

A Loving Home

SEPTEMBER 8, 2020 BY ROB DOBRUSIN

Forty years ago, when I was a rabbinical student in Israel, our program called for us to do a “service project” in the spirit of volunteerism and in order to learn about an area of Israeli society. Many of my classmates became part-time Rabbis in Masorti (Conservative) congregations throughout Israel. I chose to do something very different. One of the options was to work at a children’s home called Neve Hanna in Kiryat Gat and, missing my work at Camp Ramah as I did, I decided that I would take on this challenge.

I spent Shabbat at Neve Hanna once every few weeks leading services and getting to know the kids and staff. I also traveled to Kiryat Gat one afternoon every other week to teach a group of 8 bar and bat mitzvah age children. On the last Shabbat that I was there, there was a bar/bat mitzvah service which was one of the most memorable experiences of my year in Israel.

Although I did not know very much about Israeli society when I began this work, I sensed immediately that Neve Hanna was a very special and unique place. The children who came from dysfunctional or abusive situations lived in quiet, peaceful family units and clearly were benefitting so greatly from the close, warm relationships that they built with the adults. They were also benefitting from a connection with the Masorti (Conserative) movement as these were children from secular homes who were experiencing meaningful Jewish ritual and spiritual life for the first time in a way which they could feel comfortable with and understand.

At the time that I was at Neve Hanna, it was a very pleasant place but in the intervening years, the institution has grown exponentially in terms of the opportunities it offers to the children. There is a bakery which many of the older children work in, giving them work experience while providing bread and baked goods for Neve Hanna as well as for sale throughout Israel. There is a petting zoo where the children learn to take responsibility in caring for the animals. The connection with the Masorti movement continues with a more frequent rabbinic presence and programs for Shabbat and for all of the holidays and there are so many more programs and efforts that the staff has undertaken.

The COVID crisis has clearly presented tremendous challenges for so many throughout the world and the staff at Neve Hanna has done tremendous work in helping the environment remain stable and safe and, unlike many children’s programs in Israel, the children were able to remain at Neve Hanna through the difficult months. It is a tribute to all that the staff does that this effort has been successful.

I am honored to serve on the board of American Friends of Neve Hanna which supports the loving home of Neve Hanna through fundraising and publicity efforts. I urge you to go to <https://afnevehanna.org> to learn more about a truly wonderful place which is so important in the lives of these children.

I posted this piece on my facebook page but I want to include two more personal stories from my time at Neve Hanna here.

On my first visit to Neve Hanna, I walked onto the grounds wearing my baseball cap and tennis shoes and one of the kids playing on the basketball court asked me who I was. I told him I was a rabbi and he looked at me and laughed. “You’re not a rabbi, look at you” were his exact words.

I assured him I was and then asked if I could take a shot. I walked practically to mid-court and took a shot. Of course, it was perfect- nothing but net as they say. The kids looked at me with their mouths open and I walked away and never took another shot the whole time I was at Neve Hanna. I figured I’d quite while I was ahead.

The other incident that I remember is one I have talked about many times. The kids in the bar/bat mitzvah class came into our class one afternoon and sat there with their arms folded refusing to speak.

I asked what was going on and one of the kids said: “Shvita” which means “We’re on strike”.

I asked why and they said that they learned in science class that “human beings come from apes” and that they’re not going to listen to a rabbi because I have nothing to say to them since I believe in Adam and Eve.

I said: “Well, actually, I believe that the story of Adam and Eve is a very important story but I don’t believe that it is actually true because I also believe in evolution”.

The kids looked at me stunned. The leader said; “You don’t believe in Adam and Eve? What kind of rabbi are you? We’re not going to listen to you at all.” They got up and walked out.

But, with the help of the staff, they came back and we went on from there building a very good relationship and learning from each other.