BINA Center for Jewish Identity and Hebrew Culture

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The Students at BINA

A car leaves the Jordan Valley every Sunday afternoon, picks up a passenger along the way and continues on to attend a Talmud lesson given by Ari Alon at the Ramat Ef-al branch of BINA (meaning in Hebrew: wisdom). Ari's loyal and persistent students, some of which are the second generation in their families to attend his classes, have taken this route every week for thirteen years, since the establishment of BINA – the Center for Jewish Identity and Hebrew Culture.

BINA is affiliated with the Kibbutz Movement, but is active within all of Israeli society. It was established to supply the secular population's ever increasing demand to renew the tradition of study that has characterized Jewish culture for generations, and to delve into areas of creativity and philosophy that "converse" with the sources. The name BINA was chosen by Shneor Einam, a member of Kibbutz Shefayim. It is the Hebrew acronym for “A Home for the Creation of the Nation’s Soul,” a term coined by the Hebrew poet Haim Nachman Bialik in his well-known poem "The Matmid" (=Talmud Student). BINA is a modest attempt to be a house of creation of the nation's soul, along with other institutions that work to renew approaches to Judaism. The institute hopes to initiate a rehabilitative process which will heal the deep rifts that the Zionist movement created in the tapestry of Hebrew culture. BINA aims to be a place of study and convention, which invites youth and adults to confront all levels and facets of their culture.
The students at BINA come from very varied backgrounds. The activity at the Center revolves around the Beit Midrash (study hall), which offers more than ten fixed study programs each year on different cultural topics – Bible study, rabbinical literature, history, Zionist philosophy, Kabala and Hassidic studies, Hebrew literature, Jewish philosophy, the Jewish calendar and milestones in Jewish life. Approximately 500 people participate in these programs. In addition to these year-long programs, shorter programs and seminars are offered. Study programs at BINA are text based and aim to expose students to the spiritual treasure that the texts hold, and help them acquire independent learning skills. A prominent feature of our study methods is the attempt to expose relationships among texts and to understand the spiral process of discourse among the texts themselves through commentary and creativity that draws its terminology and descriptiveness from the past.

Different people have different reasons for joining our study programs. Some were attracted by the well known teachers on our staff, like Haim Be'er, Dov Elbaum or Muki Tzur, and later learned of other activities and courses that we offer. A large number of our students are intellectuals in their respective fields and naturally curious people who are interested in enriching their worlds through in-depth long-term study. Some come in search of a social or community environment and consider our beit midrash a cultural center to which they invite their friends to holiday events. Some feel obligated to learn certain types of Jewish studies as part of the process of defining their personal, family and communal identities. We also teach a small and unique group of women from religious backgrounds who had never studied Mishna or Gemara prior to joining our program.

Most of our students are adults who attend diligently for years. As leisure activities become more and more popular, studying Jewish sources fills a need to strengthen and deepen roots. Surveys and studies
that were conducted to understand the phenomenon of secular Jewish study halls, found that the participants are generally well established and a high percentage of them were once active in youth groups. It seems that Jewish studies fulfill a desire to re-establish their identities.

**An Open Approach to Texts as a Social Foundation**

We approach the sources from two different angles. One is the academic approach, which is critical, objective and morally indifferent, or supposedly indifferent to content of the text. The second angle is the traditional approach which considers the written and oral Torah a binding document and a guideline to a philosophy and way of life. BINA's approach attempts to restore the sources' status as a social foundation, while leaving them open to scientific and moral criticism, and encourages its students to explain, interpret, accept and reject. These are our sources, it is our heritage and it is our responsibility to develop them and shape them according to our ethics and philosophy of life, just as previous generations did.

