

Jewish Community Relations Council

Recent visit highlights Jewish Toledo’s impact on underprivileged in Israel

Last month, JCRC Director Daniel Pearlman traveled to Israel for site visits to organizations that receive allocations from Jewish Federation of Greater Toledo’s annual campaign. He then joined Jewish Toledoans Fagie Benstein and Deborah Orloff in Budapest, Hungary, for a Partnership2Gether Summit. Hallie Freed, JFGT’s Vice President, Innovations and Programs, attended the Budapest Summit as well, continuing to Israel for Partnership-specific programming in the Western Galilee.

Read more about Daniel’s trip to Israel below.

“On September 5, I visited **Kfar Silver**, a youth village and school run by **ORT** in Israel’s south. Kfar Silver is spread out over significant land and looks almost like an American liberal arts college campus combined with a farm. There are over 1,000 students enrolled in junior high and high school; 260 students live in dorms and the rest attend for the day. Like other youth villages in Israel, most of the students at Kfar Silver are considered “at-risk.” Some have behavioral or psychological issues, and many are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This school provides necessary services and a quality education to these students who would otherwise struggle in a conventional school environment.

I met with Amos, the CEO of the village, who came to this position in 2019 after 25 years serving in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and Monique, who works in international donor relations. They presented me with an introduction to the village before taking me in a golf cart on a personal tour of campus. We spoke with some students, saw the academic buildings and sports fields that were funded by donors, and more. Despite coming from an important position in the IDF, Amos explained that running the youth village keeps him busier and can often be more stressful. But he is doing a phenomenal job. Upon ORT’s takeover of the school from the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) in 2016 and Amos’ creative vision, the school has almost doubled its enrollment while graduation rates increased from 74% to 95%.

Kfar Silver is a public school, so students follow the normal Ministry of Education curriculum. But Kfar Silver also offers more courses and opportunities than a normal school can provide, thanks in part to philanthropy. The school requires students to choose two or three “tracks” to follow throughout their high school career, to learn how to specialize in what they are passionate about. There are 12 choices of tracks, ranging from different languages (in addition to English, which is required for all), to sports, to chemistry, and more. Being in a rural setting, they also have a working farm with animals and greenhouses, all for educational purposes. They are becoming solar-powered and plastic-free. They have a pool, a sports center, a soccer team, and more. But perhaps the most

unique part of the village is their therapeutic animal center. They have turtles, rabbits, small horses, a camel, an emu, donkeys, various birds, snakes, lizards, and more to help students improve their mental health. In the future, they want to build bee and ant shelters and a greenhouse for birds to use for educational purposes.

There is a strong sense of community at this school and the students are in great care. Students represent the diversity of Israeli society – Jews, Christians, Muslims, and more – and all religious holidays are celebrated. They also have 23 students from Ukraine who have enrolled since the war began. I left feeling amazed by the quality of this ORT school and touched by the power of our campaign contributions.



Bomb shelter at Kfar Silver



Amos, Daniel, and Monique Kfar Silver

On September 6, I visited **JDC-Israel** (the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, sometimes called “the Joint”) in Jerusalem, where I met Avigayil Benstein, the granddaughter-in-law of Fagie Benstein. Avigayil planned an incredible day highlighting the amazing work of JDC-Israel. Outside of Israel, JDC provides essential humanitarian assistance for Jewish communities in 70 countries around the world, and they have existed for over 100 years, well before Israel was established in 1948. JDC, along with the Jewish Agency for Israel, are two of the Jewish Federations’ major international partner organizations. But inside of Israel, JDC operates very differently.

JDC-Israel works as an innovation hub to test out creative pilot programs that can help ensure that Israel’s most vulnerable residents are cared for and supported. If these programs are successful, they are integrated into services provided by the government of Israel and implemented on a national scale. JDC-Israel works with all sectors of Israeli society: the elderly, youth at risk, people with all types of disabilities, and more. They even operate a leadership development program for public sector

employees to solve systemic challenges. The department that Avigayil works in, and that JFGT supports, is called Tevet, which helps to solve the chronic challenges incorporating certain populations into the Israeli workforce.

