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The new pioneers?

By ARIEL ZILBER
17/04/2013

Religious Jews from different sectors are reviving a moshav in the Negev. During times of crisis, *garin* members provide leisure and entertainment for children.

As he plants corn seeds in the tiny yard in front of his caravan home, Daniel Fuks takes stock of the special bond that he shares with this piece of terrain, a bond that was formed during his army service.

“During my stint as a paratrooper, I served not far from here,” says this 28-year-old kippawearing native of Miami Beach. “I got married, and a week after the wedding I was called back from marriage leave because Operation Cast Lead broke out.”

After the war and the completion of his military service, Fuks, who had been living in nearby Kibbutz Sa’ad, began to search for the ideal setting to start a new family. That is when he heard about a movement of pioneers from all streams of religious Judaism that had signed on to an initiative with one goal in mind: to bring the spirit of pioneering Zionism to the Negev and the Galilee.

Less than an hour’s drive from the hustle and bustle of central Israel, this spirit is alive and well in this nondescript plot of land adjacent to a parking lot about 100 meters from the main entrance of Shuva.

Beset by its aging population and lack of appeal, this rustic moshav was experiencing a steep downturn, particularly in comparison to many of its wealthier, neighboring kibbutzim and localities that have managed to attract more tourism and turn handsomer profit margins.

Today, however, Shuva is home to 20 families that comprise a nucleus (*garin* in Hebrew) of prospect of not just living here but also being in a community devoted to making the world a better place.”

Aharon Ariel Levi calls it an “intentional” or “missionoriented” community, one whose goal is to serve as more than just a collection of homes inhabited by random families. As one of the founders of the Shuva *garin*, Levi, who found religion in his twenties after growing up in the secular suburban town of Kiryat Tivon, never anticipated that the idea would gain the kind of traction it has, especially considering the 13 other localities across the Negev and the Galilee that have attracted religious Jews looking to make a difference.

“We wanted to create a community that merged Torah with everyday life,” he says. “We were less interested in questions of sectarian interests and politics and more interested in reconnecting with ‘Israelism,’ fusing the world of Torah and Halacha with all other aspects of life.”

AFTER OPERATION Cast Lead, Levi and a friend, Itay Yosef Lachman, were looking for a place where they could make the biggest impact in not only raising their own families and tending to their own interests but also serving the community. To their amazement, what began as a project with just three families suddenly mushroomed into more than that.

“If we had ended up with 15 families, we would’ve considered this a success,” Levi says.

"If we had ended up with 10 families, we would've considered this a success," Levi says.

The astounding momentum created by the Shuva garin has spawned an entire network known as Nettiot, where hundreds of religious families fan out to 14 communities in the Negev and Galilee.

Looking to debunk the common stereotype that devout Jews are less inclined to work and have a greater tendency to be insulated, the members of the garin focus on establishing and building their own businesses as well as contributing to the local communities.

"We were aware that there was a lack of informal activities in the communities surrounding Gaza before we moved here," Levi says. "That's what motivated us to introduce all sorts of activities that really filled a void in this area."

Members of the garin run day-care centers, afterschool workshops, activities for the elderly and mentorships of schoolchildren. As part of Project Hitzim, an initiative launched by the garin, members created a "mobile Jewish community center," whereby they travel to the surrounding towns and kibbutzim and introduce activities for children like kung fu classes, arts and crafts, yoga and dance.

During times of crisis, garin members provide leisure and entertainment for children who are forced to endure extended stints in bomb shelters. In addition, the garin places a special emphasis on environmentally friendly lifestyles and customs, a theme that is consistent with what they say is Jewish law's respect for protecting the land. Some of the caravans and homes used by garin members were built with eco-friendly materials like straw and other nature-based non-pollutants.

"When we became religious, we had two options," Levi says. "We could've decided to forget all that we had learned during our secular days and just hole ourselves up in a yeshiva in Bnei Brak or Jerusalem. The other option was to take the things that we enjoyed and cared about, like ecological awareness and protecting the environment, and fuse it with the world of Torah."

