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Shinshinim prepare to leave their 'second home'

Young emissaries conveyed 'passion and connection to Israel'

By DEBRA RUBIN

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Students from Congregation Neve Shalom in Metuchen are helped with a craft project by Israeli Shinshin Maya Shany. Photo courtesy Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ

Two young ambassadors from Israel who spent the last year with the community in the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey never expected the area to become a second home.

"If you had told me a year ago that I would miss driving a rental car or talking in English, I wouldn't have believed it," said Maya Shany in an interview with NJJN during her last week in central New Jersey. "But this is now like a second home...."

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Her fellow ambassador, Dana Zachar, expressed similar feelings, noting, "In the beginning I did not know what to expect. But I've met so many new people who I didn't think would enter my heart — but I love the kids, the people."

She said she will go back to Israel "a different person" having lived independently and experienced a different culture and plans to come back often because, she said, "I'm sure I will miss everybody."

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The pair are Shinshinim, sent, by the Jewish Agency for Israel as young Israeli emissaries, to communities in North America. They arrived last August, fresh out of high school, delaying their military service for the year. Shinshin is a Hebrew acronym for Shnat Sherut, meaning "Year of Service."

The young emissaries' stay this year has been covered by a federation appropriation and \$6,000 each from four Conservative synagogues, Congregation B'nai Tikvah in North Brunswick, Congregation B'nai Israel



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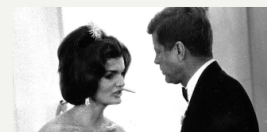
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in Rumson, Congregation Neve Shalom in Metuchen, and Marlboro Jewish Center (MJC). The pair were also involved in activities throughout the federation catchment area.

Although they wrapped up their time in the region June 16, the two technically remain under federation supervision for the summer while they work at Camp Nah-Jee-Wah, the NJY Camps overnight camp in Milford, Pa.

The two young women said they will take back with them a new view of American Jewry to share with Israelis.

Unlike in Israel, where “everybody celebrates the holidays and there is no school,” said Shany, in New Jersey she learned that “being a Jew outside Israel is hard,” as people have to make conscious decisions to religiously educate their children or follow religious practices taken for granted in Israel.

As their year draws to a close, Shany and Zachar leave having made an indelible impression on people, especially children and young people, where most of their efforts were focused.

“I could not have been more pleased about how things worked out with the two of them, especially since this was the pilot year,” said Dan Rozett, federation community and Israel engagement manager. “I knew throughout the year they were doing great work, but it was only when we had those goodbye moments with the institutions that I realized how much of an impact they had on those respective institutions and the community as a whole. Everybody was emotional to see the girls go.”

The Shinshinim were such a hit that federation plans to bring in two more for the coming year. Rozett said details have yet to be worked out, but, much like Shany and Zachar, they will each be assigned a synagogue, one in Middlesex County and one in Monmouth County.

Shany was assigned to Middlesex County and also worked with students in youth groups and at Yeshivat Netivot Montessori in East Brunswick and Nefesh Yehudi Academy, the after-school program for students who attend the Hebrew-immersion Hatikvah International Charter School in East Brunswick.

Each institution had its “own magic,” said Shany, who is from Reut — a village that is part of Modi’in in central Israel. She had some familiarity with the United States because when she was 10 she lived for a year with her family in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. But during this stay, she said, she gained a deeper appreciation of Jewish life in the diaspora.

Zachar, of Beersheva, was assigned to Monmouth County and also worked with students at The Hebrew Academy in Marlboro. She said that the challenges of maintaining a Jewish life — of having to seek out kosher food and joining a synagogue — have fostered a sense of community among American Jews that people in Israel don’t recognize.

She said that many of the American Jews she encountered have misconceptions about Israel.

For one, “a lot of people in America think everyone in Israel has a gun because they see pictures of the soldiers,” she said. Also, because of the dominance of the Orthodox rabbinate, most girls in Israel “don’t read from the Torah.”

Zachar had an opportunity to do just that when she became a bat mitzvah at MJC, “a constant reminder to myself that although I am not religious, Judaism doesn’t come in one package.”

Zachar went “above and beyond my expectations,” said Rabbi Ron Koas, MJC’s associate rabbi and education director, who is himself a native of Israel. At the synagogue she conducted activities that introduced young people to Israeli culture, geography, history, and the life of Israeli teens.

“She showed us how beautiful Israel is,” said Koas, a former Israel Defense Forces officer and shaliach in Australia. “It is really hard to transmit what Israel is while in New Jersey.”

Cantor Bruce Rockman, who supervised Shany at B’nai Tikvah, said her work with youngsters — from preschool children to high schoolers — had a demonstrable effect.

“At the end of the year we held a game of Israel Jeopardy, and we found the kids had an amazing knowledge of Israel,” he said.



“One of our goals in having Maya was to have our kids get to know Israel firsthand from an Israeli and gain that passion and connection to Israel. I don’t care how much you teach kids. They have to relate to you if you want them to feel closer to Israel. The kids tremendously related to her. She did a lot of creative wonderful programs.”

drubin@njewishnews.com

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