Building a bridge in a Complex Cultural Reality at The Ya'akov Herzog Center Complex 4

Noah Hayut

Introduction: The Religious Kibbutz Movement's Place between Worlds

Since its establishment, the Religious Kibbutz Movement has considered itself a bridge between the religious and secular sectors of Israeli society. Through the years, the movement has devoted resources to this ideal – meetings were arranged between religious kibbutz members and members of other kibbutzim with different affiliations, members of the religious kibbutz conducted weddings (free of charge) in other kibbutzim and attempts were made to encourage other types of cooperation through joined thought and discussion. These values were also obvious in the paths in which the movement directed its youth, such as encouraging regular army service for their young men and especially their young women, which deviated from the norm in the religious world both then and now. In addition, the movement is politically active: the historical pact between the secular Mapai and religious Hapoel Mizrachi political parties was made possible largely due to the efforts made by the political

Dr. Noah Hayut is the Executive Director of the Ya'akov Herzog Center and a Bible Studies lecturer. He is a member of Kibbutz Kvutzat Yavneh and has a PhD in Bible Studies from Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In the past, he served as a research partner in the Scholion Research Center, principal of the Kvutzat Yavneh high school, General Secretary of Kvutzat Yavneh and an emissary to Britain on behalf of the Bnei Akiva youth movement
representatives of the Religious Kibbutz Movement.

In the early 1980s, the Religious Kibbutz Movement announced that a giant assembly called “Together We March” would be held to express the common ideals of the religious and secular sectors in Israel, despite the disagreements. Thousands of members of the Religious Kibbutz Movement gathered in the Rose Garden opposite the Knesset in Jerusalem, along with President Chaim Herzog and...only a handful of secular representatives. The assembly was thus considered a failure in that respect.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the movement decided to establish an institution that would coordinate all of the activities that encourage dialogue between different sectors and which all Jews in Israel and abroad could consider a second home. This home would allow all Jews to express their own interpretations of Judaism by encouraging a pluralistic approach to studying traditional Jewish texts, through dialogue and attentiveness to the "other's" outlook. During those same years (1988-1989), the Elul Learning Community and the Educational Center in Oranim were established as well.

The Religious Kibbutz Movement assigned the task of establishing the institution to Mrs. Tova Ilan. Mrs. Ilan is a member of Kibbutz Ein Tzurim, an experienced, well-known educator, a public figure, founder of integrated education and a women’s rights activist. Mr. Derrick Kleeman, a Swiss Jew whose generosity made establishing this institution possible, wanted to commemorate the memory of Dr. Ya'akov Herzog, one of Israel’s initial foreign relations representatives, who was a fine example of a religious man involved in building the state with every fiber of his being, whose actions always included the Israeli society as a whole. This combination of religion and ideology, led to the establishment of the Ya'akov Herzog Center for Jewish Studies in Kibbutz Ein Tzurim, directed by Mrs. Tova Ilan.
What Is Unique About the Center?

The Ya'akov Herzog Center was established by the Religious Kibbutz Movement, as a result of the increasing cultural and social estrangement which threatened, and continues to threaten, to destroy Israeli society. Located in Kibbutz Ein Tzurim, the Center uses all types of Jewish cultural sources as a starting point from which meaningful dialogue can develop within Israeli society.

The Center’s activity focuses on giving Jewish culture a significant place in the personal and public lives of many men and women in Israel and is one of the few Orthodox institutions in Israel that study Jewish texts from a pluralistic, dialogical approach.

The Center offers classes, lectures, workshops and a beit midrash (study hall) for the general public. The classes, lectures and workshops offer a new, invigorated, up to date and relevant encounter with the abundance of Jewish culture: biblical texts, midrash, Talmudic studies, Hebrew literature, Jewish philosophy, studies of the Land of Israel and more.

The Center's approach to study is based on the idea that there is more than one legitimate voice in the world of commentary and that different voices do not contradict each other, but rather enrich each other and expand the capacity of Jewish culture.

