

# WOFI

Write On For Israel

Exploring  
Different  
Sides of  
Israel



# One Whirlwind of a Trip: A Look Back

By Russell Cohen

Perhaps the simplest way of looking at my WOFI trip to Israel is through the lens of my original goals. My first hope was to gain the tools to be an effective advocate for Israel at college and to educate those around me regarding the various issues involving the country. I feel that I achieved this. Thinking about the highly diverse group of Israelis we met and often worked with on the trip, and the numerous places we visited, I know we have experienced Israel and its many different faces and facets in a thorough, remarkable way. I now have a far greater appreciation for the nation and a much stronger understanding of the various issues, both internal and external, it is currently dealing with and will have to confront in the coming years. I am forever

indebted to the program for granting me these memories and experiences.

On to goal number two: to make new friends and have fun memories featuring all of them. I feel that I achieved this as well. Yes, every member of our group was different. Perhaps some like to stay up a little later than I do and have fewer qualms about falling asleep while listening to a speaker. For sure, some folks have drastically different tastes in music than I do. But if we all were the same, life would be far less interesting and fun.

The memories we all will share forever - groaning at the thought of visiting yet another kibbutz, trying to disappear during Nick's impromptu rap at the Arab school, driving literally in circles



WOFI Cohort 4 feeling the love at the Israel Museum

around Tel Aviv, listening to Jack's snores during the play at the Cameri Theatre, cheering at Tamar's and Maya's archaeological discoveries, wondering whether we would have to run to a bomb shelter in Sderot, dancing at the rock concert - are truly wonderful .

In sum, we laughed, we sang, we learned, we bonded, we gaped in awe, we prayed, we slept (a little), we rode around a lot in a bus, and we hopefully became wiser and better people for it all.

## Students on a Plane

By Jillian Rosales

Connecting as friends is an essential step to making a good cohort. Before we flew to Israel, we knew each other as fellow drones in all day Sunday seminars at Siegal College. Some of us knew each other from before Write On, but we weren't much of a cohort yet. That all changed when we found each other on our 12 hour flight. Some of us took the opportunity to bond over the large selection of movies available. We really got to know and love those faulty touch screens in front of us, playing each other in games of trivia and chess, reviewing movies together, and every 20 minutes checking the GPS monitor to show where over the Atlantic Ocean we were and when we would finally land at Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv.

As the plane flew ever closer to the land that some of us were excited to return to, and others to see for the first time, the suspense was almost painful. Finally, we heard the pilot announce that the aircraft had been cleared to land. We all got ready for that wonderful thud that meant we had touched down. "We're in Israel!" We all clapped. We all got off the plane, bonded closer than we had been, which was good, considering that most of us hadn't brushed our teeth since the morning before.



## Who Went This Year

- Bennett, Andrew..... Cleveland Hts HS
- Cohen, Russell..... Hawken
- Diamond, Eli..... Fuchs Mizrahi
- Fleshler, Tamar ..... Laurel
- Frankel, Danielle..... Hathaway Brown
- Greenfield, Sonia ..... Beachwood
- Immerman, David..... University School
- Jackson, Lindsey..... Solon HS
- Katz, Sarah ..... Fuchs Mizrahi
- Nick Levinsohn..... University School
- Laserson, Jannah..... Fuchs Mizrahi
- Levine, Maya..... Beachwood
- Marek, Rachel..... Shaker Hts HS
- Nemeth, Jackson..... Shaker Hts HS
- Oberfeld, Austin ..... Gilmour Academy
- Oif, Benjamin (Benji) ..... University School
- Pecha, Nadav ..... Solon HS
- Rekhson, Camille..... Orange HS
- Rosales, Jillian..... Cleveland Hts
- Ross, Ari ..... Shaker Hts HS
- Maayan Shalom ..... Mayfield Heights
- Shiller, Tamar ..... Fuchs Mizrahi
- Shiloh, Addie (Didi)..... Shaker Hts HS
- Siegal, Ilana ..... Hathaway Brown
- Socher, Dani ..... Fuchs Mizrahi

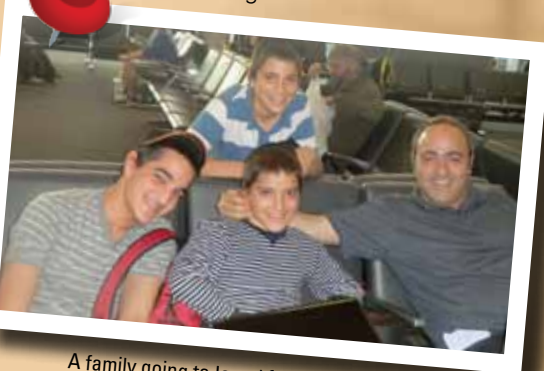
# The Journey Begins

By Nik Levinsohn

**A**t Cleveland Hopkins airport, many parents were giving their children kisses and hugs before our departure. At the Philadelphia airport where we boarded our overseas flight, we were given an assignment to ask people why they were going to Israel, if they felt safe there, and what they were most looking forward to. One WOFI group interviewed an elderly man who was born in Israel, then moved to America but now lives in Jerusalem. He said the reason he lives in Israel now is because "I feel like I am making a difference." He views himself as an outsider who is on a mission to make a difference for Israel which he feels he has a moral obligation to protect.

