermarriage and say that they will only date a Jew.

Rabbi Geffen, too, says that while many graduates of Ohr Somayach's introductory programs have gone on to establish a *shomer Shabbos* home, the yeshivah defines "success" very broadly. Every young man who decides not to marry his non-Jewish girlfriend is considered to be a success story for the program.

This broad definition of success is not a way for kiruv organizations to fudge the numbers for fundraising purposes, but rather a reflection of the complex situation young Jews face today. At a time when every door is open to them, choosing the one marked "Marry Jewish," let alone "Do Mitzvos," is no longer an obvious choice.

A few years ago, the Hillel organization asked UCLA to conduct a survey that would analyze the attitudes of American Jewish freshman. According to the study, ninety-three percent of students with two Jewish parents identified themselves as Jewish. The bad news is that the term "spirituality" failed to resonate with the students, who said that they were more interested in discussing religion than practicing it. ▶▶

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A more recent study, commissioned in 2003, by the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, showed more of the same. The secular students interviewed expressed an interest in exploring their Jewish identity and learning more about Judaism. However, they said they wanted to do it on their own terms. They rejected any message that came across as being too religious, as well as any insinuations that they might be lacking something as Jews because they don't observe the mitzvos. And they most definitely don't want to be told what to think.

So how does a lecturer at Jewel or Ohr Somayach talk to these young people about Torah and mitzvos, in a way that won't get them packing their bags and taking the next flight home?

"Today you can't tell students, 'This is the truth and this isn't the truth,'" explains Rabbi Geffen. "You can't impart a message of fire and brimstone, and say that if you don't do this, you're going to burn in *Gehinnom*. Instead, we try to get them to appreciate the magnificence of their heritage and understand that this heritage goes back thousands of years.

"Shabbos affects them tremendously," Rabbi Geffen adds. "When they see the family together — the singing and the love and the harmony, the family stroll, the children learning with the parents — all these things have a tremendous impact."

The program directors at Jewel agree that Shabbos has a tremendous impact, but their numbers are growing so rapidly that, during peak periods, they can't find enough host families able to offer the young women Shabbos hospitality. The women often also are on a personal quest for dignity. "These young women want to be respected. They're disappointed by the way the world at large views women. This is why they see *tznius* in a positive light, and why they accept Shabbos and kashrus, even though these are restrictions.

"Rav Noach Weinberg, Aish HaTorah's *rosh yeshivah*, often uses the *mashal* of a group of students who can play basketball for hours and not get tired. But if you say to the group, 'I'll give each of you one hundred dollars if you'll play basketball for one hour, but play the game without the ball,' they can't do it for ten minutes. If there's no meaning and there's no goal, the game is exhausting. When students see that *Yiddishkeit* has a goal — that there's a reason why they exist — then they find meaning in the restrictions. It's the love plus the guidelines that excites them."

Looking Further Down the Trail

Both Rabbi Geffen and the Jewel directors say that interest in their programs is on the rise. Although Jewel would like to remain fairly small, to maintain its intimate and homey environment, Rabbi Geffen says that the 200 students that participate in the Rebound program each year is just a drop in the bucket, and he would like to see the numbers grow.

"The students are there," Rabbi Geffen insists. "There's a willingness to come here

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and learn. But there are obstacles on two fronts: It takes a lot of money to be able to approach the university students, and it's hard to find young, religious couples who are willing to live on campus and serve as recruiters."

Studying in a program at Ohr Somayach or Aish HaTorah is not the only way to keep college-age students moving along the Jewish heritage trail. During the last few years, numerous programs sponsored by Orthodox organizations have sprung up on campuses throughout North America. Some of these programs are even offering their own Israel programs.

"Having all of these Israel programs is a new phenomenon," says one of the Jewel directors. "Every program attracts a different kind of student. In today's world, everything is flashing. If one program isn't flashing brightly enough for a certain type of student, then another organization will set up a different kind of program to reach those students. But one thing that everyone in kiruv agrees on is that you can accomplish more in one week in Israel than you can in ten years anywhere else in the world."

Yet despite all of the new programs, people in kiruv also know that there are still tens of thousands of students who aren't being reached by any of them. So when it comes to the future of the English-speaking Jewish community, is the proverbial glass of water half-empty or half-full?

Rabbi Geffen takes the more optimistic view, believing that in every generation there will always be a steady stream of unaffiliated Jewish youth who will want to leave the Egypt of Western culture and explore their Jewish heritage. As in the past, how full the glass will be in the future will depend on how much money continues to be invested in kiruv activities.

At Jewel the mood is more somber. "Today's generation is so far away. There's so much intermarriage. I think we're seeing the end, that this generation is the last one that we're going to be able to get to come back to *Yiddishkeit*. That's why even though the numbers are going up and more students are coming to Israel and learning on serious programs, this is no time to pat ourselves on the back. The spiritual Holocaust is still going on. There's still a tremendous amount of work to be done." ■

Avraham Zuroff contributed to this story.