The Center is open to men and women, secular and religious people from all parts of the Jewish spectrum, old and young, new immigrants and veteran Israelis, educators and agents of change to the Israeli society and anyone else interested in joining us on our quest for knowledge and growth. Almost 6,000 people participate in study programs and special events organized by the Center every year.
The Center's Activities

The Ya'akov Herzog Center runs eight different units:

1. Youth Programs

Hundreds of teens take part in the Center's programs. Our most outstanding program, *Atid* (Leaders of Tomorrow), is geared to fostering our society's youth by offering a pluralistic approach to exploring Jewish-Israeli identity in a multi-cultural society. Approximately 400 high school students from the tenth and eleventh grades participate in the program each year. The Center also runs a program for children celebrating their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The program, called *Shir Mizmor* attracts hundreds of youth every year. Identity seminars are also held for middle school and high school students.

The *Atid* program brings religious and secular teens together with the goal of encouraging young leadership with the ability to address issues of Jewish and Israeli identity in a multi-cultural society and with a feeling of social responsibility.

The program is geared towards highly motivated, socially sensitive tenth and eleventh grade students in secular and religious high schools from Israel's southern periphery. Between eight and ten students are selected from each school. These students participate in a rich program which brings them face-to-face with teenagers from communities that differ from their own.

*Atid* has been running for over a decade, with 350 young participants each year. The Youth and Society Administration of the Ministry of Education has published an instruction booklet explaining the program, including lesson plans and meetings outlines – all written by our staff. The administration works with us to find ways to advertise the program within the national school system.

Each group in this program in comprised of 25-30 high school students from religious and public schools. As some religious schools
will allow their students to participate in the program only if boys and girls are separated, some of the groups are divided by gender. Each group is lead by two instructors – one from a religious background and the other from a secular one.

The *Atid* program deals openly with personal and general identity issues through joint study of a varied selection of Jewish texts. This encourages discussion and debate of the elements of their complex Jewish-Israeli identity – one based on old values as well as new ones, religion, nationality and culture. It is an identity in which both Jewish and democratic values serve side by side. We hope that those that we consider future leaders will be able to act with sensitivity to the social conflicts that await them, with respect for the different voices of Israeli society.

Each group session includes debates and stimulating activities. The participants are expected to study theoretical topics with attentiveness and respect of different opinions and approaches. The purpose is twofold: to give this youth the opportunity to explore and define their own identity and to train them to lead community volunteer activities.

The meetings are held in the Ya'akov Herzog Center in Kibbutz Ein Tzurim. Nine sessions are held over the course of the year. One of the highlights of the program is when the participants run a social project for institutions and communities in the southern part of Israel.

Since it was so successful, the program opened branches in other locations throughout the country, such as Modiin, Jerusalem (with the support of the International Cultural Center for Youth) and in the western Emek Yizrael area (along with the Oranim Educational Center). Next year, two other branches will be opened – one in Tel Aviv (with the Rabin Center) and the other in Raanana.

The entire project, including the different branches, is sponsored by the following funds: Poppers-Prins Stiftung (Holland), The Yoreinu
Foundation, Tmura – The Israeli Public Service Venture Fund, Tsav Pius and The Fund for Support of Jewish Institutions or Projects outside Norway.

2. **Ofek – "Horizon"

Ofek was established in 2005 as a program for students (high school and college graduates) from the former Soviet Union who live at the Center, study there and tour the country. The courses are devoted to Jewish history, Israeli culture, Zionism, mastering the Hebrew language and more. During the final portion of the year, students perform volunteer work and internships in order to expose them to Israeli society and to different career options available in their fields. Approximately 80% of the program's participants in the past years ended up moving to Israel, serving in the army or volunteering for national services, studying and working here.

The program is associated with the Jewish Federation's Journey project, which also finances the project. In 2010, we opened the program's sixth year with 36 students from Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and other CIS countries.