Another traveler, who works for Homeland Security, said the U.S.'s intentions were to protect the individual civil rights of its citizens whereas Israel's intentions are to protect the entire nation, even if that means not catering to everyone's individual rights." Participants in a Christian mission were very excited to see the land that Jesus walked on. A Jewish woman described her daughter's duties as an Israeli nurse, and how she treats Arab and Jewish patients equally.

Travel to our homeland involves an easy 12 hour flight; The Israelities traveling to Israel from Egypt took 40 years! We all have to appreciate the ease of travel, especially to a place of such biblical and historical significance not only for Jews but for the three most popular religions in the world.



A family going to Israel for a son's Bar Mitzvah

# Working to Save Lives

by Ari Ross

**S**oldiers' lives. That's one of the most important things in a war, and Plasan is working to save them. Plasan, located on Kibbutz Sasa in Northern Israel, manufactures and designs armor systems to protect both individual soldiers and their vehicles (tanks, helicopters, Humvees, etc). These are ordered by governmental organizations. Founded in 1985, Plasan currently employs 600 people in Israel, along with many more across the world, including the U.S., U.K., and France. Plasan designs, tests, and manufactures these armor systems. Their three criteria they have to balance are weight, protection, and price. Everything is tailor made for the buyer.

Plasan is always researching and developing new armor systems and technologies. Kobi Merom, a Brigade commander during the First Lebanon War, was in a Plasan armored vehicle when a suicide bomber exploded in front of the vehicle. Merom was saved by the armor as over 2000 pieces of shrapnel were not able to penetrate the vehicle., Plasan has made millions of dollars while exemplifying Zionism's pioneering spirit in the humanitarian effort to save lives in war.



The WOFI gang learns about the work of Plasan

# Four Fascinating Women

by Sonja Greenfield

**A**fter landing in Israel following a ten-hour plane ride, we immediately boarded a bus for the two-hour drive to Beit She'an. At Cleveland House (named for our city's close connection to Beit She'an), we ate falafel dinner with the four Shinshiniot who are doing Sh'nat Sherut, community service. They told us about their programs and what Sh'nat Sherut really means. One of the girls, Yuval, is coming to Cleveland for 10 months to explain Israel life and culture to Clevelanders. The three other young women are doing community service in Israel. Two of the three are religious and doing community service instead of going to the army. The non-religious girl who will go to the army after community service is working with disadvantaged kids through the Israeli Scouts. The Scouts provide afternoon activities for these children. The young women are working with kids with autism, and they will teach 9th graders how to be leaders. I admire these women and I want to be just like them.



# Tour of the Northern Borders

By Eli Diamond

**O**n the second day of our WOFI trip, IDF Brigade Commander Kobi Merom took us on a tour of Israel's northern borders. There, we learned and experienced emotionally the struggles of Israeli soldiers who put their lives on the line to protect the borders and people of Israel.

Our tour was split between the intricate Lebanese border along the Galilee and the resoundingly quiet Syrian border in the Golan Heights, which has not seen violence in over 35 years. The stops we made included Mt. Adir and Metullah, along the Lebanese border; the memorial site for 73 soldiers killed in a helicopter crash during the First Lebanon War; and the northernmost point in the Golan Heights contiguous to Syria.

Merom, helped me understand the IDF's predicament in these regions. The First Lebanon War, noted Merom, is the paradigm of Israel's aggressive and decisive behavior in



Top: Commander Kobi Merom presenting the Northern border.  
Bottom: Meeting an elite unit of soldiers guarding the border

response to terrorism in the northern regions. For almost 20 years, Israel maintained a security zone in Southern Lebanon. However, once Israel retreated from Lebanon entirely, the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah increased its violent anti-Israel activity. Visiting the Lebanese border and learning about its past really allowed me to appreciate the struggles of people living on the edge of both countries.


# A Day at the Museums

By Dani Socher

**T**he House of Reuven museum that we visited houses a collection of paintings by Romanian-Israeli artist Reuven Rubin. In 1912, when he was 19, Rubin moved to Israel. He studied painting in Paris and Romania over the next decade but returned to Israel permanently at age 30. Rubin lived in Tel Aviv for the rest of his life and was instrumental in its urban development.

From the instant I stepped into the House of Reuven, I was entranced. The first piece we looked at was one of Rubin's earliest: "Self Portrait with a Flower" depicting the artist facing forward, holding a fistful of paintbrushes in one hand and a flower in the other. He painted his face as very pinched- and out of proportion with the rest of his body. The painting was rendered in very drab colors, mostly varying shades of brown. The lone bright color was the flower in Rubin's right hand, symbolic of growth and potential.

