

THE JEWISH JOURNAL

November 10, 2010

Israeli village helps at-risk youth sing a new song

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http://www.jewishjournal.com/community/article/israeli_village_helps_at-risk_youth_sing_a_new_song_20101110/



Chaim Peri, at right, and Yemin Orde children. Photo courtesy Yemin Orde

You could look at the members of the Yemin Orde Choir and call them what others have called them: at-risk youths from across the globe, victims of abandonment and dysfunctional families.

Or you could see them as they see themselves: aspiring doctors, world travelers and performers.

It's a transformation the group was happy to call attention to during four recent public appearances in the Los Angeles area. The 11-member choir was in town on a mission to raise funds and make friends for Yemin Orde Youth Village, a residential and educational program for more than 500 youths that is nestled in the Carmel Mountains near Haifa.

roots across the globe, a fact reflected in the makeup of the choir. Members hail from Brazil, Ethiopia, Ukraine and elsewhere.

To Chaim Peri, who led the village for more than 25 years, Yemin Orde's significance is greater than the help it provides to these young people, although that's essential. It is also part of making Israel the country it was meant to be.

"I still believe that each one of these kids and [the] thousands of graduates that we have [shows] that Israel can really be a light unto the nations, fulfill our best dreams," he told an audience of nearly 70 people at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills on Nov. 4.

The choir's five young men and six young women, dressed in matching blue button-down shirts, offered harmonies that matched Peri's rhetoric. In addition to folk music and tunes inspired by Jewish liturgy, there was the "Yemin Orde Anthem." Its lyrics call for "no more 'black' and no more 'white' / only togetherness and hope / we are all one humankind."

Founded in 1953, Yemin Orde was created to accommodate Holocaust survivors and immigrant children. Its name means "in memory of Orde," a tribute to British Maj. Gen. Orde Wingate, who supported the Jewish cause in Palestine in the 1930s.

These days, Yemin Orde focuses on disadvantaged children from around the world who have experienced trauma of one sort or another. About one-quarter of the residents on its 77-acre campus have lost one or both parents.

The intent is to raise confident young people capable of thriving in society. Accomplishing that requires a cohesive environment, explained Peri, who now heads Yemin Orde Initiatives, which aims to spread the village's philosophy around Israel.

"The whole idea is that kids who have experienced abandonment or have experienced negligence cannot just be warehoused, cannot just go through a process," he said. "They need a total experience that transforms them."

Part of the experience at Yemin Orde is knowing that no one can be expelled — “These kids have been expelled already,” Peri said — and that those who graduate know they always have a place to turn, including somewhere to stay if they want or need it.

And then there are the results. Eighty percent of Yemin Orde students go on to university or other professional training, according to literature from Friends of Yemin Orde, the Maryland-based nonprofit that helps to fund the village. A local office is located in Woodland Hills.

Executive director Karen Sallerson, who was with the choir in Los Angeles, said continued support is essential. “Who else is going to help take care of these kids?” she asked.

One such teen is Ro’ee Asnakew, 17, a choir member who came to Israel from Ethiopia five years ago with his mother and five siblings. When his mother died, he lived with a sister before coming to the youth village.

While he still visits home regularly, Yemin Orde has become just as welcoming for him. “At Yemin Orde, I feel like family,” he said. “It has many kind people that love me and helped me to be great.”

He spoke of his enjoyment at learning academic subjects as well as his love for the choir. “I love that we learn a new song,” he said. “It’s very good.”

Another singer, Khatia Khabazashvili, 20, graduated two years ago and is now in the Israeli air force. She hopes to continue her education at Haifa University next year. Even though she has left Yemin Orde, it stays with her.

“It is like my home,” she said. “I feel that my heart is always there.”

For Khabazashvili — who five years ago arrived in Israel from the country of Georgia, where her family remains for reasons she declined to discuss — being part of Yemin Orde filled a gap in her life.

“To come for Shabbat, to be part of a Jewish family ... I never had it [before],” she said.

Being in the choir has been a treat because she loves to sing, she said. Performing in front of audiences like the one at Temple Emanuel is important to her for other reasons, too. As she explained, “I love to sing for Jewish people because it’s very important for them to know that we are here.”

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