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Hillel Yeshiva welcomes pair of Israeli goodwill ambassadors



Adi Avital, left, and Mor Shalom are spending a year at Hillel Yeshiva in Ocean as part of Israel's Sherut Leumi (National Service) program. Photo by Jill Huber

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Two young Israeli women are fulfilling their civic and military obligations to their country by spending the 2007-08 school year as goodwill ambassadors at [Hillel Yeshiva](#) in Ocean.

The yeshiva is hosting Adi Avital, 20, and Mor Shalom, 19, through Israel's national service program. Since September, they have been living in the local Jewish community (it's the first time in the United States for both) and working collaboratively with yeshiva faculty to generate strong spiritual allegiance and solidarity with the Jewish state among students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

Avital, who lives near Haifa, and Shalom, who lives south of Tel Aviv, applied to the two-year Sherut Leumi (National Service) program two years ago. Following their acceptance, they underwent a series of intensive training sessions in Israel, said Dr. Ruth Katz, head of school for the yeshiva's preschool and elementary school. Avital and Shalom fulfilled the first year of the program by performing civic service in Israel.

The yeshiva's participation in the Sherut Leumi program, which has served many yeshivot in New Jersey and New York, is especially meaningful during the school's observance of Israel's forthcoming 60th anniversary, Katz said.

"The yeshiva's faculty, board of education, parents of students, and PTA were among those who supported this project from the very beginning," Katz told *NJ Jewish News*. "They all realized that bringing part of Israel here is a great concept, especially for those who are not able to travel there at this time."

Many members of the yeshiva's faculty and student population speak fluent Hebrew, which also brings another authentic touch of Israel to the school, Katz said. "The walls of the yeshiva now seem to breathe Israel, and it's partly because of these ongoing Hebrew exchanges," she said.

Avital and Shalom have begun a series of projects designed according to grade level. They created a large floor map of Israel for kindergarten students, who "walk" from location to location while learning about Israeli history and culture.

The pair also has led the students in the younger grades in the songs and dances of Israel and arts and crafts activities with an Israeli theme and has helped them decorate holiday cookies.

In addition, Avital and Shalom participate in the celebration of Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of the new Hebrew month. Students in the yeshiva's elementary and high schools traditionally celebrate the day with music and dancing, and this year, Avital and Shalom are leading the way.

The school community and faculty members have been "warm and welcoming," both on and off the yeshiva campus, Shalom and Avital said. Families of many yeshiva students have invited the two women to their homes to observe Shabbat and holidays.

"We're busy from morning until night," said Avital, who, along with Shalom, also assists in the yeshiva's Hebrew language classes, leads daily morning prayer services for students in grades one-four, and conducts workshops every Friday that focus on Israeli history and culture.

Students often drop by their office to say hello and to listen to the Israeli music that is always playing in the background.

"Our goal is to raise students' awareness of Israel and to interface with them," Shalom said. "They are learning that they have much in common with Israeli students, aside from religion — things like music, fashion, and movies. I tell them that young people in Israel and America spend their free time in much the same way."

"Sometimes, the only way American students learn about Israel is through Bible study," added Avital. "That's been their only exposure to Israel. We want to teach them about modern-day Israel so that it becomes alive for them."

They have created a series of question-and-answer sessions.

"The students always ask us about current events and topical issues that are taking place in Israel. They want to know about safety concerns, the settlements in Gaza, the Israeli military, and what everyday life is like in Israel," Shalom said. "We also answer their questions about defending Israel's borders and how Israelis have had to fight to retain those borders."

Avital and Shalom are living in a rented home in Deal, subsidized by the school and its leadership, said Katz. Funds for their roundtrip airfare and related transportation costs were provided by Congregation Magen David in Deal, where Avital and Shalom conduct Sabbath services in conjunction with the congregation's youth groups several times a month, Katz added.

When they return to Israel next June, Avital and Shalom plan to attend college: Avital said she is considering studying toward a degree in art therapy; Shalom said she may study communications or speech therapy.

The two women have also taught the yeshiva students a bit of (polite) Israeli slang that is now heard throughout the school's halls.

"We taught them the word '*sababah*,' which means 'everything is cool,'" said Avital. "And now, whenever they see us, they say hello and then '*sababah*.' And they're right — everything is good."