The Eretz Israel museum was the day's second stop. It was far less exciting. Its main exhibit was a collection of Israeli



Daphna explains Reuben's depiction of the port of Jaffa

family photographs. All the photographs were indeed beautiful, and some were particularly touching: a Down Syndrome couple, for example, and a gay couple with several children. The message the exhibit conveys is that Israel is diverse and has all sorts of families. However, that point could be proven in any number of ways, and filling a large gallery with these photographs in one of Israel's most prominent museums is hardly necessary.

# Breaking the Bubbles

By Tamar Fleshler

“Bubbles” are how Eilon Schwartz categorized the different factions of Israeli society. Schwartz heads Shacharit ThinkTank, an organization that challenges individuals all around the country to step out of their individual factions or bubbles.

Some of these bubbles have begun to pop. This happened, briefly, in the summer of 2011 when a demand for “social justice” (to protest the high cost of living) brought almost 500,000 Israelis (one in 15) into the streets of cities and towns throughout Israel. That’s when the poor spoke with the middle class, the religious with the secular, and the different “bubbles” began to relate with each other.

If secular teens were able to hang out with Israeli Arabs their age who live close by; or if the ultra-Orthodox tried to understand the problems that recent immigrants from northern Africa face, said Schwartz, Israel would be able to solve much of the hostility that it faces internally.

The important idea we took away is that Americans must understand how difficult and multi-layered the domestic problems in Israel are. Our job as advocates is to help them do so.



Children of one Israel, however different they may appear

## Role of Kibbutzim in Israeli Life

By Lindsey Jackson

Not all kibbutzim are the same or are built on the same principles. We had the opportunity to learn and understand what life is like on two kibbutzim. The first, Kibbutz Sasa, located in Northern Israel, is a thriving kibbutz based on the original kibbutz structure where income and possessions are distributed equally. This kibbutz has found its niche in industry with the production of protective materials (mainly for armed forces) in the Plasan Factory. The second, Kibbutz Ashdot Yaakov, is also a socialistic kibbutz; however it focuses on agriculture.

Even though they have their differences, the commonality between kibbutzim is that they create a strong sense of community among their residents. The success of Israel started with the kibbutz movement and fueled the Zionist spirit. The hard work, devotion and determination of the early settlers is why Israel is here today. Learning about life on kibbutzim helps us add a few more tools to our basket, thereby making us better advocates for Israel.



Top: Touring the banana groves at Kibbutz Ashdot Ya'akov Bottom: Benji encounters a whole bunch of bananas



# Archaeological Ruins and Soldiers

By Jackson Nemeth

**T**oday we toured the southern wall of the Temple Mount and saw the ruins of buildings remaining from ancient Jerusalem.. My appreciation for the ruins was almost entirely due to my visiting the Kotel (Western Wall) earlier. I had big expectations for the Kotel, since I had never visited it. There is no way to describe the connection I felt there. When I entered the room with Torah scrolls, I felt a lot of vibrations and almost cried with happiness.

It was also a privilege to talk to a soldier at the Southern Wall, the commanding officer of a larger group of soldiers we all got to interview. The officer had been in the IDF for two years and had 16 months left of service. He said that he really liked the army, and added that if army service were not mandatory, he would have joined the IDF anyway.

A good advocacy fact I learned is that during Operation Cast Lead, every day for three hours the fighting stopped so Israel could send water and food into Gaza. The fact that Israel was concerned with the survival of these people even during a struggle is really honorable.



Top: Soldiers enjoying the shade at the Southern Wall  
Bottom: Students and soldiers: perhaps not so different after all

## Face Time in an Arab Village

By Rachel Marek

**I** was both nervous and excited to meet Israeli Arabs for the first time in Jasar a Zarka, a poor Arab village of 13,000 residents located north of Tel Aviv. When we arrived, many different sets of eyes were staring at us as we walked to the local high school. Many children looked at us in wonder, with some taking pictures of the strangers who wandered into their village. Adults gave us more intense looks from the balconies of their homes.

I was shocked at how poor the conditions in Jasar a Zarka actually are. Many of the youth are at risk and there is a high rate of unemployment among adults. Nevertheless, many residents told us they are happy with their lives.

At the high school, we broke into small groups and began conversations with Arab teenagers. In my group we discussed hobbies that we have outside of school. Many of the activities we like are the same such as watching sports, dancing, and singing. That afternoon we shared our musical talents by singing, rapping, and drumming with the entire group..

We concluded our visit by walking to the beach and enjoying a home cooked dinner together. Even though we live on opposite sides of the world, both sets of teens realized that we are not so different after all.



Top: Welcome to a whole new world  
Bottom: New friends at the Jasar a Zarka school

# Capturing Israelis on Film

by Tamar Shiller

Over the past year, WOFI Cohort 4 has been working with Natan Dvir, an Israeli photographer. We viewed his photos of Israelis and learned different photography skills and techniques from him. Over a two-day period, WOFI-ites, under the guidance of Natan, took photos of Israelis in Jerusalem, and throughout Neve Tzedek, Tel-Aviv, and Jaffa.

Our first stop was at the Kotel, where we went up to people praying by the Wall. Even though praying is an intimate act between a person and God, most of the people I was photographing seemed comfortable with my pointing a camera in their direction.

