

*The Afula-Gilboa SNEC News
December 2009*

Dear friends,

There's never a dull moment in Israel, with events rapidly following one another some of which create emotional turmoil and distress.

As I write to you, while you are celebrating Thanksgiving we move from hope to despair over one thin, frail boy, who has become a child of the entire country, and possibly even of the Jewish world as a whole. This boy is now 21 years old, he was drafted into the IDF and then abducted – now held prisoner by our cruel enemy the Hamas which has no pity for him or their own people. I am referring to Gilad Schalit of course. Gilad has not killed anyone or committed any crime. As far as we know he is alive but has not seen the light of day since being taken prisoner and has certainly not received any family visits, no packages from home, nor has he been able to study at university. During his captivity he has not been visited by any representatives of the UN or other human rights organizations from around the world, who are always quick to condemn Israel. This is in sharp contrast to the conditions in which thousands of Muslim prisoners are held in Israel, some of whom are cruel murderers responsible for killing civilians: babies, children, women and men. Other prisoners were involved in preparing terror attacks on civilians in Israel or on Jews wherever they are. Nevertheless, they enjoy the privileges of Israel's democracy and humane approach.



I want to share with you the mixed emotions that people here in Israel feel. We all want Gilad to come home, to return to his family and to the country which he enlisted to defend, we all feel a sense of the pain and inhuman suffering felt by his parents. On the other hand, many parents and families have lost their loved ones in the very terror attacks perpetrated by the vile murderers who will probably be released in return for Gilad. For these families, it is inconceivable that those responsible for the death of their loved ones will soon be dancing with joy in their homes and towns. Judging by past experience, some of them will soon be back to their old terrorist, murderous ways.

There is also some concern that concessions given in the Middle East are a sign of weakness, which encourage yet more attacks on Israel rather than encouraging real peace between our peoples. I certainly do not envy our leaders who must make such decisions. I don't know whether there is anything that you can do, but I feel it is important for you to know what our current concerns are and how painful this subject is. I am sharing my thoughts with you as a mother and citizen of Israel just as I would with any person I feel close to and with whom I feel a sense of common fate. As our Partnership 2000 partners you are long-standing family members.

I hope that Gilad will have returned to us by the time I write my next letter, but also that the price paid will be bearable

Sincerely,

Judith Antonelli

Afula's Youth Futures is a unique, innovative model for working with children one-on-one over time, emphasizing accessibility to the community's existing services for children in need. The program aims to help children and teens realize their potential by developing their self confidence, social and learning skills and by enhancing their individual strengths. Trustee is the name given to a new social position which was developed in the Youth Futures program, and this title reflects the belief that the position predicated on a relationship of trust between the child and the adult. The trustee is the significant adult in the child's life, providing important assistance in the education and welfare systems, helping to ensure that everything possible is done to assist the children and teens to realize their individual potential.

This year, thanks to the support of the SNEC communities the program has expanded to include the junior high schools, taking into account that the transition from elementary school to junior high is sometimes traumatic. At this stage, students move from familiar to unfamiliar surroundings, they take leave of familiar adults who have played an important part in their lives, they may be separated from friends, moving from a small, intimate framework, to a larger, more anonymous one. This transition requires an ability to adapt to many structural and human changes. This is the reason for expanding the program in Afula, and two new trustees work with 32 children in the town's junior high school.



Rakefet Dasta began to work on the program in October this year. Rakefet is 28, of Ethiopian origin, and told us about her work:

"My position as trustee tends to bring out the child within me, and I don't mean this as a cliché. Whoever thought of this program and brought it to Afula is a genius. My parents came to Israel from Ethiopia in 1983 and my absorption process was fraught with difficulty. As a child, I had to worry about my parents as if they were my children. I think that if this type of program had been around when I was younger, many of the difficulties that I and other olim children faced would have contracted.

Although I have only recently become involved in this program, I have a strong connection with the concept behind the project and I am excited by the little things in its day-to-day aspects. For example, an introverted child who doesn't talk much or share his feelings, suddenly opens up and has more self confidence; after several meetings a little girl who lacks self confidence began to tell me about her life and ask for help. More than anything else, the program motivates these children, giving them the willpower to succeed and grow, particularly in situations which are often complex. I would like to thank all the donors to this project, and the Jewish Agency for their continuous work and for managing to imbue these children and their families with hope ..."

"Israel Connect" A joint program has been initiated by Afula's Oren Junior High School and Beit Morasha Heritage Academy in Springfield, Massachusetts. The program is being run under the auspices of Melitz's "Israel Connect" program.