Our first meeting of the day was with three rabbis who lead the largest Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish charity and social services organization, called a *Kupah*, in a neighborhood of Jerusalem that has 40,000 people. Roughly half of all Haredi families in Israel live below the poverty line, and many more are just above the poverty line but are still struggling financially. JDC-Israel partners with this organization and many others in a pilot program funded in part by JFGT campaign contributions called *Derech Eretz*, which seeks to add a new model to the traditional way that *tzedakah* (charity) is given in the Haredi community. We first discussed what welfare generally looks like at these types of organizations. When a family comes to a *Kupah* and asks for money to pay for necessary expenses that they otherwise cannot afford (for food, utility payments, rent, etc.), the *Kupah* will give each family 1,000 to 1,500 shekels (roughly \$300-\$500). At this specific *Kupah*, there are 200 families that receive this non-governmental welfare every week, and even more before Jewish holidays. Some of these recipients also receive government assistance, depending on their needs. When you consider that the average Haredi family in Israel has six to seven children, these 200 families mean that around 2,000 people are supported by this *Kupah* each week – and there are 250 of these types of *Kupot* nationwide doing similar work.

The problem with this typical structure is that it “gives a man a fish” rather than “teaches a man to fish.” There is also a waiting list to receive this welfare assistance, demonstrating the need for finding creative solutions. So JDC-Israel’s *Derech Eretz* pilot program partners with select *Kupot* nationwide to offer a coordinator position embedded into the *Kupah*. This coordinator is responsible for assessing the needs of every new client to determine what, if anything, they can do to improve their financial situation. They help people learn time management, budgeting, and more. They also help them market what they can offer to others. Often, they both “give” and “teach” fishing at the same time. One woman needed 2,000 shekels to enroll in a course to help her improve her trade. As a result of the woman receiving 2,000 shekels from this program, she most recently made a profit of 9,325 shekels in one day. Now, she no longer needs welfare support and is so happy to be able to support herself.

Of course, not everyone who requests assistance will be able to improve their financial situation due to their health, mental health, or other factors, so this pilot program is not meant to replace traditional *tzedakah*. Instead, it is meant to complement it. This partnership hopes to help everyone who comes

through their door in a way that works best for them, regardless of their needs or personal situation. On top of “giving” and “teaching” a man to fish, they also work on preventing people from needing assistance in the first place, by proactively offering financial literacy support classes and other resources to Haredi families.

Next, I went to the JDC-Israel office to discuss some of the chronic issues in Israel that affect employment in general, but especially in certain populations: Arab-Israelis, Haredim, people with disabilities, Ethiopian-Israelis, people who live in the periphery regions (north and south, including our Western Galilee Partnership region), and those with low income. My last meeting was with Sa’eed, an Arab-Israeli who specializes in programs that seek to raise levels of Arab employment. Arab-Israelis make up 21% of Israel’s population, but many are struggling to obtain quality employment for various reasons. After high school, Jewish-Israelis go to the army or do national service, which gives them connections, skills, and references to help them get better jobs after attending university. Arab-Israelis, meanwhile, do not do any of those activities and thus are often unemployed, under-employed (working fewer hours than they want to), or have menial jobs. Combined with the unfamiliarity of the dominant Jewish-Israeli culture and a lack of suitable Hebrew, it creates a cycle that is hard to break.



Daniel, Avigayil, and Israel Yom-Tov from the Derech Eretz program



Daniel and Avigayil Benstein at the JDC-Israel office

One of JDC-Israel’s most recent successes in helping to break this cycle was the addition of a Hebrew language course for Arabic-speaking job seekers. While it only began in 2019, it has already impacted over 5,000 people. A major project they are working on now is the creation of a gap year program for Arab-Israelis. It is unrealistic for many Arab-Israelis to join the IDF, but a gap year program would provide Arab-Israelis with connections, skills, references, and more familiarity with Jewish-Israeli culture and Hebrew language. This program could also benefit our Partnership region, Akko and Matte Asher in the Western Galilee.

I left with a greater understanding of the challenges facing Israel's most vulnerable populations but with a renewed sense of appreciation for organizations like JDC-Israel that are working hard to create lasting positive change.