Through this activity, we were trying to answer, "Who is the Israeli?" As Natan told us, "Trying to capture the essence of where you are is the challenge." If I was in another country photographing people up close and in sacred places, I think I would have received hostile reactions. This is an interesting contrast, especially since Israelis are often viewed as being rude and pushy.

At our second stop, the Arab market, most of the people there also were open to being photographed. Owners of shops too,

even if we were not buying anything from them. In the market, I tried taking a picture of some of the tourists; they were alarmed and demanded, "Why are you taking pictures of me?"

Our third stop was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where we worked with special ISO settings on our cameras since there was not much light in the church. We saw Jesus's tomb and the seven different sects of Christianity praying in separate areas of the church. Also taking close ups, we received the same acceptance as at the Kotel and the market.

On our last day in Israel, we photographed the people of Tel-Aviv. Capturing the lives of Israelis close up took me out of my comfort zone and it was definitely an eye-opening experience.



Top: Natan Dvir in action on the streets of Tel Aviv  
Bottom: Didi shows off her skills to Nadav at the Kotel



# Helping neediest refugees

By Danielle Frankel

Israel has taken in thousands of refugees fleeing civil war and poverty from places like Sudan, Darfur and Eritrea. The majority of these refugees dwell in southern Tel Aviv with many camping out in Levinsky Park. Several independent organizations and nonprofits are working to supply the refugees with necessary aid; one of the most visible is Bina Bashchuna.

We visited Bina, a "secular yeshiva." Although this description is an oxymoron, Bina prides itself on being a place where students can study religious texts and find how they relate to social justice in Israel. At Bina we met the enthusiastic Itamar, who is in charge of the organization and coordinates gap years for high school graduates.

Itamar walked us around the corner to a deprived neighborhood, which over the years has become a hub for (undocumented) refugees and foreign workers. Bina students have made a dramatic impact on the lives of these refugees: They have set up book shelves in Levinsky Park and filled them with books in many languages. The children's books are all in Hebrew to educate them and help them transition into Israeli society.

I was very impressed by Bina's accomplishments and I learned that before you judge/criticize a group of people or a country, you must first study and learn about their culture.



Bina ("secular yeshiva") and Levinsky Park refugees

# Changing Lives One Soldier at a Time

By Ilana Siegal

**H**avat Hashomer is a basic training unit in the Israel Defense Force (IDF), located in the Galilee. Here, young women commanders train male soldiers from troubled backgrounds. In Israel, it is mandatory to serve in the army, and those who are incapable of doing so are generally looked down upon by society. Havat Hashomer trains the soldiers for the army, and therefore gives them another chance at a better life.

Commander Orianne spoke to us. She is 19 and commands men ages 18 to 20. She led us to a point on the army base with a beautiful view of the mountains. Her soldiers asked her if they could meet there every morning so they could start their intense training days with a beautiful and relaxing image.

Orianne shared with us her most difficult experience: One of her soldiers, Barack, disobeyed orders and went back to his room. When Orianne went to get him, he began violently screaming at her. Orianne stressed the importance of staying calm, listening to him yell while never yelling back, and standing her ground despite how close he got to her.

She left us with the message that she tries to convey to her soldiers: They should acknowledge their past, but it does not reflect the people they are now. They must believe in themselves and embrace their opportunity of having a clean slate. The IDF is the only army I know of that invests money, time, and energy to improving the lives of difficult soldiers.

# Combining Tradition with Innovation

by Benjamin Oif

**T**he WOFI group visited Sde Eliahu, a religious kibbutz located near Beit She'an. Sde Eliahu is one of 17 religious kibbutzim in the country and one of the few that has yet to privatize. It also stays true to the original purpose of kibbutzim in Israel: to be an agriculturally focused community. This does not mean, however, that the kibbutz is old-fashioned.

The innovativeness of its farming amazed me. In 1974 Sde Eliahu became the first community in Israel to practice organic farming. They produce their food using a variety of methods in place of pesticides. For example, they strategically organize their crops so that plants susceptible to pests are surrounded by crops that repel them.

The kibbutz also developed a different system to keep the rodent population down. They realized that every organism has its natural predator. The kibbutzniks set up houses for two predatory birds: the barn owl which hunts during the night and the kestrel which hunts during the day. The only problem is that Jordan is near this kibbutz and when the barn owls would fly to Jordan, the farmers there would kill them. In Jordanian folklore, the barn owl, with its white wings and face, is a symbol of the evil eye and must be eradicated. Instead of letting the situation escalate, the members of Sde Eliahu decided to invite Jordanian farmers to their kibbutz and educate them on the benefits of the predatory birds. The cooperation between Israelis and Jordanians shows there is hope for peace in the Middle East.