Ofek runs throughout the school year (from September to June) and aims to achieve two major goals:
1. Strengthen the participants' Jewish and Zionist identity
2. Familiarize participants with the state of Israel and Israeli society, to prepare those that are interested in immigrating to Israel to do so with an understanding of the Israeli way of life.

In order to achieve these goals, the program features three major elements:
a. Academic study: The primary basis for achieving the two above-mentioned goals is exposing the participants to vast, in-depth knowledge of different aspects of Jewish culture. The study program therefore includes learning the Hebrew language, understanding the Jewish calendar, life cycle and ceremonies in Jewish life. Bible studies are taught and participants are introduced to Jewish literature and Jewish-Israeli history.

b. Emotional experiences: The Herzog Center realizes that experiencing Israel's nature, culture and population first-hand plays a significant part in shaping Jewish identity and forming a connection with Israeli society. In order to provide these experiences, the program includes many trips and hikes, army service in the Sar El volunteer program, a week in the Youth Corps army preparation program, a week in Yad Vashem World Holocaust Center in Jerusalem, participation in cultural events and meetings with representatives of different sectors of Israeli society. The program's participants meet with Ein Tzurim kibbutz members; an active, creative, religious, kibbutz-oriented community.

c. Practical preparation: The last part of the program allows the participants to experience employment in Israel. They volunteer in a workplace, with the direction of the Ofek staff to get a taste of that aspect of Israeli life and help them make educated and informed decisions about their future.

The following are quotes from Ofek participants over the years:
"Ofek opened my eyes to an entire world of Jewish culture and values. I now have the ability to connect to Israeli society without feeling like I live in a Russian ghetto. This year has prepared me for life in Israel in
the best possible way. We didn't expect to get such warm and wonderful treatment from the staff. We didn’t expect the kibbutz members to treat us so well. We found new friends and foster families among them. I now feel a deep connection to Israel society and see myself as an eternal part of it. (by participants at the end of the year)

I would like to thank the staff at the Herzog Center, and especially Doci, from the bottom of my heart for their warmth and attentiveness, their patience and willingness to help whenever needed. When I see such wonderful people, my heart opens and makes me want to help others. I learned much about values from books, but experiencing your ongoing contributions and the way you treat others, was a lesson in putting these values to practice in real life. (Tania Davidoveska, Ofek program, 2006)

I am glad that fate gave me the opportunity to open the doors to a "new world". I will return home to my educational work as a different person, with new ideas and vast knowledge. (Andrei Makorovski, Ofek program, 2005)

3. Tzahali

The Ya'akov Herzog Center established the first pre-army preparatory course for religious women in Israel in 2006. The girls study, volunteer and take part in activities in the region for a year before they begin their army service. The course aims to empower them as religious women, help them to make the most of their army service and give them a sense of social involvement and responsibility that they will take with them to their adult lives.

Why was Tzahali established?

The pre-army preparatory course for religious women was established in order to provide three fundamental needs. Two of them are internal needs of the religious community and the third is affects the entire Israeli society:
1. The number of young religious women interested in army service has increased, and a growing number chose paths other than the programs considered acceptable by the religious sector (such as National Service or the more "protected" army programs designed for religious women). These women want to join other units, in which there is more intense interaction with secular public. Most of these girls join the army with little or no preparation and find themselves in a male-dominated, secular world.

2. The need to cultivate female leadership in the religious world. The course empowers the participants as religious women who are committed to Jewish law and community service.

3. The need to strengthen solidarity and unity within Israeli society. An increasing number of people from both sectors (religious and secular) tend to close themselves off in homogeneous communities and the distance and alienation between sectors continue to increase. There is an urgent need to encourage and educate men and women from both sectors to hold dialogues in a way that sees the "other" as an opportunity and not a threat. Society needs people who understand that what unites us all is the rich, multi-faceted Jewish culture.

