

Still Different, Now Accepted

New social club in Jerusalem for young adults with communication issues

(An article that appeared in Yediot Aharonot daily newspaper, July 2002)

“It was the happiest birthday of my life,” said Debra of her twentieth birthday party, when the whole group turned out for pizza and bowling. “What a wonderful feeling it is not to worry that no one will show up for my party,” smiles Michal. “I will never forget how humiliated I was when I invited the whole class over for my birthday and only two girls showed up.” Nina chimes in, “I have two sisters who were constantly on the phone. No one ever used to call me. But that has really changed now.”

These young women are members of Re'im, a unique new social club that meets at the Ginot Ha'ir community center in Jerusalem. Re'im was created for youth with learning disabilities and communication problems, people who have “fallen through the cracks” throughout their lives. Most were mainstreamed in regular educational frameworks; though they coped with the schoolwork, they were never truly accepted by the “normal” kids. Some were in special education frameworks, and encountered many obstacles to developing a satisfying social life. Several say they never had a real friend in their lives. Their speech patterns and social skills range from subtly to obviously atypical. These young people were always sensed by their peers to be different, a difference that led to alienation and social isolation.

The group offers participants a framework of support and understanding. “I feel I don't need to prove myself all the time,” says Debra. “In the group, I feel accepted for who I am. We each have our own problems, we are all too familiar with feeling rejected and we know how much it hurts. When people talk about their loneliness or their difficulty in making friends, we can all identify with them.” Participants arrive happily and excitedly to the meetings, and try not to miss a single activity. All sorts of relationships are growing out of the group, as participants interact at other times besides during the scheduled meetings: individual and group friendships, dating, and romances are blossoming.

Some members have jobs, some work in protected employment, and others are volunteering in Sherut Leumi (the Israeli National Service) as a way to make their contribution to Israeli society instead of doing army service. Some served in the army in the past. What they have in common is that their social needs are not met in any of the frameworks in which they find themselves. They generally have had to rely on their families for most of their personal contact, even well past the age when they longed for a peer group of their own.

The club was the initiative of a mother seeking a solution for her daughter. Batsheva recounts: "The unfilled social need in my daughter's life was always obvious. The idea to start a group occurred to me a few years ago, but while my daughter was still in high school, all our energy was absorbed in getting her through her studies. She needed a lot of private tutoring due to her learning disabilities, and her daytime hours were fully occupied with schoolwork. The social lack was always evident, and became even more pronounced during vacations and holidays. Following graduation, my daughter volunteered for the National Service, where she worked with young children. At that point, contact with her peers ceased completely. Now that I have some free time and energy, I decided to establish this 'social club.'"

Batsheva turned to Amnon Reichel, Director of the Department for the Advancement of People with Special Needs at the Israel Association of Community Centers, and found the first supporter for her idea. He committed himself to advance the project in Jerusalem. Others committed their efforts to the project as well - Yuli Ben-Lavie, Supervisor of Community Development at the Jerusalem Association of Community Councils and Centers, Raya Matza, the head of the Department for the Advancement of People with Special Needs in the Jerusalem district, and Igal Shrim, who is responsible for Leisure Activities for People with Special Needs. All of them recognized the need for such a group and lent their support to the project.

According to Reichel, "Social isolation is a terrible predicament. A larger number of people in the population than one might assume require some sort of assistance in finding a social group where they are genuine and integral members". "We are not talking about a group of people who suffer from mental retardation or other mental difficulties," clarifies Matza. "These are people who experience social problems for different reasons, such as learning disabilities, head injuries or communication problems. As a consequence, they have suffered from social rejection their entire lives. They were always the ones not invited to parties, who did not go on outings with the rest of their class but rather stayed at home by themselves, and did not often venture out beyond their family circle. Our goal was to provide an affirmative social experience, raise their self-esteem, and teach them what friends are all about and how to get along with them".

Ads placed in the community listings of Jerusalem's local paper encouraged people with learning disabilities and communication problems interested in joining such a group to call Batsheva for more information. Most of the calls she received were from mothers; some were from the youngsters themselves. "The mothers all spoke of their children's social isolation. We felt immediate rapport, because I knew exactly what they meant when they told me that their son or daughter never went out to a movie or café with friends. The

youngsters who called were rather hesitant. It is not easy for a young person to admit that he or she doesn't have any friends." The group leaders met individually with the potential participants before the first meeting of the group.

The parents were invited to join the first group events. "It was very moving to hear them speak," says Matza. "These are parents who have devoted their lives to doing everything possible to advance their children's interests: accompanying them to various treatments, providing private lessons, finding them every service that would benefit them. It was only in the social arena that they were helpless to offer a solution, because you cannot hire friends or fill out an application for someone to be a soul mate for your child".