Andrew picks sunflower seeds at Sde Eliahu

Taking our tour at Havat Hashomer





Top: The map of ancient Jerusalem; yes, that person is real Bottom: Interviewing visiting Christian high schoolers from California

# Experiencing Connections

by David Immerman

**T**oday WOFI Cohort 4 experienced a history lesson unlike any we ever had sitting behind a desk. We began our day at the Davidson Center in the Old City receiving a hands-on, heads-up, tour of the ruins of the Second Temple and the surrounding city. From there we moved on to the Temple Mount Sifting Project. We sifted through buckets of ancient dirt, discovering pieces of pottery, mosaic, and even a Maccabian coin. After our short stint as archaeologists, we continued to the Israel Museum where we saw the Dead Sea Scrolls and enjoyed a new exhibit about the Hasidim of Israel.

The real lesson, however, came in our unexpected encounter with students from a Christian high school in California who were on a graduation trip. One student told me, "The Lord wanted me here. I want to stay here." Other students also expressed a strong spiritual connection to a place they had only been in for a few days. I really admired and was inspired by the connection these Christian teenagers, kids not so different from the members of WOFI Cohort 4, had with the land of Israel.

What I experienced today showed me that Israel needs bonds between its citizens and the various people and religions around the world who also call it home. I anxiously await the day that those who call Israel their spiritual home come together and bring real peace to our collective home.

# Special Shabbat In Jerusalem

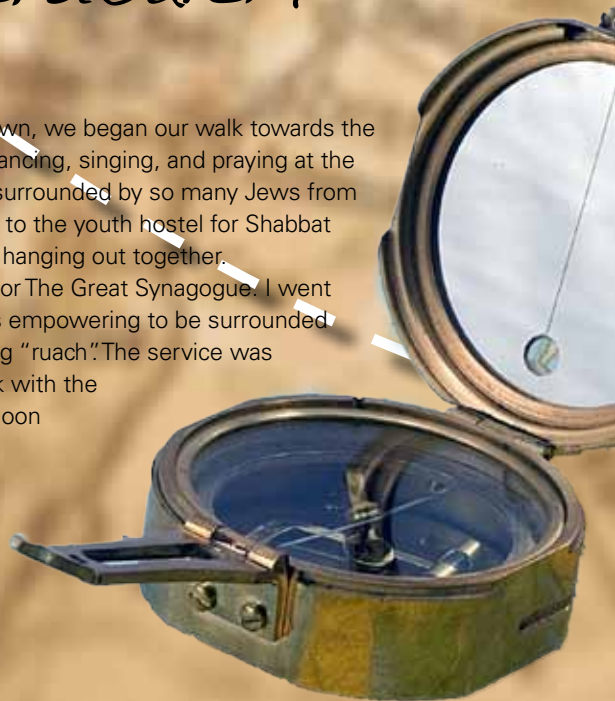
by Maya Levine

**W**OFI spent Shabbat in Jerusalem. As the city was starting to slow down, we began our walk towards the Kotel all dressed and ready for Shabbat. Hundreds of people were dancing, singing, and praying at the Kotel. We pushed our way to the wall to pray. It was amazing to be surrounded by so many Jews from around the world starting Shabbat together. Afterward, we made our way back to the youth hostel for Shabbat dinner. We had a fun program with the new Shinshinim and enjoyed free time hanging out together.

The next morning we split up, going either to the Conservative synagogue or The Great Synagogue. I went to the Conservative synagogue where we met WOFI kids from Chicago. It was empowering to be surrounded by a full synagogue of Conservative Jews all singing the blessings with amazing "ruach". The service was followed by a kiddush in the synagogue's courtyard where we were able to talk with the Chicago WOFI kids and compare our programs. We spent the rest of the afternoon eating, sleeping, playing in the park, and spending time with each other.

As Shabbat was coming to a close we walked to the family home of David Immerman where we sang songs, talked over the past week in Israel, and did Havdalah. It was great to hear what people loved about the past week and what they were looking forward to in the next few days.

There is nothing more meaningful than spending Shabbat in Jerusalem. Everyone should experience it at some point in their lives.