_Tzahali participants:_

Tzahali attracts graduates of religious girls' high schools from all sections of the Zionist-religious community. Some of the girls attended schools in which a significant percentage of graduates choose to serve in the army, while others attended schools in which only a small percentage joined the army, some even had to keep their intention to join the army a secret in order to be allowed to continue studying at that school. Some families support their daughters' decision to join the army, while in others; the
decision to join the army was received with unease and sometimes caused dispute.

**Program Curriculum**

The curriculum features Jewish study at a high level with a pluralistic orientation, in addition to social activities, group experiences and volunteer work in the area. We defined four main topics for the year-long program: leadership, Judaism, army service and society, which we address in a variety of study methods and experiences: frontal instruction, studying with partners, creative learning, informal study sessions, workshops, field trips and more. Some of the classes and activities are given by the preparatory course staff and teachers and others by outside lecturers. This exposes the girls to different opinions and a variety of different points of view.

**The Religious-Zionist community's opinion of Tzahali**

The Religious-Zionist community's attitude towards the Tzahali program has always been ambivalent. On one hand, army service for religious girls is never the preferred option, has never been supported by the rabbinical institution or by the director of religious education in the Education Ministry. On the other hand, it is a known fact that 20% of graduates of religious high schools do join the army\(^1\), and it is obvious to all educators that these girls require preparation.

What is the solution? Support the girls who decide to be drafted and thus recognize the legitimacy of this program or denounce Tzahali and give up on a significant number of girls?

---

1 Orly Lotan and Yuval Vergen, Religious girls in the army, Knesset Research and Knowledge Center, 2007 (see Knesset website)
Rav Aviner, one of the leading rabbis of the religious-Zionist community described it well. In an article that he published in 2006, in a popular religious weekly journal he wrote: "To the religious female soldiers, we say that we disagree with you and you know it, but you are still a part of our community". He continues by saying "all female soldiers are god's devoted messengers, whether exhibited by their manners and conduct or by fulfilling their tasks in our holy army."²

The fact is that most religious girls' high schools do not allow Tzahali to present the programs before the girls at school, including schools in which a large percentage of the graduates are drafted. Many of the students therefore begin army service immediately after they graduate, or attend a secular preparatory program. There is a constant increase in the number of girls who contact Tzahali, and this past year (2011), the program had to turn some of the potential participants away due to lack of space.

A comment made by one of the girls who participated in the program:

"In moments of difficulty and exhaustion, we will always be able to turn to the year we have shared and remember the contents and experiences that brought us together, and be able to draw strength from them. We will be able to turn to each other and remember all the good times we shared. We will always know that we have someone to turn to and that because of this year, we will succeed in overcoming the difficulties and attaining even greater heights".

(Liorah Levi, Class of 2006)

---

² Ynet, October, 3, 2006
4. **Cultural Absorption**

Since its establishment, The Ya'akov Herzog Center has worked with new immigrants, specifically those from the former Soviet Union. Teachers, students and volunteers in immigrant communities participate in programs that deal with Jewish-Israeli culture and the dialogue between cultures in Israeli society. The Center has held courses for immigrant teachers for many years on topics related to the "nation and the land" and we are part of an Israeli identity project in Impulse, an afternoon enrichment program for Russian-speaking students established by Russian speaking immigrants.

Over the past two years, the Center has been running a pilot study program called "Teachers for Life" which it hopes to implement in all southern Israel schools containing a significant number of Russian speaking teachers and students. This program aims to form a personal and professional dialogue between immigrant teachers from the former Soviet Union and Israeli born teachers. This dialogue is based on joint study of Jewish cultural texts that discuss identity, as well as the personal and professional life experiences of the participants. "Teachers for Life" gives teachers that work together the opportunity to learn more about the cultural and ideological worlds of their colleagues, enrich their Jewish-Israeli world and develop joint programs which deal with Jewish and Israeli identity to be taught to their students (both new immigrants and veteran Israelis).

The first stage of the project is bi-weekly study sessions, lead by two people – an immigrant and a native Israeli. During the second stage, educational programs for schools are outlined and formulated.