On September 7, I visited our Partnership region. I started the day meeting with Heidi Benish and Tanja Ronen from Partnership at the Ghetto Fighters' Museum. Created in 1949, it was the first Holocaust museum in the world and was founded by fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

I then met with Mirit Sulema from **Dror Israel's Akko Educators' Kibbutz**. The Akko Educators' Kibbutz, part of a national movement called Dror Israel, is a group of young educators living in Israel's most mixed city trying to instill leadership skills to people of all backgrounds, turning Akko from a mixed city to a shared city where people choose to live near one another. Unlike a traditional kibbutz, which is an agricultural community, the Akko Educators' Kibbutz is an urban kibbutz. Members of the kibbutz live in a building in one of Akko's poorer neighborhoods and work in local schools while running educational programming for the community. The first floor of the kibbutz building has classrooms for activities for youth and elderly populations they work with, while the upper floors are shared apartments for kibbutz members.

We started with a tour of Akko with Tamir, another member of Dror Israel and the kibbutz. We walked to the top of the Old City walls for a view of most of the city (new and old) and discussed the fascinating past and present of Akko. Then, we went to the newer part of the city to walk along the coastal promenade and visit two extremely diverse, poorer neighborhoods. We discussed the issues from the past that continue to impact the issues of the present, and we walked along a much-loved pedestrian and bicycle path that connects these two neighborhoods. Along this path, which connects Haredi Jews, Arabs, and secular Jews who all call these neighborhoods home, the Akko Educators' Kibbutz runs a bike repair stand that brings these groups together to work together to find solutions to mutual problems.

Next to this path is a beautiful community garden that another kibbutz member, Noam, helps to run. They are growing over a dozen types of organic vegetables, fruits, and herbs, led by community volunteers who want to be contributing members of society. Most do not speak Hebrew fluently, even though many immigrated 20-30 years ago from the Former Soviet Union (FSU). I met Igor, an immigrant from Russia who, along with other FSU *Olim* (immigrants) are also active in the program that JFGT helps fund, **Chofesh Bitui** ("Freedom of Expression"), which offers Hebrew instruction and meaningful social opportunities for these lonely and elderly community members who otherwise do not feel a part of greater society.

I learned about a Hanukkah program that these elderly Russian and Ukrainian *olim* ran for a local kindergarten,

complete with foods that they made for the children and a skit they performed in Hebrew. Seeing the smiles on the faces of these children did so much to instill confidence, joy, and meaning in these elderly immigrants. Also, the *Chofesh Bitui* program participants created self-portraits using materials significant to each of them and then discussed with the other participants, in Hebrew, their personal life stories and the stories of their families and the places that they are from. These stories were then translated into Arabic and hung up (in Hebrew and Arabic) in public places around the city, such as outside of the community garden, so that all residents (Jews and Arabs, religious and secular, young and old) can learn more about their neighbors. The *Chofesh Bitui* participants also go on educational trips together outside of the city to places like the Hula Valley, one of the world's best places to view migrating birds (something impossible for them to do without the Kibbutz, since most do not have cars and do not leave Akko). Some of these trips and other activities are collaborations with women's groups and other language groups that the Akko Educators' Kibbutz or Dror Israel organizes, again to emphasize that they work to bring diverse communities together rather than keeping them separate.

From language instruction to social programming to community gardening for people of all ages, the Akko Educators' Kibbutz works in so many seemingly different fields to provide meaningful educational programs and services to the community. But after experiencing it firsthand, I realized that all of these different pieces relate to one another. Igor is a member of *Chofesh Bitui* and a volunteer in the community garden because it helps him learn Hebrew, feel part of Israeli society, and ultimately create a stronger sense of community among all of Akko's residents. I left feeling inspired for the future of Akko and its diverse population.



The community garden with Noam, Mirit, and Tamir

On September 8, I met with staff and recipients of **Youth Futures**, a program of the Jewish Agency for Israel that JFGT helps to fund, at the Weizman School in Akko. Youth Futures works to empower disadvantaged children between 8 and 12 years old. Each child in the program gets individualized support tailored to them, and this plan is discussed with the child and the parents rather than just with the parents. Parents commit to this process, which can include home visits from the mentor, workshops, meetings, and more. By sixth grade, the child is often leading the meetings and can explain their own growth goals.