The garin includes a mix of families from various sectors that makes it difficult to pigeonhole them into a specific category. There are haredim, national-religious Zionists from settlements, Chabad devotees and Breslover Hassidim.

"If there's one thing that makes this garin special, it's the fact that we have people from all different backgrounds," says Mikey Linial, himself a former secular Jew from Ramat Hasharon.

"There are those who grew up as secular Jews and became religious Zionist, and we have secular Jews who became ultra-Orthodox or hassidim. We have all kinds here. This isn't a garin of a particular stream."

"I came here 18 months ago because of my wife," Linial, a transplant from Tel Aviv, says. "She has a lot of friends here, and she's very good at educating, particularly very young children. She works in a kindergarten, and she introduced methods that have been accepted into the religious community. There was a need for teachers here since the garin wanted to grow and expand, so we came."

"This is a great opportunity, and there's much to do here," Linial says. "This is the periphery in the fullest sense of the word, and we want to turn the periphery into the Center. There's no better place to do that than here."

The wonders of modern technology enable Linial to continue his work as a specialist in computer animation and Web programming and editing. In essence, he fits the profile of the up-to-date, computer-literate, modern, educated pioneer that will be called upon to revive the decaying towns of rural Israel, who have seen their youth flee to the richer pastures of the Center.

"This is the idea behind strengthening the periphery," he says. "It's not to bring people from the center of the country out here so that they can become the periphery. It's to bring people from the Center to the periphery so that the periphery could be more of the Center. It's connecting two worlds."

"We didn't come here to fulfill a vision of Little House on the Prairie, with a house and a yard," Linial says.

“That’s not what this place offers. There are a great many challenges here, and there is much to do.”

AS SUCCESSFUL as the initiative has proven to be, it has not been devoid of birth pangs. The entry of young religious Jews into an aging moshav has created inevitable tensions. According to Linial, there are generational, cultural, religious and educational gaps that have caused disagreements between the newcomers and the older moshav members. One member of the moshav’s committee refused *Metro’s* request to comment on the contributions of the garin and its impact on Shuva.

“The people here have a very different mind-set than those who came from the Center,” Linial says. “They have a different way of carrying themselves, a different style. They have different behavioral codes. You could see it in virtually every area of life. It’s something that both of us need to deal with. Whenever a garin has arrived in a town, it has encountered this type of thing.

It takes a few years to adjust. Afterwards, it’s all forgotten.”

Levi, for his part, is careful to avoid exacerbating tensions.

He has no intention of claiming that the garin has “saved” the moshav, even if reality suggests otherwise.

“It’s true, since we have gotten here, there are more young people who have returned to the moshav,” he says. “There are many more young families who are waiting to move in here, but I want it to be clear that we came here to contribute [and not to boast].”

“For 15 years, the moshav tried to sell plots of land at bargain-basement prices,” Lachman says. “For NIS 60,000, you could’ve gotten a developed plot of land.

The only other place you could get land at that price is Judea and Samaria. There is no land for sale at that price inside the Green Line, and nobody wanted to buy it, not even the sons of the families that were living here, because this moshav had a stigma of being unsuccessful.

“Once people heard that we were buying up plots of land here, the entire area was bought up by returning sons. Now there is a demand for more land, but there’s none for sale. Two other garinim came to this area after we got here, and this entire area has picked up since we made the move.”

Lachman and his wife, Esther, are budding entrepreneurs.

Not only did they establish a small business that offers naturally based cosmetics, but they are also working to promote small businesses owned by women in communities throughout the Gaza periphery. Through intense Internet-based advertising, Lachman hopes that he can turn a profit and inject some much-needed economic juice into this traditionally poor area.

“Everything here was moshavim that were devoted mainly to agriculture,” Esther Lachman says. “Now, with the influx of young couples that have arrived in the area in recent years, there’s a much greater need for advertising and leveraging women-owned businesses.”

“We came here to the margins of this country in order to create a point that will attract people,” Itay Yosef Lachman says. “We want tourists to come here and we want the economy to grow in order to bolster the margins of the Land of Israel.”



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