# An Unlikely Peace

By Nadav Pecha

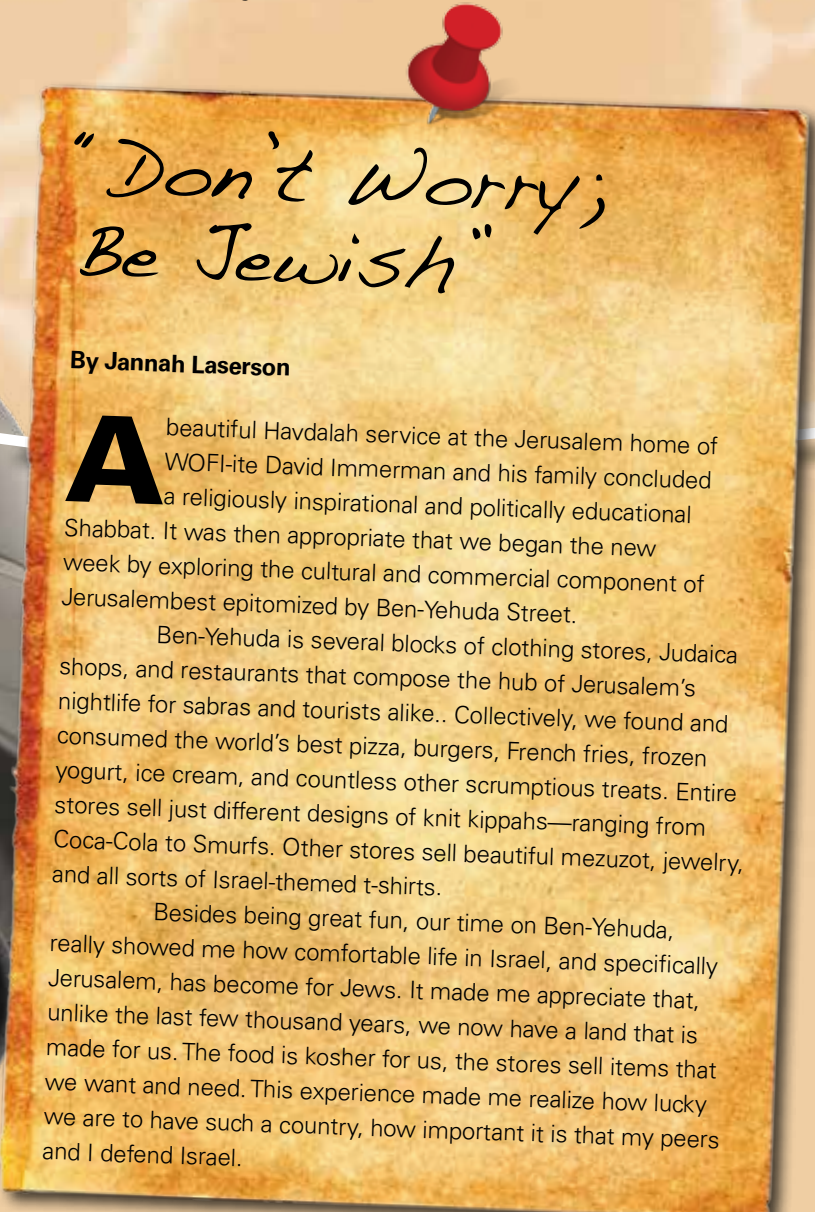
**O**urselves in intense discussion with Khaled abu Tomeh, an Arab-Israeli reporter from the Jerusalem Post. Tomeh began his career working for PLO-controlled media, but when he was prevented from reporting uncensored facts in the Arab papers, he quit. During the Second Intifada, when the Jerusalem Post found it increasingly dangerous to send Jewish reporters into the West Bank, they turned to Tomeh for the task.

Peace between Jews and Palestinians is currently impossible, Tomeh claims, as the PLO's conditions are unrealistic and unreasonable, while Hamas in Gaza is more concerned with the destruction of Israel than cooperation. He believes the current problem resulted directly from implementation of the 1991 Oslo Accords.

The international community should have given the Palestinian people an opportunity for democracy as in Israel, Tomeh argued. Instead, they granted Yasir Arafat control of the international aid sent to help the Palestinians without holding his government accountable. The citizens never benefited from the aid, thus becoming disillusioned with the peace process. They turned instead to Hamas which has caused much of the recent instability in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Tomeh suggested that all Israel can do is wait for the Palestinian people to return to the negotiating table with reasonable expectations. Until then, Israelis must defend themselves if attacked, although not with excessive force.

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"Don't Worry;  
Be Jewish"

By Jannah Laserson

**A** beautiful Havdalah service at the Jerusalem home of WOFI-ite David Immerman and his family concluded a religiously inspirational and politically educational Shabbat. It was then appropriate that we began the new week by exploring the cultural and commercial component of Jerusalem best epitomized by Ben-Yehuda Street.

Ben-Yehuda is several blocks of clothing stores, Judaica shops, and restaurants that compose the hub of Jerusalem's nightlife for sabras and tourists alike. Collectively, we found and consumed the world's best pizza, burgers, French fries, frozen yogurt, ice cream, and countless other scrumptious treats. Entire stores sell just different designs of knit kippahs—ranging from Coca-Cola to Smurfs. Other stores sell beautiful mezuzot, jewelry, and all sorts of Israel-themed t-shirts.

Besides being great fun, our time on Ben-Yehuda, really showed me how comfortable life in Israel, and specifically Jerusalem, has become for Jews. It made me appreciate that, unlike the last few thousand years, we now have a land that is made for us. The food is kosher for us, the stores sell items that we want and need. This experience made me realize how lucky we are to have such a country, how important it is that my peers and I defend Israel.

# Rockets, Rockets Everywhere

by Andrew Bennett

For over 12 years, cities within 40 kilometers (km) of the Gaza border have experienced missiles launched from terrorist groups in the Gaza strip. Since Israeli forces left Lebanon in 2000, Sderot, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and other smaller villages in the region have experienced over 30,000 rocket attacks.

For this reason, I, along with many other WOPI-ites, was a little nervous to visit Sderot and other Gaza-border towns. The fact that these areas suffered over 140 missiles the week prior to our arrival definitely did not help. However, when we arrived in Sderot and saw how beautiful and seemingly safe it was, our concerns began to disappear.