I first met with Danor, Shoval, Meital, and Elada who gave a background of Youth Futures at this school and at the other schools in Akko. Youth Futures works at five schools in Akko: two Arabic-speaking elementary schools and three secular Jewish elementary schools. At each of these schools, they pair Jewish students with an Arab mentor and Arab students with a Jewish mentor. Elada, an Arab-Israeli woman, is the mentor at the Weizman School. I visited the Youth Futures room – each school that partners with Youth Futures devotes a classroom exclusively for Youth Futures – and learned that because of less funding resulting from COVID-19, the number of mentors in the program decreased from ten to five across Akko. This means that each school used to have two mentors but now only has one, so fewer kids can be impacted since each mentor works with 16 students. Youth Futures is unique because it is holistic – the mentors are in touch with the students in school, after school, during vacation... all the time. To a teacher, the mentor is their "eyes at home." And to parents, the mentor is their "eyes at school." During the worst days of the pandemic, the mentors were designated as "essential workers," so they had permission to visit the students at home even during strict national lockdowns.

Soon, the school's principal, Yuta, joined us and explained how thrilled she is to work with Youth Futures. She also discussed more about the population of the school. The Weizman School, which serves grades one to six, is in the center of the new city, close to the Old City walls, in a working-class neighborhood. It is a Jewish public school in what is now a predominantly Arab neighborhood, so students attend this school from across the city rather than just from that specific neighborhood. Akko has a lot of new *Olim* (immigrants) from Ukraine and Russia, but at this school specifically, 40% of the students are *olim* from these countries. Between the *olim* and Arab students in the city, 70% of students in Akko speak a language at home that is not Hebrew. As such, Hebrew instruction is also part of Youth Futures. The principal explained that there is a growing need for Youth Futures at her school.

I then met with a parent of a child in the program. Shiran explained that her son, Neharai, who is in sixth grade, has been in the program for three years and has had tremendous growth thanks to Youth Futures. In third grade, he wanted to join Youth Futures. Surprisingly, the program does not have a negative stigma; on the contrary, many students want to participate because of the special Youth Futures classroom and the opportunity to have a mentor. Because of this, there is always a waiting list. Neharai was able to join the program during Hanukkah that year, which he called his own Hanukkah miracle. The pandemic began a few months later, but he continued to receive support from his Youth Futures mentor. Shiran explained that the program has greatly improved her son's self-confidence. She said that Elada, his mentor, also has brought other adults involved in his life, such as his tennis coach, into the Youth Futures picture to help him achieve his personal

goals. Elada led a workshop series with a social worker about controlling emotions, and it was so impactful that Neharai refused to miss a single meeting, even after breaking his arm. She said that Neharai is more mature, more social, and more confident, and that Elada is always there to advocate for him. Shiran has another son, who is in second grade, and he wants to join Youth Futures when he is eligible next year.

Then, I met with Neharai. He spoke so eloquently, well beyond how the average child his age would speak, and I was very moved by what he said and how he said it. He expressed that before this program, nobody attended his tennis matches, but now he has Elada to support him and help him grow. He was so happy to be a part of the program, and he appeared so confident and well-mannered. He also presented us with a gift that he made, a piece of art that says "love," "health," and "success." I returned the favor by giving him some Jewish Toledo items, as I gave the other allocation recipients. He was really surprised and grateful to receive a gift.

Moving forward, Youth Futures wants to continue to grow their impact in Akko. There is clearly a need for their important work. I left feeling grateful for this opportunity to meet with Neharai and witness the positive impact of this program.



The Youth Futures classroom at the Weizman School in Akko



Daniel Pearlman meeting with Neharai, Shiran, Yuta, Elada, and Shoval

At each of these site visits, I was thanked for the Toledo Jewish support for these life-changing programs and services. Collectively, we can create such a positive impact on Israeli society because of the generosity of our Jewish Federation's campaign contributors. ”

You can witness these amazing programs for yourself by participating in the Jewish Federation of Greater Toledo's November 2023 Community Mission to Israel! This will be our first Community Mission to Israel in over 15 years. Experience rich history, breathtaking scenery, and sacred places in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This mission is intended for first-time visitors to Israel and returnees alike. To learn more, please complete a short interest form at form.jotform.com/jewishtoledo/mission. More information coming soon.