So what makes this project so innovative, creative and interesting?

Studying Jewish and Israeli culture, as important as it is, is not enough. Cultural and social absorption requires personal encounters and connections between immigrants and native Israelis. Israeli society tends
to show disrespect towards immigrants from all over the world, and often alienates them, making absorption difficult. The large immigration from CIS countries allows immigrants to live within "ghetto" type communities and avoid becoming a part of Israeli society. The immigrants respond to the treatment that they are given with disrespect and alienation of the Israelis.

"Teachers for Life" deals with just that problem and creates dialogue based on equality stemming from joint and mutual study. It develops a Jewish-Israeli-educational language which grows from Jewish culture and allows for different approaches to this culture. This dialogue allows immigrants and native Israelis to learn about each other's cultural and ethical worlds and to learn from each other.

5. **In-Service training courses for educators in Israel and abroad**

Teachers and educators are Herzog Center's main target audience, since they have the power to act as agents of social change. The Center offers in-service training for educators and counseling for teachers interested in renewing the discourse on Jewish identity in their schools. The Center is more suited to the more mainstream religious schools than to the yeshiva-style schools, and addresses the general school system as well. The Center runs in-service training based on dialogue between religious school teachers and teachers in the general school system.

The Herzog Center feels an obligation to Jews everywhere and therefore offers in-service training to Jewish teachers in Israel and abroad. Courses are available in Argentina, Peru, Uruguay, Chile, Mexico, the United States, England and other countries. In addition, the Center has been leading the Jewish-Zionist education in South America for the past decade.
All of the in-service training is Hebrew-language based.

6. Women at the Center

As a result of the Center's commitment to developing Jewish dialogue, we offer programs that deal with the status of women in society and in Jewish culture. Some of the programs are intended for women, both religious and secular and some for the general public. The programs aim to encourage many women to take part in the Jewish discourse from which they have been excluded in the past and to trigger discussions on the status of women.

The Herzog Center hosts lectures on gender and Judaism, offers study sessions for religious and secular women and holds activities for women related to Jewish culture. An example of this type of activity is the "women's Seder" which was held before the Passover holiday, with almost 50 participants. The women enjoyed their own seder, in the midst of the holiday preparations, in which they wrote, read and studied a unique text of their own, which dealt with issues that concern them: the enslavement to Passover cleaning, "enslavement" to the modern era, family problems and issues related to Israeli society. From a large selection, we'll quote a single poem written by one of the participants:

To Aviva Shalit -
From Rachel Barzelai (mother of a combat soldier, Kibbutz Saad, near Gaza)

Torn apart by heart-ache
helplessness
longing.
Waiting desperately in the darkness
for dawn to finally rise.
Burning with terror
fear of destruction,
delusions.

Will this nightmare ever end?
And when? Who knows?

It's the holiday of freedom and redemption
And your son remains imprisoned.

From my window, facing Gaza
I warmly embrace you and offer you strength
And hope that the fine thread that connects
your womb to your son never breaks.
The walls of indifference will collapse
And Gilad will return home at last

7. Off campus programs

The Herzog Center runs more than twenty study groups outside of the Center, from the Negev in the south till Hadera in the north. These programs are geared towards local retirees, facilitators and communities.

Summary

The Ya'akov Herzog Center is active in all areas of Jewish renewal and works to strengthen Jewish pluralism. The Center's uniqueness is the skills it has acquired in encouraging dialogue over the many years of working with diverse populations, and its ability to implement this dialogue as a way of life amongst its staff and students. In addition, the Center is the only orthodox organization that defines itself as a pluralistic institute. This positions it as a "peninsula" of the religious-Zionist "continent" within the sea of the Israeli society. This position leaves it open to attack due to its unique and bold ideas, but it remains a unique and skilled media of dialogue on the different breaking points in Israeli society, most of all on the issues threatening the connection between the religious and secular sectors in Israel.