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Israeli soccer team strikes a winning educational goal



By Jenny Hazan
February 19, 2006



Hapoel Tel Aviv - we use the kids' love for soccer to improve the academic and social aspects of their lives. For as long as he can remember, nine-year-old Naseem Slesielel's passion has been soccer, and his favorite team, Hapoel Tel Aviv. That's why he couldn't wait to sign up when the Hapoel 'Keter' Tel Aviv youth league opened a clubhouse in his hometown of Gush Halav six years ago.

"I have met so many friends there," says Slesielel, a Christian Arab who for the last half decade has been playing opposite other Israeli kids from across the country, from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds. "They are just like us," he says. "We are all people."

Slesielel is among over 100 kids from his 3,000-member mixed Muslim-Christian Arab village who are participating in 'A Bridge to Peace', one of the Education and Social Projects of Hapoel, the non-profit arm of the country's most successful soccer team.

The most extensive sports project operating within Israel's Arab sector, which includes Muslim and Christian Arabs, Bedouin, Druze, and Circissian, A Bridge to Peace now boasts the participation of over 6,000 children in more than 80 communities throughout the country, about 60% of which are non-Jewish.

The general idea is to pair kids from these towns with kids of different backgrounds - be they religious or secular Jews; new immigrants, or veteran Israelis - from nearby areas, not only to play soccer games and tournaments, but also to cooperate on academic tutoring, informal educational activities, and social events.

"The soccer ball is like a guru that all the kids are glued to, and don't want to leave," Hapoel's manager at Gush Halav, Hassin Smair told ISRAEL21c. "We use the kids' love for this ball and this game to improve the academic and social aspects of their lives."

Kids enrolled in the program also get to train with top soccer coaches, enjoy individual support and counseling from psychologists and nutrition experts, as well as receive a hot meal at the end of every practice session.

"Outside of the community, they get to meet peers from other religions and cultures," adds Smair, who says that this meeting is the project's biggest accomplishment, since participants quite quickly show changes in their attitudes and behavior, with feelings of discrimination and frustration turning into motivation, hope and ambition. "This is where peace begins."



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The program also helps to bridge the gaps between communities, as a whole, not just children. Donna Issa, 18, who volunteers as a tutor at the clubhouse in Gush Halav, testifies to this fact. "I have made friends with all the people on the nearby moshavim and kibbutzim," she says.

"Our goal is to strengthen the relationships among not only the kids of the communities, but also among the adults," adds Smair. "This program has really answered a huge need in our community. From the very beginning, it has been the most successful program in our village."

The philosophy behind A Bridge to Peace is central to the founding philosophy of all Education and Social Projects of Hapoel, which boast the participation of over 16,000 kids aged six to 16, at more than 300 locations across the country - namely, to transform the lives of Israel's disadvantaged children, and to promote understanding among different groups in Israeli society.

In addition to Bridge to Peace, Hapoel runs programs for children at risk, special needs kids, kids from the Ethiopian, Bedouin, and Druze communities, as well as special programs for youth in prison, and another for girls, who in a lot of conservative places in Israel are not permitted to partake in communal sports. All programs involve a combination of soccer, study, and community volunteering.

"It's a simple deal," explains project consultant Gerry Showstack. Each child receives a sports kit that contains a uniform, sports bag, shin guards, and a ball, and each gets to participate in at least two practices a week. In exchange, each child must commit to attending meetings with a tutor and other educational enrichment activities at the community clubhouse at least twice a week.

"What is being rewarded here is excellence in education," Showstack told ISRAEL21c. Kids from different communities meet at monthly regional tournaments; at four national tournaments per year; and at Hapoel Tel Aviv home games at Bloomfield Stadium, where participating kids are given a special reception by Hapoel players and coaches.

"It's really a site to behold," says Showstack of the crowds of Hapoel kids, all in their red-and-white uniforms, at home games. "They are all from different backgrounds, and are all different ages, but they are all wearing the same uniform. It helps them understand that despite their differences, they are all part of something bigger."

Showstack is careful to clarify that although the majority of kids involved in the program are not Jewish (52-48 split between Arabs and Jews) the numbers do not reflect any sort of political policy, but are instead an accurate reflection of Israel's socio-economic reality.