We stopped first at the Sderot police station. Hundreds of missiles that had exploded in Sderot over the years were displayed there. Holding the shell of a missile sent from Gaza made me realize the hardship and stress that residents of Sderot experience every day. On a school building in Sderot, we saw a huge burn on the side of the rocket-proof building that was hit 24 hours before we visited the city.

According to Commander Kobi Merom who accompanied us in Sderot: "We do not have an effective deterrence along the Gaza border. Operation Cast Lead in 2008 did not complete the task of eliminating most of the Hamas capability to attack Israel."



Top: Shelves of rockets at the Sderot police headquarters  
Bottom: A fortified school directly hit by a rocket



The caterpillar: fun playground equipment, and life-saving bomb shelter

## It's life that I love"

by Sarah Katz

The biggest threat created by the Kassam rockets that routinely fall on Sderot is the safety of the children physically and mentally. To help these children grow up and maintain a "normal" life, the city has created safe places. Playgrounds, for example, now require sections of equipment to withstand an incoming rocket and provide a place to hide in case of attack.

One playground we visited contained a shelter disguised as a caterpillar tunnel that children could play on during normal times and use as shelter when necessary. Inside the caterpillar I noticed the quote, "It's life that I love;" the caterpillar protected just that. Many school buildings in Sderot have been remade to withstand rocket attacks, thereby allowing children to study and learn in safety.

Seeing the playgrounds and schools that have replaced more vulnerable structures showed me and my fellow WOPI members how hard the Israeli government has worked to protect its people and land from those who wish them harm. Following our visit to Sderot we discussed how our previous fear for the infamous city had been replaced with an appreciation for its people, scenery and culture.



# Working for Female Empowerment

by Didi Shiloh

**C**lose to our last day in Israel, we traveled to the Bedouin city of Rahat, home to 55,000 Sunni Muslims. We were welcomed into their community center, which serves as a school, volunteering base, and sanctuary for community functions.

Supported by Israeli and American organizations, the community center empowers residents in fields like health education and community beautification. One such organization is ISHA, a women's leadership and health education program partially funded by the Jewish Federation of Cleveland. All volunteering opportunities are organized by a young woman named Chitam. She also organizes volunteer programs for 600 teens in Rahat. The majority of students, especially within the gifted program, are women, noted Chitam. She also described Bedouin settlements as having advanced culturally with the help of the Israeli government: "In general, people are absorbing and living a new, modern path...while retaining the traditions of the past." The "women's revolution in Rahat," particularly among young women, is also beginning to grow thanks to modern education, she noted. This contrasts with traditional family life characterized by stay-at-home wives dependent on their husbands. Because she supports women advancing from traditional roles to occupational independence, Chitam is still a minority within Rahat. In an atmosphere where "the pressure is great to NOT advance," Chitam's role as an educator and mentor is key to the success and happiness of the women of her community. Chitam ignited a pride I share with feminists worldwide today.

## By Any Other Name...

By Russell Cohen

**W**e visited one of the most disputed areas on Earth, one with incredibly contradictory names: The West Bank. East Jerusalem and the settlements. Judea and Samaria. The Liberated Territories. The Occupied Territories.

Over the course of our travels, we learned the history of the conflict, heard multiple perspectives about it, and came to the realization that these various names or designations reflect perhaps the real cause of the issue: We all think of the area in question in our own terms, and few can accept the other side's choice.

Our day's journey was one of steadily moving beyond the Green Line. First we viewed the West Bank from 10 kilometers,; it was on a hill in Jerusalem which housed an unfinished mansion of King Hussein. The fact that we were so close to Ramallah, the capital of the Palestinian Authority, was shocking, but that was only the beginning. Next we were at Mount Scopus, just a few kilometers from the separation barrier (another piece of the puzzle with different names), the Palestinian village of Ezrayim nearby, and behind it the Jewish settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim. Then came Gilo, the southernmost point in Jerusalem.

By now, the Palestinian-controlled city of Bethlehem was about a mile away, the houses and roads basically within walking distance. Suddenly, we passed through a tunnel and checkpoint and we were in Gush Etzion, a community surrounded by Arab villages.

Finally we entered Efrat, part of the Gush Etzion bloc. Then, with an escort of soldiers, we passed through another checkpoint and entered the disputed area of Etam Hill. The Israeli Supreme Court wants to build the security barrier across the hill, while Efrat wants it wholly a part of the city; it hopes to build 2500 housing units on it.. The Arab towns around us and the children waving at the bus did not seem much different from those we had previously encountered, but the reality was different: They were basically in another country. Staring at the farthest hill in the farthest settlement we had visited in Israel, I could not help but gape in wonder. This felt like the ultimate edge, the final mountain.

On our way back, we continued our initial discussion of names.. Does any truly capture the essence of what is being named? Unfortunately, due to the complexity of the issues and the passions they arouse, not yet. But if we listen to the other side and try to understand where their terminology comes from, perhaps we can civilly and intelligently discuss the situation, and then finally achieve peace. All we need to do is get the words out of the way.