The main goal of the Beit Midrash is to expose its students to the rich Jewish culture and encourage them delve deep into it. Each year, we arrange a schedule of courses and lectures which attempts to give the widest possible expression of the different facets of Jewish culture throughout the ages and explore the way in which it evolved. Some of the classes are given as lectures, but the emphasis and uniqueness of BINA is that the texts are studied directly from the source, in an attempt to understand their intended meaning and relevancy for us today. We attempt to free ourselves as much as possible from historical and modern commentary which tries to create one specific narrative.

Other classes are run in a more "beit midrash" style of learning, which includes in-depth study in pairs with a teacher's guidance. This style enables a closer and more personal familiarity with the text and
encourages students to suggest new interpretations of their own.

There are shorter courses and one-time lectures as well, usually centered on Jewish holidays or on books published by one of the teachers, especially when the topic is one that we identify with (such as the recent event in honor of Asaf Inbari's book, *Homeward*).

BINA does not direct its students towards a life of commitment to any type of Jewish law, but we do hope that the deep and thorough understanding of the roots, branches and fruits of Jewish culture that the students acquire, will lead to practical changes in their lives, such as changing the way their families gather to celebrate holidays, changing their language and understanding of the importance of moral and social values above all other values in Jewish culture. Delaying wages and employee exploitation are much more severe problems in Jewish law then the fine details of the dietary laws. We are not creating a new movement in Judaism, although from the outside we might appear to stand out, but we do have a firm commitment to cultural legacy and are determined to make the world a better place.

Out staff includes innovators and great thinkers such as Muki Tzur, Haim Beer, Ari Elon, Dov Elbaum, Yochi Brandes, and other less known teachers who are no less prominent in their fields.

**BINA's Approach to Jewish Life-Cycle Ceremonies**

We want secular Jews to feel comfortable and "at home" with the Jewish ceremonies that are part of their lives. The process of planning and creating the ceremony and the involvement of everyone connected to it is no less important than the ceremony itself. Tradition is the baseline for most events in Jewish life, but we believe in:

a. leaving room for personal expression that the family can relate to
b. incorporating modern Hebrew literature (poetry and prose) into the ceremony
c. elevating women (whose voices are rarely heard in traditional ceremonies) and giving them significant roles as equal participants.

When secular Israelis reach significant milestones in Jewish life, they are often outsiders with little control over the formalities. They don't understand the words that they recite under the wedding canopy or over the grave. The most important and sensitive moments of their lives are run by rabbis or the people that work for them, who do not play any significant role in their lives. The decisions left to the families are reduced to choosing the color of the tablecloths and planning the menu. One example of how we try to make the marriage ceremony more meaningful for the couple is by providing them someone to lead the ceremony, a person who first explains it and helps them plan it to suit their preferences and lifestyles. In most of the weddings that we conduct, the woman also presents the man with a ring, which is not permitted in purely traditional ceremonies.

We assist at mourning ceremonies as well – many of us have stood alongside our relatives and friends at cemeteries, feeling their embarrassment as they try to pronounce the unfamiliar words of the "Kadish" prayer from a prayer book shoved into their hands by an ultra-orthodox cemetery staff member, all the while stumbling over the complicated Aramaic words. There is nothing more predictable than death, but we always confront it unprepared: what should we do, what should we say, how should we behave? What does tradition dictate and what is acceptable? Jewish culture has a highly developed, highly detailed mourning structure. Not everything that applied to our forefathers suits us as well, but over the course of the generations, appropriate traditions were developed for different stages of mourning – beginning with the death and the funeral, continuing on the seven days of mourning (Shiva) and the thirty-day mourning period and finally to the memorial ceremonies. It is important to be familiar with all of the stages so that
everyone can choose what comforts them and what best suits them. For this purpose, we train counselors that specialize in mourning traditions who are available for the families when needed and assist them in the process of separation and in their return to routine.