"The program is not making a political statement, but recognizes the reality in which we live and addresses the best way to deal with it," he says. "If kids grow up in a society where they feel like they don't belong to something, the future is going to be terrible - not just for them, but for everybody."

The program's Education Coordinator for the North, Oded Bashan, who is from a local kibbutz surrounded by Arab villages, bears witness to this reality. "Until I started working for the project, I didn't know anyone from the villages surrounding my kibbutz," he admits. "Now, I am friends with all the people around me."

Bashan, whose domain extends from Ajar, an Arab village on the border with Lebanon, to Haifa, says the kids have an even greater chance at building deep, meaningful relationships with their neighbors. "Most of the kids participating don't even notice that their new friends are any different than themselves. They just grow close to each other."

According to Issa, who has been involved in other peace initiatives that labeled themselves as such, it's Hapoel's switch in focus onto the larger world of soccer that makes the establishment of relationships between participants so easy. "The sport is magic because it takes the focus off of the objective of making peace," she says. "Relationships happen more naturally."

It has taken longer for the southern region, administrated by Nadav Cohen, Education Coordinator for the South and Center, to get off the ground, since a lot of the Bedouin villages in the south are not recognized by the State, and were thereby more difficult to forge initial relationships with.

According to Bashan, the longer the Hapoel program operates in a particular location, the deeper the relationship between participants tends to run. "In some places, where the program has been going on for

five or six years, the kids are more familiar with each other and each other's cultures," he says. "In other places, they're not as close."

In other cases, time has little to do with it. Take the pairing between the Arab village of Jiselazarka in the north, and Kibbutz Maagan Michael, which was initiated in December 2005, and which is now one of the project's biggest successes. "The oldest is not always the most successful," says Cohen. "The new is built on the foundation of the old. We brought a lot of knowledge to this pairing."

"This is the youth generation. All the real cooperation between Arabs and Jews is happening with them," he says, calling soccer a "universal language. If we want peace, it must begin with them."

The fact that more recently established 'Bridges to Peace' are successful is a promising indication that the program will continue to grow. Established in 1997 with 30 kids, the Hapoel program is now the second-largest youth association in Israel, next to Scouts.

The social project's initiators, CEO Meir ('Motti') Orenstein and Moshe Teomim in fact bought Hapoel Tel Aviv nine years ago in large part so they could use the team's popularity to entice Israeli kids to join the social program.

"We couldn't think of a more important way to give back to the community and fulfill our social responsibility than by reaching out to make a difference in the lives of Israel's youth from the most vulnerable areas of Israeli society," says Orenstein.

And that difference continues as the children grow up - via college scholarships, which are awarded to former participants of the program, who volunteer as tutors to kids enrolled in the program, in exchange for a leadership training course run in conjunction with the University of Tel Aviv, and assistance with tuition costs.

Issa, who will commence her first year of studies at the University of Haifa next fall, is one of over 500 volunteer tutors with the program.

"The program is having such a huge impact on my community that I am eager to participate in it in any way I can," she says, adding that she teaches the kids English and prepares lesson plans and games for them, three hours each week. "It's a lot of time. But it's really fun. I do it for the kids, for my community, and for myself - it's beneficial for everyone."

The loyal volunteer body is one of the cornerstones of the Hapoel project's success. "This is a model that works," says Showstack, who reveals plans for expanding the program in Israel. "There is great potential to expand the program in Israel and to deepen its educational impact," he says. "Sixteen thousand is a huge number, but we are still only touching a tiny fraction of the population in need. There are thousands and thousands of kids in Israel who are not involved in programs."

Showstack also reveals the organization's desire to bring the idea of the project to communities abroad. "The potential of the project reaches far beyond what has already been accomplished."

That's where Avraham ('Avrum') Burg comes in. The former Speaker of the Knesset, Chairman of the Knesset's Education and Law and Justice Committees, and Chairman of the Jewish Agency, became the project's Chairman a year ago.

"The product we are developing here is a universal one - it's not just about soccer. The same idea can be employed using any sport that carries social influence among kids. The sports-community-education triangle is a carrier for social change. We want to spread our experience - and export this model - around the world. It's not just soccer," he says. "It's a different philosophy, a different way of life, a different Israel."

Issa has faith in Burg's vision. "Despite all of the political problems in our region, we can live together if we want to," she says. "We have the power."

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