

Serving their country, Israelis inspire students



Sagit Moshe, fourth from left, and Merav Frenkel, rear, second from right, run a Rosh Hodesh program for the girls at Hillel Yeshiva in Ocean.

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Special to NJJN

November 30, 2009

With her declaration that “respect and acceptance are pathways to peace,” one of two young Israeli women who are spending the year at Hillel Yeshiva in Ocean summed up the ideals they are committed to furthering during their service at the school.

Merav Frenkel and Sagit Moshe, both 19, arrived in September as goodwill ambassadors and teaching assistants, fulfilling their civic and military obligations in Israel’s Sherut Leumi (national service) program.

They are living with members of the community while they work with faculty members to generate students’ spiritual connections and solidarity with the Jewish state. This is Moshe’s first trip to the United States; Frenkel has been here on two previous occasions to visit family members.

At the school, the young women teach Israeli song and dance, do arts and crafts activities, and help with holiday celebrations. They also participate in the celebration of Rosh Hodesh, the “head of the month” ceremony traditionally observed by women, with a breakfast, music, and dancing.

Students often stop by to chat with them in their office, with discussions revolving around popular culture and social issues. Political subjects, however, are discussed less often, they said.

"The students want to know about the 'real' Israel, and sometimes, they think Israel is different than it really is," said Frenkel, who is from Nof Ayalon. "When we tell them about Israel, we talk from our hearts, and it helps them understand their Jewish homeland."

The Israelis also converse in Hebrew with the students and teachers. "We try to help the kids love the language," said Moshe, of Ashdod. "Learning the Hebrew language and Hebrew prayers has an important effect on their Jewish lives."

Sherut Leumi is an alternative voluntary national service program for those who do not serve in the Israel Defense Forces.

This is the third year Hillel Yeshiva has participated in Sherut Leumi, which has successfully brought the flavor of the Jewish state to the students, said Dr. Ruth Katz, head of school for the yeshiva's preschool, elementary school, and middle school.

The faculty, board of education, parents, and PTA "realize that bringing examples of Israel's language and culture here is an important learning tool and a way for our students to bond with their Israeli peers," Katz told *NJ Jewish News*. The Sherut Leumi vision — to strengthen love for Israel and pride in the connection to Israel — continues to inspire the students, said Katz.

Frenkel, who plans to pursue Torah study and mentor troubled youths when she returns to Israel, and Moshe, who hopes to study psychology at an Israeli university, said they are happy to provide that inspiration.

"The Jewish community in America helps Israel," said Frenkel, "and we want to help the Jewish community here in whatever way we can. The Sherut Leumi program helps us do this."

"Learning to understand and respect the differences between people is what brings all of us together," added Moshe. "Respect and acceptance are pathways to peace."

Although they said they miss their families and friends back home, Moshe and Frenkel said they feel embraced by the local community. Each week, they are invited to spend Shabbat at the homes of community members, who also include them in holiday celebrations and social gatherings.

"People here know we're far from home, but they make us feel like they really want us to be here," said Frenkel. "They really want us to come to their homes and join with their families. It's been overwhelming and beautiful."