**Other Areas of BINA's Activities**

In 2006, BINA established the first Secular Yeshiva in Israel, where young adults ages 18-30 engage in intensive study and social action programs in the distressed neighborhoods of South Tel-Aviv. Today over 200 students study at the Secular Yeshiva in Tel-Aviv and an additional branch has recently opened in Jerusalem. What makes our yeshiva stand out over other pre and post-army programs is the intensity of study, the variety of study groups and the goals that we aim to achieve. The core groups at the yeshiva are high school graduates and post-army paticipants, at the stage of their lives in which they deliberate over the future professional lives. Our goal is to cultivate a generation of leaders with strong Jewish identities, in-depth knowledge of current and historical Jewish culture, who engage in Jewish practice and embrace social activism and justice as central values in their lives.

But Batei Midrash are only a part of BINA's activities.

BINA is very active in the public school system, teaching students, parents and especially training teachers. We aim to make Jewish sources (the Bible, literature and Jewish law) an ingrained part of the schools' culture and not just another subject in the school curriculum. We take part in the “Shorshei Yisrael” (=Roots Of Israel) educational program run by “Ort” schools, and last year we celebrated five years of joint work with the Tel Nordau School in Tel Aviv aimed at making their institution a school of Hebrew culture.

We try to cope with the alienation and even rejection that high school students feel towards anything "Jewish". These feelings are the
A Renaissance of Jewish Culture and Tradition in Israel

result of Jewish culture being seen as a religion alone, represented by the politics of the religious political parties. BINA's main Judaism "agents" in schools are young secular adults who the students can relate to who utilize many informal education teaching methods. They are not teachers, they are facilitators and counselors. They focus on social issues and current moral dilemmas and explore topics which are vital and relevant to the participants' lives. Short seminars and workshops give very limited educational opportunities, but they manage to break through the wall of hostility, provide a positive learning experience and arouse interest. One of the secrets of our staff's success is the topics that we choose: we discuss topics that interest our audience – love and relationships, financial differences, competitiveness, leadership and career – all from the perspective that the Jewish sources offer.

The "Shorshei Yisrael" program run by “Ort” schools makes a system-wide change by fostering internal strengths that existed within the school. We assume that the school itself can define what it needs and what suits it. As a rule, we prefer to plan the program along with the school staff and not present it with off-the-shelf products already prepared and completed, since we believe that successfully internalizing the change requires that teachers identify with the education goals and content of the program. By formulating the plan of action and writing the lesson plans themselves, teachers are given the opportunity for progressive work and active experience, which are the first steps towards the desired change.

BINA is part of the "Havaya" program – the Center for Secular Life Cycle Ceremonies, which serves the ever growing number of secular Israelis interested in birth, Bar/Bat Mitzva, marriage and death ceremonies which combine Jewish tradition with pluralism and equality.

Most of BINA's activities for youth and young adults combine in-depth study of Jewish sources with community service. Our sages
said "Great is study that leads to action", and we understand that as an obligation to be socially involved, especially among weaker sectors of Israeli society in poorer neighborhoods and peripheral cities. BINA's Secular Yeshiva, intentionally established in south Tel Aviv, one of the most problematic parts of Israel's first Jewish city, offers varied study programs for pre-army students, for young adults in their twenties and groups of volunteers. BINA students volunteer in the surrounding underserved neighborhoods, assisting the elderly, helping children with their homework in after-school programs and other forms of social involvement and taking responsibility for their surroundings. The Secular Yeshiva reaches out to aid children of work-migrants, asylum seekers, immigrant youth and others. Over the past four years BINA has expanded programming to neglected neighborhoods in Beer Sheva, Beit Shemesh, Yaffo and Ramle.

**The Future of BINA and its Counterparts**

BINA is a non-profit organization, meaning that in addition to income from tuition and fees charged for services provided to different organizations; it is highly dependent on contributions, especially from the US. The financial instability of Jewish renewal organizations presents a cultural and political challenge for Israeli society: the struggle of pluralistic Jewish study institutions to receive public recognition, support and funding equal to orthodox organizations, will greatly determine the future of the field of Jewish culture in the state of Israel.