The program develops and enables a two-way interpersonal connection between Jewish youngsters in Israel and the Jewish world aimed at strengthening Jewish continuity and Jewish identity and peoplehood.

Students from the two schools will communicate through a special website. The educational teams have chosen "Community" as the content for their cooperation; during the year they will also hold video conference sessions. The program's activities will climax in February 2011 when the Heritage Academy class will visit Afula.

For further information see: <http://israelconnect.org/homeeng.aspx>



Young Emissaries 2009-2010 We have had a fantastic beginning with the SNEC Israeli Young Emissaries- our 11th year! With a goal of reaching out to as many communities as possible, the Young Emissaries have already done some impressive activities as a group. A visit to the State Capitol building in Hartford included a lively discussion on health care reform with Jewish senators from Connecticut.

The group participated in a Shabbaton with Trinity College Hillel in Hartford, CT. Many friendships were formed and the group shared Shabbat services and added Israeli spirit.

We are hoping to have several Shabbatons with other colleges and have already planned another event with Clark University in Worcester, Mass.

At a recent group meeting, the Young Emissaries had a taste of American Halloween fun and carved pumpkins for their host families.

I am reminded each time I see the Young Emissaries in action at their work sites of how important and influential this program is. Many conducted moving community ceremonies to memorialize the life of Yitchak Rabin. The deep connections that are established, the love of Israel that is shared, and the impact they have on so many people is always impressive.

Sharon Reisman Conway
Director



News Around Town

Three schools in the Gilboa Regional Council received recognition as Green Schools thanks to their success in involving their schools in environmental programs. Each of the schools integrated environmental subjects in their curriculum and they also undertook environmental activity such as increasing awareness of recycling, using fewer plastic bags, building installations from recycled materials and more.

The Afula Municipality is working to reduce social gaps among members of the Ethiopian community and is trying to encourage members of the community to pursue academic studies with the help of various programs and student stipends.

Bar/bat mitzvah program at Afula's WIZO Community Center

This program has now been running for four years in succession at Afula's WIZO Community Center.

In the 2008-2009 school year, the program ran from November 2008 through August 2009. Activities included regular weekly meetings for two groups – 11 boys and 16 girls, with their respective youth leaders. The children enjoyed activities such as investigating their personal, Jewish and national identities. The content and meaning of the Jewish festivals were examined, such as Chanuka, Purim and specifically Israeli festivals such as Tu B'Shvat, Lag B'Omer, and special events were held in the north of Israel, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem.

The children's parents were involved throughout the program, accompanying their children during this important year of their lives. Parents attended activities with their children, undertook family assignments, as well as a group community-based project in which they decorated a wall in the community center.

This year, students from Afula's yeshiva high school were involved in the program and served as big brothers for the bar mitzvah boys. They assisted the boys from the religious perspective helping them become familiar with synagogue services and prayers, teaching them to lay tefillin, read from the Torah and be called up to the Torah. The big brothers were also responsible for hosting the bar mitzvah boys and their families on their special day, helping them to lay tefillin for the first time and being called to the Torah at the synagogue in the yeshiva high school. At a party for the bar mitzvah boys, held in groups of three, in one of the yeshiva classrooms, the boys and their guests were able to celebrate with a festive breakfast and heard *divrei Torah* prepared by the bar mitzvah and his big brother. Being called to the Torah was the most personal and emotional part of the event for each boy and his family, reflecting the passing into adulthood, acceptance of religious responsibility and the strong relationships that were forged between the bar mitzvah boy and his family with the big brother.

The girls participated in workshops emphasizing those *mitzvot* (precepts) which are normally in the women's realm (challah, candle-lighting, and laws of family purity), and the girls were also able to learn the various skills.

One of the highlights of the program was the bar/bat mitzvah celebration which took place at one of Afula's best banqueting halls. The event included a rich, moving artistic program during which the boys and girls performed songs which had been arranged and recorded at a recording studio, the girls prepared a dance for the guests, and the children and guests danced and sang together with great emotion throughout the afternoon.

During the summer, the program ran as a day camp at the Community Center, in which the bar and bat mitzvah children were able to share their experiences from their parties and ceremonies, they acquired computer skills, wrote a special diary about their bar/bat mitzvah year, prepared computerized photo albums, and also participated in the ordinary summer activities that children of their age enjoy.

A video summarizing the activities can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2ZkJWHkT5Q>

Sincerely,

Doudou Moatty m4010@wizo.org

