

# Israelis serving their country at local yeshiva

## Program participants inspire solidarity with Jewish state



Spending time with students at Hillel Yeshiva in Ocean are Israelis Efrat Cohen, left; Dana Shmila, center; Tali Shmila, third from right; and Hila Markovich, second from right. The four Israeli women will spend the school year at the yeshiva as part of Israel's Sherut Leumi program.

Photo by Jill Huber

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Four Israeli women are fulfilling their civic and military obligations to their country by spending the 2008-09 school year as teaching assistants and goodwill ambassadors at Hillel Yeshiva in Ocean.

Efrat Cohen, Hila Markovich, and cousins Tali and Dana Shmila, all of whom are 19, arrived at the yeshiva on Aug. 28 as part of Israel's Sherut Leumi (National Service) program. They are living in the local Jewish community while they work in conjunction with the yeshiva faculty to inspire solidarity with the Jewish state.

This is the school's second year as a participant in the program. During the 2007-08 school year, the yeshiva hosted two young women through Sherut Leumi; both worked with the elementary school staff. The experience was such a success that this year the yeshiva requested four young women: Cohen and Tali Shmila will be affiliated with the yeshiva's elementary school, while Markovich and Dana Shmila will work with the high school faculty, school officials said.

"We wanted to continue the successful outcome of last year's program," said Dr. Ruth Katz, head of school for the yeshiva's preschool and elementary school. "There was such an outpouring of kindness

and grace — *hesed* — between the Israeli women and our students, and the same sentiments are already visible this year.”

Rabbi Howard Bald, head of the yeshiva’s high school, said the success of last year’s effort encouraged parents to suggest that Sherut Leumi become part of the high school’s agenda.

“We’re creating programs that will interact with our students and bring them a sense of Israel,” Bald said. “The parents, faculty, and the program participants are all committed to making this happen.”

Israel created Sherut Leumi in the 1980s in response to the concerns of many military-age young women who felt that the Israel Defense Forces environment would conflict with their religious sensibilities. The two-year program stipulates that the IDF grant legal exemptions to these women, who then agree to perform other types of national service.

Many work in Israel in the fields of education, health care, and social services, but some program participants assist in Jewish schools in other countries. Cohen, Markovich, and Tali and Dana Shmila all underwent a year-long training session in Jerusalem that prepared them for life at Jewish day schools in other countries.

“The training is very intense,” said Cohen, who lives near Tiberias. “During the first year of the program, there are interviews, screening processes, and comprehensive exams to determine our access to general information, our interests, and skills in speaking the English language. After we were okayed by the program and arrived here, we felt such an outpouring of acceptance by the yeshiva community. They gave us a warm welcome.”

### **‘Spirit is contagious’**

Along with other activities, the women will teach Israeli songs and dances to the students, fashion arts and crafts activities with Israeli themes, assist with the school’s Hebrew language program, and lead holiday celebrations.

“I’m proud of my country and I want to spread pride in Jewish heritage to others,” said Markovich, who lives near Tel Aviv. “I want to carry that message to the world.”

Pride in their country is a common theme among the four women.

“I’m in a new and exciting place,” said Dana Shmila, who lives near Haifa, “but each time I speak to my family in Israel, I tell them how proud I am of my country. Sharing Israel with the students here increases my own sense of pride in what Israel has accomplished.”

The same holds true for Tali Shmila, who lives near Beersheva.

“I have always felt that I have an inner obligation to tell others about Israel,” she said. “The country’s spirit is contagious.”

An on-site office has been established for the Sherut Leumi women, and although school has been in session only a few weeks, the students already have begun to stop by to chat and listen to the Israeli music that is playing in the background.

“They want to know about what’s happening in Israel — what life is like there,” said Cohen. “They ask about safety and if we feel secure. I reply that Israel will always protect the Jewish people.”

She admitted to feeling an occasional wave of homesickness.

“But modern technology helps us keep in touch and share our experiences with our families back home,” Cohen said. “And the importance of what we’re doing here outweighs everything else. It’s such an important learning experience.”

Bald also has discovered some new skill sets.

“I’ve learned a little Israeli ‘slang,’” he said. “I know how to say ‘everything’s cool’ in Hebrew — *sababa!*”