# Moving Holocaust Memorial

by Austin Oberfeld

**H**olocaust memorial before, I, along with other WOFL-ites who had been there previously, toured the grounds instead of the main building. But first we went to the children's memorial.

I had also been to the Children's Memorial, but each time is more sobering than the one before because as I get older, I understand more of what really happened. There is very little light in the Children's Memorial building (just six candles and numerous mirrors) and you have to hold on to a railing to make your way through. As you walk, a voice lists the names, ages, and countries of birth of all the one million children who died in the Holocaust. A tear slipped down my cheek as I realized again how horrific the Holocaust truly was.

As we walked around the grounds of the Yad Vashem complex, our tour guide told us about Righteous Gentiles - those who helped save Jews from the Holocaust in Europe and the Middle East. Individual stone plaques list their names. Righteous Gentiles and the good they did, even as their own lives were in danger, gave us hope in humanity.



Paying respects to Herzl at his grave

As you walk, a voice lists the names, ages, and countries of birth of all the one million children who died in the Holocaust. A tear slipped down my cheek as I realized again how horrific the Holocaust truly was.

# Israel on high (musical) notes

By Camille Rekhson



**A**t the Zappa Club in Jerusalem we saw a performance called "Piut and Roll." The concert combined traditional Jewish poems and songs (piutim) with a new, fun, rock and roll style. The performers, many apparently famous in Israel, sang a number of different songs along with a core band in the background. The band performed non-stop, albeit with

alternating lead singers, for over two hours, including numerous well-deserved encores.

This concert broke the "bubbles" that make up Israeli society. The performers came from many different backgrounds and groups ranging from Orthodox to clearly secular. They worked together for years to study the piutim and then set them to rock n' roll music. It was quite a sight, for example, to see an Orthodox woman, traditionally clothed from head to toe, singing alongside men in t-shirts as well as a rabbi/performer in a suit.

I couldn't understand the Hebrew lyrics to all the songs. But that did not stop me from enjoying the concert. The large club was packed with Israelis who clapped wildly. We were no different. If anything, we WOFL-ites were more enthusiastic than the Israelis. During every upbeat song, we were on our feet dancing, cheering and clapping. It was the perfect experience for our final night together as a group. Attending the "Piut and Roll" concert has made me realize just how much of an impact WOFL has made on my life and how much I will miss my fellow members of Cohort 4.

# JUMP into Israel Advocacy

by Jannah Laserson

**H**ow can we, Jewish teens living thousands of miles from Israel, do our part to protect our homeland? That is a question we tried to answer throughout our WOFI experience. In my second year of WOFI, I worked on a program to share my new knowledge with other Jewish teens, and to spread awareness of the need to advocate on Israel's behalf.

I partnered with Project JUMP (Jewish Unity Mentoring Program)—a national high school program providing Jewish teens with community and leadership experience and associated with NCSY and the Orthodox Union. I worked with Cleveland JUMP members to develop a program in which students of all Jewish educational backgrounds could learn about Israel's

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politics, religion, culture, and economy; why it is important to advocate for Israel; and how each of us could do so.

On Monday evening December 17, over 30 teens from eight different high schools joined us for this informal educational experience. The program, called "JUMP into Israel

Advocacy," began with several intriguing videos demonstrating lack of Israel education and excess of anti-Israel sentiment on college campuses. We then split into three groups visiting three different stations. One group discussed Israel's politics and the history of how we gained control of the land. Another analyzed the novel technology emerging from Israel, and Israel's culture through its music, dance and food. JUMP into Israel Advocacy concluded with a presentation on the method of responding to anti-Israel sentiment: The David Project's ARM method of Addressing the accusation, Reframing the conversation, and concluding with a positive Message.

I feel very proud that I used the knowledge I gained from WOFI to inspire more advocates for Israel.



# Making a D.C. Difference

by Eli Diamond

**T**his spring, seven members of Write on for Israel will participate in a one-day Cleveland Jewish Federation mission to Washington D.C. There we will learn the ins and outs of what it means to lobby Congress on behalf of Israel. With the help of Amy Kaplan, Cleveland Federation's Director of Government Relations, a few of us will compose our own position papers on a host of topics ranging from American aid to Israel to the Iranian military threat. In addition, we will learn about the various roles Federation plays in shaping domestic policy towards Jews as well as its long-term goals in helping to influence congressional policy in support of our homeland.

Through the myriad of eye-opening experiences we had on our summer mission to Israel, our group of 24 WOFI-ites truly began to appreciate what we are advocating for. Between our many interviews with local soldiers and citizens and our discussions with key journalists and defense specialists, we started to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to become effective advocates for Israel. When you combine appreciation of our homeland with a broad knowledge base and a unique advocacy skill set, the future gleams bright.. With the knowledge gained in preparation for the Washington mission as well as the experiences we will absorb while on the trip, the seven of us will be all the more prepared to engage questioning peers on college campuses and beyond.