The people who responded to the ad were divided into two groups by age: 20+ and 30+. The first meeting took place on Hanukah and included a party, hosted by Igal Shrim. "The excitement was electric and the participants cooperated enthusiastically... they simply did not want the evening to be over," says Shrim. "Every time I mentioned we were nearing the end, people just kept asking me to let it continue a little longer. That night I understood the true importance of this work. We literally make people happy - not just the participants themselves, but their families as well."

The 20+ group has over twenty members, and new applicants are constantly calling for information. The 30+ group is also growing, though more slowly. Batsheva says, "Word is getting around and people keep applying. We have had inquiries from as far away as Haifa and Eilat from people who hear about the group and want to know how to start a similar project in their own area." The club promotes itself via word of mouth, as every young person and family that has experienced this problem immediately recognizes the group as a potential answer to a tremendous and obvious need. One goal is for the members themselves, as their social skills develop further, to take increasing control of the running of the group.

Jerusalem has no other solution to offer to this particular population. In Tel Aviv, a private company was formed by professional social workers who recognized the need and its commercial potential. That company has for several years, on a commercial basis, hosted social groups for special populations. "I travel every week to a club meeting in Tel Aviv," says Ami, a member of the 30+ group. "The bus rides are exhausting and expensive, but I had no choice because I had no alternative in Jerusalem." Ami has not yet given up traveling to the club in Tel Aviv, but he regularly attends the activities of the 30+ group held in the Jerusalem community center, and hopes that in the near future he will be able to make all the social contacts he desires locally in Jerusalem.

In the months since the groups started meeting, activities have been held at least weekly. Activities focus specifically on the social arena. Treatment or

therapy is not the goal. The two young counselors who facilitate the groups are sensitive to and expert in the complexities of working with this population, fully accept people who are 'different' and have already formed an excellent relationship with the participants. One of the counselors notes that "even though we decided that these groups are not 'treatment groups', related topics arise, other than social life, that require our attention. Our group consists of people who are not expert with social codes, so these are issues we address in the group."

The groups' activities will include outings to movies and coffee houses, to the extent possible given the current security situation in Jerusalem. To date, most activities have been held in the community center, which provides a room for the weekly group meeting and lends its assistance when necessary. A planning committee with rotating membership brainstorms ideas for future activities and presents suggestions to the group for feedback. Ideas include holiday celebrations, birthday parties, and an overnight trip to a youth hostel in Eilat. The group may invite speakers on topics of common interest, such as navigating intimate relationships and the resources available for semi-sheltered independent housing and vocational training, all life skills that involve interaction with others. One idea that elicited an enthusiastic response from the fans in the group is to invite the stars of a popular Israeli soap opera, "Love Lives", to visit.

Recently, the girls in the groups have enjoyed a special program - an experiential workshop called "Coloring Life." The series of 10 meetings was conducted by a social worker specializing in personal development and improving self-esteem through cosmetics. The social worker recalls moving moments throughout the workshop. In one activity, the girls were asked to draw something representing themselves. One of the girls drew a heart with a distorted shape. When asked to describe her drawing, she explained: "It's my heart. I have such a good heart, but no one knows about it because hardly anyone knows me or talks to me. That's why I drew a heart with a different shape..."

The enthusiastic and positive response to the project has encouraged its founders to believe that there would be a demand for similar social groups in other community centers around the country. "In order to get such groups started," says Reichel, "what you need mostly is a big heart. It is not a serious financial issue. All you need to give them is the initial push and they are so highly motivated they will take it from there. I believe that in time the kids will acquire many social skills that will enable them to leave the club, and that is how it should be. Once the kids have bonded, they will begin to work on empowerment and will be encouraged to contribute back to the community."

One mother enthuses about an eventual network of these clubs across the country, with interaction among them exponentially expanding the social possibilities for their members. "The leaders of the Jerusalem group could share

the experience they have garnered with leaders of new groups elsewhere. Once the members feel secure within their own groups, it would be exciting for them to meet kindred souls from other groups as well. The network can be like a youth movement with local, citywide, and nationwide contacts. These young adults, who never had a sense of belonging to a regular 'crowd', now have a whole world of friendships and relationships opened up to them. They no longer feel rejected and left behind, sitting at home while others their age have fun with friends."

"I was always alone," says Michal, "I never believed I would have a boyfriend. Here in the group I have met a wonderful guy. We are together and in love."

For more information, send your inquiry via email to elisheva@matnasim.org.il or flevitt@mindspring.com.

(Names of participants have been changed to protect their privacy.)

Budget

Expenses

Two program counselors (10 hrs/wk)	\$ 5,000
Counselor training & supervision (1hrs/wk/\$60/hr*12mts)	\$ 3,000
<u>Workshops, lectures, activities, trips</u>	<u>\$ 5,000</u>
Total	\$ 13,000

Income

Monthly Participant fees (35 participants)	\$ 1,700
Dept. for special needs populations	\$ 1,300
<u>Shortfall</u>	<u>\$ 10,000</u>
Total Income	\$ 13,000